

Diskarte as Vernacular Agency: Relational–Moral Labor and Ambivalent Survival in Filipino Platform Work

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Abstract

This article examines diskarte as a vernacular grammar of survival through which Filipino gig workers navigate the uncertainties of platform-mediated labor. Based on participatory qualitative research with ride-hailing, delivery, and freelance workers in the Philippines, the study conceptualizes diskarte as a fluid, relational, and ethically inflected form of agency. Workers enact diskarte through communicative calibration, affective regulation, relational reciprocity, and ethical boundary-work, revealing ambivalence as a normal operating condition rather than a contradiction. They continually weigh livelihood, obligation, care, and moral judgment while negotiating algorithmic control, reputational risk, and economic precarity. The article extends the Diskarte Continuum Framework and shows how diskarte offers a culturally grounded lens for understanding how Global South workers act resourcefully under constraint, with implications for Critical Discourse Analysis and relational–moral forms of reasoning.

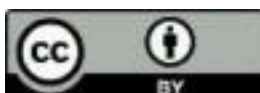
Keywords: Diskarte, platform economy, ambivalence, vernacular agency, Filipino digital labor

Bio-profile

Jose Cris Sotto is professor of media and communication, business, and language courses, with research interest in artificial intelligence, media, critical discourse analysis, and Global South agency more commonly known as diskarte. An alumnus of Centro Escolar University, he graduated summa cum laude in 2011 with the degree Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication (Journalism), and obtained his Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics in 2015 with highest academic distinction. JC is writing his dissertation for the Doctor of Philosophy in Communication at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. He is also a digital marketing entrepreneur managing his own firm serving local and international clientele.

Introduction

The expansion of the platform or gig economy has created new forms of work organized through digital infrastructures that promise flexibility while *normalizing* precarity. Scholars show how platform labor sits uneasily between entrepreneurial discourse and heightened vulnerability, as workers navigate algorithmic control, unstable incomes, and shifting customer expectations (Cant, 2019; Graham et al., 2020, p. 135–162; van Doorn, 2017, p. 898–914; Wood et al., 2019, p. 56–75; Woodcock & Graham,



2020). Much of this research foregrounds the tension between autonomy and control, often conceptualizing workers' responses as lying somewhere between resistance and compliance. Yet in Global South contexts, gig work is also embedded in moral, affective, and relational worlds that shape how workers act, decide, and survive in everyday life (Cabañes & Luna, 2024, p421–437; Soriano et al., 2021, p. 84-111).

In the Philippines, these practices are animated by cultural values such as *kapwa* (shared self), *pakikibagay* (adaptability), and *tiyaga* (perseverance), which highlight the relational and ethical dimensions of social life (Enriquez, 1992; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000, p. 49–71). Within this milieu, workers mobilize *diskarte*—a vernacular logic of resourcefulness and improvisation—to navigate uncertainty and negotiate both opportunity and obligation. Rather than a fixed personality trait, *diskarte* reflects a dynamic repertoire of reasoning and practice that adapts to structural constraints while remaining grounded in relational ethics (Morales, 2017, p. 114–139). Building on the Diskarte Continuum Framework (DCF) first developed in earlier work on Filipino TikTok humor (Author and colleague, 2025), this article conceptualizes *diskarte* as a culturally situated form of agency in which ambivalence is a patterned and enduring operating condition rather than a problem to be resolved.

At the same time, the article speaks to debates in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which has been central to examining how discourse mediates power, ideology, and inequality (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2001, p. 63–94). While invaluable, CDA's dominant frames often privilege binaries of domination and resistance that can underplay *relational-moral reasoning* in postcolonial contexts. Scholars have therefore called for grounding critique in local communicative practices and epistemologies that better register lived complexity (Canagarajah, 2012; Pennycook, 2010). This study responds by empirically tracing how *diskarte* is enacted in Filipino gig work and by examining what this vernacular logic reveals about the limits and possibilities of existing analytical approaches.

This article draws on participatory qualitative research with ride-hailing, delivery, and freelance workers in the Philippines to examine how *diskarte* is enacted communicatively, affectively, relationally, and ethically in platform-mediated labor. It offers a relational-moral account of agency under precarity, extends the DCF, and reflects on the implications of vernacular agency for CDA. The discussion proceeds by situating the study within debates on gig work, relational-moral labor, and vernacular agency; outlining the participatory and ethnographic approach; presenting findings on how workers perform *diskarte* in everyday practice; and considering how ambivalence operates as a patterned and culturally grounded mode of reasoning in Global South labor context.

