Gig Economy Riders on Social Media in Thailand: Contested Identities and Emergent Civil Society Organisations

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Abstract The emergence of the gig economy has generated a new class of workers who are categorised as independent “partners” instead of employees with rights to labour protection. Triggered by observations of a protest movement by platform-based delivery riders in Thailand, we engaged in seven months of digital ethnographic research of riders’ interactions online to understand the emergence of informal groups facilitating mutual aid and collective action. Civil society research has neglected to analyse such groups within the gig economy. The study finds that social media is a site for the development and contestation of identity narratives. We observed a “Hero” narrative that glorifies delivery riders’ independent status and a “Worker” narrative that challenges riders’ conditions. We argue that these collective identity narratives crucially facilitate or inhibit the emergence of labour-oriented civil society organisations, thus contributing to third sector research that examines civil society in the Global South.

Keywords Gig economy · Civil Society · Labour Relations · Social Media · Global South

Introduction

The way people work, socialise and organise is undergoing rapid transformation in Thailand and globally. The food delivery economy is at the forefront of this change. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the food delivery sector in Thailand grew significantly to US$ 4 billion in 2021 (Momentum Works, 2022). The leading delivery platform Grab captures nearly half of the market in which it competes with foodpanda, LINE MAN, Lalamove and other emerging platforms (Momentum Works, 2022). The impact of these food delivery platforms in Thailand has been striking, particularly in Bangkok, where delivery riders on motorcycles have become a conspicuous part of the urban landscape. These riders are part of the global shift to the gig economy and the digitalisation of work.

The rise of the gig economy in Thailand is welcomed by a consumer-focused citizenry who value the expansion of convenience and a labour force eager for independent work in depressed economic times. However, there have been increasing rumblings of discontent in the gig economy. At the end of 2020, we observed a growing labour protest movement in Bangkok by delivery riders (Bangkok Judd, 2020; Post, 2020). Fuelled by frustration with the precarious nature of gig work and a lack of worker rights, the movement reflects the contradictions between workers and capital inherent in the capitalist mode of production (Atzeni, 2010). It is also one of many struggles for better working conditions by gig workers in the region and globally (Alderman, 2015; Buckley, 2020; Gropp, 2019; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Vasandani, 2021).

We began by asking where and how do riders connect and come together. Research on gig workers elsewhere emphasises the importance of physical meeting spaces for the development of collective identities and organising for
collective action (Ford & Honan, 2019; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Wells et al., 2021). Research of gig workers also shows how in the absence of physical meeting spaces online spaces can perform a similar function (Lehdonvirta, 2016; Soriano & Cabanès, 2020; Alex J. Wood et al., 2018). Yet, the role of online spaces has not been analysed among delivery riders. While studies on delivery rider organisation consistently mention social media, they largely treat social media as a tool for communication and mobilisation overlooking potential dynamics of socialisation and identity-building online (for example, see Chesta et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2020; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Our early research in Thailand directed us to large and active social media groups and pages managed by riders, some with as many as 80,000 followers. Hence, we started asking questions about what role social media was playing in the formation of worker identities and the emergence of civil society organisations that facilitate collective action. To answer these questions, we engaged in digital ethnographic research observing and analysing online communication among riders.

Our research reveals social media as a virtual environment for socialisation and mutual aid, which is consistent with research on online interactions of gig workers in other countries (Lehdonvirta, 2016; Soriano & Cabanès, 2020; Alex J. Wood et al., 2018). Online spaces such as Facebook groups and pages help riders overcome the inherent loneliness and social disconnection of their working conditions while facilitating solidarity and mutual aid. Furthermore, riders also use online spaces as channels to cultivate and express collective identities as well as organising for collective action. On Facebook pages, riders actively express and propagate narratives of themselves as workers with the capacity to unite and campaign for better working conditions. These collective identities provide the foundation for loose social media-based groups of riders to move from leveraging social media for socialising and mutual aid to forming informal labour-focused civil society organisations.

