Personal shopper (Jastip) and the representation of digital workers: A critical study of social media discourse in the gig economy

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Abstract

Personal shoppers (jastip) have emerged as informal digital workers within the gig economy, often promoted on social media as flexible and empowering entrepreneurial practices. However, behind this narrative lies a condition of precarity and limited labor protection. This study examines how the representation of jastip workers is discursively constructed on Instagram using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. Adopting a critical qualitative approach, this research combines textual analysis, virtual ethnography, and interviews to analyze captions, visual elements, emojis, testimonials, and interaction patterns. The findings reveal that digital identity is constructed through affective language, visual consistency, and trust-oriented expressions, which serve as performative strategies to establish credibility. Participatory communication practices, such as live sessions and testimonial reposts, co-produce legitimacy while intensifying relational labor. At the level of social practice, these representations are embedded within the ideological logic of the gig economy and digital neoliberalism, where flexibility and productivity are emphasized while structural vulnerability remains obscured. This study highlights how platform logic and discourse shape trust, identity, and labor relations in informal digital work.

Introduction

The explosive growth of the digital economy has transformed social media into a major terrain for economic practice, identity formation, and sense-making. With technological advancements, present forms of work are characterized by flexibility, informality, and self-entrepreneurship, especially among young people (Roy & Shrivastava, 2020). In this regard, personal shoppers or jasa titip (jastip) are an exemplary form of informal digital labour, whereby social media serves as a tool to mediate consumption, trust, and market access across borders (Fitirana et al., 2019). What is also at play is the increasingly inextricable relationship between how we consume and what we do for work, as digital platforms continue to erode the lines separating uncensored personal expression, influencer culture, and commercial transactions (Alauddin et al., 2025; Wiener et al., 2023). In this ecosystem, communication is a key element that determines the credibility and appeal of jastipers to their audience. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective (Fairclough, 2015), social

media algorithms, participatory culture, and public expectations shape the communication dynamics between digital workers and their consumers. As this phenomenon grows, understanding how digital work is constructed and represented in media spaces becomes increasingly important.

Beyond its economic function, social media operates as a discursive space in which meanings of work, success, and legitimacy are produced and circulated. Digital workers do not merely offer services; they actively construct representations of themselves through language, visuals, interactional styles, and platform features (Khanom, 2023; Omar & Ondimu, 2024). Social media has become an arena where digital workers, including jastipers, display their professional identities with careful strategies (Lestari & Sihombing, 2022; Moody-Ramirez et al., 2023; Santoniccolo et al., 2023). From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), these representations are not neutral or purely individual choices; instead, they are shaped by broader power relations, ideological frameworks, and institutional structures embedded within digital platforms (Fairclough, 2015). In this sense, social media becomes a site where discourse functions simultaneously as a communication practice and a form of social control, organizing how digital labor is imagined, valued, and normalized.

Norman Fairclough conceptualizes discourse as a three-dimensional process consisting of text, discursive practice, and social practice. This framework enables researchers to examine how linguistic and visual texts are produced, distributed, and interpreted, while also situating these processes within broader socio-economic and ideological contexts (Fairclough, 2015, 2023). Social media is understood as a communication channel and a discourse space that can shape meaning, power relations, and identity construction (KhosraviNik, 2022; Kopf, 2025). Applying this perspective to social media enables a critical examination of how platform affordances, algorithmic visibility, and participatory norms influence discursive practices. In the case of personal shoppers, captions, testimonials, emojis, live sessions, and aesthetic consistency serve not only as marketing tools but also as discursive resources through which trust, professionalism, and entrepreneurial legitimacy are constructed (Gandini, 2021). The platforms they use are not just tools but also entities that govern visibility, audience preferences, and perceptions of value, operating as discursive structures that regulate meaning and power relations (Himani Srihita et al., 2025).

