



POWER AND CLASS IN *SORRY WE MISSED YOU*: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines representations of power and social class in Ken Loach's film *Sorry We Missed You* through the discourse of the gig economy. Using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis combined with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, this qualitative research analyzes selected film dialogues at the textual, discursive, and social practice levels. The findings reveal that gig workers are depicted as independent and self-employed, yet this apparent autonomy conceals structural dependence, economic precarity, and managerial control. Power relations are reproduced through linguistic choices that normalize gig-economy ideology and shift exploitation into personal responsibility. The study demonstrates how film discourse exposes hidden ideological structures within flexible labor systems and highlights the need for critical awareness of gig work realities.

INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the gig economy, many workers face job insecurity, heavy workloads, long working hours, and systemic inequality. In contemporary media discourse, films play

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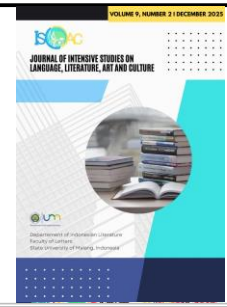
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a significant role not only as a reflection of social reality, but also as agents that shape ideology and influence how individuals and groups view and respond to existing social conditions. Among various film genre, social realism films present a direct picture and also the nuances of the complex struggles faced by marginalized communities, especially for those who face economic inequality and instability in employment conditions. Through Ken Loach's *Sorry We Missed You*, the film provides a realistic depiction of life under the gig economy in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. The Gig Economy is often presented as a system that promises flexibility and independence. Even so, it frequently masks the harsh reality of job insecurity, long working hours, and reduced labor protection (De Stefano et al., 2015; Woodcock & Graham, 2020). The film not only portrays the experiences of a working-class family, but also elucidates the dynamics of power relations and class inequality within a transient, flexible labor system.

Sorry We Missed You illustrates how economic pressures, digital surveillance, and the burden of individual responsibility create systemic vulnerabilities for workers in the gig economy work structure. Ricky, the father, is a self-employed man bound by technological oversight and strict regulations imposed by the delivery depot. Abby, his wife, works under a zero hour contract, working without paid travel time, or proper labor protections. While this may seem like freedom in the workplace, it ironically reflects a deeper mechanism of control as demonstrated in the dynamics of the gig economy, which is often claimed to provide flexibility and autonomy for its workers. But in fact, this system shows a form of exploitation and job insecurity. As explained by Wood et al., (2019) this platform-based work system reproduces power relations that tend to be asymmetrical through algorithms and scoring systems that regulate worker behavior indirectly. In this context, the gig economy has become a new means for capitalism to discipline labor through job insecurity and the elimination of social security, while disguising it with narratives of flexibility and individual freedom.

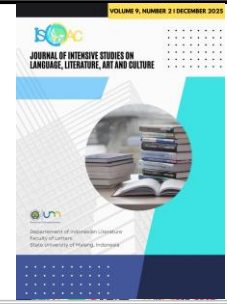
In the context of the gig economy, power does not solely operate through economic mechanisms. It also functions through symbolic means embedded in everyday language

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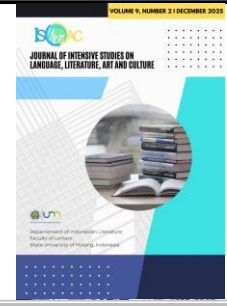
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and social practices. To comprehend these subtle dynamics, this study utilizes Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, which refers to a form of domination that appears natural yet is reproduced through language and social structure. As explained by Bourdieu & Thompson, (1991) symbolic power is a power of constructing reality and one which tends to establish a gnoseological order: the immediate meaning of the world (and in particular of the social world). Within the gig economy, the language employed frequently frames exploitative labor relations as forms of partnership or entrepreneurship, thereby encouraging workers to unconsciously accept their subordinate positions. In this manner, language functions as a potent instrument of domination, not through direct force, but through its acceptance as reasonable and natural.