The emergence of collective worker identities in online spaces is, however, complicated by the presence of gig economy platform operators. Unlike physical spaces, online spaces are open to platform companies who have a vested interest in obstructing the development of collective worker identities that could form the foundation for organising and collective action. To ensure maximum efficiency in the extension of labour power, capital strives to exert control over the labour process (Braverman, 1998). Increasingly, managerial control is extended to the realm of identities in the form of normative control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Thompson et al., 2004). We observed platforms deliberately attempting to shape the identity of riders as Heroic entrepreneurs operating autonomously. Through adopting labour process theory (LPT), we argue that platform companies’ attempt to shape worker identities is a form of normative control that undermines their capacity for collective action. The narrative of riders as Heroic entrepreneurs is both resisted and consented to by riders on Facebook pages; thus, we argue that social media sites are spaces where riders both project and contest their identities. This process of contestation impacts the formation of new forms of civil society organisations in the Thai gig economy.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We start by elaborating on the labour relations in the gig economy, locating our research within third sector literature, discussing our conceptual framework and introducing our methodology. We then present our research findings including analysis of platforms’ exertion of normative control, riders’ reaction to normative control and the emergence of new forms of labour-oriented civil society organisations. In conclusion, we discuss the implications of our findings for civil society research and identify areas for further inquiry.

Literature, Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The Gig Economy

The gig economy “involves the exchange of labour for money between individuals or companies via digital platforms that actively facilitate matching between providers and customers, on a short-term and payment by task basis” (Lepanjuri et al., 2018, p. 4). Leveraging digital technology the platform model employed by gig economy companies differs strongly from traditional business models facilitating flexible operations and reducing overhead costs (Parker et al., 2016). The gig economy is predominantly split into two categories: crowdwork which refers to online-only platforms that leverage a dispersed workforce to complete tasks online; and work-on-demand via app which refers to platforms whose workers perform services offline notably food delivery and transportation services (De Stefano, 2015). This article is concerned with this latter section of the gig economy specifically food delivery platforms in Thailand.

A key feature of the gig economy is the categorisation of workers as “partners” rather than employees, which shifts risks to workers creating precarious conditions without social protection (Friedman, 2014). While the dominant neoliberal discourse celebrates workers in the gig economy as entrepreneurs who engage independently in the new digital economy, the perspective of gig economy workers as employed workers with labour protection rights has
gained traction globally (De Stefano, 2015; Friedman, 2014). The denial of a proper employment relationship for gig workers, individualised and dispersed working conditions, and the use of algorithmic labour management practices are detrimental to worker organisation and collective action (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018). In Thailand, the challenges to gig worker organisation are amplified by weak labour unions which face legal obstacles and state-sanctioned union-busting resulting in consistently low rates of membership (ILOSTAT, 2016; Wanasiri, 2020).

**Labour movements, Civil Society and Social Media**

This article is firstly located within scholarship concerned with the emergence of new forms of labour-oriented civil society organisations. Membership-based labour unions have long been central actors in civil society, especially in the Global North (Putman, 1995). However, due to the external pressure of a changing economy and internal failures to adapt, they have faced a decline in importance (Anjum, 2012; Kumar, 1993). Yet, in both the Global North and South, labour issues persist, and demand for labour organisations remains as worker rights are squeezed under neoliberal policies and new forms of digitally mediated labour relations (De Stefano, 2015; Mosoetsa & Williams, 2012). In response, alternative forms of labour movements have emerged in the context of the gig economy (Chesta et al., 2019; Panimbang, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Alex J. Wood et al., 2018). What are the dynamics of power and control that shape the emergence of these organisations is a driving question behind the research for this article.

Secondly, this article is located within a discourse that considers alternative conceptions of civil society. Scholarship on civil society has tended to focus on institutionalised forms of civil society and neglect the diversity of informal civil society activities, which dominate urban politics in much of the Global South (Bayat, 1997). This focus reflects the evolution of the concept of civil society in liberal democracies of the Global North where freedom of association exists and formal forms of civil society are not restricted or co-opted by the state (Anjum, 2012; Kumar, 1993). However, research on civil society in the Global South, post-soviet countries and countries in economic crisis illustrates a great variety of alternative and informal forms of civil society organisations and civic engagement (Hannah, 2007; Krasynska & Martin, 2017; Schak & Hudson, 2003; Sotiropoulos, 2004; Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022; Wells-Dang, 2012). In the Thai context, Chua (2018) argues that there is no clear distinction between institutionalised civil society organisations and the state. Institutionalised NGOs often depend on the state for funds and are arguably ideologically similar. Hence, some scholars argue that large sections of civil society in Thailand tend not to adhere to traditional notions of civil society organisations and it is informal and locally rooted sections of civil society that consistently challenge state power and elite interests (Vichit-Vadakan, 2003; Walker, 2012). Hence, it is important we adopt a definition of civil society that accounts for the conditions of the digitally connected world in which gig workers live and the political and social circumstances in the Global South, particularly in Thailand.

