Delivering Precarity:

Food Delivery Gig Workers, the Façade of Flexibility, and the Future of Work

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that food delivery gig workers are the canaries in the coalmine for understanding the future of work and point to the proliferation of a more exploitative capitalist system. While exploitation in the workplace is not new, the way in which choice, freedom, and autonomy are used to repackage old forms of exploitation through digital platforms indicates a new iteration. This thesis draws on extant literature in order to analyze twelve in-depth interviews with gig workers working for food delivery platforms, as well as online forums dedicated to food delivery workers. The study finds that food delivery gig workers perceive this new labor system as advantageous in terms of flexibility, autonomy, and finances. Although this new job niche mitigates precarity for some individuals, the food delivery corporations constrain the very control that gig workers value and ultimately exacerbate worker precarity.

Gig work is both an economic relief and exploitative, flexible, and unreliable, and emancipative and restrictive. Food delivery gig workers' experiences highlight tensions for those who want both autonomy and control, alongside better working conditions and protections. Despite some workers being aware of their exploitation, conditions outside of the gig sector in the traditional economy are increasingly unable to meet their needs, so they are willing to accept and even defend a job that actively undermines their stability. Food delivery gig workers help to reveal the contradictions within the current labor market and point to opportunities for changing it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the experiences and conditions of food delivery gig workers and explores the implications of these conditions on the future of work through a critical analysis. This thesis argues that food delivery gig workers are the canaries in the coalmine and signals to us that the labor market is in crisis when viewed from the perspective of workers. Similar to the canaries brought into coal mines in the early 1900s to detect unseen poisonous gas as a warning to miners, workers' behaviors in the labor market today are signaling that the economy is increasingly unable to meet the needs of working people. As conditions in the traditional, non-gig sector are increasingly unable to meet people's needs due to their low pay, unpredictable hours, lack of affordable childcare, and the absence of health benefits, the gig economy appears to become a solution to some of these problems.

Although today's food delivery gig workers are attracted to this type of work because of how it has been packaged as a "flexible" solution to earn money, this study finds that while it appears to offer workers more control over their working lives, they are actually being exploited in both similar and different ways when compared to traditional work. This thesis explores the experiences of workers and their conditions to highlight how the ideological constructs associated with "flexibility" lead workers to become complicit in their own exploitation. Existing scholarship explores the relationship between the gig economy and labor processes of control, but often stops short of considering the ideological notions of freedom, autonomy, and choice that convince

workers to accept, and even invest in, a working arrangement where they are unfree, unstable, and more precarious.

What is unique about this study is its contribution to the discussion about the future of work and the ideological components underpinning it. This thesis argues that food delivery gig workers and their choices portend a more exploitative future of work, where contract work arrangements, with little in the way of employment protections, will become the norm. With the advent of neoliberal social and economic policies, citizens have become responsible for more aspects of their lives with less access to resources, save their own labor and time. The possibilities for autonomy and freedom in the labor market and society are more limited today, therefore uniquely positioning the gig economy to offer workers a degree of control over their working lives, drawing them into a situation in which they prop up and support the very capitalist system responsible for their precariousness.

Importantly, not all food gig workers interpret similar experiences in the same way. Still, as a group, they offer insights into how food delivery gig work can be both an economic relief and exploitative, both flexible and unreliable, both emancipative and restrictive. Therefore, any solutions or attempts to change this sector will require equally nuanced and differential responses. The gig economy signifies a more profound crisis of capitalism and work more generally, so if we can better understand the experiences of food delivery gig workers, then we have a chance to make work better for everyone.

This chapter, Chapter 1, serves as the introduction to the research and includes the study rationale and the research questions which guided this study. Chapter 2 presents and analyzes the existing literature associated with gig work and the theoretical

frameworks that inform the overall analysis. Chapter 3 covers this study's critical methodology and methods, focusing on recruitment protocols, data collection techniques, data coding, and analysis. That chapter discusses the ethical considerations, limitations, and study parameters. Chapter 4 presents the study's findings, organized into four major substantive thematic categories, with several subthemes grouped within each. The final chapter, Chapter 5, contains an overall discussion of the findings, major conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Study Rationale

This study will significantly benefit educational institutions, scholars, and activists seeking to understand the changes in the economy and how this impacts the future of work. By better understanding the individualized experiences of food delivery gig workers, how they make sense of those experiences, and how they navigate changing them, we will better understand the role of the gig economy in the lives of working people and the broader economy. This study will also be of great benefit considering the role of the gig economy in the ongoing global pandemic.

During this economic and health crisis, the gig economy has become a lifeline for both workers and consumers seeking ways to make up for lost income and receive essential goods like food and groceries without risking exposure to the deadly virus. Food delivery gig workers are indeed part of the food supply chain, occupying that crucial last mile, as they are responsible for getting the product to its final destination. Therefore, this study will benefit those seeking to understand the role of the gig economy and “essential” work during the pandemic and beyond.

This study will also raise awareness and make the conditions of food delivery gig workers transparent, particularly for consumers and the public. Like other food supply chain workers, food delivery gig workers and their labor are often relegated to the background or rendered invisible yet remain vital to the health of the economy and of everyday people. When conditions and experiences remain unknown and hidden, exploitation can thrive, making advocating for and creating change more difficult. Through exposing the conditions and experiences of food delivery gig workers to the public, this study makes transparent what was designed to be opaque. It helps to create a shared understanding of working conditions among food delivery gig workers and consumers alike.

Lastly, this study will benefit labor organizers as they will be able to draw upon the experiences of workers and their conditions to design and create organizing efforts that speak to the needs of workers and provide more and better protections for them. Gig workers fall outside of the basic workplace protections, including the right to form a union, so information on how workers navigate making changes to their conditions and understanding them will be of benefit to crafting solutions.

Research Questions

For this study, I recruited food delivery gig workers from across the country to understand their working experiences and conditions, how they understand the labor market, and how they navigate or seek to change their working conditions. In this thesis, I address the following three research questions:

1. What are the everyday experiences and conditions of work for food delivery gig workers?

2. How do food delivery gig workers make sense of the labor market?
3. How do they navigate or seek to change these work conditions?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMING

The rise of the gig economy and its impact on work has been extensively critiqued, analyzed, and studied by scholars from a broad range of disciplines. This literature review aims to offer an overview of the primary debates and literature related to gig work, paying particular attention to three areas of literature: the neoliberal economy, gig economy studies, and collective organization among workers. Moreover, I will introduce the theoretical tools and concepts that I draw on to conduct my analysis. The following pages focus on the development of these discourses and theories, as they relate to the experiences of gig workers and what this tells us about how they understand the labor market.

The first section provides a background to the conditions that have led to the rise of the gig economy, paying particular attention to how neoliberal social and economic policies over the last few decades have led to a shift in the standard employment relationship, resulting in more "flexible" work arrangements and an increasingly precarious workforce. This section ends with introducing the Marxist tools and theoretical frameworks I will be using, Marx's (1978) theory of alienation and estrangement, Burawoy's (1979) hegemonic control, and Althusser's (1971) ideological state apparatus. The following section explores recent research on the gig economy, highlighting the contradictions between the promises of the economy and the lived experiences of workers, the role of technology and algorithms as management systems, and inequalities in gig work. Finally, collective organization among workers presents the

gig economy's contested organizing landscape, examples of resistance, and proposed solutions.

Political Economic Context

In this section, I reveal how the macro-economic policies of the last forty years have provided the conditions for the gig economy to thrive. I look into how 1970's-era policies have resulted in the restructuring of the workplace and then move to how this restructuring has made the lives of workers and society more precarious over time. I end with an engagement with the theoretical economic tools which underpin these changes and will guide my analysis.

Neoliberal economic restructuring

The neoliberal socio-economic policies of the last four decades have had vast implications on nearly every facet of society, acutely exacerbating income inequality and adversely affecting workers. Reforms such as de-unionization, financialization, globalization, and the digital revolution have led workers across class, gender, and race to occupy an increased state of precarity, risk, and instability as it relates to their employment (Hacker, 2006; Kalleberg, 2009: 2018; Lambert, 2008; Lin & Neely, 2020). These macro changes to the economy have resulted in a reorganization of the workplace, and the standard working relationship, where contracted, contingent, and "flexible" labor has become the norm. Weil (2014) explored this new employment relationship and its implications in his book, *The Fissured Workplace*, describing how globalization and other neoliberal processes have led companies and businesses to seek new ways to adapt to the economy that disadvantage and endanger the worker.

According to Weil, the fissuring of a workplace occurs when the demand by capital markets for profit and efficiency leads businesses to focus solely on core activities to produce results for investors and consumers, resulting in a shift of all other components considered non-essential to be contracted or outsourced elsewhere. Notably, he notes that these two actions can be contradictory. Once central operations become contracted out, the company risks the quality of the product, service, or brand recognition, therefore compromising profits and value creation. The "glue" that holds these two contradictory goals together is a net of enforcement standards and strategies made possible through new communication and information technologies and franchising sectors of the economy.

The fissuring of the workplace thus prioritizes the flexibility of the companies to respond to and exploit changes in the marketplace, leading to a simultaneous "rise in profitability for the lead companies who operate at the top of industries and increasingly precarious working conditions for workers at lower levels" (p.8). The fissured workplace, therefore, upends the direct employment relationship, as previous relationships maintained in-house are outsourced or contracted out, resulting in more precarious employment as risk is "shifted onto smaller employers and individual workers, who are often cast in the role of independent businesses in their own right" (p.8).

In many ways, the gig economy is the epitome of the fissured workplace; platform companies depend upon the independent contractor classification to hire its workers, saving on labor costs and creating distance between their workers to avoid any liability or resemblance of employer status, while still being able to control the quality of the product and service through a digital management system. The result of a fissured workplace

organization is a more contingent and precarious workforce whose work is increasingly temporary, contract-based, and fragmented.

Precarity and Risk

According to Kalleberg and Vallas (2017), precarious work is "work that is uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections" (p.1). Gig work is in many ways the archetype of precarious work, given the brevity of the jobs or gigs and that many of the risks and responsibilities that were previously taken care of by the businesses have been shifted to the worker, who are not eligible for basic workplace protections like healthcare, paid leave, or the right to form a union (Ravenelle, 2019). While gig work may have become synonymous with precarious employment, it is essential to recognize that this is not necessarily a new condition for workers.

As Woodcock and Graham (2020) reveal in their book, *The Gig Economy, A Critical Introduction,* the precarity many workers are experiencing as a result of neoliberal economic policies and subsequent workplace employment restructuring is not a new phenomenon but a return to what has been the norm for most workers throughout the history and the globe. Indeed, other scholars (Kalleberg, 2009; Bent, 2017) have also argued that when contextualized within the existence of work, precariousness has been the norm, and the relative stability and security of employment most of the Western world has experienced after WWII has been the exception.

Many debates around precarity and the precarious worker seek to demonstrate that it is something new, an emerging class, or a departure from the standard employment relationship (Beck 1992; Bourdieu 1998; Butler 2015; Standing 2011). However, despite

the differences in how scholars view precarity as an emergent or re-emergent phenomenon, that it is an integral part of the workplace is cause for concern, particularly concerning how responsibility for operations has shifted to the worker, who has the least power to control them.

This "risk shift" (Hacker, 2006) occurred when corporations and governments shifted a growing amount of economic risk onto individuals "in the name of enhanced individual responsibility and control," resulting in widespread economic and social insecurity (p.8). As workers assume more risk, they have less access to stable employment relations and compete for jobs in a "spot market" that resembles a trading floor (Hacker, 2006). Moreover, precarious, and insecure work conditions have led workers to increasingly accept what Pugh (2015) calls the "one-way honor system," whereby workers comply with employers' needs while expecting very little, besides wages, in exchange.

