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Free to Enjoy a Pre- carious Ride

On Entrepreneurial Game Playing in the
Platform-Based Food Delivery Sector

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Abstract

How do digital platforms operating in the gig economy control their workers, given that they do not hire subordinate employees but instead assign “gigs” to autonomous freelancers? Going against the dominant view that digital platforms redefine Pre- or Post-Fordist modes of control with the help of digital technology, this study places the labor process of the gig economy in its own, unique, political economy. Building upon ethnographic research on the operations of *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* in Amsterdam, I show that these food delivery platforms do not strip their couriers from as much autonomy as possible but rather grant them with a set of carefully confined decision-making opportunities that allows them to navigate the internal food delivery market themselves. This managerial system gives rise to a dynamic in which (semi)autonomous, yet severely underpaid delivery couriers continuously employ strategies to maximize their gig income. As their success is partly dependent on their ability to understand and act upon market logics, they are forced to play what I call an *entrepreneurial work-game*. Platforms maintain in control of the labor process by creating the conditions *for* and heavily regulating the rules *of* this work-game. In the short run, the game yokes couriers’ interests with those of the platforms by carefully regulating when (evening) where (around restaurants) and how (as fast as possible) couriers work. When the interests of both do not appropriately align, platforms do not dictate couriers’ behavior directly but, instead, modify the conditions under which couriers are forced to play (contingent piece rates, incentives, continuous recruitment). In the long run, the game helps to disguise the highly exploitative capital-labor relation that underlies the couriers’ new employment construction, thereby hollowing out the sociological basis for workplace resistance to occur. My findings develop labor process theory by theorizing how market logics are used and manipulated to regulate the labor process and enrich ethnographic research on workplace practices by introducing a new type of work-game.

Key words: Gig economy, Labor Process Theory, Work-games, Autonomy.

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Describing the process of writing this thesis as a “bumpy ride” seems to be an understatement at the very least. Much like the many protagonists of this story – food delivery couriers working for *Deliveroo* and *Uber Eats* – I always had the feeling of having too little time to thoroughly engage with my topic and that I was forced to take decisions about directions to go without being reassured of a positive outcome. For me, this journey has come to an end, for them it did not. While being (mis)catagorized as independent freelancers, they will continue to push themselves to the limit to deliver as many meals per hour as possible only to receive a salary barely reaching minimum wage in return – an employment construction that the new platform based constellation of capitalism presented to them as “freedom”. As this study is, most likely, not going to change their precarious work context in any particular way, the least I can do is genuinely thank them for taking the time to talk to me and devote this thesis to them.

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1. Controlled by a Shadow Employer

“piece-wage is the form of wages most in harmony with the capitalist mode of production”

Marx, 1867/2013, p. 388-389

“The very act of playing a game produces and reproduces consent to the rules and the desirability of certain outcomes”

Burawoy, 1985, p. 38

The rise of the platform-based gig economy challenges existing understandings of the labor process, as it organizes work outside the traditional, top-down, capital-labor relationship (Gandini, 2019; Goods, Veen & Barrat, 2019; Veen, Barrat & Goods, 2019; Zanoni, 2019). In their own rhetoric, platforms function as technology companies that do not offer taxi (*Uber*), delivery (*Deliveroo*) or cleaning (*Helpling*) services themselves but only operate as “neutral” market intermediaries by connecting “independent contractors” to individual “gigs” via their digital infrastructure (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016).

In academic as well as social circles, the idea that platforms do not employ employees but work with independent freelancers has been challenged (Chen, 2018; De Stefano, 2015; Gandini, 2019; Tassinari & Maccaronne, 2017; Wood, Lehdonvirta & Graham, 2018; Zanoni, 2019). The most heard accusation is that platforms do not grant their workforce the autonomy or entrepreneurial independence that the label of “independent contractor” is supposed to entail. Hence, all over the world platforms are brought to court and charged for developing an employment construction that does not pass the so-called *control* (De Stefano, 2016, p. 473) and *economic reality test* (Stone, 2006, p. 257) to legitimately count as non-standard employment – to stick to the legal terminology (Aloisi, 2015; Cherry, 2016). In these views, categorizing workers as independent contractors simply serves the purpose of cutting labor costs and thereby contributes to the financial return platforms can extract from their wage investment (Friedman, 2014; Zanoni, 2019; Zwick, 2018). Digital platforms are therefore best understood as “shadow” employers: although they claim to act as neutral market intermediaries, in reality they expose their workers to “less visible” forms of labor control to conceal the actual capital-labor relation that underlies their business model (De Stefano, 2015; Friedman, 2014, p 171; Gerber & Krzywdzinski, 2019; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Shapiro, 2018 p. 2954).

While being in the public eye and under legal scrutiny, platforms see themselves confronted with the following managerial dilemma. On the one hand, the fact that they categorize their workers as independent contractor forces them to grant them with a significant amount of autonomy over the planning and execution of their work tasks (Shapiro, 2018; Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta & Hjorth, 2019). For instance, many platforms permit laborers to self-schedule their work and decide themselves whether to reject or accept incoming gigs (Cachon, Daniels, & Lobel, 2017; Gurvich, Lariviere & Moreno, 2016; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Not granting any autonomy would, after all, weaken their position in court and thereby hollow out the legal underpinning upon which their business model is built (De Stefano, 2015 p. 493; Shapiro, 2018, p. 2855). On the other hand, platforms need to deploy control mechanisms to guarantee that their workforce uses this freedom in a way they desire. For instance, the self-scheduling of work is known to result in coverage problems that, in turn, can lead to customer dissatisfaction (Cachon et al. 2017; Gurvich, et al. 2016). Platforms are, in other words, at the same time compelled to impair workers' autonomy to more easily steer them in the preferred direction (Braverman, 1998/1974). This dilemma reveals a fundamental conflict of interest apparent in any capitalist labor process (Thompson, 1990; Edwards, 1979): capitalists' control over the labor process is hampered when workers experience unbridled autonomy over when and how to work, while workplace autonomy – whether demanded by workers themselves or enforced in court ¹– is impaired by managerial control mechanisms (Friedman, 1977; Huws, 2010; Shapiro, 2018).

Understanding the manner in which managers strike a balance between autonomy and control is a continuing problem within labor process theory. As this theoretical approach sets itself the goal to document “the transformation of the labor process and labor power” (Warhurst, Thompson & Nickson, 2008, p.98), the aim of this thesis is to explore how platforms operating in the gig economy account for this managerial problem. With this, it responds to Gandini's (2019, p.1051) recent call to utilize labor process theory to “take a more centre-stage position in the critique to the emergent phenomenon of work(ing) through (and for) a digital platform”

¹ Research indicates that platforms anticipate upon this legal context when designing their control mechanisms, yet occasionally forced to expand workers' autonomy in class action lawsuits (De Stefano, 2015, p. 493). For instance, in two similar American class action cases the taxi drivers working for ride hailing companies *Uber* and *Lyft* agreed to remain classified as an independent contractor *only if* their platforms payed them a certain amount of money and expanded their individual decision-making authority. More concretely, in these settlements *Lyft* agreed to show its drivers more information about passengers before accepting ride request and *Uber* to allow their workers to form associations and post signs requesting tips in their vehicles (Gale, 2016; Said, 2016).

(see also; Gerber & Krzywdzinski, 2019; Veen et al. 2019). Hence, the main question of this study reads: *how do digital platforms operating in the gig economy establish their control over the labor process without stripping workers from all their autonomy?*

To answer this question, I examine a particular branch of the gig economy: the platform-based food delivery sector (Goods et al. 2019; Shapiro, 2018; Veen et al. 2019). In this sector, digital platforms match and coordinate economic interaction between restaurants, consumers and food delivery couriers.² In order to reconstruct this labor process from the perspective of gig laborers, I worked for two of the biggest food-delivery platforms myself: *Deliveroo* and *Uber Eats*. Just like in the rest of the gig economy, food delivery couriers work as freelancers and are payed on a piece rate (i.e. per each delivered meal). In return, they experience more decision-making authority over the planning and execution of their work than in almost any other comparable low skilled job. Without getting any direct reprimands from my supervisors, I cancelled shifts one minute before they started, alternated full-time employment with months of inactivity and almost continuously distracted myself with music and social media. Certainly, something beyond top-down managerial control must be holding these couriers in check, the question is what?

The existing literature has responded to this puzzle by arguing that platforms have updated existing modes of labor control with the help of 21th century technology. A first account emphasizes that digital platforms implement a digitized version of *Taylorism* to control the workforce (Aloisi, 2015, p 653; Cherry, 2016, p. 3; Kittur et al, 2013, p. 1302; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016, p. 3772; Steward & Stanford, 2017, p. 431). The main idea is that because digital platforms do not “win” workers’ loyalty by proving good pay or a stable job, platforms reduce workplace autonomy to the bare minimum to reduce the risk of moral hazard. In these interpretations, the platform is depicted as a “digital sweatshop” (Pittman & Sheehan, 2016, p.260) or “virtual assembly line” (Aloisi, 2015, p. 653), that establishes control by cutting the labor process in simplistic micro-tasks, strategically withholding information and surveilling workers’ movement in real-time (Aloisi, 2015; Shapiro, 2018; Gandini, 2019). A second view

² Even though both platforms used the term “riders” in their formal communication and this term appeared to be the most popular way my informants referred to themselves and their colleagues, I decided to employ the term food delivery couriers instead. It is partly because platforms like *Deliveroo* and *Uber Eats* wrap their business models into a discourse of technological utopianism, innovation and connectivity, that they are able to conceal their capitalist face (Martin, 2016; Cherry, 2016). Alongside the bright looking uniforms, huge backpacks and slick advertisement, the term “riders” neatly ties in with this discourse and obfuscates couriers’ actual status of employee.

emphasizes that platforms do not strip gig-workers from *all* their task discretion but, instead, return to *post-Fordist* control strategies by normatively prescribing to workers what to think, feel and say (Gandini, 2019, p. 1048; Veen, et al. 2019, p.2). Again, digital technology only intensified this type of control as the widespread usage of user-generate performance systems enables platforms to expose gig-workers' "emotional labor" to unremitting social appraisal from customers who continuously report on the social competence of their service provider with ratings (Glöss, McGregor, & Brown, 2016, p.7; Hochschild, 1983; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Ruval & Dourish, 2016, p.102; Stark & Levy, 2018; Chan, 2019, p.184).

While analyzing the gig economies' labor process from within in its own, unique, political economy and by getting closer to the lived experiences of couriers themselves, I came to reject both interpretations described above. I discovered that both food delivery platforms do not strip couriers from as much autonomy as possible, nor thoroughly manipulate their feelings with ratings, but grant them with a set of carefully confined decision-making opportunities that allows them to navigate the internal food delivery market independently. This managerial system gives rise to a dynamic in which (semi)autonomous, yet severely underpaid delivery couriers continuously employ strategies to maximize their gig income *as if* they were playing a game (Burawoy, 1979). As their game success is partly dependent on their ability to understand and act upon market logics, they are forced to play what I call an *entrepreneurial work-game*. This game contributes to managerial control, by making couriers not only work when (evening) and where (around restaurants) they are most needed, which I refer to as control in the short run, but also by removing the antagonistic capital-labor relation underlying their new employment construction from view, which I call control in the long run. I will conclude that the entrepreneurial work game enables *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* to strike a balance between autonomy and control, as it makes it possible to obtain desired conduct from couriers, not by dictating their behavior directly but rather by continuously modifying the market conditions under which they are forced to "play".