Gig Work, Autonomy, and Algorithmic Control

Gig economy scholarship highlights a tension between autonomy and control. While early accounts framed platform work as flexible and entrepreneurial, enabling self-directed income generation, later analyses reveal that such freedom is constrained by the technological and economic structures of platform capitalism. Algorithmic systems allocate tasks, manage visibility, assess performance, and discipline workers through continuous tracking and rating regimes, often obscuring the presence of managerial control behind the language of independence and opportunity (Cant, 2019; Graham et al., 2020, p. 135–162; van Doorn, 2017, p. 898–914; Wood et al., 2019, p. 3–23; Woodcock & Graham, 2020). Workers must therefore navigate what might be described as conditional autonomy:



they can choose when to log on and which tasks to accept, but these decisions unfold within opaque systems in which income remains unpredictable and reputational standing is fragile.

This conditional autonomy carries emotional and moral consequences. Algorithmic metrics incentivize speed and satisfaction, pushing workers to internalize discipline and perform affective labor. Often-arbitrary feedback has real consequences, fostering vigilance and risk management (Graham et al., 2020, p. 135–162; Wood et al., 2019, p. 3–23). Precarity thus extends beyond economics, reshaping workers' psychological states and relational self-presentation.

These dynamics are not experienced uniformly across global contexts. In many parts of the Global South, platform labor intersects with longstanding informal economies, limited labor protections, and deeply rooted forms of social and economic vulnerability. Rather than replacing previous forms of work, the gig economy often layers itself onto complex livelihood strategies in which families and communities collectively manage uncertainty and scarcity (Anwar & Graham, 2021; Srnicek, 2017). In the Philippines, this means platform work is rarely experienced as a discrete job category. Instead, it is woven into relational networks, household economies, and communal expectations, where obligations to kin, neighbors, and community members shape how income is used, how work is valued, and how risks are shared (Cabañes and Luna, 2024; Soriano et al., 2021, p. 84–111).

Studies of Filipino digital labor highlight how workers rely on forms of cooperation and mutual support to manage the volatility of algorithmically mediated work. Practices such as sharing information, offering assistance, pooling resources, and mentoring others demonstrate that economic survival is deeply relational rather than strictly individual (Cabañes and Luna, 2024; Soriano et al., 2021, p. 84–111). These practices resonate with broader cultural logics that emphasize relational interdependence and moral responsibility. Precarity is therefore experienced not only as a condition of labor but as a social and affective state distributed across families, communities, and peer networks.

Against this backdrop, ambivalence emerges as a central feature of everyday reasoning within the gig economy. Platform work offers possibilities for income generation, entrepreneurial identity, and temporal flexibility, while simultaneously embedding workers in systems of algorithmic surveillance, reputational fragility, and market instability (Graham et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2019, p. 3–23; Woodcock & Graham, 2020). Rather than interpreting this ambivalence as contradiction or confusion, recent scholarship increasingly recognizes it as intrinsic to the lived experience of digital labor. Workers continuously weigh relational obligations against financial necessity, calculate how to balance care and efficiency, and evaluate when to assert agency and when to accommodate.

This study builds on these insights by examining how Filipino gig workers enact ambivalent forms of agency through the vernacular logic of *diskarte*. Approaching the gig economy through *diskarte* foregrounds how responses to algorithmic control, reputational uncertainty, and economic precarity are filtered through cultural values, moral reasoning, and relational expectations. In doing so, it shifts attention from abstract models of autonomy and resistance toward the everyday, situated, and ethically inflected decisions through which workers navigate life under platform capitalism.

Relational–Moral Labor in Filipino Contexts

Filipino gig work reflects relational and moral worlds shaped by *kapwa* (shared self), which frames the person as fundamentally interconnected with others, *pakikibagay* (adaptability), which emphasizes social adjustment and harmony, and *tiyaga* (perseverance) (Enriquez, 1992; Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino, 2000, p. 49–71). These values structure obligations, reciprocity, and care,



embedding decisions about work and survival within collective networks where risks and responsibilities are negotiated rather than individually borne.

Research on digital labor in the Philippines reflects a relational moral economy. Soriano et al. (2021) document mutual aid among workers, where influencers and intermediaries coach and connect others, forming informal infrastructures of trust that sustain livelihoods amid precarity. Cabañes and Luna (2024) likewise show digital labor embedded in shared livelihoods, with families and communities pooling resources, information, and emotional labor; precarity thus becomes a collective condition mediated through kinship, friendship, faith, and neighborhood ties. These dynamics shape how workers enact agency, as decisions are weighed against obligations, reputational expectations, and ethical considerations of fairness and care, requiring moral navigation that balances self-interest with *pakikipagkapwa* while maintaining dignity and trust under uncertainty.

Within this milieu, *diskarte* emerges as a vernacular logic of adaptive problem-solving grounded in relational ethics. Morales (2017, p. 114–139) defines it as creatively finding solutions under constraint, blending initiative with collective negotiation. Both strategic and moral, it navigates survival, obligation, and opportunity. Viewed through this relational lens, gig work reveals *diskarte* as a culturally grounded form of agency, where responses to precarity are shaped by ethical reasoning, social infrastructures, and cultural expectations, rendering ambivalence a patterned mode of navigating platform labor.