To analyze these representations, this study uses Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA conceptualize language as a social practice that constructs and is constructed by power relations (Fairclough, 1993). Using Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework—texts, discursive practices, and social practices—allows for a deeper understanding of how linguistic choices in film dialogue produce and reproduce dominant ideologies, especially those related to class and control over labor. Using this method, this study analyzes how colloquial language in the film *Sorry We Missed You* contributes to and reflects in the normalization of the neoliberal values of the gig economy, including pseudo-flexibility, individualization of risk, and the continuation of class hierarchies in contemporary employment relations.

Among the existing CDA approaches, Teun A. van Dijk emphasizes the role socio-cognitive processes in shaping ideology through discourse (van Dijk, 1998, 2008). His model focusing on the internalization and reproduction of ideology through shared mental. In contrast, Fairclough situates discourse within broader institutional and structural contexts the influence language use. As mentioned by Al-Mas'udi & Al-A'mery, (2021) and Thi Quyen, (2024), Fairclough's model is more appropriate for this study because it allows an examination of how discourse functions as a social practice that



legitimizes power and class inequality in the gig economy.

The main purpose of this research is to analyze how the discourse in *Sorry We Missed You* can represent the power relations between workers and companies in the gig economy, and to explore how the language in the film is used to normalize forms of inequality and domination in today's work relations. The following are some of the research questions that guide this study:

1. How does the discourse construction in *Sorry We Missed You* reveal the forms of domination and subordination experienced by workers in the gig economy work system?
2. In the context of power relations, how is the language in the film used to reproduce, normalize, or even cover up the practices of inequality that occur in modern work relations?

This research aims to increase knowledge in the field of media discourse analysis by highlighting how film narratives can be a means of transmitting ideology. In addition, this research also highlights the role of language in shaping public perceptions of work, freedom and responsibility in contemporary capitalism.

In recent years, the study of the gig economy has undergone significant development, along with increasing attention to unstable working conditions, algorithmic control, and representations of worker identity. Research by Martorell & Roig Telo, (2024) reveals how visual humor such as memes and digital cartoons act as a tool for social critique of the working conditions of food delivery drivers. In this context, visual media not only represent workers as familiar figures in public life, but also construct critical narratives about false flexibility, exploitation, and the loss of boundaries between private and work life. These critical visualizations expose stereotypes such as "martyr driver" or "speed hero", shaping public perceptions in ambivalent directions: between empathy and glorification.

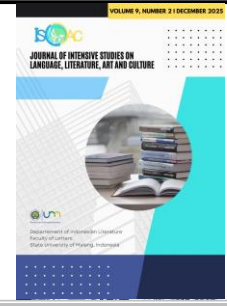
On the other hand, Alacovska et al., (2025) expanded the discussion by emphasizing how freelancers' identities are shaped through multimodal visual

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representations on social media. From the research, it appears that workers construct an image of themselves as autonomous and productive individuals, as if they have full control over their time and work choices. Unfortunately, this image often reinforces neoliberal narratives that emphasize individual responsibility while hiding the reality of structural subordination. These visual representations that seem aspirational and full of freedom may be a form of internalization of the detrimental ideology of flexible work.

Both studies focus more on visual representations in digital contexts, such as memes, graphics and social media. In contrast, relatively few studies have applied a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to examine how the gig economy is represented in more complex narrative and visual forms such as movies. The rapid evolution of the gig economy has given rise to novel and unstable work patterns, which necessitate critical examination (Vadavi & Sharmiladevi, 2024). From here, the CDA approach developed by Norman Fairclough offers a very relevant framework. Fairclough, (1993) states that discourse not only reflects social reality, but also actively shapes and reproduces social structures, including power relations and ideologies. Through three dimensions, namely text analysis, discourse practices, and social practices, CDA allows us to understand how language and visual elements are used to normalize class inequality and work control in the contemporary economic system.

The CDA approach opens up space to read films not only as works of art, but also as ideological tools that reproduce or even challenge structures of domination. Therefore, while the contributions of Martorell & Roig Telo, (2024) and Alacovska et al., (2025) are crucial in showing how art workers' identities are constructed through digital visualization, this study attempts to fill this gap by analyzing the representation of power relations and class in Ken Loach's film, *Sorry We Missed You*. This film is relevant because it highlights the complexity of flexible work, economic pressures, and family breakdown as consequences of an exploitative work system.