Theoretical Frames

Marx's (1978) theory of estranged labor is helpful in understanding how these changes in the economy are impacting workers. In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx describes how pervasive alienation is in a capitalist society, focusing on four types of alienation: from the product of labor, the labor process, fellow human beings, and our human nature. In the first form, workers are alienated from the products of their labor, meaning the products they create don't belong to the worker, as they are owned and disposed of by another. The second type focuses on how workers are alienated from the labor process, meaning their labor belongs to another and is both beyond their control and in the hands of someone who is hostile to them. The third type

focuses on fellow human beings, describing how because workers are controlled by those who exploit their labor and those who consume the things they produce, people become hostile and distrustful of others. The final form, alienation from our human nature, is what Marx called self-estrangement, where the worker feels as though they do not have any meaning to their work, losing their sense of self at work and feeling estranged from others and society generally. While this state of estranged labor predates the neoliberal economic policies which have given rise to the gig economy, they persist in both ambiguous and unambiguous ways. As work has become more contract-based and fragmented, workers are more physically distant from the actual value of their labor, what they create, their fellow workers, and themselves. However, as discussed above, as work has become fragmented and more responsibility is contracted onto the worker, it is done so under the rhetoric of freedom and personal responsibility, distorting the reality of workers alienation in an attempt to paint it as the opposite.

The way in which personal responsibility and control are used as a justification to shift risk onto individuals and obscure the structural forces responsible for it recalls Michael Burawoy's (1979) theoretical notion of hegemonic control. Extending Marx's critique of the "free labourer" as being free of "everything necessary for the realization of his labor power" (Marx & Engels,1978, p.338), Burawoy's (1979) study of factory workers and the piece-rate system found that when workers are granted a degree of autonomy, their employers are better able to gain consent to their exploitation. As Burawoy states,

> "Within the labor process, the basis of consent lies in the organization of activities as though they presented the worker with real choices, however narrowly defined

those choices might be. It is the participation in choosing that generates consent" (p.27).

This concept is particularly relevant to gig workers, who can exercise a degree of autonomy and control while on the job, as they can choose when and where they work and what jobs or gigs they accept. As with the piece-rate system, gig workers are also incentivized to increase production rates through incentives and bonuses, evocative of what Burawoy (1979) calls the game of "making out". "Making out" creates the illusion that labor is a game, leading workers to develop strategies and compete with one another (and themselves) to surpass production expectations. While these "games do indeed arise from worker initiatives," they can only be played with strategies or choices that affect outcomes and never the rules of the game, as the game is permanently embedded within and restricted by the capitalist system (p.86). Burawoy's notion of hegemonic control, therefore, argues that capitalism has co-opted choice to get workers to embrace and defend capitalism as the preferred ideology: "We are compelled to play the game, and we then proceed to defend the rules" (p.93).

The way in which choice and ideology are operating together as tools to prop up the capitalist system in both the piece-rate factory system and gig work speaks to a second Marxist inspired ideological framework, Althusser's (1971) Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). According to Althusser, an ideology is a system of beliefs that seeks to naturalize, legitimize, and reinforcing the interests of the dominant class. Dominant ideologies exist alongside the repressive state apparatus, like the police and court systems, to prop up and defend the dominant economic structure and all its forms of exploitation. When ideas about freedom, control, and autonomy become attached to labor

processes, workers then "contribute to the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e., capitalist relations of exploitation," all the while obscuring the actual reality of their freedom (Althusser, 1971, p.154). Therefore, the ideology of freedom through the illusion of worker choice is used to uphold a system that depends on their exploitation.

These theoretical lenses, therefore, complicate the notion that gig work is "flexible" and new. When examined in the context of precarious work and labor processes like workplace control, gig work begins to resemble older forms of work, exploitation, and alienation, rather than embody the future of work. While the gig economy does not necessarily signal a departure from how workers have been consenting to their exploitation, it does signal a new iteration in control where the ideology of freedom and choices are being used to exploit workers. Moreover, it is through digital interface, the technological medium through which most gig work occurs today, that is fueling and continuing the trajectory of neoliberalism through new "speed[s], scope[s], and scale[s]" at which "labor has been devalued through neoliberal economic restructuring" (Zwick, 2018).

The neoliberal political and economic reforms over the last forty years, such as deregulation, financialization, de-unionization, and the hollowing out of the state through austerity measures, have put the onus on individuals to be responsible for more aspects of their lives with fewer accessible recourses. Under the rhetoric of personal responsibility, individuals use their labor power to make up for the failure of institutions like the state and corporations, ultimately obscuring the structural forces which have created the situation in the first place. Against this backdrop, in these conditions, an exploitative business model like the gig economy was able to thrive, framing itself as a solution to the

economic woes of society, effectively shielding that it is both a result of and perpetuating the very same neoliberal economic policies.

Gig Economy Studies

While precarious work has been around before the gig economy, the conditions of the last few decades have allowed it to flourish. The gig economy was overwhelmingly welcomed as a technological innovation that would positively change the future of work and society. Still, over the last decade, it has proven to fall short of these lofty promises, revealing it to be an economic system tethered to industrial forms of exploitation. In this section, I present some of the dominant ideas in the gig economy, beginning with how the economic and political context of the Great Recession aided the rise of the gig economy before turning to some of the debates between supporters and critics of the gig economy. Then I explore some studies which focus on the algorithmic management system of gig platforms, drawing ties between new and old forms of exploitation, before moving to literature that takes up the declining conditions of gig work.

The Gig Economy and the Great Recession

The gig economy is the result of the continuation and intensification of neoliberal economic policies and developments that have been underway since the 1970s, but its rise is often associated with the Great Recession (Ravenelle, 2019; Rosenblat, 2018; Schor, 2020;). The sharing economy, as the gig economy was first known was, was regarded as a solution to the economic and cultural instability of the crisis. The mass unemployment, underemployment, and loss of confidence in established institutions like banks and governments, provided the right economic and cultural conditions for the on-demand, sharing-economy business model like Uber to thrive.

As Juliet Schor (2020) discusses in *After the Gig,* the financial fallout coupled with the growing protests over inequality like Occupy Wall Street led many to want to be a part of a more equitable society through participating in the sharing economy, where value was generated and shared not with corporations but other working people. Similarly, Alex Rosenblat (2016) in *Uberland* discussed how the sharing economy was viewed favorably against the social and economic insecurity of the time and as a "social technology movement designed to use tech to share resources more efficiently" to alleviate some of the financial insecurity created by the recession. Millions of people, including large amounts of the middle-class, saw the opportunity to use existing assets on the market as a necessity, as well as an opportunity to participate in a "hopeful new paradigm for earning income" (Rosenblat, 2016, p.28). As a result, a lot of the initial scholarship and research on the gig economy was skewed towards the benefits it could offer to working people and the future of work.

The research on the gig economy tends to be divided among supporters and critics. Research in support of the gig economy primarily focuses on its capacity to change the future of work for the better, transform the economy, society, work, and bridge inequality (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Gansky, 2010; Sundararajan, 2016). For example, Arun Sundararajan's (2016) work argues that the gig economy will expand economic opportunity for low-income households, put existing assets to use in the market, and reduce dependency on one employer by working across multiple platforms. Moreover, the gig economy is promised as a way for workers to become emancipated from work, more autonomous, and in control of their work and lives. Indeed, research has consistently shown that workers value autonomy in the workplace, enjoy the freedoms of

setting their hours, and making decisions absent of an arbitrary management system (Crowley, 2012; Dean & Auerbach, 2018, Roscigno et al., 2018).

Critics, on the other hand, point the way the gig economy and "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2016) have increased forms of labor control while generating a more precarious and intra-competitive sector of workers under the guise of technological innovation (Hill, 2015). Scholz (2016) refers to this as "crowd-fleecing," where digital workers have to shoulder more risk and responsibility for meager pay while their labor and insecurity "disappears behind the heavy curtain of the Internet" (p.121). Because the labor of digital workers like gig workers is controlled and mediated through algorithms or "black boxed" from transparency (Pasquale, 2015), it obscures the power dynamics between customer, worker, and corporation, making it difficult to know who owns the means of production, the relations of production, and ultimately who is in control. The black boxed nature of gig work is typified by the algorithmic management systems upon which it is based.

Algorithmic Management

"Algorithmic management," or the way algorithms shape and control digital work environments, has emerged as a recent topic of research in gig studies (Griesbach et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2015; Rosenblat, 2017; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). This research points to how the algorithms built into the apps actively shape and control the behaviors of workers despite the claims of autonomy and being your own boss. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) studied Uber drivers' comments in online forums to reveal that algorithms actively influenced workers' behaviors through information asymmetries, surveillance, and strategic use of customer reviews and ratings. They find that "the decentralized structure

of Uber's systems and their rhetorical invocation of 'platforms' and 'algorithms' may render the impression that Uber has a limited managerial role over driver behaviors," but that the app's design and deployment mimic a traditional managing relationship (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016, p.3777).

The role of algorithms in managing the time and activities of workers is consistent across forms of gig work. Wood et al. (2019) conducted a study of remote gig workers or workers that do their gig work remotely via platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk and Upwork (in contrast to local gig work like food delivery and transport). They found that workers' formal control over their working hours is highly restricted and predicated on customers' orders and reviews. Moreover, they find that "autonomy resulting from algorithmic control can lead to overwork, sleep deprivation, and exhaustion as a result of the weak structural power of workers vis-a-vis clients," indicating both the limits to autonomy in gig work and the harsh working conditions (Wood et al., 2019, p.33).

While algorithmic management and control is a commonality across types of gig work, Griesbach et al.'s (2019) study has shown that the degree to which the algorithm controls workers can vary across platforms as well. Focusing on the food delivery platform sector, the authors find that while each platform used an algorithmic management system, there is significant cross-platform variation. Through conducting in-depth interviews with workers across food delivery platforms, they found they all had similarities in experiences, but that the grocery shopping platform, Instacart, exerts the most control over workers, in what they coined "algorithmic despotism."

In a related study, Veen et al. (2020) explore the labor processes of control in food delivery and find that control regimes in food delivery extend beyond algorithmic

management in three distinct ways: "the technological infrastructure; deliberately created information asymmetries constraining worker choice; and the obfuscated nature of the performance management systems." (p.393). This hybridization of control processes "enable[s] platforms to produce tightly managed labor processes with marginally attached workers who are geographically dispersed" (p.401). They found how workers interacted with the platform control incorporated some of Burawoy's (1979) game of making out, particularly in that participants used gamification as "a coping response to alienation of their labor" (p.400). Additionally, they found that workers responded to these forms of control through individual forms of resistance and reworkings, while collective expressions of agency were largely absent.

Worker Experiences and Conditions

Critics also take up the tension between the promises of the gig economy and the lived experiences of workers. Ravenelle (2019) used a combination of content analysis of sharing economy platform websites, recruitment materials, and in-depth interviews with platform workers to juxtapose the modernity associated with app-based work and the rolling back of workplace and worker protections that make gig work more similar to the industrial age. To conduct her analysis, she grouped the workers into three categories: Success Stories, made up of people who can use the gig economy to achieve the financial goals they set, Strugglers, people who can't make ends meet; and Strivers, people who are able to get by and use this money as a supplement. She found that the degrees to which workers were dependent upon this income to meet their basic needs were essential to their overall experience with the job, with Success Stories having the most positive experiences and Strugglers having the most negative. This finding is congruent with other

studies on gig workers (Schor and Attwood, 2017), and raises concern in light of a recent national survey that found that "one-in-three digital gig workers say the income their earn is essential to meeting their basic needs" (Smith, 2016, p.14).