Existing studies on digital labor and the gig economy have predominantly focused on issues of labor exploitation, flexibility, precarity, and income instability, particularly within platform-mediated services such as ride-hailing or delivery applications (Dorschel, 2022; Graham et al., 2017; James, 2022). While these studies provide important insights into structural inequalities, they often overlook the discursive representation and normalization of informal digital workers through everyday communication practices on social media. As a result, the symbolic and ideological dimensions of digital work, especially in non-formal, self-managed entrepreneurial contexts, remain underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by examining how personal shoppers construct and negotiate their identities as digital workers through social media discourse. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis as the primary analytical framework, this research investigates how representations of work are produced at the textual level (language, visuals, symbols), sustained through discursive practices (interaction, participation, trust-building strategies), and embedded within broader social practices such as the gig economy, platform governance, and digital neoliberal ideology. Concepts such as participatory culture, algorithmic visibility, relational labor, and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) are treated not as independent theoretical frameworks, but as contextual elements that shape and are shaped by discursive processes. By focusing on personal shoppers as informal digital workers, this

study contributes to critical communication scholarship by highlighting social media as an ideological space that legitimizes flexible entrepreneurship while obscuring structural vulnerabilities such as the absence of labor protection and economic security. This research demonstrates how digital work is discursively constructed as both an opportunity and a demand requiring constant performance, affective labor, and adaptation to platform logics. In doing so, the study advances critical discourse studies of digital labor by foregrounding representation, power, and meaning-making within the everyday practices of social media-based work.

Method

This study employs a critical qualitative approach, positioning Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical framework. CDA is used to examine how the representation of personal shoppers (jastip) is discursively constructed through social media practices. Virtual ethnography and in-depth interviews function as complementary methods to contextualize the production, circulation, and interpretation of discourse within everyday digital labor (Mardiyah, 2023; Rosaliza et al., 2023). Following Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, the analysis operates at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social practice. The textual dimension focuses on linguistic and visual elements in Instagram posts, including word choice, language style, metaphors, visual symbols, photos, captions, hashtags, and emoji usage. The discursive practice dimension examines how content is produced, distributed, and consumed, focusing on communication strategies, audience interaction patterns, testimonials, and engagement dynamics. The social practice dimension situates these discourses within broader socio-economic and ideological contexts, particularly the gig economy, algorithmic governance, and participatory culture shaping contemporary digital work.

The research objects consist of five active Instagram-based jastip accounts, selected through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria included accounts that had been active for at least six months, demonstrated consistent audience engagement, and explicitly positioned jastip as a primary economic activity. Inactive accounts, personal accounts not primarily used for jastip services, and accounts with minimal engagement were excluded. The units of analysis comprise Instagram posts, captions, comments, profile descriptions, and observable interaction patterns. Data collection was conducted through virtual ethnography over a three-month period, during which the researcher carried out non-interventional participatory observation of uploads, stories, live sessions, and public comments. Observations focused on posting rhythms, narrative strategies, branding practices, responses to trends, and the formation of digital communities through hashtags and mentions. Field notes were systematically recorded to capture recurring discursive patterns and contextual dynamics.

In addition, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with five jastip owners and ten followers or customers. The interviews explored participants' experiences of digital work, self-representation strategies, motivations, challenges in managing digital identity, and perceptions of algorithms and audience expectations (Benlahcene, 2021; Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). This method enabled the study to capture not only visible public discourse but also the affective, emotional, and strategic dimensions of communication practices within the platform-based economy. Data analysis involved thematic coding informed by CDA principles. Recurring discursive patterns such as narratives of trust, flexibility, entrepreneurial identity, and professional legitimacy were identified across textual, interactional, and contextual data. Methodological triangulation across content analysis, virtual ethnography, and interviews enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

Ethical considerations were addressed by anonymizing all account identities and interview participants.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings using Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis framework, focusing on how representations of personal shoppers (jastip) are constructed at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social practice. These accounts include those offering inter-country product personal shoppers, domestic exhibition product personal shoppers, concert tickets, and other needs personal shoppers. Each type of personal shopper has its own market segmentation and management system in marketing and implementing personal shoppers, which were validated based on the researcher's observations of Instagram accounts and the results of informant interviews.