Diskarte as Vernacular Agency

Within Filipino social life, *diskarte* occupies a central place as a vernacular way of describing how people act resourcefully under constraint. Morales (2017) characterizes *diskarte* as the creative ability to find workable solutions when options are limited, blending practical ingenuity with sensitivity to context. It is not reducible to cleverness or opportunism. Rather, it describes a repertoire of judgments, improvisations, and negotiations through which people respond to uncertainty in ways that sustain livelihood, dignity, and relationships. In the context of platform work, *diskarte* names how workers constantly adjust to algorithmic systems, customer expectations, peer networks, and obligations to kin.

Building on this understanding, the DCF conceptualizes *diskarte* not as a shifting continuum of practice. Workers may draw on survivalist tactics to make ends meet, adopt strategic approaches to manage ratings and income, mobilize relational practices to build trust and reciprocity, or pursue entrepreneurial initiatives when opportunities arise. At certain moments, *diskarte* may also take subtly subversive forms, where workers navigate around rules that feel unfair or impractical. Workers move fluidly across them, sometimes within the same working day, responding to the pressures, opportunities, and relationships that surround them.

Seeing *diskarte* in this way helps clarify the role of ambivalence in everyday practice. Filipino gig workers often make decisions that must serve multiple aims at once: maintaining income, preserving self-respect, protecting relationships, and upholding moral responsibility. These aims do not always align neatly, yet they coexist within the same decision-making process. Ambivalence, then, is not confusion. It is a patterned feature of reasoning shaped by structural constraint and relational ethics. Agency emerges not as total freedom or total constraint but as an ongoing process of weighing, adjusting, and responding.

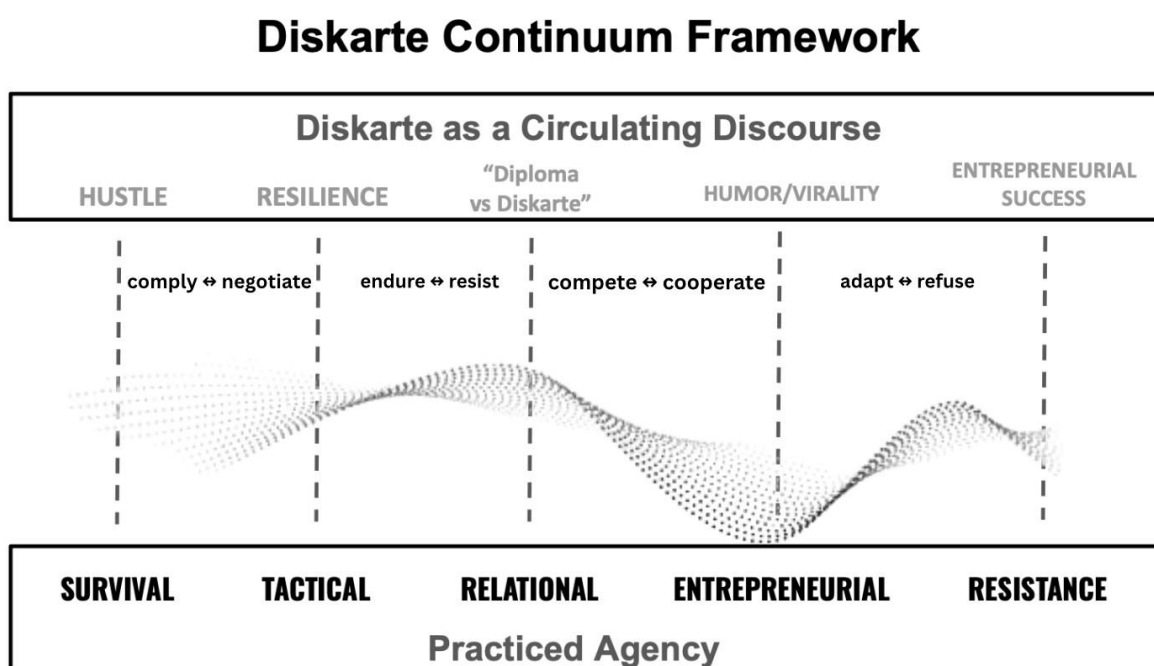
This vernacular account of agency also intersects with debates in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Foundational CDA scholarship has demonstrated how discourse mediates power, ideology, and



inequality, highlighting the role of language in reproducing or challenging domination (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2001, p. 63–94). While these insights remain invaluable, CDA has often framed agency primarily through binaries such as resistance versus compliance. Scholars such as Pennycook (2010) and Canagarajah (2012) therefore advocate for approaches that attend more closely to local epistemologies, communicative practices, and relational forms of reasoning. *Diskarte* offers one such lens.