Scholars have also explored how the gig economy stands to reinforce existing inequalities. Ravenelle (2019) finds that those who possess skills and capital before entering the gig economy are often Success Stories. This is similar to Schor's (2020) hypothesis that the platform economy may be enhancing privilege, based on her findings that most supplemental earners were not leaving jobs for the gig economy but rather adding to their primary income. While she admits that these jobs did afford this group a way to avoid downward mobility and the hypothesis needs to be tested, if true, it could mean "the platform economy is not just enriching the 1 percent; it's also contributing to greater inequality within the middle class" (Schor, 2020, p.104).

Furthermore, research (Edelman et al., 2017; Ge et al., 2016; Thebault-Spieker et al., 2015) has also indicated that platforms can facilitate peer-to-peer racial discrimination, where based upon the name, profile picture, and even location, customers and workers make decisions on whether or not to accept a service or a ride or book a stay. While most research seeks to expose that the gig economy perpetuates inequalities, a study from Milkman et al. (2020) highlights the perpetuation of gender roles among female Instacart workers but also their awareness of the class position they occupy when doing this work, especially when they were mistreated by clientele.

Recent literature on the gig economy has focused on declining working conditions, revealing low earnings, poor and dangerous conditions, discrimination, and harassment (Ravenelle, 2019; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). Additionally,

a number of reports have been published in the last few years highlighting the dangerous working conditions and experiences of gig workers as they navigate this work without basic employment protections (Figueroa et al., 2021; Herrera et al., 2020; Lew et al., 2021; Smith, 2016). These reports are finding that many workers are not only earning below minimum wage, but sometimes do not receive payment from the platform companies at all (Figueroa et al., 2021). Moreover, these reports are finding that the pandemic has exacerbated the health and economic security of gig workers, as many stopped working out of fears of contracting the virus and had no other income to depend upon (Herrera et al., 2020). Reports have also indicated that public benefit usage is more common among gig workers than workers in traditional employment, yet many gig workers struggled with applying and receiving these benefits during the pandemic (Lew et al., 2021). Ravenelle's (2020) study on New York City-based gig workers found that many did not seek out unemployment benefits during the height of the pandemic because they either did not know they were eligible or how to apply, they were afraid of being stigmatized, or they could not afford to wait for the benefits so they "turned to an occupation of last resort" (p.912). Her findings point to the costs of this risk shift, and the internalization of structural problems as individual solutions, as many people turn to and come to see gig work as a social safety net.

As the promise of the gig economy begins to wane and workers are faced with poor working conditions and low wages, they have begun mobilizing and advocating for better pay, conditions, and protections, similar to those which exist in traditional employment. However, due to their status as independent contractors, gig workers' do not have the right to organize the way traditional employees can. Even so, the current

state of organized labor makes it difficult for even non-contracted workers to fight for better conditions, leading gig workers to try and mobilize for better conditions through experiential and diffuse tactics.

Collective Organizing Among Workers

The state of organized labor in the United States today is one of the least advantageous for workers in the history of the country. As of 2020, the union membership rate was 10.8%, nearly half of the membership rate of 20.1% three decades ago (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). The implications of a weak state of organized labor and fewer unions extend beyond the workplace, as studies show there is a direct correlation between low union density and high inequality, and conversely, when there are more unions, and a strong state of organized labor, inequality decreases, and wages and conditions improve even for nonunion workers (Shierholz, 2020).

The importance and significance of unions is not lost on most working people, as nearly half of nonunion workers are in favor of joining one ("Working people", 2021) and 60% of people think that the decline in unions has been bad for workers (Green, 2021). The issues with forming unions among workers are many, but mainly lie in the weak state of labor laws, lack of enforcement, and that many workplace arrangements do not line up with existing laws (Rhinehart & McNicholas, 2020). These issues become compounded with gig workers, who are denied the right to form a union due to their independent contractor status.

The weakened state of US unions and labor can be tied back to the neoliberal political and economic policies discussed at the beginning of the chapter, where I explained how companies considered labor costs to be "external" to the major operations

of companies and sought work arrangements which benefitted their profit margins. However, despite the disarray labor and labor organizing finds itself in, gig workers have been speaking out and attempting to organize for better conditions. In this section, I present literature that reflects the complicated terrain gig workers navigate in order to change their conditions, beginning with how gig workers attempt to organize, how their wants can double as barriers to creating change, and finally I address some of the scholarship on opportunities to change the gig sector.

Organizing Actions and Attempts

As issues surrounding low wages, poor working conditions, and lack of health benefits proliferate through the gig economy, workers have engaged in collective action to change these conditions (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Wood & Lehdovrita, 2019). While some organizations have succeeded (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018), overall, the gig sector is a fragmented organizing space. Gig workers are fragmented by differences across nationalities, occupation, and platforms (Wood et al., 2018), the independent vs. employee classification (Dubal, 2019), and the degree of investment and dependence on the job (Broughton et al., 2018). However, despite the differences among workers and the decentralized form of the work, gig workers are coming together through a variety of ways and tools to try and change their conditions.

Due to the decentralized structure of the work, a lot of gig work organizing takes place in digital spaces. Maffie (2020) finds that digital spaces like online forums and social media pages are crucial for ride-hailing gig workers to create community and forge a collective identity. Moreover, he finds the more interactions workers have on these platforms, the more favorably they are to view unionization and are more likely to join an

organization. Similarly, Wood et al. (2018) finds social media groups and online forums important for regional workers, like Amazon Mechanical Turk workers, in connecting and organizing in the absence of unions. Rosenblat (2018) found these spaces to be "primary sites of communication for routine workplace matters" but found that they can facilitate organization through behaviors like disseminating information on forums to protect each other from "hostile cab drivers" or police (p.200). Tassinari et al. (2020) also argue that despite the isolation of food delivery gig work, with the combination of online spaces and physical meetups, it is possible to overcome individualism and develop solidarity among food delivery gig workers.

In addition to digital spaces, digital tools have also been developed and utilized by workers trying to create change in the gig sector. Doorn's (2020) study on Berlin-based food delivery drivers for Deliveroo described how drivers created their own calculation tool to reverse-engineer the fee structure of the app to make transparent how they were getting paid. Drivers used this tool to gain new members to their group by tapping into workers' resentment of their unfair treatment by the company. However, they did not link this to their larger ambitions for worker rights and protections out of fear of losing those invested in the independent contractor model. The use of the platform helps companies to "bypass rules, standards, and traditions that have protected working standards," putting workers in a precarious working position as well as organizing situations (Woodcock & Graham, 2020, p.11).

However, workers have also taken advantage of how work is organized via digital platforms to organize collective action (Heiland, 2021; Wells et al., 2020). Wells et al. (2020) found D.C.-based Uber drivers used the "just-in-place" business model of

platform companies to create solidarity and community in the airport parking lot they were required to wait in until they received a ride. They also coordinated to turn their apps off collectively before flights landed to increase demand for drivers and boost prices. The decentralized labor process became "a mechanism for worker agency" momentarily before Uber began deactivating participating drivers (Wells et al., 2020, p.327).

What Workers Want & Barriers to Change

Gig workers understand the power which the companies possess over them and see this as a deterrent to organizing, as discussed in Dubal's (2019) study on Bay Area gig workers and driver advocacy groups. Dubal (2019) found that many workers are not of one mind regarding employee classification. Although many want better conditions, benefits, and wages commensurate with employment, they were hesitant to say they wanted to be classified as such. The context in which her research took place was leading up to the vote on the ABC bill in California, otherwise known as "AB5", which would pass into law an employment test that would grant independent contractors, like gig workers, employee status. She found that many drivers advocated for regulation in the industry but had ambivalence towards employee status. This ambivalence was "informed by the relative powerlessness in relation to gig companies and by uncertainties and insecurities specific to app-based work" (Dubal, 2019, p.5). Workers were afraid of how gig companies would behave as employers, felt powerless against them, and feared losing the flexibility they had come to value.

Indeed, gig companies have used worker preference for flexibility as part of their campaigns to keep workers classified as independent contractors. According to a survey

conducted by the Mellman Group (2020) and paid for by Doordash, 76% of respondents said flexibility was extremely important to them. Another study conducted by Hall and Krueger (2018) and paid for by Uber found that 79% of drivers preferred independent contractor to employee status. As Dubal's (2019) study demonstrates, though, this preference is not so clear cut and is informed in part by fears and financial need.

Studies have shown that gig workers value flexible working hours, whether they require or enjoy it. Chen et al. (2019) studied the value of flexibility for Uber drivers. They found that when compared to a fixed taxi shift, the difference in value is $135 per week, meaning flexibility can create as much value as driving 6.7 hours. Katsnelson and Oberholzer-Gee (2020) conducted a similar study among rideshare drivers and food delivery gig workers in California. They also found that flexibility is of high value and important to workers' welfare. They found that when a driver is forced out of their preferred shift, it "is equivalent to cutting weekly earnings by 5.3%" (p.3). When shifts are assigned, even if hours worked remain unchanged, it reduces welfare, and 80% of drivers said they would choose another job if assigned to their least preferred shifts (p.13). However, they found that the valuation of flexibility did fluctuate, with flexibility being of only modest value to over 20% of their drivers. In contrast, for the top decile, "losing flexibility is equivalent to a 15% pay cut" (p.3). Finally, they identified three types of flexibility that workers valued and impacted their welfare: "the ability to adopt different schedules from week to week, an option to make last-minute (hourly) changes to one's schedule, and the opportunity to increase gig hours in times of crises such as the 2020 pandemic" (p.19).

Moreover, they extended their value of flexibility estimates to measure how the "value of worktime flexibility influenced California voters" (Katsnelson & Oberholzer-Gee, 2020, p.3). The context in which they conducted their study was during the vote for the since-passed law, Proposition 22, a bill drafted by Lyft, Uber, Doordash, Instacart, and Postmates in response to AB5, to grant an exception to app-based transportation and delivery drivers from being classified as employees. The proposition was framed as a solution to the current employment system, which Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi argued "is outdated and unfair. It forces every worker to choose between being an employee with more benefits but less flexibility, or an independent contractor with more flexibility but almost no safety net" (Khosrowshahi, 2020). Tony Xu, CEO of DoorDash, offered a similar critique of the current employment system and advocated for "a third way that recognizes that this new approach to work is here to stay" (Xu, 2021). While Katsnelson and Oberholzer-Gee (2020) did find that value of flexible work hours had some influence, ultimately, voting decisions were dictated by political ideology, with more Republicans voting in favor of the proposition. While laws like AB5 do not require employers to set schedules (Sachs, 2015), it is often framed that way.

Opportunities for Change

This could be why workers prefer and defend independent contractor status despite wanting more workplace protections and supporting regulation of the gig industry. This contested landscape for organizing has also impacted what recommendations scholars have for changing the industry and protecting workers. While many scholars (Cherry, 2016; Stewart & Standford, 2017; Tronsor, 2018) still call for the regulation of the industry and amending and/or changing labor laws to allow for contract

workers to organize and bargain collectively, the International Labor Organization (2019) is pursuing "universal labor guarantees for all," where all workers would have the same fundamental rights and working conditions (p.39). Dubal (2019) has also suggested broader legal changes, such as adding flexible scheduling into the traditional employee benefits rather than creating a new set of benefits for contract workers. Healy and Pekarek (2019) contend that because many battles over gig worker classification have resulted in a "deadlock," with competing legislation from both sides canceling each other out, other avenues such as targeting and leveraging consumers on behalf of workers could be a promising strategy (p.159).