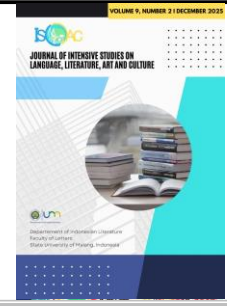
By combining a visual perspective on the representation of worker identity with the CDA framework, this article contributes to the study of media and the gig economy by

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revealing how cinematic language—through dialogue, narrative, and visual elements—is used to both normalize and critique power relations in contemporary work systems.

METHOD

In this study, the researcher uses a qualitative research design, applies Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the main method to analyze how discourse in the film *Sorry We Missed You* can construct and create ideologies of power, class, and labor control. CDA enables this research to explore how language not only functions as a communication tool, but also as a medium to maintain social hierarchies and power relations (Fairclough, 1989).

The main data source of this research is the transcript of the movie *Sorry We Missed You*. The transcripts include dialogue and selected scenes that show ideological elements related to the flexible work system, power inequality, and class identity. In this research, data collection will be done by: 1.) Watching the movie thoroughly to understand the narrative, character development, and contextual background. 2.) Selecting key scenes and dialogues that are rich in discursive representations of power, class struggle, power inequality, or ideological persuasion. 3.) Transcribing relevant scenes, ensuring linguistic and interactional elements are preserved for textual analysis. This purposive sampling was based on theoretical relevance rather than numerical representation, which is in accordance with the principles of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

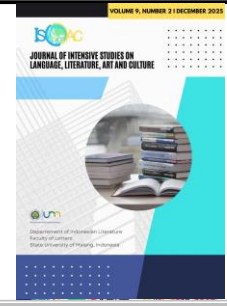
Next is the data analysis plan. To analyze the data, this research will use Norman Fairclough's, (1995) three-dimensional framework, which consists of text analysis, discursive practices, and social practices. To make the analysis process clearer and more effective, several practical steps were taken in this study. After selecting relevant scenes, the researcher transcribed the conversations and divided them into smaller units of interaction to capture linguistic details more accurately. Before entering the analysis stage, here are some examples of dialogues that are representative and used as the basic for analysis: "You don't work for us, you work with us", and "You sign up with us, you become an

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owner driver franchisee”.

1. Textual Analysis (Description)

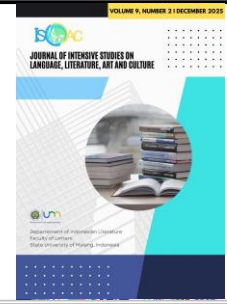
The first stage is to focus on the linguistic features of the selected dialogues, such as the choice of words (lexical), the use of modality (possibility/necessity), the use of pronouns, sentence structure, and the tone of the way of speaking. This analysis is carried out to identify how certain language choices can reflect domination, subordination, and forms of resistance in work relations. For example, terms like “*work with us* or *owner driver* are analyzed as discursive strategies that normalize inequality and shift responsibility to the worker.

2. Discursive Practice (Interpretation)

The next stage analyzes how the dialogues are produced, distributed, and function within the overall narrative of the film. This includes examining the interactional roles between workers and management, particularly how language shapes or reinforces class identity, responsibility, and authority. For example, the expressions used by Maloney – such as describing obligations as choices show how managerial discourse shape workers perceptions of autonomy and control. At this stage, the analysis focuses on how characters internalize these discursive patterns and how audiences might interpret these representations in contemporary labor ideology.

3. Social Practice (Explanation)

The final stage connects the linguistic and discourse findings to the broader socio-economic context of the gig economy. In this case, the gig economy is understood as a work structure that is based on flexibility, temporary contracts and individual responsibility, yet covertly reproduces economic domination and the removal of job security. This framework draws on views such as those put forward by Wood et al., (2019), that the gig economy is not only a technological phenomenon, but also a new hegemonic practice that shifts the burden of risk from companies to individual workers.