Chambers and Kopstein (2006, p. 364) describe civil society as “a sphere in which individuals come together and form groups, pursue common enterprises, share interests, communicate over important and sometimes not so important matters”. Reflecting traditional understandings of civil society as voluntary associations they categorise this form of civil society as “apart from the state” in contrast to civil society against the state, in support of the state, in dialogue with the state, in partnership with the state or beyond the state. The informal groups of delivery riders we observed initially coming together voluntarily on social media sites for mutual aid constitute a form of civil society apart from the state. However, we observed a shift within these groups going beyond mutual aid and developing a common identity that facilitates collective action towards a common goal. According to Chambers and Kopstein (2006, p. 365), “in civil society individuals come together to pursue particularistic ends”. When these particularistic goals challenge the state, corporations and other elite interests, civil society actions take on a political dimension. Therefore, following Wells-Dang (2012, p. 24) we conceive civil society as “a political process of collective action and alliance building”. Through this process, civil society actors “articulate their interests and make demands; defend their rights vis-a-vis the state and others; and meet their needs directly, without depending on state agencies” (Uphoff & Krishna, 2004, p. 359). It is through these lenses we explore how delivery drivers transition from individuals that come together for mutual aid to becoming civil society actors.

Thirdly, this article speaks to a discourse that examines the role of social media within civil society. New forms of networked communication such as social media decentralise power, enable the seamless formation and growth of groups with common interests, and empower civil society actors to circumvent traditional hierarchal state-centric power structures (Castells, 2015; Castells & Cardoso, 1996). Hence, authors such as McNutt et al., (2018, p. 27) argue that social media could trigger a change in the way the third sector is organised, which “might revolutionise non-profit research and theory”. Given the prevalence of digital technology in all sectors of society, it is crucial that...
non-profit and third sector research considers new forms of civil society that are emerging online. Virtual civil society organisations are particularly salient in societies where conventional civil society is weak and there is little trust in the state (Beissinger, 2017; Papachristopoulos & Zafir-organisations are particularly salient in societies where
civil society that are emerging online. Virtual civil society
non-profit and third sector research considers new forms of
fundraising (for example, see Lai & Fu, 2021; Tian et al.,
media, as tools for administration, marketing and
information communication technologies, including social
(2018) research on civil society tends to focus on the use of
emergence of virtual civil society organisations and associ-
dations that do not conform to traditional conceptions of
civil society is often neglected. By examining the dynamics
of power and control that shape how groups on social
media develop collective identities and form particularistic
goals, we intend to address critical questions on how new
forms of civil society organisations, particularly labour-
oriented organisations, are emerging in the digital age.

Conceptual Framework: Labour Process Theory (LPT)

Labour process theory (LPT) focuses on issues of control
over the labour process and worker agency in the face of
such control (Lucio & Stewart, 1997). Rooted in critical
Marxist thinking within the sociology of work and critical
management studies, LPT frames managerial control over
the labour process as a key mechanism for ensuring the
most efficient transformation of labour power into a com-
modity for the maximisation of profit (Braverman, 1998).
Scholars examining the gig economy have frequently
adopted LPT as a framework to understand the control
exerted by platforms over gig workers through mechanisms
such as algorithmic control, the “gamification” of work,
incentive structures and information inequalities (Gandini,
2019; Gerber & Krzywdzinski, 2019; Veen et al., 2020;
Alex J Wood et al., 2019). Studies in Thailand have also
adopted LPT to demonstrate that platform companies exert
control over delivery riders’ labour process (Teerakow-
itykajorn & Tularak, 2020). These scholars reject the notion
that delivery riders are independent “partners” instead
framing them as “workers” and platform companies as “employers” with the capacity to exercise power over the
labour process.

Recently traditional forms of control have been sup-
plemented by normative control, which shifts the focus of
control from behaviours and outputs towards crafting
worker identities to align with company objectives
(Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Thompson et al., 2004).
Previous studies have found evidence of different forms of
normative control in the gig economy (Ens, 2019; Fleming
& Sturdy, 2011). In our research, we focus specifically on
identity regulation as a form of normative control
(Rennstam, 2017). According to Rennstam (2017), identity
regulation puts the naturally occurring socialisation process
of identity formation under managerial control through
measures that construct specific personal characteristics or
skills as ideal characteristics of a ”good” worker in the
given domain. According to Stewart et al. (2020), platform
companies project a public narrative of the gig economy as
an opportunity for flexible and self-determined work
unattainable in traditional employment and gig workers as
entrepreneurs that flourish in this working environment.
They argue that this narrative supports the justification for
platforms to avoid compliance with legal employment
requirements.