Another proposed solution to the gig economy is platform cooperativism (Formaitti et al., 2020; Scholz, 2016), intending to combat the power of platform companies and realize the promise of the gig economy through communal ownership, democratic governance, and the equitable distribution of value. The state of California is currently trying to pass the Cooperative Economy Act (CEA), which would "form a federation of labor contractors cooperatively owned and operated by gig workers and would allow individual workers to band together in jointly owned and democratically controlled organizations that provide staffing services to gig companies" (Herrera et al., 2020). Moreover, cities in Georgia, Kentucky, Iowa, and New York have all created local food delivery coops in the last year as an alternative to third-party apps like DoorDash and Uber Eats (Abello, 2021). Another suggestion among scholars, activists, and legislators alike is the idea of a Universal Basic Income (UBI), which would both reduce the stigma attached to government assistance that affects some stigma for gig workers as

well as make up for the erosion of the safety net due to neoliberal economic and social policies (Ravenelle, 2020; Scholz, 2016).

In this literature review, I evaluated the relevant existing research surrounding areas of interest pertaining to my study. In this chapter, I addressed the rise of the precarious workforce due to neoliberal economic policies, gig studies literature focusing on platform labor processes, inequalities, conditions in gig work, and finally, the organizing space for gig workers and potential avenues for change. While my contribution draws on these different bodies of literature, it is most closely aligned with Griesbach et al.,'s (2019) and Veen et al.'s (2019) studies. I draw on some of the same theoretical frameworks about labor processes and workplace control to examine the experiences of the food delivery gig workers. My study diverges in terms of sample sizes, regions, methods, and scope. Contrary to those studies, I am not seeking to draw distinctions between control experiences on various platforms, but to gain an overall perspective of food delivery gig workers across platforms. I also extend my analysis beyond workplace control as I seek to understand how gig workers make sense of their experiences on the job in the context of the broader labor market. In addition to those two studies, I also draw upon Ravenelle (2019) and implement her categorization of workers based on dependency on food delivery to categorize my participants and assist in analyzing the data. The next chapter outlines the methodology and methods used to design my study on food delivery gig workers.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research project in terms of its methodology and design, with attention paid to sampling, ethics, and resulting limitations. I first outline the research questions motivating the thesis and then offer a justification for the applicability of a critical methodological approach to this qualitative study of food delivery gig workers. Next, I will discuss the sampling and recruitment process, the sources of data I used, how I collected the data, and how I analyzed the data. I will conclude with an ethics section where I discuss some of the issues I ran into during the early stages of my research, as well as addressing some of the limitations given the parameters of the study.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the everyday experiences and conditions of work for food delivery gig workers?
2. How do food delivery gig workers make sense of the labor market?
3. How do they navigate or seek to change these work conditions?

Methodology

This qualitative study was approached using a critical methodology. Critical methodology is derived from critical social theory. According to Bentz and Shapiro (1998) critical social theory seeks, "to understand, analyze, criticize, and alter social, economic, cultural, technological, and psychological structures and phenomena that have features of oppression, domination, exploitation, injustice, and misery." (p.149). Thus, a critical methodology contributes to our understanding of the world not through simply

explaining what we are seeing or observing and accepting it as true, rather it seeks to complicate these observable truths to understand the power relations, cultural dynamics, and hegemonic ideologies that underpin and "interact to construct a social system." (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011, p.288). This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how workers are navigating the gig economy and the labor market more broadly, as well as provided a way to understand what ideological constructs and structural conditions are pushing and pulling people into gig work.

The goal of this research was to examine how the ideological constructs of freedom, autonomy, and control are used to convince workers to consent to their own exploitation through contract-based work arrangements like food delivery. I wanted to understand food delivery gig workers experiences in the context of gig work, and the economy itself. Therefore, a critical methodology, which focuses on the particulars of a phenomenon to understand the general, is appropriate in this research endeavor, as it is trying to grasp the fuller picture of why people are making choices to enter gig work and what this means for the future of work.

The "ideological critique" component of critical methodology makes this approach of particular use to my project. I wanted to see how the prevailing justifications purported by the platform companies lined up with the lived experiences and perceptions of the workers themselves, with "the intent to see whether the ideas really describe the reality or rather only serve to justify some particular interest group and its power in and over the institution or society." (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p.149). In order to investigate this, I designed a critical case study, where I conducted semi-structured interviews with food delivery platform workers. The purpose of the interviews was to gather data on

workers experiences as food delivery gig workers, in order to compare how their experiences and perceptions lined up with the dominant narrative of platform companies; that flexible work arrangements like the ones they offer are inherently good and offer workers freedom and control. The value in gaining the perspectives of the workers in this instance is that it can shed new light and offer insights into the structures and processes responsible for hegemonic knowledge and ideas while making the individual experience understandable in new ways.

Moreover, an additional goal of this study was to explore how food delivery gig workers are seeking to change their working conditions. This additional goal also justifies the choice of a critical methodology given that the "assumption [is] that this knowledge will be used in processes of social change by people to whom understanding their situation is crucial in changing it" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p.146). In conducting this research on food delivery gig workers, my intention was to produce research and knowledge that will be useful in disrupting the status quo and ideological constructs that keep workers complicit in their own exploitation.

Recruitment

I chose to recruit workers who worked for at least one of the following food delivery and grocery delivery platforms: Uber Eats, DoorDash, and Instacart. I chose these three because they each hold a large percentage of the US food and grocery delivery market share and would therefore increase my ability to recruit participants. Structuring my recruitment strategy to maximize the number of participants was important based on what I knew through my research assistantship with the Center for Work and Democracy at Arizona State University about the isolation of gig workers and

the difficulty in accessing them for various organizing efforts. I also anticipated that some interested respondents may not continue with the study and wanted to prepare for that possibility. In addition, these platforms were chosen because they all consider delivery workers to be independent contractors, and not employees, an employment arrangement which defies physical space and exists in the broader domain network. This classification is foundational to the narrative that platform companies have created around gig work, that it is flexible and provides workers more freedom, autonomy, and control. I am interested in the role that ideology plays in gig work, and therefore it is not specific to one platform.

Once I decided on the platforms I would be recruiting from, I designed recruitment scripts for four different online spaces; the online forum site, Reddit, the Phoenix-area Craigslist, social media, and ASU email circulation. Based on my interviews with organizers of gig workers through my research assistantship, I was aware that accessing gig workers was a challenge even among worker-organizers, so I chose to target multiple areas in order to maximize the potential for participants and increase my sample size. The first space I targeted were online forums on Reddit. I targeted specific pages on Reddit, called "subreddits", which correlated to the specific platforms I was looking at. I went to r/uberdrivers for Uber Eats, r/doordash for Doordash, and t/Instacart shoppers for Instacart. I also included the thread r/couriersofreddit, which contains delivery workers from a variety of platforms, to further expand the reach of my recruitment. The second place I sought recruitment was Phoenix's Craigslist. The third site of recruitment were personal social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and

Twitter, and finally the fourth site was an email circulated through the School of Social Transformation at ASU.

In total I recruited and secured twelve participants. The most successful of the recruitment sites was the online forum Reddit, where eight of the twelve participants came from. Two were recruited through the Craigslist advertisement and two came through connections of friends. Once interest was expressed in participating, I confirmed with participants that they currently reside in the United States and worked for at least one of the platforms listed above. Once this was confirmed, I sent participants a questionnaire with topics and areas that would be covered during the interview. Lastly, they signed a consent form prior to the agreed upon interview date.

Data Sources

In addition to the interviews with food delivery gig workers serving as a data source, I also did some light archival research on online forums and company advertisements. In order to get a better understanding of how food delivery gig workers communicate with one another, I spent some time going through the same subreddits I used to recruit participants in order to gain a picture of how workers used the space and what they spoke about. While an in-depth analysis of the online forums is beyond the scope of this study, they played a pivotal role in how I recruited my sample. Additionally, online forums came up throughout the interviews, leading me to include them as an additional data source to my study.

I also looked at a few of the advertisements from each of the platforms I targeted. The purpose of including an advertisement as a data source was to compare how the messaging of the advertisements spoke to, contradicted, or lined up with the experiences

of the food delivery gig workers. I used this relationship between the corporate advertisement and the lived experience of the worker to better contextualize how workers make sense of their everyday experiences. A thorough content analysis of advertisements from each company is beyond the scope of this project, so I therefore focused on one advertisement series, the #WhyIDash campaign from DoorDash. I chose this advertisement series because it was created and released as recently as December 2020 and the series focused on the experiences of and testimonials of the drivers themselves on why they do the job. Given that my study is focusing on the experiences of food delivery gig workers, the DoorDash series was best suited to be an additional data source. The series consists of three, thirty-second testimonials from delivery drivers, or "Dashers", making deliveries and explaining why they do the job.

Data Collection

Data collection from my primary data source, the food delivery gig workers, consisted of individual semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a discussion of the questions and topics relevant to the research and to pursue related or relevant lines of inquiry that might arise. In addition to conducting the interviews, I maintained a detailed research journal. I wrote memos throughout the interview process to keep track of emerging ideas and concepts and where interviews overlapped, and where they diverged. I also utilized my committee members to discuss initial findings and emergent themes as they appeared to me during the interview process.

Each interview was conducted virtually via Zoom, with some lasting thirty minutes and others stretching to nearly three hours. All interviews were audio and video recorded. I created pseudonyms for participants to preserve their anonymity so they could

speak freely without fear of retaliation. The interview questions were structured into four main sections: 1) how workers got into the job and the conditions of work, 2) details on their earnings, budget, and how they are paid via the platform, 3) their larger perceptions about the work itself, and 4) how they felt about creating change in the industry. The line of questioning did not always occur in a linear fashion, and depending upon participants answers, categories were shifted to accommodate the flow of the conversation.

Data collection of my first archival data source, the online forums, consisted of going through each subreddit mentioned above, and screenshotting some of the posts workers made and comments responding to the original posts. I focused on posts which dealt with workers seeking advice from other delivery workers, as well as posts where workers complained about conditions of work. This process of data collection occurred in tandem with the interviews, as I used what participants said in the interview as a guide for what topics to look for in the forums. For the advertisements, I searched on the DoorDash YouTube channel for recent advertisements to find the #WhyIDash series.

Sample

I created a master list (see table 1) of participant demographic information, including the following: pseudonym, location, age, years working in the gig, platform(s) they work for, and dependence on the job (full-income or supplementary). The purpose of the list was to keep relevant interview data stored in an easily accessible place to refer to during the writing process. I offer more description on these elements below.

My sample consisted of twelve food delivery gig workers. Their ages ranged from early 20's through mid 60's. The sample was gender balanced with six men and six women. I recruited at a national scale, so I have participants from many different regions

of the country, from eight states in total. There is an over-representation of Arizona-based participants based upon the utilization of my social networks and the Phoenix Craigslist in the recruitment process. Participants were invested in the job at different levels and worked a range of hours. I borrowed from Ravenelle's (2019) categorization of workers based upon their level of investment or dependency on the income from the job. I categorized the participants as either "supplemental", meaning they have additional sources of income or financial support either by way of another job, spousal support, or have reduced expenses by living with family members, or "full income" to refer to participants who rely upon this income solely for all their expenses.