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The results of this study show that the film not only represents the social reality of informal workers, but also shows that dominant ideologies such as freedom, flexibility, and individual responsibility can be reproduced through language. The movie shows that instead of providing a path to freedom, the flexible work system creates new forms of power that are hidden and larger. This analysis is divided into two sub-chapters based on the research focus, which begins with the discursive construction of domination and subordination experienced by workers in the gig economy and languages as a medium for normalizing structural inequality.

Discursive Construction of Domination and Subordination in the Gig Economy

The findings show that this film constructs power relations through linguistic strategies that appear neutral on the surface but actually serve to normalize exploitation. At the textual level, the film depicts how language is used to reproduce power relations and construct workers' identities in the gig economy. Instead of explicitly showing coercion, power is embedded in seemingly neutral statements that normalize exploitation (Fourie, 2023; Wardhana et al., 2020). For example, in the scene where Ricky is introduced to the depot's work system by Maloney, power is conveyed through language that redefines the work relationship *"You don't work for us. You work with us. You don't drive for us. You perform services. There's no wages, but fees. No clocking on - you become available. You sign up with us; you become an owner driver franchisee. Master of your own destiny, Ricky"*

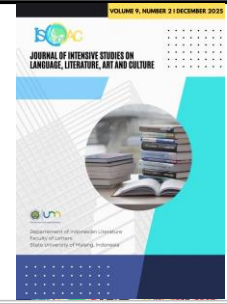
The use of words such as *"owner," "franchisee,"* and *"master of your own destiny"* gives an illusion of autonomy and entrepreneurial freedom. However, this perceived freedom actually contradicts the rigid structure that governs Ricky's daily work—strict supervision, financial penalties, and non-negotiable requirements. This is reinforced by statements such as *"no wages, but fees" "you become available" "if you lose it (the scanner),*

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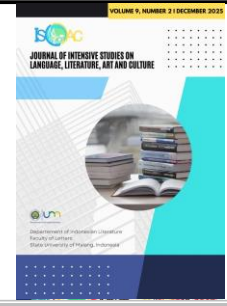
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you'll have to pay for it", and "You want a day off? You'll be charged £100 per day". These statements reveal how linguistic framing hides structural dependence by imposing costs, risks, and responsibilities on workers.

At the level of discursive practice, these statements reveal the existence of a power that is disguised as formal policy. Maloney's speech acts establish compliance by referring to professionalism and personal responsibility. The choice of words shows how managerial discourse in the gig economy maintains control through ideology rather than direct coercion. Through such linguistic strategies, managerial discourse not only instructs workers but gradually shapes how they view their own position in the labor system. Ricky's acceptance of these terms—without question—shows how discourse shapes workers' subjectivity. This internalization becomes clear when Ricky says *"I've got to make this work. It's our only chance to get back on track"*, in this section, his statement reflects how power works by transforming external pressure into internal motivation. Ricky's statement reveals the emotional mechanisms at embedded in the gig economy, where failure is viewed as a personal mistake rather than the product of a structural system. What appears to be an expression of determination actually signifies the internalization of systemic pressure by workers—they feel responsible for economic instability that is actually a product of exploitative platform systems. Through this kind of discourse, the gig economy successfully instills neoliberal values such as independence, perseverance, and productivity into workers' identities, making domination appear voluntary and natural.

At the level of social practice, this film reflects the broader structure of the gig economy, which responsibility and risk are entirely transferred to workers without adequate social protection. The gig economy function as an extension of neoliberal capitalism that disguises economic control as entrepreneurial freedom. The use of technology as a tool of surveillance reinforces symbolic domination under the guise of autonomy and flexibility. According to Fairclough, (1993), this illustrates how language use at the micro level—such as managerial discourse and workers' self-justifying



expressions—connects with relationships as the norm and maintaining unequal power distributions in the contemporary labor system.