Power and agency are rarely one-sided. LPT scholars
consistently highlight how workers are not only objects of
control but retain the agency to actively resist or consent to
regimes of control (Burbawoy, 1982; Thompson & Smith,
2017). Several studies show how gig workers consent to
normative control and adopt platform companies’ identity
narratives (Josserand & Kaine, 2019; Soriano & Cabañas,
2020; Stewart et al., 2020). However, the studies by Stew-
art et al. (2020) and Josserand and Kaine (2019) also
reveal workers contesting the identity narratives propa-
gated by platform companies. Stewart et al. (2020) further
argue that identity narratives that contest dominant plat-
form narratives play a key role in the emergence of col-
lectivism among delivery riders. In this study we are
interested in how collective identities facilitate the emer-
gence of alternative forms of labour-oriented civil society
organisations.

Methodology: Digital Ethnography

The research for this paper builds on a rich tradition of
applying ethnographic methods to studying the sociology
of work in offline and online field sites (Braverman, 1998;
Burbawoy, 1982; Lehdonvirta, 2016; Soriano & Cabañas,
2020). Since our focus is on interactions and communica-
tion within online spaces, such as social media, our primary
method of research is digital ethnography, which has been
adopted by scholars from various disciplines including
third sector research (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Kozinets,
2010; Oreg & Babis, 2021; Pink et al., 2015). While digital
ethnography may incorporate both online and offline field
sites, we adopt netnographic methods, which is a sub-cat-
egory of digital ethnography that focuses solely on online
field sites (Kozinets, 2010). Within the literature on the gig
economy, scholars such as Soriano and Cabañes (2020) and Lehdonvirta (2016) have studied the online interactions of crowdworkers including identity-building processes and the role of online forums for the organisation of collective action.

Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the fluidity of online spaces, we started the research without a clearly defined field site. As a starting point, we used identifiable Facebook pages that were used to mobilise riders to participate in protests and then expanded to other social media pages and sites. Although other sites of research were included, most observations and data collection were concentrated on the three Facebook rider managed pages with the most followers and the three public rider Facebook groups with the most members. The pages include two pages dedicated to riders from all platforms and one page dedicated to Grab riders. Followers on these pages range from 13,000 to 86,000. The three groups observed are dedicated to three of the largest platforms (Grab, Foodpanda, Lalamove) and membership ranges from 19,000 to 78,000. We also observed and analysed the presence of platform companies online. Netnographic research in the form of non-participant observation was conducted for approximately seven months starting in early 2021. The research was carried out using our personal Facebook profiles which allowed for a deep immersion in the field site as the posts would appear on our Facebook feed throughout the day as they would for riders. The collected data were coded and grouped around emerging themes building on narrative analysis (Bernard, 2017).

The nature of Facebook as a virtual field site raises new ethical concerns for the researcher (Sveningsson, 2004; Willis, 2019). Most importantly, acquiring informed consent from participants is difficult if not impractical (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004). However, like public spaces offline informed consent is not necessary in public online settings (Willis, 2019). Willis (2019) argues that for an online space to be considered public it must be public on a technological level and members of the community must perceive the space as public. Applying this criterion, we identify the Facebook pages and groups in our study as public places and as such informed consent from participants was not required. Nevertheless, we consistently applied measures to ensure the anonymity of research subjects by masking quotes and omitting the names of informants and groups.

Findings

Platform Projections of a Hero Identity Narrative

A feature of identity regulation, as a form of normative control, is the provision of a set of vocabulary to workers which supports the propagation of an identity narrative that encapsulates the characteristics and values that align workers with their employers’ objectives (Rennstam, 2017). Grab recruits its delivery riders online with slogans such as: “Partner with us to empower your livelihood and more”; “Take pride in satisfying millions of our hungry customers every day”; and “Be your own boss”. The use of the terms “empower” and “take pride” as well as the notion of being one’s own boss imply that working as a rider both requires and allows for a specific set of values such as pride in individual capabilities and independence.