This study is divided in five parts. In the next section, I introduce the theoretical premises of labor process theory and explain how work-games can contribute to managerial control, thereby taking into account that this workplace phenomenon tends to change depending on the transformations of the labor process and the political economy more generally. Anticipating the results, this section closes by describing the specific political economy from within which the platform-based gig economy and its particular form of managerial control could emerge. Second, I apply my theoretical puzzle to the food delivery platforms *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo*

and explain how their novel employment construction effects the managerial challenges they face. Third, I report on the way I collected, processed and analyzed my ethnographic data, thereby as well specifying on the methodological challenges I encountered and the strategies I used to resolve them. Fourth, I present my results by first showing that *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* do not return to existing modes of control and thereafter demonstrating that they maintain in control of the labor process by creating the conditions *for* and heavily regulating the rules *of* a work-game. As this entrepreneurial work game permeates the entire the labor process, this discussion is structured around the four phases of food delivery: 1) waiting for an order; 2) selecting an order; 3) waiting at a restaurant and 4) cycling to a customer. Lastly, I synthesize my main findings and discuss how they contribute to labor process theory more generally.

2. The Labor Process, Workplace Autonomy and Game-playing

2.1 Control in the Gig Economy

Before it is possible to understand *how* work games can contribute to managerial oversight in the gig economy, it is necessary to explain *why* there is a constant imperative for platforms, (capital) to control gig workers (labor) in the first place. Labor process theorists relate this constant managerial imperative to labor's unique characteristics as a commodity that, although embedding the potential to produce value, does not offer any guarantee to actually do so (Braverman, 1998/1974, p.39). After all, when managers purchase labor power for a wage (i.e. the potential to work) they must still convert this into actual value producing activities (i.e. actual work effort). In order to reduce the "indeterminacy" surrounding this translation process (Smith, 2006), managers always expose the workforce to control: all the techniques that influence workplace processes and increase productivity levels of workers. Although initially focused on coercive and top-down modes of control (Braverman, 1998/1974), more recently labor process scholars came to agree that managers also rely on more subtle and indirect control instruments that mobilize workers' cooperation and consent instead of their direct opposition (Burawoy, 1979; Friedman, 1977; Thompson, 1990). Because work-games belong to this latter category, they are useful analytical tools for understanding how platforms establish control over the labor process from a distance.

2.2 Game-playing and Managerial Control

A work game refers to the phenomenon in which workers become fixated on achieving a desired, but uncertain, outcome and start to employ tactics and strategies to achieve this goal (Burawoy, 1979, 1985). These "outcomes" are often work-related and can vary from maximizing one's tip-income (Sallaz, 2002), increasing work speed (Sherman, 2007) to obtaining work-related bounties (Burawoy, 1979). Work-games can permeate the labor process to different degrees, varying from only shaping off-task behavior (Roy, 1959) to coinciding with all activities shown in the workplace (Burawoy, 1979; Sallaz, 2015). Because workers' game strategies significantly impact their chance to achieve this desired outcome and are, in turn, informed by their individual skills and capabilities, work-games are understood to be seductive (Burawoy, 1985, p. 38). Important to note is that the term game should not be

interpreted in a literal sense but be understood as a conceptual tool. Although it is likely that workers are actually defining their work experiences in game-like terminology, it is the mixture of outcome uncertainty and individual choice that constitutes a work game's conceptual core (Burawoy, 1985, p.38).

Work games would solve many of the managerial problems associated with employing a workforce constituting of independent contractors, as they have the ability to function as a source of indirect control in work contexts where workers experience a significant degree of autonomy. In the short run, games can stimulate workers' effort (Sallaz, 2015) and micro-manage their behavior without direct interference of a manager (Sallaz, 2002; Sherman, 2007). Sherman (2007), for instance, shows that when employees play "tipping games", they start to tailor their service offerings to the wishes of their customers to elicit tips, thereby thus voluntarily showing the type of work behavior that benefits managers – i.e. custom-made service delivery. Moreover, because workers generally play a work game collectively, they often police each other's individual performance, thereby thus engaging in "peer surveillance" (Sewell, 1998). Especially when work-games revolve around production outcome – such as the number of delivered meals – they tend to regulate the labor process more effectively than more direct and coercive control mechanisms can (Burawoy, 1979; Sallaz, 2015).

On the long run, games contribute to managerial control by drawing away attention from the larger capitalist context in which they take place (Burawoy, 1979). When a chess player attempts to checkmate its opponents' king, he or she could not come up with a game-strategy to attain this goal and, at the same time, start questioning the rules of chess more generally, Burawoy (1985) explains himself. Playing a work-game thus means consenting to its rules and granting legitimacy to the material conditions that define them.

For these reasons, managers are often actively engage in facilitating and stimulating work games whenever they occur and, more recently, have even started to implement gamific elements to the organization of work "from above" (Burawoy, 1978; Woodcock & Johnson, 2017). The introduction of top down gamification has already been observed in relation to the platform-based gig economy. For instance, *Uber* admits to have designed their ride-hailing platform with a video game in mind (Scheiber, 2017). In attempts to prompt taxi drivers to stay logged on or move into a certain direction, this platform exposes their drivers to all sorts of "psychological tricks"– textual and visual nudges, graphic manipulation, non-cash rewards – frequently simply copied from actual video games directly (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Scheiber, 2017). Perhaps,

this is also why gig workers often frame their work as “casual” or even “fun” and, at times, state that working for a platform feels more like a hobby than a job (Goods et al, 2019; Malin, & Chandler, 2016, p. 388; Manriquez, 2019; Petticca-Harris, et al, 2018).

2.3 Three Managerial Models for Dealing with Autonomy

As the nature of work-games change depending on the transformations of the labor process and the political economy more generally (Sallaz, 2015) this study uses the *extended case* approach to explore this workplace phenomenon in the context of the gig economy. This analytical method was initiated by Van Velsen (1967) and Gluckman (1961) and further refined by Burawoy (2009, p.9) in order to connect in-depth ethnographic research on “microprocesses” within organization – like work-games – to the more structural “macroforces” they emanated from. It assumes that every constellation of capitalism gives rise to its own “prototypical” form of labor control (Burawoy, 1983, p.589) which can be revealed when placed against the background of its own political economy, here understood as the combination of ideological and material conditions. Following this logic, the two sections below will present a short historical overview of the development of managerial systems and their associated work-games up until today. This in order to introduce the control strategies that platforms are asserted to have brought back and to explain from within which political economy the new labor process of the gig economy emerged. This discussion focuses on the way managers deal with workers’ autonomy, as this seems to be the main managerial challenge platforms are confronted with today.

Workplace autonomy is defined as “the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out” (Hackman & Oldman, cited in Kalleberg, 2011, p. 133). Labor scholars generally agree that workplace autonomy has increased in the course of western management history (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Vidal, 2013; but see: Kalleberg, 2011). In the early 20th century, the scientific management movement of Frederick Taylor prescribed managers to strip workers from as much autonomy as possible in order to “perfect” their direct labor control (Sallaz, 2015, p. 5). Inspired by rational choice theory, workers were understood as calculative and rational agents who would always take advantage of their autonomy by, for instance, slowing down their pace of work. In order to reach the highest productivity levels, Taylor therefore recommended managers to strictly confine the autonomy of workers by dividing, prescribing and monitoring each step of the labor process carefully.

When the “conception” of work was completely separated from its “execution”, he argued, workers would turn into deskilled puppets that could be “watched, corrected and controlled by a distant brain” (Braverman, 1998/1974, p. 86).

Unanticipated by Taylor and his followers, the pre-planning and pre-calculation of all elements of the labor process in combination with direct surveillance incited a “storm of labor opposition” (Braverman, 1998/1974, p. 60) as it had turned work into an extremely monotonous activity from which little to no personal satisfaction was to be gained (Baldamus, 2013). Although the possibilities for game-playing were limited in these highly restricted work environments, they did occur and tended to take the form of what Sallaz (2015) calls “coping” or “resistance” games. In their attempt to confront “the beast monotony”, Roy (1959, p. 158), for instance, observed how factory workers broke up their repetitive and deskilled work routines by turning short, off-tasks, acts of playful camaraderie (e.g. stealing each other’s banana) into daily rituals of alleviation. Sallaz (2015) argues that in this context, continuous resisting the strict managerial directions also attained a game-like character and regularly culminated in more organized strikes, thereby hampering control in the long run.

During the transformation from competitive (pre-Fordism) to coordinated capitalism (Fordism), managers perspective on the desirability of workplace autonomy changed in a positive direction. From now on, autonomy was not *only* understood as a risk but *also* as an opportunity for establishing control. Under the influence of industrial psychology and human relation theory, managers became less distrustful of the workforce and started to perceive workers’ behavior as not merely driven by their economic self-interest but also by instincts and sentiments (Friedman, 1977a). Moreover, as the emerging trade-union movement simply requested more task diversity, managers had often no other choice than to concede to those demands. In this context, a managerial strategy emerged that Friedman terms “responsible autonomy”: an enlarged degree of task discretion for workers, albeit within carefully delineated confines (Friedman, 1977, 1977a). The underlying rationale was to alleviate resistance by granting workers a restricted degree of autonomy and, subsequently, win their loyalty by offering good pay, stable jobs and career opportunities within the firm (Burawoy, 1979; Friedman, 1977).

When viewed from the shop floor level, the expansion of choice within limits gave rise to two different work-games Sallaz (2015) terms “learning” and “reward” games. For instance, Burawoy (1979) observes a work context in which management defined the production output

for each individual factory laborer but, subsequently, left them unsupervised while attaining these goals. As hitting these daily production targets required skills and experience, new workers, like Burawoy himself, would initially construct their work as a stimulating learning challenge. When attaining this goal became easier, the game of “making out” (i.e. hitting ones targets) continued to shape shop floor dynamics, albeit it changed in focus. Instead of learning, collecting bounties became its central currency, as consistent performance in this game still affected one’s wage, social status and career opportunities in the firm.

In the wake of a globalizing economy and technological innovations starting in the 1970s, the Fordist organization of labor lost in influence. In the new post-Fordist reality, a global division of labor emerged in which the manufacturing of industrial products was increasingly outsourced to the global south while the service industry took center stage in the global north (Felstead & Jewson, 1999). As productivity in the latter industry primarily depended on workers’ emotional (Hochschild, 1983), affective (Hardt & Negri, 2000) and cognitive (Berardi, 2009) activities, “immaterial” labor overtook its physical counterpart as main source for economic value production (Böhm & Land, 2012; Lazzarato, 1996). In this context, autonomy was no longer a privilege for which loyalty was demanded in return but, instead, an “ally of economic success” (Rose, 2004, 162). Not only did workers have to have the discretionary space to tailor their service offerings to the individual wishes of a direct client (Leidner, 1993; Sallaz, 2002; 2015) their performance was also very much dependent on human qualities that were difficult to prescribe in Taylorist manuals: empathy, creativity and authenticity (Dowling, 2007; Fleming, 2009).

Hence, managerial control did not disappear but simply entered a new “frontier”: employees’ hearts and minds (Ray, 1986). In order to elicit effort and increase competitive advantage, post-Fordist managers started to manipulate workers’ underlying norms and values (Kunda, 1992) as well as their emotions, affects and identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Hochschild, 1983). Recruiting employees with the right “personality” (Sallaz, 2002, p. 405) and developing on-job training programs about “professional” client interaction were common strategies for establishing this kind of normative control (Hochschild, 1983). Inspired by the success of Japanese firms, these methods reached their summit with the “corporate culture” movement of the 1980s (Kunda, 1992). This control strategy ascribed to managers the task of establishing an emotional bond between employees and their firms. After all, if workers “fell in love” with their company, self-discipline would guide their behavior and make them strive for “excellence” voluntarily (Peter & Waterman, 1982). When workers’ autonomy was made

subordinate to “the realization of corporate values”, drastically expanding workers discretion over the scheduling and organization of work not only enhanced productivity levels but also established managerial control in a more totalitarian fashion (Willmott, 1993, p. 526).