Three out of twelve participants were invested at the full-income level and the remaining nine were invested in a supplemental capacity. I used these categories to present the sample, but there are important caveats to the unique circumstances for each individual participant, which I will elaborate on as they are introduced in the next chapter. I also noted the "primary" platform participants worked for, with the caveat that many worked across multiple platforms, which I discuss when I present my findings. The time working in food delivery also ranged, from a few months to several years. Similar to the level of investment and platform, there are caveats to this, as some left for other jobs and came back, or went from delivering supplementally to delivering full-time, which will be elaborated upon in the next chapter. A table with an overview of these demographics is listed below.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	State	Primary Platform	Investment Level	Time Delivering
Rodger	Male	30's	New York	DoorDash	Supplemental	2 years
Maxime	Female	20's	Iowa	Uber Eats	Full-Income	2 years
Scott	Male	60's	Texas	DoorDash	Supplemental	1 year
Deborah	Female	30's	Missouri	Instacart	Supplemental	1 year
Mark	Male	30's	Arizona	DoorDash	Full-Income	5 years
Eric	Male	20's	New York	Uber Eats	Supplemental	2 years
Maura	Female	30's	Pennsylvania	DoorDash	Supplemental	5 months
Pat	Male	30's	Arizona	DoorDash	Supplemental	1 year
Amanda	Female	20's	Arizona	DoorDash	Supplemental	6 months
Anthony	Male	30's	New Jersey	Uber Eats	Supplemental	2 months
Jamie	Female	30's	Arizona	DoorDash	Full-Income	1 year
Roberta	Female	50's	Arizona	Uber Eats	Supplemental	4 years

Table 1- Sample Demographics

Data Coding and Analysis

I transcribed the interviews using the Zoom transcription tool and read over each interview and audio multiple times for accuracy. I employed a critical discourse analysis, transcribing my interviews in a denaturalized style (Oliver et al., 2005). The focus during the transcription phase was, therefore, less on how people used the language but on what their language revealed about their understandings of power, as "the maneuverings of power are often captured in the content of the interview rather than in the mechanics of the conversation" (Fairclough, 1993, as cited in Oliver et al., 2005, p.5).

Once transcription was complete, I began an iterative coding process. My first reading of the transcripts was to identify the initial themes, where I focused on the descriptive elements that appeared across multiple interviews. Once I created the initial list of codes, I used the qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti, to begin to make my codebook, where I assigned each initial code a different color, defined the criteria of each code, and then color-coded all the interviews according to the initial themes. Following the advice of Miles and Huberman (1994), I kept the names of these codes as close to the

content they were describing. After the initial coding, I went through the interviews again, looking for subthemes within the broader emergent themes, seeking out less descriptive and more inferential themes, and added those to the codebook as well.

At this phase, I also took note of which themes appeared less frequently across interviews or sometimes only once, adding them to the codebook so I could determine later on in the analysis process if they were relevant or extraneous. I went through the interviews twice more once they were color-coded to ensure that the transcription fragments that I highlighted did line up with the codebook and adjusted according to how my codes developed over the analysis process. Chunks of text that overlapped between themes remained so until the writing process, where I decided which theme the quotation would support.

Once I had color-coded all the interviews, I revisited my codebook to continue to organize themes into categories that would aid in my analysis and determine which codes could be absorbed into others or disregarded. I organized this final list of codes using the sections of my questionnaire and the work process as a guide. I then established four clusters of codes corresponding to the work process: 1) how participants got into the job, 2) how participants navigated the job, 3) what participants thought of the job, 4) what participants thought about changing the job. Using these criteria, I sorted the codes related to each stage of the work process, knowing that some may overlap.

Ethics

My IRB application was submitted and approved prior to recruitment. The IRB code for this study is STUDY00013877. I ran into several issues during my recruitment process, most of which occurred through the subreddit forums. My original IRB

application did not include an incentive for participation, and the members of these groups were upset by this. Upon some initial responses and discussion with my Chair, I amended my IRB to provide an incentive of a $20 Visa gift card for participating. By the time this was approved, and I edited my posts, many of them had been taken down for violating community guidelines, all of which have community rules about "spam" and posting about surveys without permission or compensation. When I contacted the administrators of each forum, letting them know I changed the incentive portion, they informed me the removals would stand because there was too much negative traffic on my posts. As one administrator stated, their users were "surveyed out."

Another subreddit removed my post "due to the massive number of requests that all gig economy subs get, we only allow surveys that either provide a cash reward to all

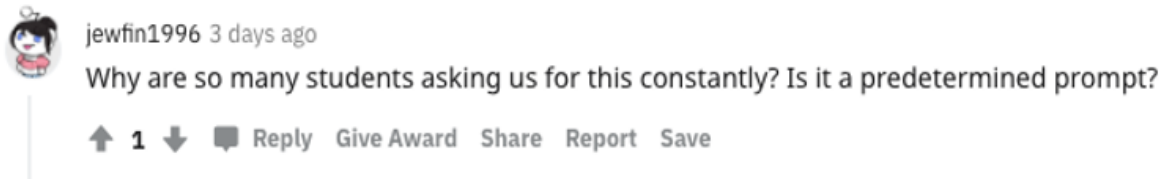

Figure 1. Response to recruitment in an online forum for Instacart shoppers. Screenshot by author May 2021.

participants or are submitted by contributing members of the community." This sentiment of being overburdened by surveys from students and scholars alike was also echoed in some of the comments on my posts. For example, one member questioned why they received so many requests from students (see figure 1). Another asked me if I was working on a team, as they were asked to participate in a similar study. These comments

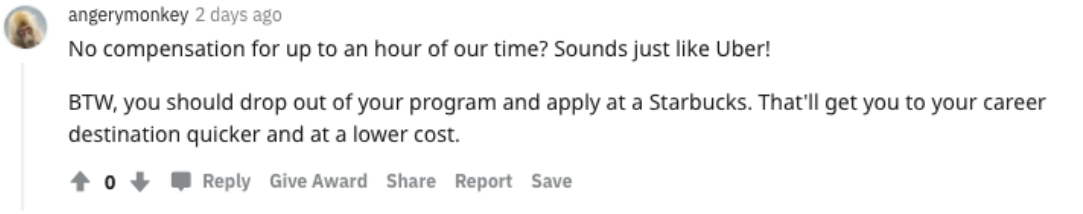

Figure 2. Response to recruitment in an online forum for Uber drivers. Screenshot by author May 2021

suggested that there is a lot of interest in this sector, and most of that interest does not translate into any meaningful change or benefit to the worker.

Moreover, the comments made about surveys and interviews by users and administrators suggest that they add to the feelings of exploitation they already navigate within the platforms they work for. For example, before I amended the IRB to include the incentive, one user suggested I might as well work for Uber (see figure 2) since I expect people to participate without being compensated for their time. Others suspected that I worked for the companies and attempted to mine information, as one person said, "Aka: DoorDash trying to gather dasher info not to be such a shitty app" (see figure 3).

Notably, Reddit is an anonymous website where all users communicate with a pseudonym, but members of these groups still expressed fear of surveillance and data mining. The fear of surveillance was expressed in their comments, with multiple people telling me that they wanted to participate but were not comfortable meeting with a stranger over Zoom. One person who participated in the study requested that I send my social media accounts to prove that I was who I claimed to be. This fear of surveillance illuminated that fears of deactivation and retaliation from the platform companies are genuine concerns for these workers. The anonymity of the platform probably encouraged

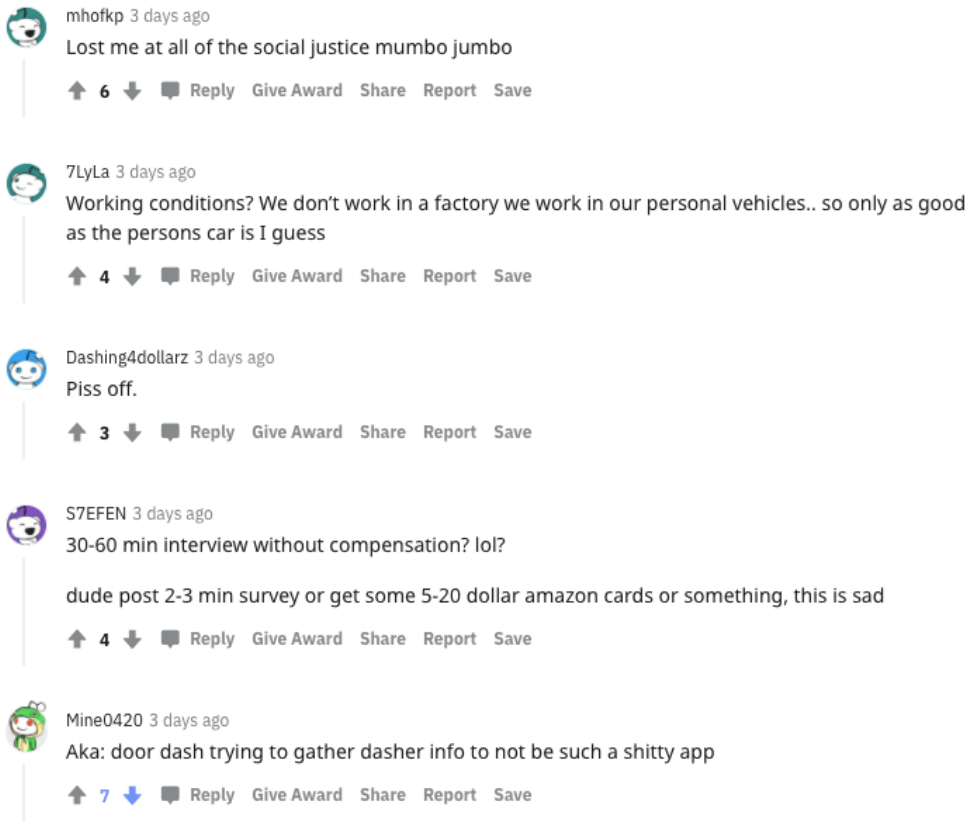

Figure 3. Responses to recruitment in an online forum for DoorDash drivers. Screenshot by author May 2021.

some users to be more critical of my study. Still, it is an important way to protect themselves from retaliation by the platforms they work for.

Several users also commented on the social justice aspect of my study and claimed I could not get a job with a degree in this field (see figure 2). What this anti-academia and anti-expertise sentiment expressed through comments disparaging social justice and my degree suggested to me was that these gig workers can see someone like me, a graduate student associated with a university, as complicit in or even part of their exploitation. Moreover, I interpreted this as indicating that institutions like higher education are no longer working for working people. This backlash to education also led

me to not ask participants about their education level, for I feared such a question might be controversial after what I saw during the recruitment process. There was also hostility on the part of forum members towards me not just for my degree in social justice and seeking to find out information about their experiences, but that I represented unwanted change to the structure of the gig economy and that I was trying to change it (see figure 4).

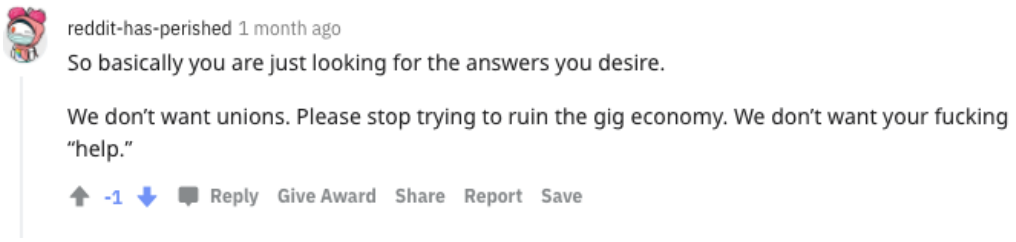

Figure 4. Response to recruitment in an online forum for delivery drivers. Screenshot by author June 2021.

Furthermore, in my eagerness to recruit I overlooked the community guidelines prior to posting my recruitment script. What this misstep revealed to me is that digital communities need to be approached with the same care that researchers approach physical communities and that despite the medium and apparent lack of boundaries to the space, there are rules and guidelines that need to be observed and respected when recruiting participants in digital spaces. The digital medium can sometimes blur the boundaries of research in ways that do not happen through in-person research and reflects how digital spaces and digital work are treated differently, all of which comes down to impact the worker and adds to their feelings of alienation, isolation, and exploitation. Ultimately, these issues with recruitment added to the evidence that recruiting gig workers is challenging to navigate. More importantly, these workers are in constant fear

of deactivation through digital surveillance and struggling to make ends meet, as signified by their insistence upon being compensated for their time.