Textual Representation: Trust as a Discursive Resource

The analysis was conducted on the linguistic and visual structures that shape the digital identity of personal shopper providers. At the textual level, the analysis reveals recurring linguistic and visual patterns that function to construct trust and professionalism (see Table 1). Captions consistently employ evaluative vocabulary such as "trusted," "real picture," and "fast response," combined with affective emojis (e.g., ♡ ☺✈). Reposted testimonials operate as intertextual resources that legitimize labor through peer validation. In addition, emoticons such as hearts, smiles, and airplane symbols are widely used to reinforce the emotional dimension and association with global mobility. One of the Instagram accounts of a personal shopper manager displays visuals in the form of short unboxing videos. The captions use a light tone but are full of assurance: "Unboxing Bimba Nylon Bucket & Card Holder with me😍🤭♡ . Apart from videos, testimonials are also often displayed in the form of Instagram stories. Hashtags like #jasatitipmurah and #openbangkok are also frequently used to reach specific audiences. This strategy combines personal and performative narratives to build an accessible professional persona. The following are examples of content used by personal shopper providers. Below are some examples of content types that are often shared by Instagram accounts.

Picture 1. Screenshot of content uploaded by one of the Instagram accounts

Picture 2. Another screenshot of content uploaded by one of the Instagram accounts

Credibility production in social media heavily relies on visual aesthetics and relatable language (Abidin, 2020; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Digital identity in this context is performative and shaped through curated, repetitive rituals dictated by platform logic. The representation of digital workers cannot be separated from the role of algorithms, visual trends, and repetitive practices that are part of digital culture. In this context, performativity is not just an outward appearance but a continuous process that influences how the audience constructs and accepts identity. Trust is built through promises, aesthetic consistency, and the familiarity of the language used in everyday narratives.

Interviews with followers confirm the effectiveness of this strategy. FA and FH mention that they trust more when they see real pictures or testimonials from other customers. NS adds that the casual communication style, accompanied by emoticons, makes the personal shopper feel more personal. This strategy is recognized as a conscious effort from the owner's perspective (Haya & Diniati, 2024). HA emphasizes the word "trustworthy" to underline credibility, and S links her digital identity to her K-pop fandom through fancams and proof of ticket purchases. At the same time, NM chooses to display her OOTD and personal skincare routine so that consumers see her as a real user. Thus, the digital identity of proxy shopping services results from a negotiation between symbols produced on social media and the interpretations given by followers. This representation aligns with authentic work (Banet-Weiser, 2018), presenting authenticity as a continuously negotiated performance. In proxy shopping services, authenticity work is evident in the effort to balance a professional impression with personal closeness, which followers consider to be the leading indicator of trust.

Discursive Practices: Participation and Relational Labor

This dimension examines how texts are produced and consumed. At the level of discursive practice, representation is shaped through participatory communication enabled by Instagram features such as Stories, live shopping sessions, and direct messaging. Meaning is co-produced by jastip owners and audiences, while testimonial reposts function as discursive mechanisms of legitimacy. These practices also intensify relational labor, requiring continuous emotional availability and responsiveness. Personal shopping service providers utilize Instagram features such as stories, live sessions, and Q&As to establish two-way communication. These interactions are not only for answering questions, but also for strengthening emotional closeness and building trust (Nugroho et al., 2025). One consignment service account shows story polls such as "What brand do you want me to buy for you, my dear?" or live broadcasts from shopping outlets with narrations such as "Hunting for discounts for you, my dear!". Active audience responses are an important part of content production, demonstrating the symbiotic relationship

between content producers and consumers. Every Instagram account of a shopping service provider observed showed a communication strategy of replying to comments and DMs personally and reposting customer testimonials with captions such as "thanks for trusting us, let us shop together again next time ♡". Additionally, to foster connectivity and trust between proxy shopping service providers and their audience, warnings about fraud cases are periodically published as educational content on proxy shopping service accounts.