In the post-Fordist work context of expanded autonomy and normative control, a new type of work game emerged that revolved around the interaction with customers (Sallaz, 2002, 2015; Sherman, 2007). While working at an expensive hotel, Sherman (2007), for instance, observed how workers tried to increase their tip income by anticipating guests’ preferences and tailoring their services offerings to their wishes, thereby automatically showing the type of behavior that was normatively expected from them by management. In other words, in post-Fordist work-games, customers tend to turn into “agents” of normative control by policing and rewarding the emotional and behavioral display of workers.

In sum, this historical trajectory shows a development towards a larger degree of autonomy. While managers initially established control by stripping workers from all their task-discretion (pre-Fordist), they later expanded it to, subsequently, “win” workers’ loyalty through economic (Fordism) or cultural means (post-Fordism). This begs the question: which control systems do platforms operating in the gig economy implement and what work-games arise from them? Before responding to this problem, my application of the extended case logic first demands reflection on the specific political economy from within which this new, platform based, configuration of capitalism could materialize.

Table 1. Managerial Systems and Their Associated Work Games

	pre-Fordist	Fordist	post-Fordist	Gig Economy
<i>Degree of Autonomy</i>	Taylorized Autonomy	Responsible Autonomy	Subjugated Autonomy	?
<i>Managerial responds to the “problem” of autonomy</i>	Stripping workers from as much autonomy as possible to establish control	Trying to “win” workers’ loyalty by proving job security good salary and career opportunities.	Granting autonomy while rendering workers’ feelings, emotions and identity subordinate to capitalist interest	?
<i>Class Relations</i>	Adversarial	Non-adversarial	Non-adversarial.	?
<i>Ideological Inspiration</i>	Rational-choice theory	Industrial psychology and Human relation theory	Corporate culture theory	?
<i>Work-Games</i>	Coping games, Conflict games	Learning games Reward games	Social Interaction Games	?

2.4 The Rise of the Gig Economy

The rise of the gig economy started in the 1990s as a direct response to the falling profit margins and increasing global competition (Kalleberg, 2011) and fits into a broader, worldwide, movement towards precarious employment (Cherry, 2016; Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011). After managers stripped their organizations from all non-value adding elements following the principle of “lean” management, radically cutting labor costs was the last resort to secure competitive advantage (Srnicek, 2017). Temporarily hiring freelancers for “gigs” instead of offering them a more long-term employment served this end. The “taskification” of work, as Casilli and Posada (2019, p.291) call it, not only enabled firms to more easily match their labor force to rapidly changing market conditions, but it also helped to reach higher levels of exploitation by freeing them from the social security costs associated with traditional employment (Friedman, 2014; Zwick, 2018; Zanoni, 2019).

Next to these material conditions, human capital theory provided firms the ideological legitimization to implement this new employment construction (Fleming, 2017). Following this logic, people are no longer perceived as citizens, employees or students, but instead as competitive, mini-enterprises that profit from their own human capital i.e. personal skills, knowledge, health (see also Brown, 2015). Human capitals do not exchange their labor power for a salary – like wage laborers – but make a profit by taking entrepreneurial risks and outdoing their competition themselves (Read, 2009). Since enterprises bear the costs and benefits of being an economic actor individually, placing workers external to the firm while categorizing them as freelancers became a logical next step (Fleming, 2017).

Digital platforms draw on this “gig” logic most heavily, as they do not “outsource” a small part of their production to independent contractors – as most firms nowadays do – but build their entire business model around them (Srnicek, 2017). In fact, in their rhetoric platforms do not even operate as traditional firm any longer but, instead, as neutral market intermediaries that connects freelancers to single “gigs”. Critical research shows this does not correspond to their actual role: platforms do not just facilitate interactions between supply and demand but continuously manipulate the internal market they created themselves to secure their interest (Gerber, & Krzywdzinski, 2019; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Van Doorn, 2017). As most platforms remain in control of the price setting – the main mechanism through which markets establish equilibrium between supply and demand – these internal markets should not be

understood as “real” markets, but as managerial tools platforms employ, shape and hide behind to exert control.

This raises the following research questions: how is managerial control organized when the workforce consists of a transient collection of “free agents” (Pink, 2002)? Does it result in the unlimited autonomy over how, where and when a job is performed – as often promised – or does it give rise to new types of managerial control? The platform-based food delivery sector is a useful case for evaluating this question. However, before this is possible, it is necessary to translate this theoretical puzzle into a concrete, empirically grounded, managerial dilemma.

3. The Managerial Dilemma of Food-Delivery Platforms: Uber Eats and Deliveroo

Deliveroo and *Uber Eats*, the objects of this study, are multinational platforms that match and coordinate the economic interactions between restaurants, consumers and food delivery couriers with the help of their digital infrastructure. In Heeks' (2017) typology, both platforms belong to the "physical gig economy", as the service they facilitate is "tangible and delivered to a client in a physical location" (p.71). In the Netherlands, they operate in a highly competitive playing field next to market leader *Thuisbezorgd.nl* (part of *Takeaway.com*), small specialized food delivery companies (e.g. focused on the delivery of vegan food) and independent restaurants that organize their food delivery themselves (Wijngaarde, 2017).

Following the gig economy's playbook, both platforms categorize their delivery couriers as independent contractors to cut labor costs. While *Uber Eats* has always used this employment construction, *Deliveroo* transferred to this system about seven months before the start of my fieldwork. The fact that *Foodora*, a platform still working with employees, recently stopped its operations in the Netherlands not only illustrates how this new employment construction creates new conflicts "within capital" (Zanoni, 2019, p 147) – as *Foodora* was essentially being punished for treating its workers well – but also that surviving in this market without this freelance construction has already become extremely challenging (Heerde, 2018). Nonetheless, holding on to this model is also not without risks: during the course of my fieldwork, *Deliveroo* was caught up in a lawsuit for misclassifying their workers; now awaiting its final judgement from the Dutch Supreme Court – a decision that, most likely, will also impact *Uber Eats'* operations (Anderson, 2019).

In this context, *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* see themselves confronted with the following managerial dilemma. On the one hand, they have to grant their couriers a significant degree of autonomy, since exposing them to much direct control would hollow out the legal ground upon which this construction is built and with that threaten their financial viability. Hence, delivery couriers are allowed to self-schedule their shifts, complete deliveries anywhere in the city and distract themselves with music or social media while hitting the road. On the other hand, competitive pressures forces food delivery platforms to find ways to regulate the labor process from a distance. Particularly, ensuring a sufficient amount of available couriers at any point a day in all the corners of the city is of utmost importance, as this has the biggest impact

on couriers' average delivery time: the main variable over which platforms compete (Hirschberg, Rajko, Schumacher & Wrulich, 2016). How do platforms like *Deliveroo* and *Uber Eats* solve this problem, given that they cannot mandate couriers to show up at work or bike to the outskirts of the city due to their freelancer status? To answer this question, I hopped on a bike myself and joined delivery couriers' precarious ride.

4. Researching the Labor Process Ethnographically

Burawoy (1985) rightly points out that fully grasping managerial control without due attention to the “subjective” experiences of workers is impossible, as it is often workers’ “day-to-day adaptations” (p.39) to their tasks – game playing, work floor culture – that generates their cooperation. In order to understand these lived experiences, I conducted participatory observations while working for *Deliveroo* and *Uber Eats* in Amsterdam, the Netherlands – a method heavily neglected in the existing literature (Van Doorn, 2017). In the Dutch capital, *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* are the two biggest food delivery platforms that categorize their employees as freelancers and therefore seemed the most information-rich organizations for my study (Wijngaarde, 2017). In the period between August 2018 till March 2019, I spent 92,5 hours “on-demand” while delivering 191 meals in all corners of the city. In the attempt to get a holistic impression of this work, I alternated full-time workweeks with part-time one, tried out morning, afternoon and evening shifts and read all internal newsletters meticulously.

Taking notes was easy, as couriers continuously used their phones while waiting for their meals to be ready. Although I tried to rewrite my smartphone jottings into more formal fieldnotes right after my shifts, the physical nature of my work rendered this challenging. Fieldnotes were written in the first person and included account of my emotional responses to game playing, as I treated them as “analytic leads” in my analysis (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2001, p. 361). My presence in the field was not considered abnormal by others, as my identity of a white male students with a (lower) middle class background was a regular one. In fact, my delivery work did not only have an academic purpose but also a personal one, as it partly covered my personal living expenses at the time. Hence, I found myself almost as invested in the game of income maximization as any other part-time courier.

However, after a couple of weeks of delivery work, I noticed that it was difficult to learn about couriers’ personal work experiences through “casual conversations” alone (Silverman & Patterson 2015, p.51). Not only did I spend most of my hours by myself, cycling from restaurant to customer; the platform structure also made it difficult to build up a “special bond of trust” with fellow couriers (Schwandt, 2007, p. 149). Running into the same person was extremely rare and conversations tended to be cut-off abruptly since they were typically held in restaurants while waiting for a meal to be ready.

To get a more in-depth understanding of couriers' personal experiences, I started to conduct more formal, off-site, interviews with delivery couriers at the end of my fieldwork ($n = 19$). Although informants were recruited via various channels (i.e. online forums, personal contacts, my fieldwork and snowball sampling), my sample did not fully reflect the overall demographic of delivery couriers in the Netherlands in terms of race (89% was white) educational background (89% obtained university level) and financial dependency (58% had other sources of income) (Ter Weel, et al. 2018). Particularly, it proved to be challenging to find full-time couriers from racial/ethnic minority groups to participate in my study – a significant cohort of the local courier community. This not only had to do with language barriers, but also with the fact that some of them were wary of talking to me as they did not possess the right “papers” to do delivery work (see also: Alderman, 2019). In trying to prevent the “silencing” of their voices, I approached these initially underrepresented groups more pro-actively while at work.

My interviews lasted around 30 to 40 minutes, were conducted in English or Dutch and processed anonymously. I divided the interviews in three parts. To give my informants the opportunity to introduce topics of their own choosing, I started with a set of open questions about their 1) their motivation to work as a freelance courier and 2) general work experiences while completing deliveries. In the second part, I attempted to validate if my personal experiences as a courier were similar to those of others, thereby exploring topics like strategies and routines, work conflicts, interactions with colleagues and the platforms. In the last part, I asked couriers to self-identify their age, gender, race and educational background. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in their original language to increase reliability.

During my tenure as a delivery courier, I kept my status as a researcher hidden from the platforms, my customers and most co-workers. Although aware of the ethical issues related to covert ethnographic research (Coser, 1959), I argue that the benefits outweighed the costs. First of all, it allowed me to access the “secretive” organizations *Deliveroo* and *Uber Eats* and reveal the precarious conditions under which their couriers work, information that – I hope – can contribute to progressive change (Roulet, Gill, Stenger & Gill, 2017). Second, because my interaction with fellow couriers was always extremely transient and often did not take more than five minutes, I was not “betraying” any long built up trust. In fact, couriers often seem to gain personal satisfaction from the brief moments they talked to me as it allowed them to release some work-related frustrations. As I revealed my status during the interview-phase, my study should be considered as semi-covert.