Describing riders as “Heroes” is a particularly pervasive feature of platform companies’ efforts to construct rider identities. The LINE MAN platform offers riders a Hero version of the brand’s rider jacket if they can regularly achieve a designated volume of deliveries. In one advertising campaign, riders are further directed to identify as heroes by saying the slogan “INLINE MAN Food Hero fights for every meal to make sure every meal is delicious” to customers when they make deliveries. Grab also produces rider jackets featuring Marvel superheroes and incorporates the Hero identity in their points system that ranks riders based on delivery performance metrics and customer ratings by making “Hero” the highest attainable rank (Fig. 1).

The Hero narrative portrays riders as hard-working and service-minded individuals who give their best to deliver goods and services while overcoming considerable difficulties. For instance, one of Grab’s online video campaigns shows riders delivering food to a boat, making merit for an old couple that cannot go out and dealing with complaining customers. Another video campaign advertises the Grab Mart service, which involves riders delivering groceries to customers. The campaign features singing riders choosing the freshest products for their customers. While these campaigns are directed at consumers, they also capture the attention of riders, evident in riders mentioning the videos in several posts shared across rider Facebook groups and pages. These campaigns support the formation of a rider identity with the values of grit, a hard-working ethic and a service mindset. The projection of the Hero narrative and the associated vocabulary presents riders with the values and characteristics associated with a “good” rider within the context of precarious and individualised working conditions, thus functioning as a form of identity regulation.

Rider Adoption of the Hero Narrative

Posts made on rider Facebook groups and pages reveal that the Hero narrative and the associated characteristics are widely embraced and consented to by riders. Riders actively portray themselves as hardworking individuals that fight to overcome difficulties within the context of precarious working conditions while earning a living and
providing for their families. One widely shared post is an artist’s depiction of riders as superheroes. Riders representing each of the platforms are illustrated as distinct superheroes in a form that nearly mirrors the platforms’ use of superhero imagery (Fig. 2).

By embracing the Hero narrative riders’ consent to the normative control of platforms, effectively internalising the values and norms of behaviour that platforms see as desirable. In some cases, riders enforce these values and norms of behaviour among themselves. One example observed is a reaction to a post in which a rider complained about a negative experience with a customer. Instead of expressing support, fellow riders assigned blame to the rider who made the post by citing the rider’s lack of service-mindedness. In another case, a page administrator created a live stream of them accompanying a rider to apologise to a restaurant for rude behaviour.

Many posts showcase hardships throughout the day, but these hardships are often framed as obstacles to overcome with a fighter’s mindset. One rider posted the following:

“People ask me about working in the sun. Isn’t it hot? Aren’t you afraid of getting black skin? My Answer: “I’m more afraid of starving to death.” […] I decided […] to drive for Grab because I thought it provided me more freedom. […] When I tried it, it was a little bad at first. […] I felt very upset. But I met many fellow riders who gave me a lot of advice. […] During the Covid-19 pandemic it’s not easy. […] It is very tiring, but I’m proud! 😊”

The rider recognises the difficult working conditions but refrains from complaining and instead expresses gratitude to Grab for the opportunity to earn a living. The tough working conditions are portrayed as an individual challenge and the ability to overcome them as a source of personal pride. The post is also a call to all riders in the Grab community to fight on to overcome their individual challenges. One widely shared video portrayed a rider who was missing one hand, but through hard work and determination, was able to make a living as a rider. The video received widespread acclaim in comments that affirmed the necessity to fight hard to succeed as a rider reinforcing the notion that success or failure ultimately depends on individual effort.

By adopting the Hero narrative riders adjust to the trying working conditions. If they are the Hero of the story, then the effort necessary to be a successful rider is a choice rather than forced on them by platforms. The Hero narrative thus effectively masks the real social relations of production based on exploitation and unequal power between riders and platforms.
Riders as Workers: Contesting the Hero Narrative

The Hero identity narrative, while significant, is not uncontested. Some riders resist the framing of their hardships as individual challenges. In social media posts, riders highlight their common conditions by complaining about the arbitrariness and unfairness of the platform’s algorithm and negative customer reviews. They challenge unfair and unexplainable bans or deactivations from using a platform or the general inefficiency of the platform’s app. Most of these posts receive both understanding and encouragement from other riders in the comments section suggesting recognition of common grievances. In contrast to the Hero narrative, these posts and comments display a recognition that riders are dependent on platforms, which take advantage of them as workers and have little concern for the problems they face. A post by a foodpanda rider conveys this sentiment:

“We work for the foodpanda system, so the platform doesn’t care if the rider has one problem or another. They only care about the number of orders in each region. But we must accept the system. In the end, there is no use to complain about it, we must use the app to make money anyway”.