Limitations and Parameters

The research of this project is in no way exhaustive and while the findings of this study resemble many of the previous studies findings and contributes to the growing body of literature on gig workers and the gig economy, there are some limitations that may have impacted the findings. The first limitation to the study is the size of the data set. Due to the nature of this study, an exploratory research study in partial fulfillment of a master's degree, there were time and scope limitations which prevented me from conducting a study with more participants. Moreover, the research had to be conducted entirely over Zoom due to the on-going pandemic, further limiting the nuance of the findings.

Another limitation was the racial composition of the sample. While the data set was gender balanced and had a wide age range, it was overwhelmingly white, and was therefore skewed. Had my recruitment resulted in a more diverse pool of workers, there may have been some additional perspectives to enhance and add nuance to the findings. There was also an uneven representation of delivery workers who primarily worked for the three platforms I recruited from. As noted in the study, many food delivery gig workers worked across multiple platforms, but indicated that they had a primary platform they worked for. There was an overrepresentation of DoorDash drivers (7) versus Uber Eats (4) and Instacart (1), and while I was not interested in the differences between the experiences on the platforms, having a more balanced representation of the platforms may have strengthened the findings.

Another limitation was the geographical location of the study. While I designed the study to be national in scope, in hindsight focusing on one region may have been beneficial. As my findings illustrate, there are variations in how people experience the job based on the region they are in, and this degree of difference is important to the experiences of the worker and their interpretation of those experiences. Moreover, not issuing a survey along with the interview to gather more demographic information on participants was a limitation to the study. While I did gather some basic information during the interview, issuing these questions in a survey format would have given more interview time to other questions. Additionally, this information could have provided me with more context to the backgrounds and lives of the workers, which may have provided more poignant findings.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings of my study. The way in which the findings are presented is meant to mimic the journey of food delivery gig workers, beginning with how they entered the job, how they learned to navigate the job, how they came to understand the job, and lastly how they see the possibilities to change food delivery gig work. For readers less familiar with how food delivery gig platforms work, please first consult Appendix A, where I describe the three platforms explored in this study, DoorDash, Uber Eats, and Instacart.

This chapter includes four sections, each correlating to one of four major themes, noting that some of these themes overlap. I demonstrate how the experiences of food delivery gig workers do not move in one direction; they are nuanced, complicated, and oftentimes contradictory. While there is some variation given the differential needs and relative social position of the workers, the way in which they navigate food delivery are all patterns along a continuum of experience.

Pathways to Food Delivery: "It's More Freedom"

The gig economy is often framed as and seen as a solution to a range of economic problems. For companies seeking ever-more flexibility to make gains in a neoliberal economy, the business model of gig work provides them a way to maximize profits and keep operational costs like labor low. The gig economy is also seen as a de-facto safety net during times of economic crisis or downturn, providing easily accessible jobs to anyone with a car, smartphone, and time. Even in non-crisis times, gig work is often seen as a viable solution to the financial troubles mainly due to the flexible scheduling it offers

workers, who can work as little or as much as they want to while working around other jobs, childcare responsibilities, health conditions and emergencies, or class schedules. For many workers, taking up gig work in a supplemental, part-time, or full-time capacity signaled a point of departure for them from their previous working experiences.

Three themes emerged about how participants came into this line of work: flexibility, temporary, and instability. Participants came from a wide range of working backgrounds. Some previously held jobs in education, healthcare, supply chain logistics, fast food, and construction. Their reasons for entering food delivery were equally as diverse, and for many, the job was seen as a solution to problems they were encountering related to their employment. Some were looking for supplemental income, while others were looking to replace their income entirely due to a pandemic-related job loss or because they were unable to find a job in their field after moving to a new city. Others felt that the hours and schedules they were working in their previous jobs were not justifying their pay nor able to fit with their responsibilities outside the home and found food delivery to afford them a desirable schedule with commensurate pay. While many came to the work in different ways and for various reasons, nearly every participant cited the flexibility of scheduling as a central selling point, necessity, or positive aspect of the job.

Flexibility

Flexibility is one of the hallmarks of gig work and a significant benefit, as many gig workers combine it with other jobs. According to Hall and Krueger (2018), roughly two-thirds of Uber drivers have full-time or part-time jobs outside of gig work. Moreover, a recent study of DoorDash drivers from the Mellman Group (2020) found

that just 16% report that gig work is their only job, while 39% have full-time jobs, 14% have part-time jobs, and 20% of drivers are students. Flexibility is, therefore, crucial for workers who have other jobs and obligations, where working with a set schedule would be inconvenient or impossible to maintain. The platform companies heavily emphasize how food delivery gig work can accommodate different circumstances and responsibilities workers may have, mainly through their advertisements.

In DoorDash's advertisement series, #WhyIDash, delivery drivers or 'Dashers' offer testimonials about why they choose to work for the service while video of them driving, picking up, and delivering orders is presented. The workers featured in this series, Rich, Marilyn, and D'Shea (see figures 5, 6, and 7), are all middle-aged and tout the flexibility in scheduling as something they both enjoy and require. For Rich, the flexibility of Doordash allows him to balance his full-time teaching job with "the opportunity to make a little extra cash on the side" (DoorDash, 2020a). Marilyn values flexibility because it allows her to care for her son with special needs while also being able to "help out the family" (DoorDash, 2020b), D'Shea also describes the benefits of flexibility as it relates to her daughter who has special needs, but the advertisement ends with an emphasis that she doesn't want to be an employee because she is "an independent lady" (DoorDash, 2020c). At the end of each thirty-second advertisement, a statistic from DoorDash's impact report appears, meant to underscore the testimonial from each Dasher, indicating that "90% of Dashers work fewer than 10 hours per week" (DoorDash, 2020a), "90% of Dashers think it's very important to have flexibility and set their own schedules" (DoorDash, 2020b), and "76% of Dashers say dashing has helped provide for themselves and their family" (DoorDash, 2020c).

Figure 5. Rich from the #WhyIDash series. Screenshot taken from YouTube by author September 2021.

Figure 6. Marilyn from the #WhyIDash series. Screenshot taken from YouTube by author September 2021.

Figure 7. D'Shea from the #WhyIDash series. Screenshot taken from YouTube by author September 2021.

Indeed, when discussing with participants about why they got into gig work, they all mentioned flexibility as something that attracted them to the job, they valued about the job, or required based on other commitments. At times their responses mimicked the testimonials of the Dasher's in the advertisements, as they cited that flexibility allowed them to balance childcare responsibilities, full-time jobs, and afforded them more freedom by way of setting their own hours and being independent. As to how they got into food delivery, seven of the twelve participants said they had seen an advertisement for the job, while the remaining five said a friend, family member, or co-worker got them into it.

Rodger, a 30-something full-time software engineer from Rochester N.Y., fell into the latter category, as he described how a co-worker who did DoorDash on the side convinced him to sign up: "[they were] showing [me] how much money they were making, and they said, 'Hey, if you need extra money, this is a good way to do it and be able to be flexible'." Similar to how the companies advertise, Rodger's co-worker also emphasized the flexible scheduling as a selling point in his recruitment. When workers recruit others to the platform, they are given a referral bonus for signing that person up. However, none of the participants mentioned the referral bonuses, even when discussing recruiting their own friends to the job, which three said they had done. For many, the incentive to take up food delivery was purely financial, as was the case with Rodger, who even with his full-time job as a software engineer, was living paycheck to paycheck and saw DoorDash as,

> *...purely for money to help pay bills. It was a good way to add additional income without having to worry about the second boss, worry about scheduling or anything like that, and being able to cancel shifts if I needed to. That was the*

> *main driver, was not having to deal with somebody telling me, 'Well, you have to work today because you're scheduled, you've been scheduled.'*

For Rodger, the incentive was to earn more money, but the "main driver" for entering food delivery was that he could work without having to report to anyone or having to deal with somebody telling him what to do. Rodger also valued the ability to prioritize his family,

> *...some weeks I'll take off if we just have too much family stuff going on. Or I have tournaments, or whatever it is, any extracurricular activities come first and then working comes second.*

Such value for flexibility reflects a relatively new idea to workers that was borne in the years after the Great Recession. A desire for a better quality of life and "work-life" balance became important drivers for job and career choices. Many workers who had done everything "right" to achieve middle to upper-middle-class success faced unemployment, loss of retirement funds, and home foreclosures. As traditional forms of employment were no longer able to fulfill the promise of a stable future amidst millions of jobs lost, flexible work opportunities like gig work became appealing to a vast majority of workers to earn money on their own terms.

This desire for a better "work-life" balance has again become more common during the pandemic era, as the economic fallout combined with a vast healthcare emergency led many workers to reconsider how they spend their time and at what risk, prompting career and job changes, and for some, leaving the workforce altogether (Thompson, 2021). Moreover, while the money Rodger earned from food delivery was helping him pay bills, it was still supplemental to his full-time job, which meant he could prioritize family-related activities over delivering when he wanted to. Other participants,

particularly those who relied upon delivery for a majority, if not all their income, did not always have that luxury.

Not all workers had familial obligations to schedule, but workers with children spoke about the benefits of flexible hours and balancing childcare responsibilities. Maura, a 30-something woman from Pennsylvania who left her job as a warehouse worker to do food delivery gig work, explained that having a flexible schedule has allowed her to be home more and cover childcare needs for her family:

> *I was working in the warehouse, and I had to work overnight, to make $16 an hour. I had no other choice, there was nothing else that I was going to do, and you know, in a matter of a few minutes because that's all the [DoorDash] application really took, I was quite surprised how quickly I was making at least 25% more and* ***during the day and having a normal schedule****. To replace my former income, I only have to work 22 to 25 hours. My partner is a truck driver so he's not physically here all the time, so as a parent who is by themselves a lot, cutting back on hours was a huge plus for us, and now, if I have extra hours to work that's extra money that I'm bringing in.*

The flexibility of food delivery not only allowed Maura to prioritize childcare responsibilities, but in doing so she was able to cut her working hours in half while increasing her earning potential. In addition to positively impacting her family life and income, Maura also discussed how the flexible nature of the job has been "invaluable" for her mental health.

> *I have borderline personality disorder, so like trying to like deal with like relationships at work, I'm great for the first six months until people want to like know about me and then that's it. I can't, I can't deal with it anymore….but I don't feel like that anymore, and the change for my mental health has been insane…like I'd be having you know, a bad day and I just had to have a bad day there for eight hours and* ***if I'm having a bad day now, I just go home. And that is invaluable you know****, and I see that a lot, I see that a lot on Reddit. There's a lot of us out there that have mental health issues and, working you know, in a traditional job seriously agitated certain aspects of it and this just doesn't.*

The flexibility to create her schedule around her mental health needs was something she could not do in her previously held "traditional" jobs and was part of what she valued about food delivery. Maxime, a woman in her 20's living in Iowa who works full-time across a variety of delivery platforms, echoed something similar when discussing why she started doing the job,

> *The flexibility, the ability to go online at any point. Because some days for me, I just wake up and I'm just like, 'Oh, I am very much in pain', and I'm like, I cannot work today. But I know that I'll be able to work another day.*

The flexible schedule allows Maxime to prioritize her health without fear of losing her job. Roberta, a woman in her 50's from Mesa, Arizona, who delivers for Uber Eats in addition to having a full-time online sales job, also appreciated the "work-life" balance aspect of food delivery. She cited both her childcare responsibilities, as her son has special needs, and her physical health as reasons why she needed a job that affords her flexibility,

> *I used to have a career in health administration and* ***between my physical health and my children I couldn't, I couldn't maintain that career.*** *I was supposed to have disability that I had paid into for the 10 years I'd been with the company and of course, you know, insurance companies, their job is to not pay. So, they found a loophole, denied me, and I lost my income. I had to do something to pay my bills and this was something I could do without getting fired for not being able to work when I couldn't physically work.*

Part of the appeal of flexibility then is not just having the ability to choose which hours one works but also that it acts as a source of income protection. When one's physical and mental health or childcare responsibilities prevent them from working or adhering to a set schedule, flexibility guarantees that they will still be able to work another day, a welcomed relief for those who have previously feared losing their jobs when having to choose between addressing an emergency or their income. This is

particularly true for women in professional careers, like Roberta, who decided to leave her career to pursue something more conducive to her responsibilities outside the home.