In this study, the Diskarte Continuum Framework visualizes *diskarte* as a flexible and relational form of agency that shifts across overlapping zones of practice rather than discrete, bounded categories. Ambivalence is built into the model as a normal operating condition rather than a deviation or analytical problem, reflecting how workers continually balance livelihood, obligation, care, and ethical judgment in their everyday decisions.

Figure 1. Diskarte Continuum Framework



The Diskarte Continuum Framework theorizes *diskarte* as a form of practiced agency that oscillates across survival imperatives, tactical negotiation, relational care, entrepreneurial positioning, and ethical discernment. It foregrounds ambivalence as the constitutive condition of agency, through which Filipino gig workers continuously recalibrate strategies in response to the exigencies of platform-mediated precarity. By emphasizing the labor of negotiation and moral weighing, the framework situates *diskarte* as an ethically and relationally embedded practice, capturing the dynamic interplay between constraint, opportunity, and social accountability. (See also **Table 1. The Diskarte Continuum of Communicative Ambivalence**)

Tracing the Development of the Diskarte Continuum Framework

The Diskarte Continuum Framework (DCF) was not derived solely from gig work research but inductively developed in a study of Filipino TikTok users navigating the “Diploma o Diskarte” debate through ambivalent humor (Author and colleague, forthcoming). Analyzing six widely circulated videos and comment threads via multimodal critical discourse and reception analysis, the study conceptualized diskarte as a continuum of communicative agency—spanning survivalist, strategic, relational, entrepreneurial, and subtly subversive practices. Humor functioned as a hinge enabling critique and accommodation to coexist, normalizing ambivalence in everyday reasoning. Grounded in vernacular discourse, the DCF serves as a methodological intervention in Critical Discourse Analysis by foregrounding relational–moral reasoning and culturally situated agency, challenging binary models of resistance and compliance.

The present article extends this program of work by applying the DCF to the domain of platform-mediated labor. Here, *diskarte* is enacted not only through humor but through communicative calibration, affective regulation, relational reciprocity, and ethical boundary-work. Gig workers also move fluidly across the continuum identified in the earlier study, navigating livelihood, dignity, obligation, and care under algorithmic precarity. Tracing the DCF’s development across studies clarifies that the framework is both theoretically cumulative and participatory in orientation, and situates the contribution to CDA in a broader effort to ground critique in vernacular reasoning, relational life, and the moral textures of everyday work.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a participatory qualitative design to examine how *diskarte* is enacted in Filipino platform-mediated work. The approach recognizes workers as knowledgeable social actors whose interpretations and moral reasoning are central to understanding vernacular agency. The project combined digital discourse mapping, semi-structured interviews, participatory workshops, and focused workplace observation. This design allowed *diskarte* to be explored not simply as a descriptive label but as a lived and collaboratively theorized practice embedded in relational, cultural, and economic life.

Data Collection

Data generation follows a two-phase, integrative qualitative design aligned with ethnographic studies of platform labor while extending them through participatory, discourse-centered methods. Like Keller (2023) and Kusk (2025, p. 1-11), it foregrounds workers’ lived interpretations of platform labor, but treats participants as reflexive co-analysts. Phase one mapped digital artefacts on diskarte across Facebook, TikTok, and freelancer forums, focusing on vernacular narratives among Filipino gig workers. Six purposively selected TikTok videos¹—depicting both constructive and exploitative forms—served as workshop stimuli, organized around tensions: Diploma versus *Diskarte*, Individual versus Collective, and Conventional versus Exploitative. Phase two combined semi-structured interviews with participatory co-analysis workshops, eliciting narratives on work, morality,

¹ This approach draws on visual methods literature, which highlights how moving images elicit narratives, moral reasoning, and tacit knowledge (Collier & Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002; Henry & Feters, 2012; Pink et al., 2016), situating discussion



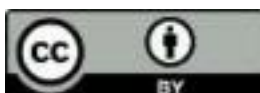
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in culturally recognizable work realities.



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relationships, and affect, while inviting participants to refine interpretations. Brief ride-alongs and hub observations captured in-situ practices. Participants included TNVS drivers, delivery riders, freelancers, and online sellers, purposively sampled for diversity, each with at least six months of sustained platform-based income and workshop participation.

Data Analysis

Analysis was guided by the DCF, which treats *diskarte* as fluid, relational, and contextually negotiated rather than a fixed trait. It informed data generation and interpretation as a heuristic, not a rigid coding frame. In interviews and workshops, participants engaged in guided oral reflection using a visual DCF prompt, responding to questions about placement, overlap, tension, and prioritization of *diskarte*. Responses were in Filipino, English, or code-switching, drawing on emic terms (e.g., *pakikisama*, *diskarte lang*, *tiis muna*, *bisyo ng sistema*). The researcher documented placements and shifts through recordings, field notes, and reflexive memos, foregrounding ambivalence as everyday moral reasoning.