The rider’s post asserts their status as workers and dependency on the platform. This sense of dependence on the platform and helplessness is shared by other riders who note that any attempt to protest would be futile given the dominant narrative. One rider posted: “In fact, if we create too much fuss, we become a bad person in the eyes of the public. In the end, we have to accept the system that paints us as being in the wrong”. Some riders also draw the connection to the Thai labour market and labour protection laws, which is evident in the following post:

“I feel pity for Thai workers because the law doesn’t help with anything. Bowing to foreign companies to exploit us working like slaves. However, it’s a Thai habit to let things slide without knowing how to fix or change it. That’s how it works in our own country, being left to be taken advantage of”.

These posts portray a narrative of riders as exploited and powerless workers. The use of terms such as “exploitation”, “being taken advantage of” and “working as slaves” signifies an acknowledgement of the power imbalance between riders and platforms and implies the collective nature of these power structures.

In some rare cases, riders address the classification of the riders as “partners” as a source of their exploitation. Shared across different rider Facebook groups, one post presented an analysis of riders’ classification as partners: “[…] The ‘partner’ status […] is nothing other than the platform company’s excuse to extort workers and evade worker protection legislation. In addition, […] flexible employment gives workers no bargaining power with the company. […] Because riders on the platform are workers they deserve compensation, welfare rights, protection, and the company honouring their responsibilities. They are not independent partners who don’t have the power to negotiate like we have been deceived to believe […]”

As part of the contestation of rider identities, the post is a clear call to riders to recognise themselves as workers with rights.

From Mutual Aid Groups to Labour-Oriented Civil Society Organisation

The Hero and Worker narratives generate contrasting perceptions of rider working conditions and identities. On the one hand, the Hero narrative highlights gig work as empowering and self-determined. On the other hand, the Worker narrative conveys sentiments of powerlessness and dependence on the platforms. While the Hero narrative constructs riders willing to accept their precarious working conditions as individual challenges to overcome, the counter Worker narrative recognises the precarious conditions as intentionally created by platforms. The latter’s acknowledgement of these structural conditions often comes with expressions of powerlessness that contrast with the empowerment promised by the Hero narrative, but it also raises questions about the potential of resistance through collective action.

Despite the contesting identity narratives, we observed riders throughout the groups and pages frequently coming together to extend solidarity and mutual aid. Cases of mutual aid range from answering questions and sharing tips on how to deal with work-related challenges to more direct actions such as assisting in the case of accidents and the collection of donations for the families of riders that had fatal traffic accidents. Most rider pages were founded with a focus on providing mutual aid and often take the lead in providing the most extensive and organised help to their fellow riders.

Scholars in a Marxist tradition argue that mutual aid and solidarity are fundamental forms of collectivism and the basis for the development of more direct forms of collective action (Atzeni, 2010; Fantasia, 1989). Some riders who adopt the Worker identity narrative recognise collective action as a potential avenue to addressing their many grievances. One rider jokingly hypothesised about the potential of a countrywide strike: “Just a funny thought what if riders all over the country stop working in
protest?’' Another rider took a more assertive position: “If protests are ineffective, let’s try to agree to stop working for a day or two. That will probably shake up the people at the top”. These posts indicate that some riders can overcome the sense of disempowerment woven through the Worker narrative to establish an optimistic view that collective action can challenge the power of platforms.

We also observed a shift towards collective action at an organisational level. One case is a group of riders who managed a rider Facebook page. It transitioned from an informal group focused on mutual aid for Lalamove riders to an organisation resembling a union that champions all riders’ rights. It changed its name from Lalamove Freedom Riders to Freedom Riders Union and began displaying characteristics of a more formal union organisation including the collection of member fees and organising social activities. Over the following months, the group evolved into a nationwide network with different organisations in various provinces that organise protests and strikes. Another group behind a page dedicated to Grab riders engaged in a dialogue with representatives from Grab and the Ministry of Labour. While these attempts resulted in little to no tangible improvements in riders’ working conditions, the adoption of these strategies marks a shift away from localised mutual aid groups towards forms of civil society organisations with specific goals.