Following an abductive approach to theory development, I analyzed the content of the interview transcripts and fieldnotes to find out whether platforms draw on existing models of labor control or use new managerial strategies (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). To systemize this process, I coded all data with the help of the software program *Nvivo*. Following Boeije's (2010) three-step coding scheme, I started this process by reading all the interview transcripts and fieldnotes and assigning a code to data sections with similar topic (*open coding*). Sections of data were selected based on their relevance to broad topic of labor control. In this phase, I stayed "close to the data" and coded as many fragments as possible, as I did not want to discard relevant information (Boeije, 2010, 146). While exploring this list of codes, I found out that the great majority of them did not "fit" the pre-Fordist (i.e. Taylorist) or post-Fordist (i.e. normative control) mode of labor control but were "anomalous" in light of these existing models (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p.167). For instance, a significant number of codes referred to couriers' ability to schedule and organize their work independently to point into the direction of Taylorism and too little codes showed signs of systematic normative manipulations. Instead, many of them reported on the strategies couriers employed to maximize their gig income and therefore pointed in the direction of what Burawoy (1985, p. 38) understands as a "work-game": a set of rules (strictly confined decision-making opportunities to navigate the market) a set of possible outcomes (number of completed deliveries per hour) and a set of outcome preferences (maximizing gig income). As abductive analysis rests on the cultivation of surprising findings, I recoded my data to document the different game strategies couriers employed (23 in total) and allocated them to the four phases of food delivery (*axial coding*). To improve validity, I triangulated my data by crosschecking if similar game strategies were described in both data sources (fieldnotes and interviews). Keeping in mind that work-games have to potential to regulate the labor process from a distance, I finalized the coding process by evaluating the wider organization function of this game and exploring how it enabled platforms to establish control over a workforce constituting of autonomous freelancers (*selective coding*). Quotes and fieldnotes were translated to English by me and the names of couriers and restaurants anonymized.

5. Controlling a Workforce of Autonomous Couriers

5.1 Are Platforms Redefining Existing Types of Labor Control?

Many scholars contend that platforms return to Taylorism to control the labor process. Aided with 21st century technology, platforms develop new ways to divide, prescribe and monitor work by cutting work into online micro-tasks (Aloisi, 2015), strategically withholding information from the workforce (Shapiro, 2018) and tracking workers' movement through GPS surveillance in real-time (Gandini, 2019). From my first shift onwards, I noticed that *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* indeed put much effort in the standardization of the labor process and utilized digital technology to attain this goal. Echoing depictions like “digital sweatshop” (Pittman & Sheehan, 2016, p.260) or “virtual assembly line” (Aloisi, 2015, p. 653), both platforms relied on algorithms to allocate gigs and had programmed their software to instruct couriers where to go (addresses), what to pick up (order numbers) and how to get there (fastest routes) through smartphone apps. Hence, at its core my work consisted of the endless reiteration of one deskilled process: picking up meals at a restaurant, transporting it to customers and waiting for a next order request to start over again. However, denoting the labor process as Taylorist is not accurate, as this would mean ignoring features of food delivery that are in direct opposition to its core logic.

First of all, I quickly discovered that although both platforms prescribed couriers what to do, they barely monitored whether individual couriers followed up on their instructions – let alone sanction those that decided to ignore them. For instance, although the app laid down the “shortest” routes to the restaurant and customer, diverging from this path never led to managerial reprimands. In fact, most couriers tended to ignore these route prescriptions and either turned to *Google Maps* or their own navigation skills to find their destination: “The route planning is horrible in the app, like it makes no sense. I am saving a lot of time by planning the routes myself”, Janos, a Hungarian part-time courier, for instance explained (Interview, 12-03-2019). Illustrative for this lack of actual monitoring is the fact that during the entire course of my fieldwork, the platforms only checked in with me twice with texts: once when I had a very hard time finding the entrance of an office building and another time when the preparation of sushi took exceptionally long.

Of course, the power of workplace surveillance is not necessarily related to actual *amount* of monitoring but, instead, to the *subjective* experience of feeling watched (Thompson, 2013, p.

132-133). However, couriers neither showed behavior that would point in the direction of panoptic surveillance; at least not in the long run. Sophie recounted how during the first couple of shifts she rode her bike like a maniac, as she felt being watched by some sort of all-seeing eye: “I was totally getting stressed out! It felt as if they were watching me with camera’s, through their system or something. Just quitting the job crossed my mind continuously. This work was way too hectic for me!” (Interview, 14-03-2019). However, when after a while she realized that this behavior was unnecessary, she started to slow down her pace and actually enjoyed all the “freedoms” this job had to offer. In fact, most couriers perceived this low degree of managerial surveillance as a unique feature of gig-work. While waiting for new orders, Jason, for instance, told me that amongst all the “shitty job” available this was probably the best one, as there is no “boss breathing down your neck!” (Fieldnote, 28-03-2019).

Secondly, the labor process was infused with individual decision-making, a feature a Taylorist system would limit to the bare minimum. Not only were couriers able to self-schedule their work-shifts (*Deliveroo*) or even put themselves on “available” any time a day (*Uber Eats*) – characteristics the gig economy has become (in)famous for – both platforms also granted couriers with a relatively high degree of task discretion during the labor process itself. While being on-duty, couriers were able to complete deliveries anywhere in the city, reject incoming orders, leave their shift prematurely and choose their own means of transportation, outfit or music. In line with existing research, a subjective experience of autonomy figured therefore prominently in the narratives of the food delivery couriers I met (Malin & Chandler, 2016; Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017; Occhiuto, 2017; Peticca-Harris, deGama & Ravishankar 2018; Veen, et al. 2019; Wood, et al, 2019). Couriers particularly valued the ability to self-schedule their work. Pieter, for instance, explained how this enabled him to combine his delivery work with being a full-time master student:

I just really enjoy not being bounded by fixed work-shifts or days. There are just periods that I need more money than in others. Being a student means being really busy at one point in time and having lots of spare time at others. This job allows me to anticipate upon this (Interview, 18-03-2019).

It is very plausible that the platforms did not implement Taylorism because their business model is dependent on classifying workers as freelancers. Meticulously monitoring workers’ performance or stripping them from as much task-discretion as possible would simply render the legal underpinning for their already controversial employment construction even more flimsy. The fact that *Deliveroo* was way less reluctant to expose their workforce to high levels of managerial surveillance in the period before 2018 – the time they still employed couriers –

further verifies this point (O'Connor, 2017). When talking to senior couriers, I learned that *Deliveroo* used to send out texts to low performing couriers to ask why they were taking so long and assess couriers' overall performance on a biweekly basis (e.g. average riding speed and number of rejected orders). To signal that they work with autonomous freelancer instead of employees and strengthen their position in court, *Deliveroo* further alleviated its labor control policies during the course of my fieldwork by, for instance, no longer sanctioning couriers for rejecting incoming order requests.³ In other words, the platforms did not implement Taylorism because of technical impediments – their digital infrastructure provided ample opportunity to do so – but for legal purposes.

If not Taylorism, did the platforms return to post-Fordist modes of control by shaping workers' behavior normatively, as a second group of scholars has argued? Particularly, for gig work that includes the provision of services to a visible customer – such as food delivery – the widespread usage of user-generated rating systems, is taken to be a manifestation of “techno-normative” control (Gandini, 2019, p. 1041). Just like in post-Fordist service work, platforms create expectations about the desirable behavior script their workers should follow when interacting with customers (i.e. friendly, professional, engaging) and use customer generated ratings - instead of tips - to make sure they actually follow up on these prescription (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Hence, these researchers assert that rating systems intensify normative control, as they turn emotional work from something that was semi-voluntary and hard to manipulate into an activity workers are forced to participate in in order to feed their reputational metrics (Gandini, 2019), remain competitive in comparison to others (Chan & Humphreys, 2018) and secure future employability (Rosenblat, Levy, Barocas, & Hwang, 2017). Were *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* able to grant workers a significant degree of autonomy because they knew that their couriers would bike fast and act friendly in exchange for positive ratings?

Again, this is not what I found. User generated ratings played a minor role in the labor process of food delivery work. In fact, couriers working for *Deliveroo* were not even rated by their customers and the ones using *Uber Eats* attached little meaning to them. For the largest part of

³ Reading the court reports on the misclassification lawsuit *Ferwerda v. Deliveroo*, I learned that the claimant issued the fact that *Deliveroo* used to sanction its couriers for rejecting orders as evidence for the existence of an authority relation between couriers and the platform (and thus a conventional employee-employer relation). Although couriers were, in theory, free to reject incoming order requests, *Deliveroo* granted the couriers that never rejected orders the privilege to sign up for work shifts before the less compliant couriers were able to. In other words, they sanctioned those that regularly rejected orders *de facto*. Given this context, it seems very likely that *Deliveroo* just stopped this managerial practice to abate the ground for this accusation and strengthen its position in court (*Ferwerda v. Deliveroo*, 2018).

my fieldwork, I was not even aware of the fact that I was being rated by my *Uber Eats* customers and yet still managed to obtain the maximum score on almost all my deliveries. In contrast to, for instance, taxi (*Lyft*), cleaning (*Helpling*) or moving services (*Dolly*), delivery couriers barely interacted with their customers, rendering the possibility to perform emotional work simply minimal. Charlie explained how he had to get used to this dynamic and still conditioned himself to play the role of a “friendly” service employee at the start of his delivery career:

I remember being pretty enthusiastic while the customers just really couldn't care [laughs]. I turn up at the restaurants and the people's houses being like: “hey, have a nice evening [puts on a friendly face]. Then they would be just like: “Yeah...” [puts on an indifferent face] [...]. I expected a bit more contact because once your enthusiasm wears off you are really just like on your own for hours (Interview, 13-03-2019).

Sophie, a Dutch part-time couriers and ex-waitress, experienced the fact that no manager prescribed her what to wear, how to greet customers and who to talk to as totally liberating: “you would even be able to, I don't know, scream or something, it all doesn't matter as long as you stayed logged on to that little machine” (Interview, 14-03-2019).

More broadly speaking, the platforms did not seem to expose couriers to much normative control whatsoever. They did not put much effort in recruiting couriers with the right “attitude” or thoroughly teach them about the desired way to interact with restaurants or customers via on-job training. *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* simply hired everyone who signed up to, subsequently, sent them onto the streets without much preparation. Unsurprisingly couriers showed no signs of being “in love” with their platforms, nor a sense of proudness to represent their brand. In fact, many of them even look down upon both companies and everything they came stand for: “they do not necessarily pursue any laudable ideals” Sophie, for instance, lamented (Interview, 14-03-2019).

Ultimately, *Deliveroo* and *Uber Eats* showed little interest in thoroughly manipulating couriers' norms, values and emotions, as this would run counter their seductive rhetoric of being “your own boss” (Uber, 2019). Ensuring a sufficient number of available couriers at any point a day and in all corners of the city seemed way higher on both platforms' managerial priority list, particularly considering their extreme high turnover rates and the fact that they could not force their freelancers to show up at work or cycle to an understaffed part of the city. This managerial problem, I argue, is particular to platform-based gig work and could therefore not be solved with yet existing managerial models.

5.2 Playing the Entrepreneurial Game of Income Maximization

In the platform-based food delivery sector, platforms remained in control of the labor process by creating the conditions *for* and heavily regulating the rules *of* a “work-game” (Burawoy, 1979). While riding a bike myself, I noticed that *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* did not strip couriers from as much autonomy as possible, nor controlled their behavior through user-generated ratings, but granted workers with a set of carefully confined decision-making opportunities that allowed them to navigate the internally created food delivery market themselves. Couriers, in turn, used this discretionary space to develop strategies to increase the amount of meals they were able to deliver per hour. In other words, the labor process showed all the signs of being regulated by a work-game: a set of strictly confined decision-making opportunities, a set of uncertain outcomes susceptible to individual manipulation and an outcome preference: maximizing gig income (Burawoy, 1985, p. 38).