Languages as a Medium for Normalizing Structural Inequality

The second findings highlight how language not only represents inequality but also actively reproduces and legitimizes it. At the textual level the language used in the film not only represents inequality, but also actively normalizes and reproduces structural injustice. The use of the term's *"partner"*, *"franchisee"*, or *"owner driver"* continually disguises the exploitative conditions of labor relations. When Ricky heard this statement *"You sign up with us, you become an owner driver franchisee. Master of your own destiny, Ricky"*, at first glance, this sentence sounds motivating. However, in reality, Ricky has no real control over his work schedule or working hours, delivery routes, income, or the conditions and decisions associated with his job. The use of motivational language hides structural subordination, presenting dependence as independence. Through this lexical framework, the film shows how managerial discourse in the gig economy transforms limitations into illusion of freedom. The choice of words that describe work as *"self-determination"* or *"personal freedom"* becomes a powerful ideological tool that normalizes control and hides the unequal relationship between workers and platforms.

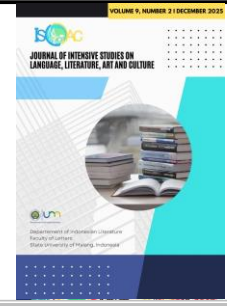
At the level of discursive practice, such languages are ideologically reinforced through repeated repetition until it becomes part of the everyday life of workers. Through repetition, managerial and motivational discourse—which emphasizes autonomy and responsibility—gradually shapes the way workers view their own roles and failures. Ricky's statements *"Son, I've got to go to work. I have not got a choice."* *"It'll be different in six months, I promise"* these statements demonstrate the internalization of guilt and obligation. His words reveal how discourse shapes subjectivity: he interprets his difficulties not as the result of structural exploitation, but as temporary challenges that can be overcome through personal effort. This belief shows how the gig economy ideology function not only through policy, but also through language that normalizes obedience,

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perseverance, and self-reproach, transforming systemic uncertainty into a matter of individual responsibility.

Apart from Ricky, Abbie also shows a different but equally strong form of internalization of symbolic power. As a care worker, she faces multiple pressures, both economic and emotional shaped by the same ideological framework of self-sacrifice and responsibility. In one scene, she says in a tired and frustrated tone *"I'm doing my best. I don't have enough time... But I still have to be there."* her word shows that the discourse of moral and affective responsibility has been internalized in Abbie as a working woman. She feels that she must always be present and provide empathy to her clients without questioning the exploitative and inhumane work system.

At the level of social practice, this film illustrates how the gig economy ideology transcends the workplace and influences broader social spaces. It shows how economic uncertainty and pressure affect not only individual workers but also entire families. Ricky's family experiences mounting debt, internal conflict, and declining physical and mental health as direct consequences of structural inequality. Ricky says *"We're thousands of pounds in debt, Seb. I've got fines coming out of my arse. If I don't pay him and sort it out, we'll end up on the streets."* This statement reveals that the flexible gig economy system functions as a structural mechanism of oppression, affecting the working class both economically and socially. It emphasizes that what is presented as flexibility and opportunity is, in practice, a form of systemic control that perpetuates inequality across social institutions.

Discussion

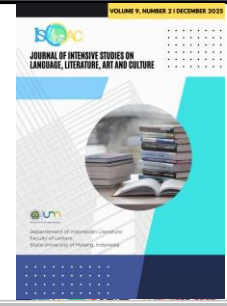
The findings show that language in *Sorry We Missed You* functions as both a medium of communication and an instrument for reproducing hidden power relations and normalizing structural inequality in the gig economy. Fairclough's, (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) definitively explains how textual choices, discursive practices, and broader socio-economic structures interact to form ideological systems of domination.

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Neutral lexical choices like *"franchise owner," "partner,"* or *"owner driver"* serve as ideological tools that obscure hierarchical relations and shift responsibility onto workers. This internalization of gig-economy ideologies, grounded in neoliberal values such as personal responsibility, autonomy, and individualism, is a key driver of this shift.

Bourdieu & Thompson, (1991) concept of symbolic power further strengthens this interpretation. Bourdieu explains that domination is most effective when it appears natural and is accepted unconsciously. The dynamic between Ricky and Maloney is clear: managerial discourse, wrapped up in motivational or entrepreneurial language, justifies strict systems of surveillance, penalties, and obligations. Tirapani & Willmott, (2023) are correct, neoliberal domination rarely operates through explicit coercion. It is embedded in institutional norms and everyday language. Phrases like *"master of your own destiny"* create the illusion of agency while subtly transferring financial risk and operational burdens to workers. This linguistic framing is critical because it transforms structural exploitation into a seemingly voluntary arrangement.