Gig workers also considered their education goals when taking on this new line of work. Jamie, a 30-something woman from Tucson, Arizona, who delivers for DoorDash full-time, was pursuing her EMT certification. The job, she said, "will allow me the flexibility to take the course through the fall and not have to worry about my work schedule interfering with school and things like that." Moreover, she talked about how she enjoys being able to decide her working hours,

> *If I'm not feeling it, I'll just take a day off, you know, just like call it a wash, which is like super nice. Or, you know, maybe I made an okay amount of money this morning and at lunch, so I don't feel like going out for dinner. So, it's very flexible, it's nice.*

Jamie's comment sums up what the general attitude towards flexibility is among workers; that it is "nice" to be allowed to make decisions on how to spend your working hours. While many cited flexibility as a necessity because it could fit with other jobs, family obligations, education, or health needs, the idea that workers valued having control over decisions like where and when they worked was also echoed in these conversations. Indeed, this "nice" feeling workers expressed about being in control of their schedule suggests that most did not experience this level of control or flexibility in their previous jobs, and it is an important factor in how people think and make decisions about work.

Temporary

In addition to flexibility, workers also found the temporary nature of the gig to be an attractive aspect that drew them into the work. The gig economy is often advertised as and known to the greater public as a side job, or a 'side-hustle'; something you do to

make money during your free time. This was emphasized in the #WhyIDash advertisements, particularly with Rich, who speaks about ‘dashing’ when he is not working full-time as a teacher, telling us, “You can earn as much as you want or as little as you want, it’s a no-brainer” and then the statistic, “91% of Dashers work fewer than 10 hours per week”, appears across the screen (DoorDash, 2020a). While the advertisements’ focus is on how Rich values the flexibility of the job, that it ends with a statistic of a high percentage of workers working a very low number of hours per week, also emphasizes the temporary nature of the gig.

The way the job is presented in these advertisements and known to both workers and the public as something to be done in a temporary capacity, in your spare or free time, suggests that the job is not meant to become a career or be a long-term commitment. This transient nature of the gig is reflected in the onboarding process. Across gig platforms, this tends to be minimal and, as earlier described, involves a quick online application and background check. The ease of entry into gig work combined with the side-hustle narrative the platforms tell workers and the public alike suggests that gig work is temporary by its nature. However, this depiction of gig work as temporary is disrupted by workers' experiences on the job, many of whom find that the gig becomes a more permanent fixture in their lives.

The way that participants spoke about the temporary nature of the gig was another theme that emerged as it pertained to how they got into food delivery gig work. Nearly everyone spoke about their intention to exit this line of work eventually, once they finished school, met a certain income goal, or found a career in their field. Part of the appeal of the job being temporary is that it can be easily cut back or dropped altogether.

This was the case with Rodger, who initially began DoorDashing to help pay his bills, but after receiving a promotion at work, was able to cut back his delivery hours and dependence and put that income "towards building some different investment opportunities." No longer financially dependent on delivery to pay his bills, Rodger declared, "as soon as those [investments] start to replace the income from DoorDash and GrubHub, that's when I'll cut it off and stop." Similarly, Roberta, who has been delivering for Uber Eats for over four years, talked about ending her time delivering food once her other online sales job could replace the income the gig platform was providing for her,

> *Ultimately, my goal is that my business becomes lucrative enough that I can quit doing any of these. And I did for a little while, I was doing really good during the pandemic, because people had nothing else to do but sit online, attend online parties and shop. And I went like four months, where I didn't have to, and that's kind of where I want to get again, [where] I don't have to do this. But I will always, I think, until I hit a certain level, where I'm consistently bringing in two to three grand a month, I'll keep doing this, because I easily clear 600 a week.*

For Rodger and Roberta, the income from food delivery was necessary, but only in a temporary capacity in the sense that they aspired to eventually terminate the gig.

This aspiration to only do this job temporarily was also echoed by Deborah, a 30-something Instacart shopper who lives in St. Louis, Missouri. Deborah began working for Instacart after re-locating from Colorado. Previously she worked as a community liaison, but unable to find a job in her field in a new city, she thought she could work for Instacart until something else came along. Deborah found Instacart to be a good place holder job because the flexible hours allowed her to coordinate with her husband to take care of their son, who was going to school in a hybrid, virtual and in-person capacity, due to the pandemic. However, she was very adamant that this is only temporary, saying, "I value this, but of course this is not my career. I don't want to stay here forever. This is

hopefully, just, I don't know, a seasonal thing in my life." She expressed frustration that she was still in this temporary phase, telling me that she had hoped "that it was just a summer thing…but one year later, I'm still doing Instacart because I couldn't- I can't find a job."

Despite the understanding that food delivery gig work is a temporary job, something you do on the side, when you want, for as long as you want, workers found that this aspect of the job played out differently once they began doing the work. Food delivery gig work is generally taken on by workers under the guise of being a temporary position, obscuring the truth that it can and in many cases does become a more permanent and necessary fixture in their lives. Even though a majority of those I interviewed had been doing this job a year or longer, they all talked about it as something temporary, suggesting that despite the ease with which one can get into the job, it's not as easy to leave, or as will be discussed in the following section, maintained.

Maxime, who has been working on a variety of platforms for over two years, thought being part of a temporary gig long-term as "weird",

> *Yeah, it feels weird, because I think food delivery is very easy to get into, but very hard to maintain. I think that's kind of what they bank on is people coming in and out…. like realizing how hard it really is, and then leaving, and then new people needing money, so they come back, so it's very weird to be a part of the system for a long time. Well, a relatively long time, you just see that they don't really care about you that much. But it's a means to an end so you're willing to be a part of it.*

In the span of a typical person's working life, two years to spend in one job is not extraordinarily long, or abnormal, but that Maxime characterizes her experience as a gig worker for that long feels "weird", suggests that she understands this is not typical of this

industry. Atypical gig workers like Maxime who remain in the gig relatively long term, understand that the platform relies upon a high turnover rate.

In addition to the length of time some workers have remained in the gig, they also saw their full-time hours to be uncharacteristic of what they considered to be the average delivery worker. Their long hours did not align with the image of the "side hustler" or gig worker, and certainly did not line up with DoorDash's claim that most workers worked fewer than 10 hours a week. At the time of our interview, Jamie had only been working for DoorDash for about 5 months, but she worked full-time, on average 50-60 hours a week. She understood that this was atypical, "…from what I understand. I'm not the average DoorDasher, most people only work like a little bit a week, like maybe 10 or 15 hours." That some workers recognize that the way they use the job compared to others is atypical or stands in contrast to the very idea of the gig, suggests that the idea of food delivery work as temporary or part time is incongruent with the lived experiences of many of the workers.

The temporary gig becomes more permanent for some workers who find that other jobs do not meet their financial needs or are too restrictive compared to food delivery. This is the case with Mark, a 29-year-old from Phoenix, Arizona. Mark is a self-described "veteran" of gig work and has been working for platforms for five years. Before he got into gig work, he was a manager at a fast-food sandwich restaurant. He had seen an advertisement for Uber on social media and thought it would be an easy way to make some extra cash on the weekend. After one weekend of driving for Uber, Mark had made more money than he had all week managing, and he decided to drive full-time. Over the course of his time in the gig economy, he tried to get other jobs outside of gig

work, as he saw his earnings go down after the first year or so. He never stayed in these other jobs too long though, and always found himself back in the gig, driving passengers or delivering food. He told me that the other non-gig jobs,

> *...they've either not been lucrative enough, or just too many issues to stay at,* ***it's more freedom, more earning opportunities with these apps.***

What Mark's comment reflects is that despite the temporary nature of gig work, for those who come to rely on this income and the way in which they earn it, notably through flexible and "more earning opportunities", the seemingly temporary nature gives way to a more lasting one. The lasting nature of the gig illuminates that workers are increasingly making choices about their working lives based upon both wages and the way in which they earn those wages.

Some participants even mentioned that they had recently quit or left another job to do food delivery full-time, further disrupting the image of gig work as temporary. Maxime, who felt "weird" being in the gig long term, began doing food delivery as a part-time job in addition to her job in a university library media department. She switched to doing food delivery full-time with her partner in the last year noting,

> *...it's been easier since I don't have a second job. It feels counterintuitive,* ***but I just never had a job that paid enough****, and that was like consistent that I could do food delivery and [that]. This has been really good because we can work as much as we want to make rent and everything. It's still hard, but it it's easier than stretching my abilities to different jobs.*

For workers like Maxime, using the gig as intended, as a temporary side job, was in her experience, more difficult than just committing to food delivery full-time. That she was unable to make enough money in a traditional job, even in a professional setting like a university, suggests that the economic security of many full-time positions is eroding,

creating space for temporary gig work to fill in the gaps and in some cases, take on more permanency. Additionally, Maxime seems to see food delivery as a way to escape the alienation of working two jobs where, she was working all the time and struggling to make ends meet, by instead taking one job where she and her partner can "work as much as we want to" to cover all their expenses. Maxime also echoes the messaging from the DoorDash advertisement with Rich, where he says, "you can make as much as you want or as little as you want" (DoorDash, 2020a). Interestingly, Maxime interpretted the messaging that was intended to get workers to do this work in their spare time as a way to justify turning a part-time gig into full-time work.

Workers who make the decision to enter gig work, in a part time, supplemental, or full-time capacity, are usually doing so as a reaction to their previous working experiences, as some see gig work as a viable solution to issues they had with other jobs. Maura, who left her job working in a warehouse for food delivery, talked about how the job compared to her previous work experiences,

> *I'm thinking about making other choices and changes down the road because, like I said, this is a thing that I could just be told tomorrow I'm not allowed to do anymore. Now, I take it seriously and I go there, I get the thing, I take it, whatever, but it could happen, I guess. But I almost feel more stable in this situation because I always knew before that it was going to be attendance that kept me from either advancing or staying long term in a job, so that aspect of this has been life changing honestly.*

Maura always felt unstable in her previous jobs, particularly because her mental health condition would lead to issues with attendance, causing her to not remain somewhere long term. While she recognized that there is a similar level of instability in food delivery due to the deactivation policies, this instability is notably different for her. That her deactivation or firing in food delivery would not be due to her attendance record, but a

result of how the work was organized, made the unstable working conditions something she could deal with. That she is able to control an aspect of work that was previously responsible for her losing jobs has been "life changing." Maura is no more stable in food delivery than she was in her previous lines of work, as she recognizes she could be told at any time that she is not "allowed to do this anymore" and therefore needs to prepare to make some changes, but it is the *appearance* of control that she has through micro choices and decisions like setting her own hours, that leads Maura to remain in and accept a job that is just as, if not more precarious than her previous ones.