Perhaps surprisingly, the game couriers played showed most similarities with the “reward game” Burawoy (1979) observed decades ago while working as a machine operator. Akin to the manufacturing industry, the fact that delivery couriers were paid on a piece rate allowed both platforms to minimize their direct surveillance and rely on this monetary incentive to maximize workers’ effort and work efficiency. Instead of a wage bonus, stable employment or increased career opportunity within the firm – the “rewards” of consistent performance under Fordism – food delivery couriers played a work-game to maximize their individual gig income. Because this income was entirely made up of piecework pay and did not include a guaranteed base rate per hour, couriers had no other choice than to take this game very seriously.

However, the nature of the game itself was very different, as not couriers’ knowledge about machines or ability to be in good terms with “auxiliary workers” (i.e. truck drivers, crib attendants) determined their success (Burawoy, 1979, p. 65). Instead, couriers’ gig income depended on their capacity to understand and act upon market dynamics, as well as their willingness to invest in vehicles or take risks while on the road. Hence, while acting upon the rules of supply and demand, couriers became engrossed in what I call an *entrepreneurial work-game*.

It was through this game that platforms were able to establish control over their workforce. First, the game successfully matched couriers’ interests to those of the platform. In their urge

to maximize their income, couriers decided to work when and where they were most needed (evenings and around restaurants) and deliver their meals as fast as possible. However, the game also caused coordination problems of its own, as not many couriers were willing to work during the less profitable hours (mornings) and areas of the city (the outskirts). The fact that *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* were able to modify their rules and conditions of the game “from above” allowed both platforms to solve these coverage problems without having to use direct force and thus violate couriers legal status as an independent contractor (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017, p. 542). The next section will first demonstrate that this work game permeated all the phases of food delivery and enticed couriers to self-direct their behavior to benefit the platform and, second, show how the platforms intervened in this game to secure their interests.

Phase 1. Before a Shift Starts: “You Should Get an Electric Bike!”

The first step in becoming a delivery courier was to acquire a vehicle. As couriers’ vehicle choice drastically affected the amount of deliveries they were able to complete hourly, this decision was the first, very important, strategic choice they made while playing the entrepreneurial work-game. Although riding in a car was not prohibited, most couriers rode either a normal bike, an electronic bike or a scooter. With an electronic bike, delivering up to four orders per hours was considered as “relatively easy”, while reaching this amount on a regular bike proved to be very difficult. Not only did electric bikes drastically increase couriers’ cycle speed, it also lengthened their physical endurance – qualities *Deliveroo* and *Uber Eats*, of course, also benefitted from. I delivered my meals on a regular bike, as I considered purchasing or renting an electronic one not worth the hassle and too expensive. Consequently, at a start of a shift my cycling speed would always start off being relatively high, to quickly deteriorate after the first couple of deliveries. During the last hours, I usually moved forwards at a snail’s pace, to pop down on my sofa right after entering my home. As couriers played the work game more *with* than *against* each other, full-time couriers repeatedly advised me to rent an electric bike as working without was just “way too exhausting”.

Following the ideological principles of human capital theory (Fleming, 2017), couriers talked about their vehicles as being an investment that would “pays itself back”. For instance, Jakub, a full-time courier who dropped out of college, explained that he was about to buy an electronic bicycle worth a “3000 euro” to improve his “delivery rate” (Interview, 18-03-2019). Echoing this sentiment, Jack, a migrant from Ghana who combined his work as a courier with cleaning kitchens, considered leasing one a good option but still doubted whether it would be worth the

“extra seven euro’s a day” (Fieldnote, 26-08-2018). In general, couriers’ vehicle choice seemed to be connected to the number of hours they spent on the road: full-time couriers rode scooters or electronic bikes while part-timers mostly stuck to regular bikes.

After couriers had decided upon their means of transportation, they made yet another strategic decision: when to work. As explained, with *Uber Eats* couriers were able to “go online” at any time they wanted, whereas with *Deliveroo* they had to reserve one-hour shifts. When deciding upon your work-schedule, a very important game strategy was to take daily demand fluctuations into account and only be available for order requests during “peak” hours – i.e. lunchtime and the evening: “It never really made sense to work in the morning, you just receive way less order requests, it’s just way more quiet”, Thijs explained. (Interview, 01-04-2019). By and large, the time a day had the biggest impact on couriers’ hourly income. In the empty hours before and after lunch, couriers spend extensive periods of time “on-demand” waiting for new incoming order requests. Consider, for instance, the following overview of my eight-hour shift in March.

Table 2. Completed Orders per Hour Shift March

Time a day	Number of completed orders
11:30-12:30	2,75
12:30-13:30	0.25
13:30-14:30	1
14:30-15:30	0
15:30-16:30	1
16:30-17:30	0
17:30-18:30	2
18.30-19.30	4

Fieldnote, 28-03-2018

During this day, I managed to deliver around three to four orders during dinner- and lunchtime but only one or two in all the hours in between. Although this day must be considered as an extreme case, with waiting times reaching to an hour or more (for one order I waited 108 minutes), it is indicative for significant difference between the day and evening shifts.

Next to adjusting their work schedule to lunch and dinner hours, a second way to be assured of a continuous flow of order requests was to take local weather conditions into account. Jason, for instance, once advised me: “you should start riding during rainy days. It makes it way easier to make good money!” (Fieldnote, 28-03-2019). He was not wrong; after a few minutes of rain, I always witnessed the amount of available orders increase drastically, as this motivated them to pop out of their houses and almost exclusively occupy the otherwise extremely busy bike lanes of Amsterdam. In sum, without much direct interference of the platforms, in this first phase of the labor process the game ensured that couriers showed behavior that benefitted managerial interest: primarily working in time of high demand and increasing their speed by investing in vehicles.

Phase 2. Selecting an Order

After couriers decided upon these two boundary conditions, they could start to deliver meals by putting themselves on “available” on their smartphone apps. When receiving an “order request”, couriers had the opportunity to “accept” or “reject” it within a couple of seconds, something that felt much like an actual video game. To make this decision, the app presented them the following information: 1) the name of the restaurant; 2) the location of the restaurant; 3) the location of the customer and 4) the piece rate.⁴ While maintaining invested in maximizing their income, couriers selected their order strategically by taking the following issues into account.

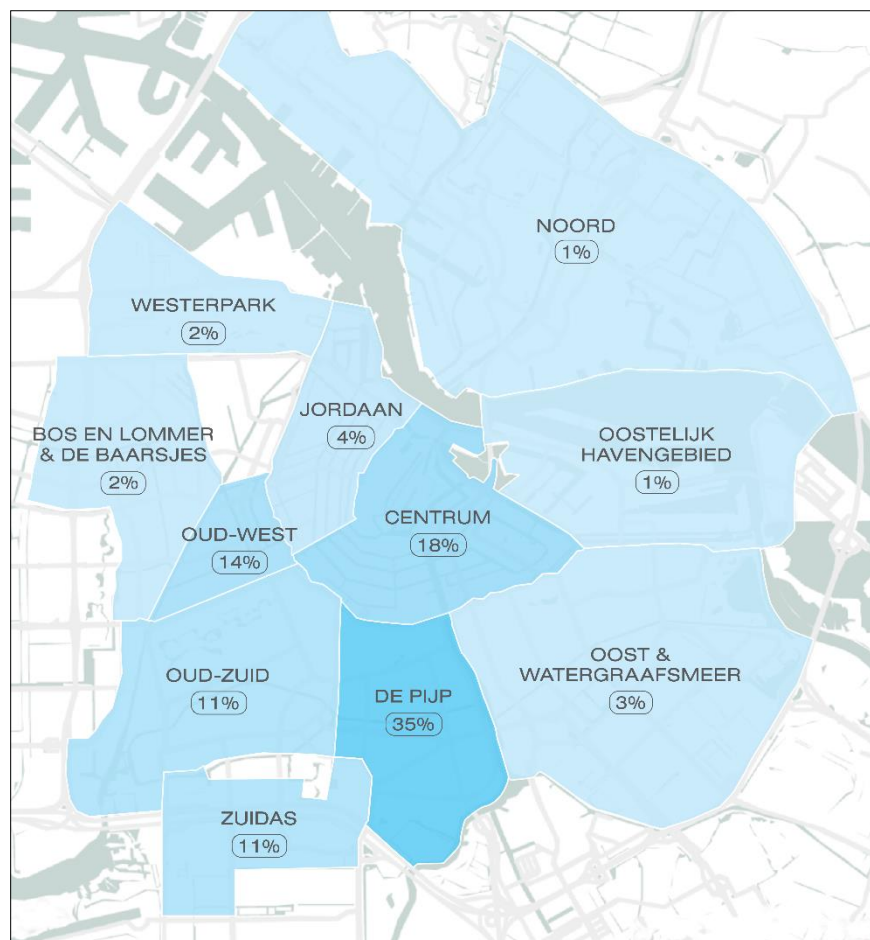
1. The Area of the Restaurant and the Customer: “Never Go to the Financial District!”

To be assured of a continuous influx of order request, couriers avoided orders that would take them too areas in the city without many restaurants. After all, as the likelihood of receiving an order was, at least partly, based on couriers’ location vis-à-vis a restaurant, ending up at the outskirts of Amsterdam drastically increased their chance of spending time waiting. “I know some parts of the city you just do not want to go”, George explained, “you have to cycle there and then cycle all the way back to the center to get another order” (Interview, 18-03-2019). Neighborhoods couriers generally avoided were *Amsterdam Oost* (not enough restaurants), *Nieuw West* (too far from the center) and the financial district (office buildings were difficult

⁴ Especially when working for *Uber Eats*, making this decision sometimes felt like a gamble. Unlike *Deliveroo*, this platform only presented their couriers information about the location of the restaurant and not the customer, rendering informed decision making very difficult. A control strategy *Uber* also uses with regards to their taxi drivers (Rosenblat, & Stark, 2016)

to find and enter). After a few days of doing deliveries, I found myself using George’s game strategy too. Just like many other couriers, I always tried to navigate myself back to the neighborhood *De Pijp*, given its high number and density of restaurants. In fact, of all the 191 meals I delivered, 35% came from restaurants located in this neighborhood (see Figure 1). The consequence of this popular tactic was, again, that without direct intervention of the platforms, the game incentivized couriers to direct themselves back to locations they were most needed: areas with high density of restaurants.

Figure 1. Percentage of Order Pickups per Neighborhood (n = 191)



2. Average Waiting Time of the Restaurants: “Never Go to Asian Express!”

Second, couriers avoided restaurants that were notorious for heaving lengthy meal preparation times. After arriving at a restaurant, couriers usually spent about five minutes waiting for their order to be ready. However, this number could rise up to 30 minutes or more when having bad luck. To decrease the risks of “losing money” while waiting, couriers rejected incoming orders

from certain restaurants. For instance, a couple of months into my fieldwork, I started to reject order requests from the Asian restaurant chain “China Express” as they always made me wait for ages. Harry, who shared this experience with me, described this place as “serial offenders of taking a long time” and told me that everybody “hates” it (Interview, 15-03-2019). Echoing this sentiment, Jack further complained: “they make you sit around for ages, they are always like ‘take a seat, have a drink’, well that doesn’t matter to me, you know!”. (Interview, 20-03-2019).

3. *The Piece Rates of the Order: “Take the Shorties!”*

Lastly, couriers took the piece rate of an incoming order into account. For both platforms, piece rates were calculated per individual order and usually hovered around four to seven euro depending on the distance of the delivery trip. As couriers considered the base rate per order relatively high, most of them preferred doing a several “shorties” (i.e. orders that did not require much cycling) per hour over completing one or two “long ones” (i.e. orders that would take you to the outskirts of the city). Harry, for instance, usually rejected orders with a piece rate over six euro’s: “it is too far away, and it takes a long time to cycle there” (Interview, 15-03-2019). Thijs added that although this strategy increased his chance of encountering slow restaurants it was worth the trade-off: “even if a restaurant takes fifteen minutes to prepare, I am still able to complete three deliveries per hour”. (Interview, 01-04-2019). Unlike the game strategies discussed so far, these last two strategies – avoiding certain restaurants and neighborhoods – did not align with the platform’s interests directly and incited, as we shall see, managerial intervention.