Throughout the social media pages and groups, however, there was evidence of opposition to direct collective action soliciting conflict between riders. Some riders expressed bewilderment and opposition to them, exemplified in the following comment: “Why do you protest? If you feel that the company gives you too little, then just don’t work. They don’t force you to work, do they? I’m really confused when I see this”. Emphasising that riders are not forced to work for the platform exemplifies the Hero narrative’s characterisation of riders as autonomous and independent entrepreneurs. Another rider goes further by stressing that riders are independent entrepreneurs as per their classification as “partners” while highlighting the futility of protests and strikes due to the large pool of potential future riders:

“You should understand first that Grab is not your boss, and we are not employees. Grab is a connection service. Whoever wants to use the service is free to use it and whoever doesn’t is free not to. It’s not compulsory. Let’s be honest. Everyone looks out for themselves, so why should the company care about the riders? And why would we want to waste time protesting because people who are in a worse position than us are ready to join Grab every day?”

In response to comments such as these, another rider commented: “It is called working for the collective. Do you understand that sometimes one voice is not enough? We need many voices to be successful. But an ass licker like you wouldn’t understand”.

These kinds of rider conflicts speak to the contestation of rider identities. Under the worker identity, riders see collective action as empowering, while riders who adopt the Hero narrative see collective action as an affront to their individual liberty and autonomous entrepreneurial lives. This shows that while the Worker narrative facilitates collective action the Hero narrative undermines these efforts. Therefore, the potential of these emergent civil society organisations to organise and garner the support of workers to collectively campaign for better working conditions and protection is contingent on the broad adoption of the Worker identity narrative among riders.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that riders in Thailand use social media to overcome the challenges associated with their individualised working conditions. Organisations that leverage social media to facilitate mutual aid among riders have emerged and increasingly developed features of unions. Our research extends the argument of Stewart et al. (2020) who argue that riders contesting platform narratives forms the basis the development of collectivism among riders. We argue that contested identity narratives not only constrict or facilitate the development of collectivism but also the development of labour-oriented civil society organisations. Our findings further demonstrate that social media is an important space for the development and contestation of identity narratives. Therefore, we argue that social media can play a role in the emergence of new forms of civil society beyond functioning as mere tools for organisational communication and logistics. In the Thai context, these findings are mirrored in scholarship on Thai social movements that highlights the growing importance of social media to galvanise support as well as build collective narratives (Auethavornpipat & Tanyag, 2021; Singpeng, 2021). Thus, civil society scholars in Thailand should take social media and other online spaces seriously when considering the changing Thai civil society landscape.

This study further contributes to a discourse that examines alternative forms of labour organisations in the gig economy which has so far neglected to analyse the role of social media as an arena of identity formation among work-on-demand via app workers such as delivery drivers. Additionally, we argue that it is important for third sector research to consider these newly emergent forms of labour movements as part of civil society. Our findings suggest that the underlying processes of identity formation on social media can provide insights into emerging civil
society organisations within the gig economy and beyond. This study thus contributes to a discourse within third sector research that argues for broadening the conception of civil society to include informal, online and other alternative forms of civil society organisations.

This study was limited to research in online settings, and we suggest that future research considers the interaction between offline and online settings. Attention should be directed towards how the contestation of identities among riders online translates into an offline environment and how offline settings influence the processes we observed online. The research was also limited to public social media groups and pages, but preliminary ethnographic research we have conducted indicates the extensive use of the LINE messenger app among riders who form closed group chats to facilitate solidarity and mutual aid in a local terrain. We suggest that further research could shed light on the relationship between these small and localised groups with larger organisations on Facebook and how identities may also be contested within these closed groups.

Furthermore, we discovered cautionary evidence that an external formal civil society organisation has played a role in the process of organisation, specifically facilitating formalisation and capacity building of rider organisations. This suggests that while rider organisations defy traditional notions of civil society organisations, they do not emerge in a vacuum but rather engage in relationships with wider civil society. Hence, we suggest a closer analysis of the relationships between these new organisations and other civil society actors, particularly examining the influence of these external civil society actors and movements on the adoption of the Worker identity narrative among riders. Despite these unanswered questions, our research provides important insights into the dynamics of identity development among gig workers and the emergence of new forms of labour-oriented civil society organisations that champion workers’ rights in rapidly changing economies.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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