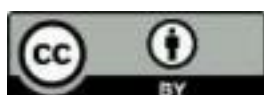
Coding was manual and interpretive, combining open, descriptive, and in vivo strategies aligned with Critical Discourse Studies (Raskind et al., 2019, p. 32-39). A deductive schema from the DCF generated initial codes (e.g., survival, relational, ethical, affective, resistant), which were iteratively refined to capture emergent meanings and tensions. In vivo codes were retained where analytically significant. Coding remained iterative and participatory: preliminary interpretations were revisited in workshops where participants affirmed or contested them. Overlaps were treated as meaningful intersections, while reflexive journaling ensured transparency and analytic accountability.

Ethics and Reflexivity

Ethical approval was secured from the researcher's institution. Participation was voluntary with informed consent; pseudonyms and secure data storage ensured confidentiality. Participants received modest compensation. Safeguards minimized reputational and economic risks, with participants retaining control over shared artefacts. Reflexive journaling documented coding decisions, ambivalence, and distinctions between agency and constraint, while also interrogating researcher positionality. Participatory elements ensured analytic accountability, grounding interpretations in workers' meanings rather than imposing external frameworks.

Results and Discussion

The findings examine the enactment of *diskarte* across ride-hailing, delivery, and freelance labor. Drawing on interviews, discourse mapping, and participatory workshops, the analysis shows how workers negotiate algorithmic systems, customer demands, peer dynamics, and familial obligations. *Diskarte* emerges as a fluid repertoire of practice shaped by moral reasoning and structural uncertainty, with ambivalence constituting a patterned mode of decision-making. Workers continually balance economic survival with dignity, relational obligations, and ethical responsibility, at times reproducing micro-hierarchies even as practices of care persist. In this context, *diskarte* functions as a communicative, affective, and ethical resource through which workers navigate precarity within the DCF.



Communicative Calibration in Everyday Negotiation

Filipino gig workers enact *diskarte* through finely tuned communicative strategies that navigate client expectations, algorithmic unpredictability, and shifting conditions. Humor, relational warmth, tone management, and subtle negotiation transform routine exchanges into opportunities for trust-building, problem-solving, and persuasion. Competence is signaled not only through task performance but through interactional style, reflecting situated agency within platform constraints.

Humor operates as a key relational resource. One bakeshop owner notes, “Ah, don’t come back here. I might feed you again!” (R-CR1), while a freelance digital artist explains, “I use humor and being relational...so that the client would feel comfortable...[this] has given me a considerable amount of tips” (P-CR4). Such gestures function as relational signaling, fostering goodwill and client retention.

Micro-negotiation further illustrates communicative *diskarte*. A Grab driver reflects, “Sometimes I get annoyed with short-distance trips...when business is slow, I accept them” (P-CR13). Another driver recounts persuading customers to cancel platform bookings to secure full payment (P-CR8). These interactions rely on tact and relational judgment, framing negotiation as mutually beneficial while creating maneuverability within constraints.

Workers emphasize that communicative *diskarte* develops through experience. A former nurse turned entrepreneur highlights sustaining trust across ventures by “offering solutions like discounts” (P-CR7), while a veteran driver underscores how route familiarity and conversation once maintained loyal clientele amid increasing precarity (P-CR11).

Across accounts, communicative calibration emerges as a culturally grounded form of agency. Workers actively shape interactions through humor, reassurance, and negotiation, stabilizing relationships, protecting reputations, and securing incremental advantages within a volatile platform economy.

Affective Regulation as Invisible Labor

Affective regulation constitutes a central dimension of *diskarte*, revealing how Filipino gig workers manage frustration, uncertainty, and fatigue while sustaining a composed, service-oriented persona. This emotional labor is strategic, protecting earnings, ratings, and continued platform access. Workers describe cultivating patience and restraint to navigate demanding customers, opaque systems, and fluctuating workloads.

One worker notes, “Grab is fine... I just let it go. Sometimes I gently ask the customer to give me a good rating” (P-CR12), illustrating how emotional control and communicative tact intersect to safeguard livelihood. Similarly, a rider explains, “Most of the time, I just let it slide rather than stress myself out and risk getting reported” (P-CR9). Such responses are not passive but calculated, absorbing inconvenience to avoid conflict and reputational harm.