Phase 3. Arriving at a Restaurant: “It is Going to Take a While, Consider Cancelling!”

After couriers accepted an order, they made their way to the restaurant to pick it up. Upon arrival, couriers would always show their order numbers to a restaurant employee and be asked to wait for it to be ready. In this phase of the labor process, there were limited possibilities to employ game strategies, as the production speed of restaurants was simply out of couriers’ control: “you can try to speak to them [the restaurant] but it won't make much of a difference, you just kind of have to wait”, George explained (Interview, 18-03-2019). However, the fact that both platforms allowed couriers to cancel orders after arriving at a restaurant, reopened possibility for game playing. To figure out whether cancelling was worth doing so, many couriers would ask restaurants to estimate how long the preparation of the meal was going to

take. Hence, only those couriers who really enjoyed strategizing tended to cancel orders while waiting at restaurants regularly. Bram, a part-time courier who utilized almost every opportunity to maximize his income, stated:

If I drove a long time to get there [the restaurant] I tend to wait, as this otherwise would mean I drove all those kilometers for nothing. However, if it [the restaurant] was around the corner and they make me wait fifteen minutes, I tend to go to a new restaurant. In these occasions moving on is just worth doing, as I can make around five euro every quarter-hour (Interview, 14-03-2019).

Phase 4. Biking to the Customer: “It is Like a Race Against the Clock”

The last step of the labor process was to bike from restaurant to the customer. Though the imperative to increase delivery speed permeated the entire labor process, when biking from a restaurant to a customer it was most prevalent. Thijs explained:

You want to get yourself as fast as possible from the restaurant to the customer. The other way around does not matter that much, as the moment I arrive a restaurant one minute later there is still a big chance that it [the food] is not ready yet (interview 01-04-2019).

While being on the road myself, I repeatedly observed how couriers pushed themselves physically to maximize their cycling speed, only to use the brief moments at restaurants to catch their breath. Fanatic couriers not only increased their cycling pace, but literally accelerated *all* their physical movements:

It is a sunny afternoon when I make my way to a customer in Amsterdam Oost. While cycling through the *Piet Heinkade* a fellow courier overtakes me at great speed. Everything about him emanates hurriedness: he rides a racing bike, wears a colorful cycling outfit and a pair of flashy sunglasses. As we are sent to the same office building, I can see him putting his bike as close to the office entrance as possible and ringing their bell without taking off his backpack. “BEEEB” the door clicks open. While I take the elevator to the third floor – the location of both our customers – he runs up the staircase, taking three steps at a time. Upon my arrival, he is already agitatedly knocking on the lobby door, as the secretary did not see him immediately. After the door gets unlocked, he storms in, drops off his meal and exits the lobby even before I managed to take off my backpack (Fieldnote, 15-11-2018).

Although some couriers considered biking as fast as possible also more “fun” or referred the warm food in their backpacks, the main reason for employing this strategy was maximizing gig-income and thus related to the game: “it’s simple, if you stand still you do not get paid [...]”. Every minute of inactivity just feels like a waste of time. It is truly a race against the clock”, Bram stated (Interview, 14-03-2019). Consequently, many couriers complained about feeling

“rushed” all the time and admitted that they often took more risk in traffic than they wanted to. For instance, Sophie specified:

You are on a mission, you know. A mission of delivering this package in which it can be difficult to hold yourself in check. While cycling, I sometimes think, I am doing this work exactly because I am healthy and I have good functioning legs, if I would waste all that [by getting into an accident] I also wouldn't be able to continue doing this work (Interview, 14-03-2019).

While cycling, I frequently witnessed fanatic game players cutting off other road users, ignoring traffic rules or even smashing into fellow cyclists. For some, using an “aggressive” cycling style was a conscious game tactic. Jakub, for instance, told me that he often skipped red lights in order to maximize his income: “I am going recklessly, but I am good, you know, I can really predict things”, thereby referring to the movements of his fellow road users (Interview, 18-03-2019). Gabriel even admitted that his risky cycling style was, at least partly, responsible for him hitting a fellow cyclist who did not have bike lights:

It's like you are doing your job, you have an order, so you are biking fast, you are in your world and if somebody doesn't have light on you don't see them, especially because you are going fast (Interview, 18-03-2019).

In other words, while forced to act like mini-enterprises, couriers' success in the game did not only depend on their ability to understand and act upon market dynamics but also on their willingness to put their own life at risk. This is, perhaps, one of the cruelest consequences of an economic system in which workers are being transformed into autonomous economic actors (Fleming, 2017), as it shows that some couriers were willing to jeopardize their own health for entrepreneurial purposes. Again, *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* only benefitted from couriers' risk-taking behavior and their inclination to maximize their cycling speed, as, in the end, this contributed to the main variable over which they competed: average delivery time.

Important to note is that although the rules of the game were the same for everyone, the possibility to employ income increasing strategies were unequally distributed between full-time and part-time couriers. For the former group, which largely consisted of people with a migrant background, just working in times of high demand (evening and lunch) was not a viable option, as this would not result in enough money to “make ends meet” (Fieldnote, 28-03-2019). Hence, to compensate for the unprofitable hours before and after lunch, many couriers belonging to this group saw no other option than prolong their workweeks up to seventy hours or even more – a reality many gig laborers are forced to abide to (Wood et al., 2019). The latter group, mostly consisting of white students, was less financially dependent on

their gig-income and therefore in the position to adjust their work-schedule to the daily demand fluctuations. This strategy not only ensured them a continuous flow of incoming orders, but also allowed them to be “pickier” about whether to accept or reject an incoming delivery requests (see Phase 2). After all, during the “peak hours” the availability of orders was often so high that rejecting a couple of delivery requests did not increase the risk of ending up with nothing. Consequently, when measured in wage per hour, this skewed distribution of income increasing game playing opportunities resulted in a significant wage gap between full-time and part-time couriers.

5.3 The Courier-Platform Interest (Mis)Alignment

As just became clear, the game of income maximization permeates all the phases of the labor process. Akin to Burawoy’s (1979) observation, this wider function of the game was to align couriers’ interests with those of the platforms. In their urge to maximize their income, couriers decided to work when they are most needed (evenings, during bad weather), return to the neighborhoods where they were most needed (*De Pijp, Het Centrum*) and deliver their meals as fast as possible. In other words, it enabled platforms to establish control over the labor process without depriving couriers from their autonomy. However, as already hinted at, not all strategies worked in platforms’ interest directly, especially not when performed by all couriers at the same time (see Table 3.). If all couriers would avoid the morning shifts, refuse to bike to the outskirts of the city and reject incoming orders from slow restaurants many meals would maintain undelivered. As demanding couriers to make these decisions would go against couriers’ legal status as a freelancer, platforms coordinated these problems by heavily regulating and continuously modifying the market conditions under which couriers were forced to “play”. In this way, *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* solved their main managerial challenge: ensuring a sufficient number of available couriers at any point a day in all the corners of the city and thereby created a balance between autonomy and control. In the next section I will explain what this looked like in practice.

Table 3. The Courier-platform Interest (Mis)Alignment

Game strategies	In platforms' interest	In platforms' interest if coordinated	Against platforms' interest
Investing in vehicles	+		
Working during bad weather	+		
Maximizing cycling speed	+		
Ignoring traffic rules	+		
Taking shortcuts	+		
Only working during the evening		+	
Avoiding restaurants with long waiting times		+	
Not leaving the city center		+	
Only choosing short rides		+	
Going against the rules of the game			+

5.4 Manipulating the Market Conditions Under Which Couriers are Forced to Play

The first way in which both platforms manipulated couriers' game playing conditions was by continuously recruiting new and often financially vulnerable couriers, thereby creating a situation in which the supply of couriers always outstrips the total number of delivery requests (Van Doorn, 2017). Next to advertisement campaigns, *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* organized this by incentivizing their own couriers to recruit new ones. For every new "hire" a courier would bring in, couriers received a "referral bonus" of up to 200 euro. During the course of my fieldwork, I noticed how this policy had a very direct effect on the income security of couriers. For instance, whereas it used to be relatively easy to secure a significant amount of one-hour work shifts with *Deliveroo*, when the number of couriers started to increase it turned out to be almost impossible. At the end of my tenure, the work schedule would always be fully booked the second after its publication, leaving me, and many other couriers, often without any work shift for the week: "now they accepted so many couriers because that is better for them, but for us it is definitely horrible", Jakub, for instance, complained (Interview, 18-03-2019).

Second, both platforms temporarily increased the monetary reward per delivered meal to secure a sufficient stock of available couriers in times of high demand. For instance, *Uber Eats* offered its couriers a guaranteed "base rate" of ten to twelve euro during dinner times (usually between

18:00 and 20:00). In order to be guaranteed of this income, it was necessary to be available for order requests in the city center and deliver a minimum amount of meals per hour (usually one or two). As both platforms continuously modified these “promotions” to respond to changing demand dynamics, these incentive schemes showed high levels of contingency and varied per one (*Uber Eats*) or two weeks (*Deliveroo*). In addition, the platforms responded to unexpected demand fluctuations – such as an upcoming storm – by using so called “boost” bonuses. On a Sunday in March I, for instance, received a text from *Uber Eats* at 15:13 stating: “Uber Eats Amsterdam – We expect a lot of orders tonight! [money bag emoji]. Take advantage of boosts between 18.00 and 20.30 (up to 30% more on every delivery)!”.

Third, the platforms used strategies to incentivize couriers to bike to understaffed parts of the city, thereby responding to the popular game strategy to avoid the city’s outskirts. The fact that the platforms did not offer flat fees but adjusted their piece rates depending on the cycling distance of an order, already rendered these unpopular trips somewhat more profitable. Especially, couriers riding a racing or electronic bike were tempted to accept long-distance delivery gig’s, as this enabled them to benefit from their extra speed. Jakub, who rode one of these bikes, explained that he always accepted these orders because his bike and physical good shape enabled him to go “super-fast” anyways. (Interview, 18-03-2019). Next to this in-built incentive, both platforms also regularly adjusted the rules of the game to entice couriers to work in understaffed neighborhoods. For instance, *Deliveroo* offered couriers an extra bonus on top of their regular wage if they completed a certain amount of orders in an understaffed neighborhood (e.g. *Amsterdam Noord*).

Lastly, the platforms policed whether couriers “broke” the game rules they had set. The fact that all the bonuses were not granted by a physical manager but allotted through a smartphone application, created ample opportunity for what couriers referred to as “cheating” – i.e. a form of workplace resistance that occurs in all segments of the gig economy (Möhlmann, & Zalmanson, 2017; Shapiro, 2018). To receive *Uber Eats*’ guaranteed “peak hour” base rate of eleven euro per hour, Bram, for instance, explained how he would first deliver a single meal to receive this bonus and, thereafter, switch to *Deliveroo*’s app to work for them: “once I had delivered an order for *Uber*, I would just not check the box “delivered” so I would not receive any new order requests”(Interview, 14-03-2019). Similarly, Sem recounted how he used to collect the same guaranteed base rate without doing any work at all: “you would just cycle to the outskirts of the city so you wouldn’t receive any orders [...] order a meal at the only

restaurant around yourself, pick it up [...] and eat it thereafter.” (Interview, 27-03-2019). However, both couriers also added to these stories that it did not take long before their “cheating” strategies were discovered and made impossible by the platforms. In other words, to prevent what Burawoy (1979, p. 89) refers to as a “system crisis”: the situation where game playing dynamics endanger profit margins, both *Deliveroo* and *Uber Eats* made sure that game was played by their rules.