The internalization of neoliberal ideology is evident in Ricky's interpretation of systemic pressures as individual responsibility. The subject's statement, *"I've got to make this work"*. This assertion exemplifies the manner in which external constraints are reinterpreted as individual obligations. The phenomenon that appears to be determination is, in fact, the absorption of a discourse that transforms precarity into a moral duty. This is consistent with Fairclough, (1993) argument that discourse functions as a social practice through which individuals reproduce dominant ideologies. Ricky does not perceive the depot's rigid demands as a form of institutional domination; rather, he frames them as reasonable expectations. This can be considered an example of symbolic violence, as defined by Bourdieu.

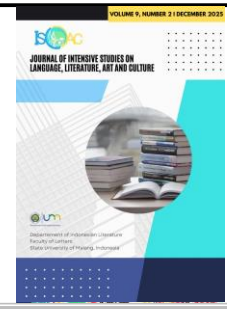
The manager's concise statement, *"It's your business. Remember?"* serves to perpetuate the ideological illusion of independence within the gig economy. Ricky's linguistic positioning as an autonomous entrepreneur is a mere facade, as he is, in reality, denied any form of institutional support or protection. This statement exemplifies the systematic

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transfer of responsibility from the company to the worker, where all risks, failures, and consequences are framed as personal rather than structural. In this manner, discourse functions as a form of symbolic power that normalizes exploitation and legitimizes unequal relations of control within platform-based labor (Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991; Fairclough, 1993; Fourie, 2023).

Abbie's experience contributes an additional dimension to this symbolic subordination, albeit not in terms of gender. Her work underscores the emotional and moral demands placed on care-sector workers, who are frequently expected to demonstrate constant empathy and provide ongoing support, despite facing exhausting and insecure working conditions. In response to Abbie's assertion that she is exerting maximum effort, it is crucial to assess the veracity of this claim *"I'm doing my best. I don't have enough time... But I still have to be there."*, she illustrates how workers internalize a discourse of moral responsibility that supersedes their own well-being. This perspective aligns with (Husso & Hirvonen, 2012), who underscore the notion that care work, irrespective of the worker's identity, often entails an emotional commitment and a moral obligation that are entrenched through societal discourse. In this sense, the film reveals how symbolic pressure and emotional expectations reinforce structural control, making workers compliant even without explicit coercion.

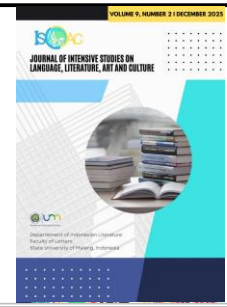
The film employs a variety of discursive strategies that illustrate how ideologies of flexibility, autonomy, and entrepreneurialism mask underlying forms of exploitation. These strategies ultimately engender compliance while perpetuating the illusion of choice (Abdullah et al., 2024). In this paradigm, workers are conceptualized as autonomous entities, held accountable for their individual success or failure. This perspective diverts attention from the systemic constraints that influence their professional experiences. This ideological framing aligns with the perspectives of Wardhana et al., (2020) and Fourie, (2023), who contend that narratives within the gig economy depict precarious conditions as opportunities for growth, thereby normalizing the transfer of risk to workers. The film illuminates how managerial discourse melds motivational rhetoric with a rigid contractual

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structure, thereby engendering compliance while perpetuating an illusion of choice.

The broader social implications of gig-economy discourse are also evident in the film. The family of Ricky is confronted with financial obligations, emotional distress, and a deterioration in overall well-being that are directly attributable to platform-based labor. Similar conditions of insecurity and lack of protection have also been documented in real-world gig workers across different regions (Tobing, 2024). His statement, *"We're thousands of pounds in debt, Seb... If I don't pay him and sort it out, we'll end up on the streets,"* reflects how structural inequality extends beyond the workplace into the domestic sphere. The gig economy, therefore, functions not only as an economic system but also as a mechanism of social regulation that affects relationships, household stability, and class identity. This finding aligns with Fairclough's, (1993) assertion that discourse is intricately intertwined with overarching social structures that perpetuate inequitable power dynamics.