The type of content with the highest engagement rate comes from behind-the-scenes posts, such as the queuing process, packing goods, and the journey back to Indonesia. This finding shows that the audience is interested in the final product and the work that shapes the overall narrative of the personal shopper. The displayed work process is an important part of building trust because it represents the transparency and dedication of the personal shopper providers. Thus, digital communication in this context goes beyond the transactional dimension and reveals a strong narrative and affective character. In the author's view, this dimension reflects a shift in values in digital relationships, where process and emotion become important elements in building credibility and connection with the audience.

This practice demonstrates participatory communication and consistently builds digital intimacy. This illustrates the concepts of relational labor (Duffy et al., 2019) and participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2013), where emotional involvement shapes economic value. Bucher (2020) also highlights how algorithms regulate personal shopper providers' work and communication rhythms. They must comply with the algorithmic rhythm to keep their content relevant on the timeline. This strategy shows that the relationships built are transactional and based on consciously constructed digital intimacy. These interactions also show that the process of meaning production is collaborative between personal shopper providers and audiences, who play an important role in the sustainability of the digital economy.

The success of personal shoppers is highly dependent on communication practices that build emotional closeness. The observation results show that Instagram stories, reposted testimonials, DMs, and WhatsApp groups are the main interaction channels. Posts such as "looking for discounts for you, dear" or reposted testimonials with captions such as "thanks for trusting us" form a transactional and affective communication pattern. Followers confirm the importance of this communication. ERP feels appreciated when her personal testimonials are reposted. Nadhifah believes personal interactions, such as asking about product preferences, build stronger trust than simply posting catalogs. ABP adds that consistent communication makes her feel comfortable transacting multiple times.

Meanwhile, ANI, who uses the personal shopper less frequently, admits to feeling less connected when communication is minimal. Owners have different strategies for building trust. Sonia strictly requires full payment before ticket sales, which followers perceive as a sign of professionalism. PA and HNF rely more on close friends to build initial trust. HA combines formal communication (catalog and prices) with light interaction in stories to make the audience feel closer. This also indicates the presence of relational labor (Duffy et al., 2019), which is the continuous emotional work done to maintain relationships with the audience. This relationship is ambivalent: it strengthens customer loyalty and demands energy and time. All owners acknowledge the difficulty of balancing time with their main job or studies, while followers understand these limitations but still demand quick responses. This shows that digital intimacy is both a source of value and pressure.

Social Practices: Digital Hustle, FOMO, and Neoliberal Ideology

The dimension of social practice highlights the economic and ideological context surrounding delivery services. At the level of social practice, these discourses are embedded within broader ideological structures of the gig economy and digital neoliberalism. Narratives of flexibility and hustle normalize self-exploitation, while urgency-driven content activates FOMO, aligning consumer desire with intensified labor demands. Social media thus operates as an ideological space where precarity is reframed as entrepreneurial freedom. Delivery service providers take advantage of the flexibility of digital platforms to reach markets, but at the same time face pressure to always appear active and attractive. Virtual ethnographic findings show that many practitioners experience digital fatigue due to the need to maintain continuous performance. This is evident in one example of an account posting more than 10 stories per day during a significant promotional period with content ranging from shopping queues, price details, and real-time testimonials. In addition to stories, there were 2-4 live streams per day, sometimes to the point of losing their voice or even going offline for a while. Audience comments such as "Stay strong!" show solidarity and highlight the performative burden that operators must bear.

This condition supports the theory of digital hustle (Steinberg & Zhang, 2025), which emphasizes that digital workers must constantly maneuver to deal with algorithms and audience expectations. Wood (2023) also states that gig economy workers face a heavy emotional burden due to an opaque and performance-oriented work system. This pressure comes from platform demands and the audience community, which demands quick responses, regular content, and consistent personal narratives. This creates complex working conditions in which personal shopper providers act as entrepreneurs and public figures who must continuously build closeness with their followers. The narratives of success constructed on social media, such as testimonials that "the consignment service business requires little capital but yields large profits," contain a digital neoliberal ideology (Scholz, 2012) that emphasizes individualism and meritocracy, while obscuring structural inequalities such as the absence of social protection and unlimited working hours.