Reviewing these strategies, it is clear that *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* did not operate as “neutral” market intermediaries but, instead, continuously manipulated and modified the market conditions under which couriers were forced to “play”. Just to be clear, this internal market should not be understood as a “real” market in which a fluctuating price establishes equilibrium between supply of couriers and demand of delivery gigs. Both platforms remained, after all, in charge of the price setting. Instead, the internal market of food delivery gigs should be viewed as a tool the “shadow” employers *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* utilized, manipulated and hid behind for the purpose of managerial control, a finding a small number of studies already hinted at (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Van Doorn, 2017; Gerber & Krzywdzinski, 2019).

When following this interpretation, with the four interventions described above the platforms simply tried to manipulate couriers’ individual wage-effort calculation, to use labor process theory terminology – i.e. the amount of effort couriers are willing to exert when delivering a meal in return for a certain amount of wage (Smith, 2006, p. 390). This, not only by temporarily boosting the wage for a gig with a bonus (e.g. boost bonuses during bad weather) or increasing couriers’ income security in times of high demand (e.g. guaranteed base rates) but also by profiting from financially vulnerable couriers like migrant workers. This last group is, after all, more likely to abide to low wage levels due to their limited resistance options (Zwick, 2018; Theunissen, Zaroni & Van Laer, 2019). By means of these manipulations, the platforms were able to solve the coordination problems the game had brought about.

5.5 Disguising the Capital-Labor Relationship

Thus far, I explained how *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* were able to (re)align couriers’ interests with those of themselves by determining the conditions under which couriers were forced to play (resulting in control in the short run). In this final section, I show that the game served a second purpose: disguising the hierarchical capital-labor relationship. For *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo*, concealing the actual, antagonistic, capital-labor relations underlying their freelance model was of crucial importance, as it was exactly this principle that constituted the root of

their business model. From my first day onwards, I noticed that both platforms were, for instance, very careful not to refer to me as their employee in their communication, thereby masking this hierarchy rhetorically (see e.g. Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). However, in this last section, I will show that it was through the practice of game playing that the platforms' status as "shadow" employee was disguised most effectively. This, I argue, enabled both platforms to establish managerial control in the long run as it reduced the likelihood for workplace resistance to occur.

The game disguised this relation in two ways. First of all, the game redistributed the usual hierarchical conflict between workers and managers – in this case couriers and the platforms – in the lateral direction of a third party: the restaurants. As couriers were paid on a piece rate, slow restaurants functioned much like the uncooperative "truck drivers" or "crib attendants" Burawoy (1979) observed in the manufacturing industry, as they could hold you up for a considered period of time. Restaurant employees, on the other hand, did not have a direct stake in couriers' delivery speed and often showed little willingness to maximize their work effort. This clear conflict of interest, frequently resulted in a charged relationship between both parties:

It's dinner time, when I arrive in a burger place to pick up an order. I see sweat dripping off the cooks' foreheads, they are clearly working their asses off; trying to keep up with the pace of orders from guests in the restaurants and their online customers at the same time. When I walk to their open kitchen, a fellow courier just tells the cooks his order number and asks them how long it is going to take. "10 minutes", they answer. With an agitated face, he positions himself in a corner, his arms folded. After about five minutes, he seems to lose his patience and repeatedly starts to ask the cooks if his order is ready: "Soon! Take it easy" they answer annoyed. After a while, one cook tells me I can pick up my order, even though the hurried courier is first in line. Clearly frustrated, he barely manages to put up a smile when I say "good luck" on my way out. (Fieldnote, 30-07-2018).

Especially when restaurant left couriers in the dark about how long the preparation of their meal was going to take or presented them with the wrong information, friction was likely to occur. After all, this ruled out couriers' possibility to make an informed decision about cancelling the gig or not. For instance, Thijs explained: "If they would just tell me straight up it is going to take fifteen minutes, I can just decide to reject the order [...] the moment they keep stringing me along I can do nothing at all!" (Interview, 01-04-2019). During the interviews, many couriers told stories about getting into intense arguments with restaurants whenever they felt misinformed. Oliver, for example, recounted that a pizzeria chef once called him a "fucking asshole" for not treating their pizza with great care. "I was just like, you lied

to me at the beginning [about the preparation time] you have to treat us with respect. He costs me five euro you know” (Interview, 11-03-2019).

Contrarily, when I asked couriers about their interaction with *Deliveroo* or *Uber Eats* it struck me that most of them rarely reached out to their platform employers and if they did only discussed unpolitical logistic-related issues. Instead of complaining about their precarious work conditions or challenge managerial decisions that had fundamentally changed the rules of the game (e.g. *Deliveroo*'s decision to change their flat fee of five euro per order to a contingent distance based fee), couriers only felt the need to contact the platform if the delivery of a particular meal was being obstructed due to technicalities (e.g. a wrong address) or exceptionally uncooperative restaurants. In other words, couriers perceived the precarious game-like work context *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* had created as unchangeable and only regarded it necessary to turn to their platform employers if they felt mistreated in achieving the desired outcome: maximizing gig income.

In sum, because the game incentivized couriers to maximize their delivery speed and positioned restaurants as only human actor they encountered slowing them down, workplace conflict revolved around this interaction and was not focused on the managerial decisions of platform themselves. This dynamic, in turn, disguised the actual antagonistic relation between couriers and their platform employers.

Second, the game made it appear *as if* couriers' individual performance had a significant impact on their income, thereby removing from view that, in the end, it was the platform who determined the piece rates and thus couriers' overall wage levels. Especially the less “successful” game players, which often happened to be female, tended to related their low income to their personal shortcoming, thereby reproducing a neoliberal discourse on individual responsibility (Burchell, 1993). For instance, Chen, a Chinese-Canadian courier who just moved to the Netherlands and had a hard time finding a “real” job, explained that although her work as a delivery courier earned her just enough to “survive” she still had “nothing to complain about” and described the payment as “decent”. After all, her low income was, she reasoned, a consequence of her bad physical shape and unwillingness to work in bad weather: “if you are really athletic and you do not care about the weather, you can earn a very good living of it. But for me, I barely do any sports and get this cold head when its windy.” (Interview,14-03-2019). The combination of the short time span of delivery work and the fact

that the platforms allowed couriers to continuously make small decisions when “on demand”, made it even more difficult to not blame yourself when your strategy did not play out so well:

It’s a Friday afternoon when my phone starts ringing. “Beeb, Beeb”. It is an incoming order request. I hesitate whether to except it, as it comes from a restaurant with notoriously long waiting times (“China Express”). Since I am already waiting 20 minutes “on-demand” without receiving any gigs I decide to accept it anyways. Upon arrival, it is quiet inside. Would this mean that my meal is going to be ready quickly? I show my order number and start to wait outside. 10 minutes pass. I decide to go inside to ask if it is almost done. Another 10 minutes pass. I am getting frustrated, why did I accept this order when I knew this restaurant always keeps couriers waiting for ages? After another 5 minutes it is finally done I continue my journey being frustrated about my stupid decision (Fieldnote, 15-03-2019).

As a response, couriers did not collectivize and demand higher piece rates, but just extended their workdays and adjusted their game-playing strategies to their individual skills and capabilities – a workplace dynamic related to piece wage payment Marx (1867/2013, p. 387-388) himself already pointed at. For instance, Chen, to stick to the same example, explained that because she knew she was not the fastest cyclist she tried to focus on “the bigger picture” by, amongst other things, rejecting orders from slow restaurants (Interview,14-03-2019). Echoing this sentiment, Maria, a female artist from Portugal, considered doing several short orders over a couple of long ones more “tactical” in her specific case, given her “body size” (Interview, 29-03-2019). In sum, the individualized reward relation the game brought about stimulated couriers to relate their low wage to their individual game-playing (in)competence, instead of platforms’ attempt to buy their labor power against the lowest possible costs. This lived experience, again, helped to disguise the structural antagonism underlying their new employment construction.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Discussion

This study showed that: (1) *Deliveroo and Uber Eats* did not strip couriers from as much autonomy as possible but granted them with a set of carefully confined decision-making opportunities that allowed them to navigate the internal food delivery market themselves; (2) this managerial system gave rise to a dynamic in which (semi)autonomously operating, yet severely underpaid delivery couriers continuously employed strategies to maximize their gig income, a phenomena that I termed the *entrepreneurial work-game*; (3) this game coupled couriers' interests with the interests of management and disguised the structural antagonism underlying their capital-labor relation; (4) platforms were able to control couriers behavior without violating their legal status as independent contractor by permitting the labor process to be regulated by this game and by continuously modifying its rules and conditions. These findings contribute to literature on the platform-based gig economy and labor process theory more generally in following five ways.

First, this research challenges existing understandings of managerial control in the platform-based gig economy by means of ethnographic research. *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* did not solve their main managerial challenge of ensuring a readily available labor pool in all corners of the city by redefining re-Fordist (digital Taylorism) or post-Fordist (user generated rating systems) modes of control (Cherry, 2016; Gandini, 2019) but, instead, by allowing the labor process to revolve around a highly staged and heavily regulated work-game. Playing the entrepreneurial work-game of income maximization myself enabled me to experience first-handedly how this workplace dynamic coupled couriers' interests with those of the platform and thereby controlled workers behavior from a distance. This finding invites scholars studying the platform-based gig economy to shift their attention from *direct control* via deskilling and user generated ratings to *indirect control* through the regulation of game-playing conditions. The fact that almost all literature on labor control is desk or interview based (e.g. Aloisi, 2015; Gandini, 2019; Peticca-Harris, et al. 2018) perhaps explains why the importance of these more coercive forms of control have been overestimated, as this has happened in the context of call center work as well (Sallaz, 2015).

Second, this study augmented the empirical literature dealing with the laborer-platform relation by showing how the game of income maximization helped to obfuscate the structural

antagonism that underlies it (Thompson, 1990, 101). Platforms thus not only disguise their true status of “shadow” employer (Friedman, 2014) by using a misleading rhetoric in which employees are referred to as “driver-partners” and work-tasks rebranded as “gigs” – to use the example of Uber’s taxi service (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016), nor by replacing a human manager by a digital application that exposes the workforce to less visible forms of workplace control – i.e. algorithmic management (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016), user-generated performance ratings (Gandini, 2019) and information asymmetries (Shapiro, 2018). Instead, this study revealed that the game of income maximization *itself* created a work floor dynamic in which the inherent contrariety between platforms and gig laborers was removed from view (Burawoy, 1979). After all, the game redistributed the hierarchical conflict between platform and courier in the direction of restaurants and made it appear *as if* low wage levels were the sole consequence of individual game performance instead of top down price setting. In other words, this finding complements the above-mentioned literature by relating platforms’ concealed employer status to day-to-day work practices and adaptations that figure more prominently in couriers’ actual lived experience.

Third, my findings show that work games do not necessarily derive from workers’ initiative but can have a highly staged, if not top-down character. *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* not only continuously intervened in the game by implementing new bonuses and incentives, they also seemed to have designed the labor process with an actual video game in mind – something anecdotal evidence verifies (Scheiber, 2017). Because couriers did not just employ strategies to top up their income with tips (Sallaz, 2002; Sherman, 2007), nor experienced the comfort of a secured base rate per day (Burawoy, 1979), the possibility to “opt-out” were, moreover, much more limited than in previous work-games. This finding fits into a broader scholarly trend as, over the years, researchers have ascribed more explanatory weight to the role managers play in the implementation of work games. The first-generation work-game scholars, for instance, still understood game playing as a socially constructed and non-economic phenomena that workers undertook independent *of* and in opposition *to* management (Crozier, 2010/1964; Roy, 1959). Burawoy (1979) and his followers – the second-generation – rejected this idea and argued that although games still “arrive from workers initiatives” (p. 86) managers usually regulate them to make them serve capital’s interests (see also: Sallaz, 2002, 2015). Lastly, drawing inspiration from the discipline of games studies instead of Marxist sociology, the third generation revealed how, nowadays, firms purposefully implement coercive psychological tricks drawn from (video) games to control workers’ behavior “from above” (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017, p.