Affective regulation also extends to workplace relations. An online business owner emphasizes relational care: “I do not reprimand my staff... I have a familial relationship with them... This is the type of relationship that I extend to my clients” (P-CR1), highlighting how emotional labor intertwines



with ethics, faith, and community. Meanwhile, algorithmic unpredictability intensifies anxiety: “The algorithm is very unpredictable... It takes a long time to recover” (P-CR10). A graduating student similarly underscores relational pressure: “I really need to take care of my professional relationships... Across accounts, affective regulation emerges as indispensable to *diskarte*. Workers perform patience and composure while navigating systemic inequities, reflecting dispositions such as *tiyaga* and *pakikibagay*. Ambivalence persists: despite recognizing structural constraints, workers exercise emotional discipline to sustain viable personas, making affective labor both a survival strategy and moral practice.

Relational Reciprocity and Informal Support Systems

Relational reciprocity forms a core dimension of *diskarte*, revealing how Filipino gig workers embed their labor within networks of mutual aid, trust, and obligation. Rather than navigating platform precarity alone, workers cultivate and sustain relationships that provide guidance, emotional support, and practical assistance. These relational ties generate forms of social capital that extend beyond individual survival and contribute to collective resilience. As one synthesis puts it, “freelancers share expertise, provide practical assistance, and promote each other’s work through reposts, while Grab drivers rely on friendships for guidance, resource-sharing, and access to loans” (P-CR4, P-CR12). These networks operate simultaneously as communicative channels for advice and as moral communities grounded in reciprocity and *pakikipagkapwa*, reinforcing a sense of shared responsibility.

Peer networks also function as informal infrastructures that help workers interpret and respond to the shifting demands of platform labor. As described elsewhere, these ties “serve as conduits for information, advice, and emotional support,” enabling workers to manage algorithmic uncertainty, client complaints, and fluctuating work opportunities. Reciprocity underpins these exchanges, as cooperation and assistance coexist with the reality of competition for income. The relationality of *diskarte* is visible in how cooperation, entrepreneurial collaboration, and subtle forms of resistance are woven together through everyday acts of sharing knowledge, tips, and platform workarounds.

These relationships are not merely instrumental. They also embody ethical expectations around care, fairness, and communal responsibility. Relational *diskarte* integrates economic survival with a broader moral economy in which helping others, offering support, and building trust are intrinsic to sustaining one’s own livelihood. Even where latent hierarchies and competition emerge, norms of solidarity and reciprocity remain salient, illustrating the ambivalent character of *diskarte*: workers look after themselves while also looking after one another.

Across these accounts, relational reciprocity anchors *diskarte* within collective and cultural logics. Agency is not exercised in isolation but in relation to others, shaped by shared moral sensibilities and social obligations. These informal support systems make precarity livable, embedding platform labor within the relational fabric of Filipino everyday life.

Ethical Boundary-Work Under Constraint

Ethical reasoning constitutes another crucial dimension of *diskarte*. Filipino gig workers describe navigating a constant tension between maximizing opportunity and maintaining moral integrity, reflecting how agency is anchored in personal and cultural values rather than purely instrumental calculation. Ethics is not abstract reflection but active boundary-work: setting limits,



deciding when to bend rules, and determining what remains non-negotiable even under economic pressure.

Several participants explicitly link *diskarte* to fairness, honesty, and discipline. One participant states, “You shouldn’t cheat people. You need discipline (in doing gig work). What you earn should come from honest work. You should follow the law” (P-CR12). Another frames ethical judgment through faith: “I go back to the teaching of my religion when I need to practice *diskarte*. I believe it is possible to apply unconventional strategies to make ends meet while still maintaining my moral grounds” (P-CR6). A young freelance artist likewise emphasizes protection through clearly agreed-upon terms: “The client usually dictates how they want to be satisfied, but I remind them of the boundaries that we had set early on in the finalization of the contract” (P-CR3). Here, *diskarte* involves drawing and defending ethical lines — not just finding a way to survive.

These accounts show how ethical awareness ensures that survivalist strategies do not transgress cultural or legal norms. Workers actively weigh what is workable against what is right, balancing economic necessity with relational and moral accountability. Ethical *diskarte* therefore tempers the ambivalence of platform work. Even as workers adapt and improvise, they do so while attempting to sustain integrity, dignity, and fairness — to themselves, to clients, and to others within their labor ecosystems.

Across these narratives, ethical boundary-work emerges as inseparable from communicative, affective, and relational practices. Decisions about negotiation, self-presentation, and cooperation are continually filtered through moral judgment. *Diskarte* thus appears not only as a tactical orientation to precarity but also as an ethical one — a way of acting that seeks to reconcile material survival with cultural values and moral commitments.

Shifting Across the Diskarte Continuum

Across these accounts, it becomes clear that *diskarte* is not a fixed trait or a single mode of acting. Rather, workers move fluidly across different positions on the *Diskarte* Continuum — survivalist, strategic, relational, entrepreneurial, and at times subtly subversive — often within the same working day. These shifts illustrate how ambivalence is not a sign of contradiction, but a patterned mode of reasoning in the context of platform-mediated labor. Workers continuously weigh moral commitments, relationship maintenance, financial necessity, and algorithmic risk, crafting decisions that are at once pragmatic and ethical.