Integrating Fairclough's CDA and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, this study unveils the multi-layered mechanisms through which domination is produced and maintained, including textual (linguistic choices), discursive (internalization and repetition), and social (neoliberal structures and platform logic). These findings corroborate earlier studies Fourie, (2023); Husso & Hirvonen, (2012) that demonstrate the legitimization of precarious labor within gig-economy discourse. This legitimization is achieved through the framing of insecurity, extended work hours, and self-sacrifice as rational and expected components of the workforce. *Sorry We Missed You* contributes to this understanding by illustrating how cinematic language—especially dialogue—normalizes ideological assumptions and shapes the identities of workers who must navigate structural inequalities presented as personal challenges.

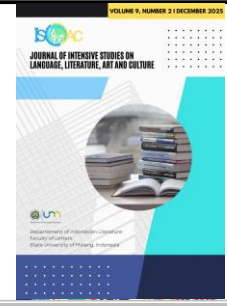
The film reveals the complexity of modern exploitation, which operates through economic mechanisms, symbolic narratives, and affective pressures. A critical understanding of these discursive strategies is essential for exposing hidden power structures in contemporary labor systems. Subsequent research endeavors may involve

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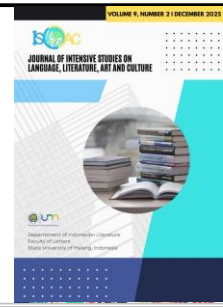
the examination of analogous discursive patterns in other films or cultural contexts, or the investigation of how alternative narratives have the potential to challenge neoliberal ideologies and enhance collective awareness of workers' rights.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

A comprehensive review of the extant literature reveals that *Sorry We Missed You* offers a compelling perspective on the dynamics of power within the gig economy. The film's analysis suggests that this power manifests not solely through economic mechanisms but also through symbolic and emotional forms of domination. The language and narrative employed in the film function as ideological tools that normalize inequality and construct workers as fully responsible for their own circumstances, while obscuring the systemic forces that constrain and exploit them. Through the implementation of subtle discursive practices, neoliberal values such as flexibility, autonomy, and individual responsibility are internalized and reproduced by the characters, thereby reinforcing their subordination without the presence of explicit coercion.

This study lends further credence to the notion that the flexibility purportedly afforded by the gig economy does not constitute genuine autonomy. Rather, it serves as a sophisticated instrument of social control, perpetuated by language, surveillance practices, and widely accepted social norms. The experiences of Ricky and Abbie illustrate how economic pressure, emotional exhaustion, and social vulnerability are intertwined, positioning workers within a cycle of compliance that perpetuates class inequality and structural injustice. Consequently, this film offers a critical reflection on contemporary labor conditions, exposing the paradox between the narrative of freedom and the reality of subjugation in modern work systems.

The findings of this study offer potential insights for policymakers, academics, and labor organizations seeking to address the hidden forms of exploitation within the gig economy. In the context of addressing the challenges posed by flexible employment systems, a range of efforts have been proposed. These efforts may be categorized into



three distinct categories: policy-oriented measures, media-based initiatives, and educational programs. The policy-oriented measures include the strengthening of labor protection policies. The media-based initiatives focus on promoting narratives that underscore themes of solidarity and workers' rights. Finally, educational programs aim to enhance the awareness of workers regarding the symbolic, economic, and social risks associated with flexible employment systems. It is recommended that subsequent research endeavor to investigate analogous discursive patterns in other films or digital labor platforms. This would facilitate a more comprehensive critical understanding of power relations in contemporary work environments.

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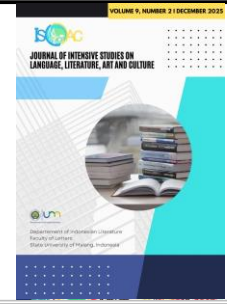
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