542; Schrape, 2014). My findings expand the analytical scope of this last group, by showing that this literature should move beyond its original focus on small, behaviorist game-like interventions and also interpret the implementation of carefully confined decision-making opportunities that dovetail uncertainty and goal-orientation as a form of top-down gamification.

Fourth, this study develops ethnographic research on the labor process by exploring the theoretical confines of a new type of work-game. Remarkably, the entrepreneurial work-game I observed played a very similar role in the wider labor process of the gig economy as the one Burawoy (1979) reported on in the manufacturing industry, namely: 1) aligning the interests between platform and delivery couriers and 2) obfuscating the inherent antagonism between both parties. However, in terms of gameplay characteristics it departed from existing work-game models heavily. Instead of being shaped by their engagement with customers (Sherman, 2007), machines (Burawoy, 1979), fellow workers (Roy, 1959) or the manager (Crozier, 2010/1964), food delivery couriers played their entrepreneurial work-games while interacting with the (digitally mediated) market. Hence, couriers' success in this game did not necessarily depend on their knowledge of machines or interactions with other human beings (customers, colleagues or managers) – as in previous work-games – but on their ability to understand and act upon the rules of supply and demand, as well as their willingness to invest in vehicles or take risks. In other words, this game was a product of human capital theory (Fleming, 2017) and entrepreneurial ideology more generally (Read, 2009).

Lastly, my findings raise new questions about the racialized nature of exploitation in the gig economy (Van Doorn, 2017; Zwick, 2018; Alderman, 2019). Although the rules of this entrepreneurial game were the same for every courier, this research showed that the ability to employ income increasing strategies were unequally distributed between full- and part-time couriers. While the latter group confined their delivery shifts to the profitable periods of high demand, the former was forced to also work during the less profitable hours to make ends meet. As the group of full-time delivery couriers largely consisted of non-white migrant workers, this dynamic gave rise to an hourly wage gap that seemed to follow a racialized logic (Alderman, 2019). Van Doorn (2017) already pointed out that historically grown inequalities pertaining both race (and gender) are being reproduced, if not worsened in gig economy (see also Zanoni, 2019; Rosenblat et al. 2017). My findings confirm this observation by pointing at the unequal distribution of game-playing opportunities (see also: Manriquez, 2019). However, because race was not the main focus of this study and migrant workers were underrepresented in my

interview sample, future research should explore how identity related inequalities are imbued in the institutional make-up of the gig economy and contribute to capital accumulation.

6.2 Conclusion.

How do digital platforms operating in the gig economy control their workers, given that they do not hire subordinate employees but assign “gigs” to autonomous freelancers? After fully immersing myself in the platform-based food delivery sector, I found the existing explanations inadequate for the work behavior I observed on the streets of Amsterdam. Instead of stripping couriers from as much autonomy as possible (Taylorism) or controlling their emotions through rating (normative control), *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* granted workers with a set of carefully confined decision-making opportunities that allowed them to navigate the internal food delivery market themselves. Couriers, in turn, used this autonomy to employ income increasing strategies in all phases of the labor process. As their success was partly dependent on their ability to understand and act upon market logics, they were forced to play what I call an *entrepreneurial work game*.

Uber Eats and *Deliveroo* remained in control of a workforce constituting of autonomous freelancer by allowing the labor process to revolve around this game. The game not only contributed to managerial control by coupling couriers’ interests with those of the platforms (control in the short run), but also by removing the antagonistic capital-labor relation underlying couriers’ new employment construction from view (control in the long run). To make sure that couriers played this game in the way the platforms wanted, the platforms did not dictate couriers’ behavior directly but, instead, manipulated the market conditions under which they were forced to play (e.g. bonuses, incentives). In other words, *Uber Eats* and *Deliveroo* were able to grant couriers with a significant degree of autonomy over when and how to work because they rendered these “freedoms” subordinate to an internal market they developed themselves and could manipulate from above (see Table 4.). This autonomy was therefore more of a deception as, in practice, it meant carefully adjusting your work schedule to the merciless vagaries of the internal market.

Table 4. Autonomy and Control in the Platform Based Gig Economy

The platform-based gig economy	
<i>Type of Autonomy</i>	Market dependent autonomy
<i>Managerial responds to the “problem” of autonomy</i>	Granting workers with a significant degree of autonomy while remain in control of the market conditions through which they exercise these “freedoms”
<i>Class Relation</i>	Non-adversarial
<i>Ideological inspiration</i>	Human Capital theory
<i>Work-Game</i>	Entrepreneurial work-games

Following extended case logic, the emergence of this new managerial system (market dependent autonomy + entrepreneurial work-game) can only be understood when placed against the background of more broad transformations in the political economy. First of all, the increasing competitive pressure firms faced in the wake of increasing globalization (*material*), organizations operating in the gig economy did not decide to intensify direct control to secure their competitive advantage, as was usual in the past (Burawoy, 1983, 1985), but to drastically cut labor costs by recategorizing workers as independent contractor. This employment status, in turn, rendered the transition from time- to piece wages rational – an element without which the entrepreneurial work-game would not have been possible. Next to competitive pressure, this new managerial system was heavily informed by rising popularity of human capital theory. After all, the game incited couriers to act like competitive mini-enterprises, a behavioral pattern neatly fitting into its ideological prescriptions (*ideological*).

Although the extended case logic does not rule out the possibility that different control mechanisms co-exist side by side, it does argue that every constellation of capitalism creates a “prototypical” form of control (Burawoy, 1983, p.589). This begs the question whether the managerial strategy described in this study pertains to other segments of the gig economy as well? Particularly for platforms operating in the “physical gig-economy”, scholars have described workplace dynamics that seem to hint in the direction of indirect control via market dependent game-playing (Heeks, 2017; Malin & Chandler, 2016, p. 391; Manriquez 2019). Akin to food delivery couriers, the taxi drivers working for ride hailing platforms *Uber* and *Lyft*, for instance, also adjust their behavior to local demand fluctuations by primarily putting

themselves on available in busy times (the Friday and Saturday nights) and areas of high demand (around bars and discotheques), thereby thus self-directing their behavior to benefit the platform (Malin & Chandler, 2016; Chen & Sheldon, 2015; Manriquez 2019). In fact, in a recent study on work experiences of *Uber* drivers, Manriquez (2019) revealed that on a subjective level these gig laborers also seem to interpret their work *as if* they were playing a game. Moreover, very similar to what I observed, these ride hailing platforms also seem to allow the rules of supply and demand to regulate the work floor, only to intervene with bonuses and incentives when they are thrown out of balance (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). When work is not only managed but also performed online, as in the “digital gig economy” (Heeks, 2017), the characterization of digital Taylorism seems to hold more potential, as in this sector work is undeniably subdivided in the tiniest and most deskilled units possible (Cherry, 2016; Gerber & Krzywdzinski, 2019). However, even in this segment of the gig economy, scholars have documented gig laborer attempts to maximize their income by acting upon the rules of supply and demand. For instance, Wood et al. (2019) revealed how “remote gig workers” (p.60) from countries like Nigeria and Kenya tended to adjust their working hours to be in sync with their clients in the West. Consequently, these workers were not only forced to work up to 78 hours a week but also to ignore their local time zone by working at night and in the weekend. As it seems likely that the gig economy is here to stay, let me close by inviting scholar to explore the practice of game playing among these different groups of gig laborers and remain critical about the way this new, platforms based, constellation of capitalism has managed to sell precarious work as freedom.

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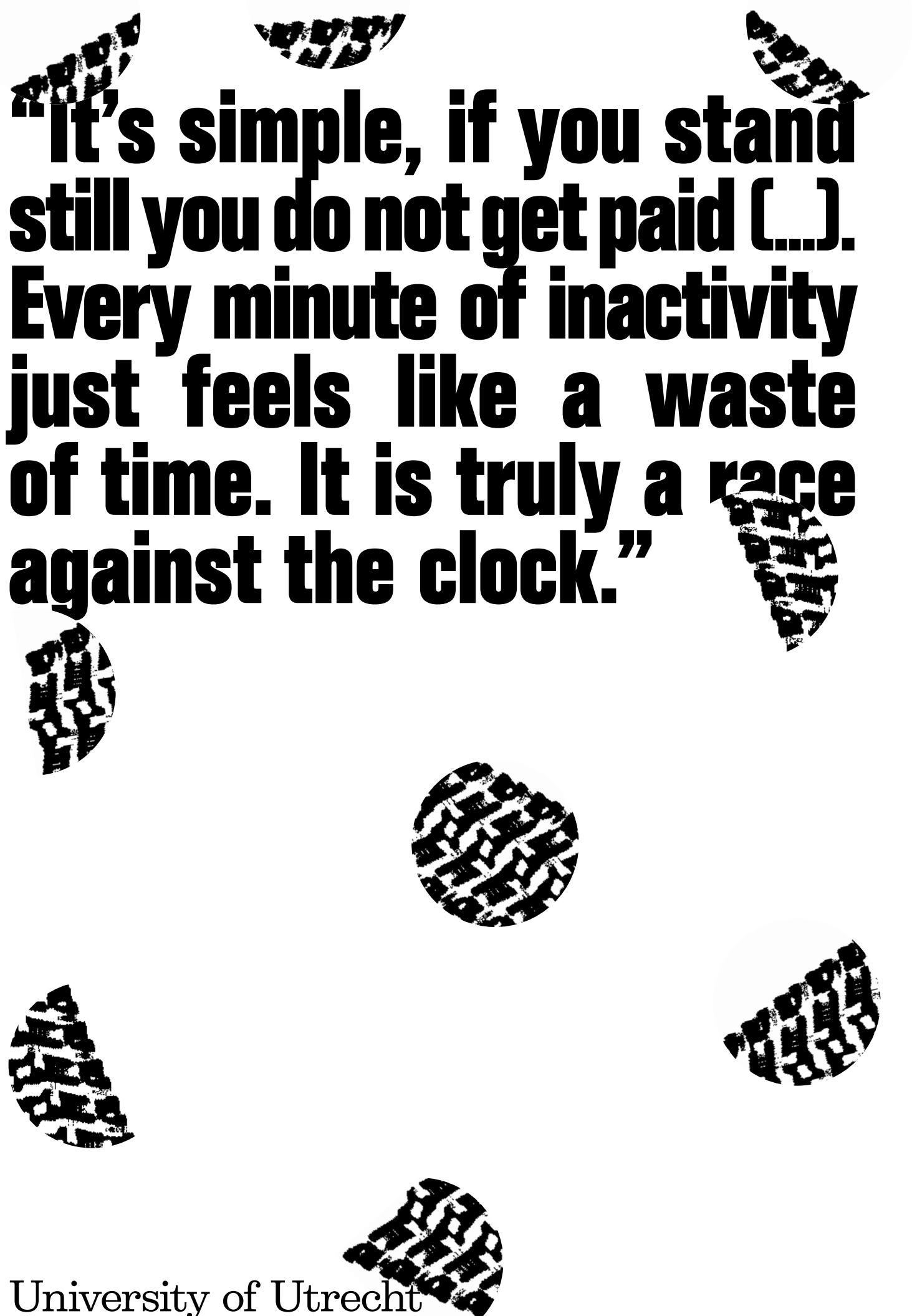
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“It’s simple, if you stand still you do not get paid (...). Every minute of inactivity just feels like a waste of time. It is truly a race against the clock.”