Through three months of virtual ethnography, the researcher observed how personal shopper providers manage their work rhythms, adapt to algorithms, and form communities and digital identities through daily interactions on Instagram. These observations show that digital work is an economic issue and an arena for producing identity, affection, and power. Delivery services are part of the flexible but uncertain gig economy (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2023). The owners' orientations vary: S and NM manage delivery services as a serious, even primary, business; H sees delivery services as having growth potential; while HN and PA only do it incidentally. Followers also have different perspectives: NA and ABP see proxy shopping as a potential primary career, while Addin considers it more suitable as a side job.

The Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) phenomenon is the primary driver of consignment services. Followers admit they are driven to buy because they fear missing out on exclusive or limited edition products. H takes advantage of the Jakarta X Beauty event, HN offers viral Korean products, S targets the hype of K-pop concerts, and PA takes advantage of the momentum of Ramadan with Dubai chocolate and abayas. FOMO not only creates economic opportunities but also pressures owners always to be responsive to trends. Social media observations show the intensity of daily activities: dozens of story updates, marathon live sessions, and behind-the-scenes content such as long queues and the packing process. Interviews confirm this performative burden. S talks about losing her voice after prolonged live sessions, HA complains about long queues, NM faces supplier price negotiations, and

PA worries about fraud. Followers are aware of this pressure, but at the same time, they affirm expectations that owners should always be active.

To strengthen the analytical clarity of the findings, Table 1 summarizes key discursive elements identified through Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework

Table 1. Critical Discourse Analysis of Personal Shopper (Jastip) Representation on Instagram

CDA Dimension	Discursive Elements (Empirical Evidence)	Analytical Interpretation (CDA)
Text	Recurrent lexical choices in captions such as "trusted," "real picture," "original items," "fast response," and "bestie prices." Frequent use of affective emojis (♡ 😊 ✈). Structured captions combining product description with personal tone (e.g., "Unboxing with me").	Linguistic and visual choices construct trust, intimacy, and professionalism simultaneously. Trust is discursively framed as a personal attribute of the worker rather than an institutional guarantee, shifting responsibility and risk to the individual jastip owner.
Text	Reposted customer testimonials in Stories, often accompanied by captions such as "Thank you for trusting us" or "Let's shop together again."	Testimonials function as intertextual resources that legitimize labor through peer validation. Credibility is produced collectively and repetitively rather than through formal regulation or platform accountability.
Discursive Practice	Interactive features such as Stories polls, Q&A, Live shopping sessions, and direct message negotiations. Real-time narration during shopping activities.	Meaning is co-produced through participatory communication. Representation emerges from interaction between jastip owners and audiences, illustrating how discourse is shaped by platform affordances and audience expectations.
Discursive Practice	Continuous responsiveness to comments and messages, personalized replies, and emotional expressions of gratitude.	These practices exemplify relational labor, where emotional availability and intimacy become integral components of digital work. Visibility and engagement are tied to algorithmic reward structures.
Social Practice	Narratives emphasizing flexibility, hustle, and opportunity (e.g., "small capital, big profit," "side hustle to main income"). High frequency of posting and behind-the-scenes content.	Discourses reflect and reproduce digital neoliberal ideology, normalizing self-entrepreneurship and individual responsibility while obscuring precarity, lack of labor protection, and extended working hours.

CDA Dimension	Discursive Elements (Empirical Evidence)	Analytical Interpretation (CDA)
Social Practice	Urgency-driven content related to limited editions, viral trends, concerts, or seasonal events, often framed with countdowns or scarcity cues.	FOMO operates as an affective mechanism that aligns consumer desire with intensified labor demands, reinforcing platform-driven productivity and continuous self-performance.