This fluidity is visible in the way communicative, affective, relational, and ethical practices overlap. As has been observed, “workers regulate frustration, uncertainty, and fatigue generated by fluctuating demand and algorithmic penalties,” while also cultivating peer networks that “serve as conduits for information, advice, and emotional support,” and holding firm to ethical principles around fairness, honesty, and discipline. These dynamics show how *diskarte* integrates emotional regulation, cooperation, moral judgment, and strategic action into a single, culturally grounded repertoire of agency.

At the same time, *diskarte* is ambivalent. It enables Filipino gig workers to navigate precarity, yet it can also involve reproducing micro-level hierarchies through competitive positioning, selective compliance, or strategic signaling. As you note, this is “neither universal nor intentional.” Even where self-interest surfaces, workers remain guided by ethical norms and attention to communal well-being, underscoring the moral complexity embedded in everyday practice. Ambivalence here “oscillates between self-interest, relational obligations, and moral judgment,” reflecting the tensions inherent in working within algorithmically governed systems while remaining anchored in relational life.



Taken together, these findings illustrate that *diskarte* is best understood as a relational and culturally situated form of agency. It is enacted through communication, emotion, reciprocity, and ethics — always in motion, always negotiated. Ambivalence is not a problem to be solved, but a normal operating condition through which Filipino gig workers live, endure, and make sense of their place within a precarious platform economy.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that *diskarte* operates as a culturally grounded logic of action through which Filipino gig workers navigate platform-mediated uncertainty. Rather than a singular trait, it emerges as a repertoire of communicative calibration, affective regulation, relational reciprocity, and ethical boundary-work. Ambivalence is not merely a byproduct of precarity but a patterned condition through which workers sustain livelihood, dignity, and trust. Agency here is neither heroic resistance nor passive compliance, but relational, situational, and morally inflected.

Analytically, these practices unfold along a continuum—from survival-oriented calibration and tactical compliance to relational negotiation, entrepreneurial positioning, and moments of ethical refusal. These are not fixed types but shifting orientations shaped by material risks, relational obligations, and moral stakes. This perspective complicates dominant accounts of gig work centered on autonomy, control, and resistance. While platform infrastructures intensify surveillance and vulnerability, workers' responses are not purely instrumental; they are mediated by values such as *kapwa*, *pakikibagay*, and *tiyaga*, and sustained within networks of care and obligation. *Diskarte* thus illuminates how workers preserve self-respect, maintain relationships, and uphold ethical commitments under strain.

This practice-based account contrasts with popular representations of *diskarte* as individualized hustle or entrepreneurial ingenuity. While such narratives render it visible and aspirational, they obscure the moral reasoning and relational labor underpinning everyday survival. Ambivalence lies at the core: workers recognize systemic inequities yet act through humor, patience, micro-negotiation, and ethical discernment. They “regulate frustration, uncertainty, and fatigue generated by fluctuating demand and algorithmic penalties,” rely on peer networks that “serve as conduits for information, advice, and emotional support,” and exercise judgment to avoid wrongdoing. Ambivalence thus becomes productive, enabling adaptation, reflection, and relational survival.

At the same time, *diskarte* has micro-political effects. It can mitigate or subtly subvert platform constraints, but also reproduce hierarchies through competition, selective compliance, and boundary-making. These tendencies are “neither universal nor intentional,” yet reveal how agency is negotiated within uneven terrains where ambivalence “oscillates between self-interest, relational obligations, and moral judgment.” While often stylized through humor in public discourse, ambivalence in practice carries material and ethical consequences.

These insights extend Critical Discourse Analysis by moving beyond binaries of resistance and compliance. Distinguishing *diskarte* as discourse from *diskarte* as practice links symbolic circulation to lived action, capturing the cultural entanglement often flattened in Global North frameworks that “struggle to capture” such complexity and “prioritize linear narratives.” The DCF addresses this by



foregrounding relationality, ambivalence, and cultural grounding, integrating survival tactics, emotional labor, and ethical reasoning into a single model of communicative agency. In doing so, it advances efforts to “ground critique in local communicative practices,” recognizing humor, affect, and care as sites of agency.

Ultimately, *diskarte* is both resource and burden: it enables survival yet shifts responsibility onto workers and their networks. It does not absolve platforms but highlights the communicative, emotional, relational, and ethical labor required to render platform economies livable. Diskarte thus constitutes a vernacular grammar of survival—dynamic, relational, and ambivalent—offering a grounded account of agency in Global South platform labor.