Challenges and Expectations for the Platform

Consignment services face various challenges: time management, logistics, fraud risk, and price transparency. Husnah experienced long queues at events, S faced the risk of over-slot ticket wars, NM negotiated with suppliers, HN calculated shipping costs, while PA was concerned about transaction security. Followers highlight the risks of unsuitable goods, non-transparent prices, and communication limitations. Trust is a key factor in mediating these challenges (Rohim, 2024). Testimonials, proof of transactions, payment systems, and personal interactions are mechanisms for building trust. Testimonials are not only visual symbols, but also social proof that reassures consumers. The improvement of digital platforms is increasingly becoming a hope for owners and followers alike. Owners want cheaper promotional features, a verification system for personal shoppers, communication support, and ecosystem sustainability. HN emphasizes that personal shoppers should not harm MSME businesses. Followers want stronger consumer protection. This confirms that social media is not only viewed as a technical medium, but also as a political-economic arena where business legitimacy and sustainability are at stake. Consignment services are in high demand among various groups, but platform requirements and concerns still limit the development of these services.

A combination of primary data from social media and secondary data from interviews shows consignment services as a complex social practice. Digital identities are formed through linguistic and visual symbols; communication practices produce relational labor that reinforces trust while creating burdens; the gig economy, FOMO, and algorithms give rise to an ambivalent digital hustle. While social media shows "what is displayed" in visual and performative narratives, interviews explain "how and why" the actors carry out and interpret the practice. Thus, digital representations and personal experiences complement each other in explaining personal shoppers as an economic, cultural, and emotional phenomenon in the platform era.

Contribution and Significance

This study offers three key contributions to the literature on digital labor and communication studies. First, it extends critical discourse analysis of digital labor beyond platform-based services such as ride-hailing or delivery apps by focusing on informal, social-media-based entrepreneurial work. Unlike influencers or formal online sellers, personal shoppers occupy a hybrid position between consumer, entrepreneur, and digital worker. This study reveals how their labor legitimacy is discursively constructed through trust-based narratives rather than institutional recognition. Second, the findings demonstrate how trust operates as a central ideological mechanism in the representation of informal digital workers. Trust is not merely an interpersonal value but a discursive resource that compensates for the absence of legal protection, contractual clarity, and platform accountability. By foregrounding linguistic choices, emoji use, testimonial formats, and

interaction rituals, this study shows how credibility is systematically produced through communication practices. Third, this research highlights the role of platform logic and algorithmic visibility in shaping digital subjectivities. The study reveals how jastipers internalize platform demands, engaging in continuous self-performance and emotional labor to remain visible and competitive. This contributes to broader debates on digital neoliberalism by showing how ideology is embedded not only in economic structures but also in everyday communication practices.

Overall, this study advances critical communication scholarship by positioning social media not merely as a promotional tool, but as a discursive and ideological space where labor, identity, and power relations are continuously negotiated. It underscores the need for more inclusive regulatory and policy frameworks that recognize the communicative and affective dimensions of informal digital work.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the representation of personal shoppers (jastip) on social media is produced through complex discursive processes rather than visual or verbal content alone. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, the findings show that digital worker identities are constructed across textual, discursive, and social practice dimensions through linguistic choices, visual symbolism, interactional routines, and platform-mediated power relations.

At the textual level, trust is performed through affective language, aesthetic consistency, emoji use, and repetitive expressions such as *"trusted"* and *"amanah,"* functioning as symbolic substitutes for formal institutional guarantees. At the level of discursive practice, participatory communication—through Stories, direct messages, live sessions, and reposted testimonials—co-produces legitimacy while intensifying relational labor and emotional demands. At the level of social practice, these representations are embedded within the ideological logic of the gig economy and digital neoliberalism, where narratives of flexibility and hustle, reinforced by FOMO-driven content and algorithmic visibility, mask precarity and the absence of labor protection.

This study contributes to digital communication and labor scholarship by extending critical discourse analysis to informal, social-media-based work outside formal platform infrastructures. It highlights how trust, legitimacy, and entrepreneurial identity are discursively produced through everyday communication practices rather than regulation. The findings underscore the need for greater recognition, platform accountability, and policy support to ensure more sustainable conditions for informal digital workers in the platform era.

Acknowledgements

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