Conclusion

This study examines *diskarte* as a vernacular grammar of survival through which Filipino gig workers navigate the uncertainties of platform-mediated labor. Drawing on participatory qualitative research, the analysis suggests that *diskarte* is not reducible to a singular tactic or disposition, but constitutes a repertoire of communicative calibration, affective regulation, relational reciprocity, and ethical boundary-work. As reflected in workers’ accounts, ambivalence emerges not as an anomaly but as a constitutive condition of agency. Workers continually negotiate tensions between livelihood, relational obligation, and moral judgment, enacting forms of action that are simultaneously pragmatic and ethical, self-protective and relational. Conceptualizing *diskarte* as a continuum foregrounds its fluidity, capturing how workers move across survival-oriented, relational, entrepreneurial, and ethically reflexive orientations as conditions shift.

Situated within debates on digital labor and Critical Discourse Analysis, the study highlights how agency in the Global South is culturally embedded and relationally sustained. Workers’ practices are mediated by values such as *kapwa*, *pakikibagay*, and *tiyaga*, and supported by informal infrastructures of care and mutual support. The *Diskarte* Continuum Framework (DCF) offers a contextually grounded analytic lens that brings into a single frame dimensions often treated separately—emotional labor, relational work, and ethical reasoning—thereby addressing the limits of models that privilege binary distinctions between resistance and compliance. At the same time, the findings resist romanticization. While *diskarte* enables workers to cope with and at times tactically navigate algorithmic precarity, it may also contribute to the reproduction of subtle hierarchies and competitive distinctions, underscoring the micro-politics of survival under uneven conditions.

Methodologically, the study’s participatory orientation seeks to anchor interpretation in workers’ own meanings and reasoning. Nonetheless, the analysis remains situated and partial, reflecting specific sectors and contexts. Future research may extend this inquiry by examining how *diskarte* intersects with gendered, classed, and spatial inequalities, and how these intersections further shape the contours of vernacular agency.

Recognizing *diskarte* as a vernacular agency allows for a more differentiated understanding of how Filipino gig workers inhabit precarity while sustaining dignity, relational commitments, and ethical reflexivity. Distinguishing between *diskarte* as circulating discourse and as practiced action underscores the uneven translation between visibility and lived experience, reminding scholars that



what becomes legible on platforms does not exhaust how agency is enacted on the ground. This perspective invites more culturally grounded analyses of labor, communication, and power—attentive not only to resistance and control, but also to the ambivalent, relational, and moral labor through which precarious systems are made livable.

Table 1. The Diskarte Continuum of Communicative Ambivalence

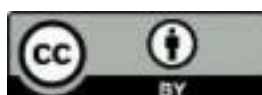
Grounded in participatory qualitative research, the continuum maps how workers move across zones that are context-dependent orientations. What differentiates the continuum from dominant representations of *diskarte* in circulating discourse—such as viral narratives of hustle or “Diploma o Diskarte”—is its focus on *practiced agency* through which workers manage ambivalence rather than resolve it. While circulating discourse often stylizes ambivalence through humor or aspiration for public legibility, the continuum foregrounds how ambivalence is lived, negotiated, and carried across small decisions to comply, adapt, negotiate, or refuse. In this sense, the table positions *diskarte* as a vernacular grammar of action that reveals how agency operates under conditions of uncertainty without collapsing into either resistance or compliance.

Continuum Zone	Orientation to Precarity	Dominant Communicative Practices	Affective & Ethical Logic	Participatory Insight
Survival-Oriented Calibration	Immediate livelihood continuity under constraint	Polite compliance, selective silence, humor as softening device	Endurance (<i>tiyaga</i>), restraint, harm minimization	Workers place themselves here during moments of acute risk (ratings, penalties, daily quotas), emphasizing “ <i>tiis muna</i> ” rather than choice
Tactical Navigation	Situational maneuvering within platform and client constraints	Negotiation, selective disclosure, strategic timing	Pragmatic judgment, risk calculation, moral trade-offs	Participants describe “ <i>diskarte lang</i> ” as moment-by-moment adjustment rather than long-term planning
Relational Accommodation	Sustaining work through social legitimacy and trust	Humor, <i>pakikisama</i> , relational repair, affective diplomacy	Care, reciprocity, moral accountability (<i>pakikipagkapwa</i>)	Workers emphasized that “ <i>tamang pakikitungo</i> ” is as important as technical skill
Entrepreneurial Self-Positioning	Leveraging flexibility for stability or upward mobility	Self-branding talk, competence signaling, client management	Aspirational discipline, responsibility, controlled optimism	Participants locate this zone as fragile and exhausting, not purely empowering
Subtle Resistance & Ethical Refusal	Managing contradiction without open confrontation	Rule-bending, quiet refusal, ironic humor	Moral boundary-setting, dignity preservation	Workers stress this is conditional and selective, not oppositional activism



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