That flexible, temporary gigs are becoming more permanent and seen as a viable option long term is problematic for food delivery workers in very material ways. Like highly paid corporate consultants, but working in a much lower pay bracket, contract-based labor, like food delivery gig work, are qualified as such in part because of the brevity of the gig or contract. Despite those who do it full-time, legally they are stringing together many small individual gigs to fulfill their working hours. Therefore, they are not afforded the same workplace protections and employment rights that come with traditional employment, leaving them in a constant state of precarity and at risk of "deactivation" for violating terms and agreements. Despite years on the job and subsequent time, energy, and money spent in this line of work, many are left navigating unstable wages, not having health benefits, sick leave, paid time off, in sum, no safety net in case of emergencies. The next section begins to reveal how promises of flexibility and temporary and the illusion of choice give way to long-term precarity that can have negative material impacts on workers.

Instability

Overall, participants found the flexible scheduling and freedom to work when they want, for as long as they want, to be a positive thing. For many who entered this job, they had other jobs to juggle, children to care for, or mental and physical health issues that often held them back from taking on a "traditional job." As the participants in the previous sections detail, being able to fit in this temporary job around their other responsibilities and do the work until they completed their degrees or found another job is often valued, and a primary motivator for why they do the job. However, as they articulated their daily experiences on the job, the darker side to an inherently flexible and temporary job began to reveal itself. Workers hinted that these elements of the job come as a tradeoff, particularly when it comes to hours and wages. Because gig workers come to the work in a variety of ways and are invested in it to different degrees, it's difficult to come up with the average weekly hours, or average weekly earnings. Despite the different levels of investment in the gig, research has found that 56% of gig workers consider their earning "essential" or "necessary", compared to 42% who say it is "nice to have" (Smith, 2016). What these statistics suggest is that the inconsistency and fluctuations in pay are impacting an increasing number of workers who depend upon this income.

Each time I asked someone how much they made an hour on average or how many hours they worked a week, many included conditional clauses such as, "it depends", "it fluctuates", or "it varies" in their replies. Despite their enthusiasm for the flexible aspects of the job, particularly with scheduling, many participants also alluded to the unstable side of flexibility in these same conversations, as illustrated in these various

responses given during one-on-one interviews when I inquired about average take-home pay:

> *It all depends on where you're at and stuff even then it's not guaranteed. (Eric)*
>
> *It's kind of all over the place. That's one of the things or one of the reasons that I do it is because it's flexible. (Amanda)*
>
> *Oh, um, I think it really varies from week to week. (Maxime)*

Deborah, who turned to Instacart after she couldn't find a job in her field, repeatedly emphasized how inconsistent her hours can be,

> *By week? Well, it depends. I do it part time because I have a kid. So, while he's in school, I try to do it. So sometimes I work between four and four and a half hours per day. Sometimes I work the weekends. To be honest with you, it depends. I tried to work like between four and four and a half hours. Some days, for example, when my husband can stay at home. I work six or seven. But that's the thing, why I do Instacart is because I don't have like, a regular schedule.*

Workers like Deborah, who need to coordinate childcare duties, see Instacart as their best option but are also aware of its drawbacks,

> *Right now, it works. If I could have like a regular job, I would make my schedule work with my son. I would leave him at school, I would do something else. I would have more money to pay for childcare.* ***Right now, I can't afford that so that's my main reason, that's why I'm doing Instacart still.***

Deborah encapsulates the struggle many gig workers experience between having a flexible schedule and maintaining a steady income, notably using "sometimes" and "depends" to convey just how unstable her work weeks can be. Even though she explained that she does this work because she does not have a regular schedule, she still struggles to find consistent, lucrative working hours during her week. Moreover, her comments reveal that delivery gig work can be a catch-22, particularly for parents. Instacart shopping allows Deborah to look after her son while earning some money.

However, the inconsistency in earnings, in part due to her flexible schedule, is also prohibiting her from being able to earn enough to afford childcare, which is on average about $16,000 a year per child in the U.S. (Thompson, 2019). She indicated that her husband is the "breadwinner" of the household and covers most of her expenses. If she works all day, she said she can earn between $20-25 per hour but clarified that this average is still not accurate nor enough, as she has "to pay for my gas, I have to pay the insurance on my car, I have to pay my cell phone, I have to pay my taxes." Part of why delivery workers have a hard time knowing and articulating how much they make is not only because their hours and wages are hard to pin down, but they begin to see there are expenses that need to be factored in, and then factored out of their pay.

The same wavering occurred in other responses about average income. Most participants provided a range of hourly incomes, like Amanda, a 20-something college student in Tempe, Arizona, who said,

> *I mean, there's some hours where you know, I might make way below minimum wage or something. I know I've had one hour where I made like, five bucks off the whole hour, but things get balanced out the more hours you work, so it usually hits somewhere around [$15], I think.*

Workers were unclear on how much their hourly rate is, but they were aware they can earn below minimum wage at certain points. Although they were resigned to the fact that this occurred, they argued it could be made up by working additional hours and making more deliveries. Mark had a much more animated response when asked about his average earnings,

> *Um, it's just how much are you going to put into it? And how hard are you going to work at it? You know, this isn't necessarily a nine to five, you know, hourly paid job, it's hard to say I make 20 bucks an hour, because that's an average, sometimes I'm making $4 or $5 an hour and it sucks. I want to go home. Fuck*

> *this, it's not worth my gas. Other times, it's 50, 60, 70 bucks an hour. And it's like, I'm too sleepy, I need to go home or otherwise, I'm going to crash even though I want to stay out and keep driving.*

Workers like Mark and Amanda seemed to think that below minimum wage pay was at times, part of the job, and at other times, a reflection that you may not be putting enough work into the job. Mark's emphasis on personal responsibility was reflected in other responses from other workers, as well as the DoorDash advertisement, where Rich states, "it's no secret the more time you put in, the harder you work, the more money you make" (DoorDash, 2020a). The idea that you are in control of your earnings is part of the freedom ideology that platform companies like DoorDash and Uber Eats wield to get workers to consent to wages below the minimum wage, obscuring that the instability in hours and wages is actually borne out of how the platform is designed, rather than a reflection of how much effort one puts in.

Mark and Amanda reflect the power of this ideology through their responses, when they indicate that in food delivery, low wages are at times acceptable because there will always be more opportunities, more profitable hours to "balance it out" in the future. In essence, they are free to choose to work more, to make up for the fact that they are not guaranteed a minimum wage. The promise of flexible, high wage hours that the companies offer stands in contrast to the experiences of many workers, many of whom indicate that they understand the two to be mutually exclusive. For Instance, Pat, a 31-year-old driver for DoorDash from Mesa, Arizona, captured this tension between a flexible schedule and good wages when asked about how he determines his schedule,

> *Well, it's advertised as sort of oh just whenever is good for you, not the case - because if I do whatever I want I'll just be sitting there sometimes with no orders. See, really how to do it is during the peak times to make it worth your while,*

> *which is really lunch rush and dinner rush, and then on the weekends, when the drunks want fast food, so that makes it a little bit difficult, I think, and also sometimes the peak times are also very random.*

The flexibility that workers are afforded on the job to determine when they want to work does not always translate into high paying hours, and sometimes means no orders at all. The narrative that you can work when you want and make as much as you want begins to be disrupted when we stack this narrative pushed by the company up against the experience of the workers themselves. For workers like Pat, to make enough money on the platform, he needs to prioritize the higher paying hours, or peak times, when demand is high, complicating the idea that he is free to choose his own hours. Even though he admits the higher paying, peak hours, usually follow some sort of pattern, they can also be "very random", leading to unstable and unpredictable working hours.

This instability, particularly with hours and wages, unravels the lofty promises of freedom of food delivery gig work, while simultaneously demonstrating the hegemonic power of the freedom ideology. Food delivery gig workers experiences on the job reveal that the flexible, temporary nature of the job can impact their ability to work and earn consistently, yet some workers still cite that their ability to control their schedule is extremely valuable to them and worth the tradeoff. Moreover, that many workers came to gig work from a variety of economic sectors, relying on the income as a supplemental source of earning or a full income, suggests that working people's needs are increasingly being unmet and they are actively searching for other forms of work which fit their needs and wants. In the next section, I demonstrate how this façade of flexibility begins to unravel further, as the ways in which the workers discuss how they learned to do and

navigate the job, further reveal the limitations to their agency and control as independent food delivery gig workers and point to the façade of flexibility.

Learning and Navigating Food Delivery: "My Own Algorithms for Success"

The way platform companies are designed is to ensure there is always enough supply to meet demand, meaning there are always enough delivery drivers to respond to consumer requests. To guarantee a steady supply of delivery drivers at a low cost, platform companies keep barriers to entry extremely low; there is no interview process, training period, nor formal mentoring program as you would find in other types of employment. The absence of red tape to begin working and earning is often seen as a positive, particularly during times of economic downturn.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce released a statement in April 2020, the month after the onset of the pandemic, praising platform delivery companies for stepping up to help Americans, citing their ability to deliver to those who were isolated at home and "most importantly…providing vital earnings opportunities to Americans who have lost hours or jobs amid the economic slowdown" (Cates, 2021). Central to this ability to provide vital earnings is that many people can sign up and be approved to work in a matter of days. While people can sign up quickly for a delivery job, the lack of any real training means the responsibility to learn how to do the job falls on the workers, which can be a lengthy and expensive process.

When participants spoke about how they learned to do the job, they began to further unravel the idea that this job affords them flexibility and control over their time and working lives. Many workers found the absence of the typical onboarding process to

be something they really valued about the job. As Jamie described it, to begin working right away was “very helpful”,

> *Honestly, I don't know how I would have made it through the last couple of months without this particular kind of opportunity, which does create some dissonance for me, since I'm all for not having people treated like independent contractors. But I was going through a divorce, and I'm still not receiving spousal support. So, I'm kind of like, 100% on my own at this time. And my ex-spouse was not okay with me working, one of the reasons why I left, so I don’t have a job history, I don't have credit, there's a lot of things that made it difficult for me to get a regular job. So, you know, this was something that I could jump straight into and don't need the job history don't need to worry about waiting two weeks for a paycheck, like a lot of things made it very, very helpful when I needed it.*

Jamie’s experience reveals the benefits to low barrier work like food delivery, particularly for those in crisis or in need of work immediately. While Jamie is largely against the loss of rights she experiences as an independent contractor, the benefits she was able to gain from this work arrangement led her to accept the terms of the job more easily. While the ability to work immediately without the red tape of other types of employment can be seen as a positive, the downside is that without any formal training it is up to the workers to figure out how to navigate the new job.

Workers drew on their previous job experiences, technological knowledge, help seeking skills, and friends and family members, to figure out how best to navigate the job, and train themselves. Overall, three themes emerged around the discussions on learning and navigating the job, they were knowledge accumulation, strategies, and information asymmetries.

Knowledge Accumulation

Workers learned how to do their new job by doing it, experientially, and by engaging with online forums and communities found on Reddit or Facebook. Most

workers were familiar with the online forums, especially Reddit, but others like Deborah and Maura, only turned to these sources after the advice from their respective husbands/partners. Through these two ways, workers figured out not just how to do the job, but how to make it profitable for themselves by learning which areas to target, what times to work, and which deliveries one should accept or decline, what workers referred to as "filtering."

Acquiring this knowledge took time and according to my sample, it took workers anywhere from a month to a year to figure out to learn how to navigate the job, depending on how often they were working and how integral it was to their household income. When Roberta started food delivery, it was her only job (now she has two) and even though she was working full-time hours it still took her a year to figure out how to make the gig profitable. During that time, she wanted to quit, but she could not because her "circumstances dictated that I keep trying." When I asked her how she acquired the knowledge to do the job, she credited trial and error while also telling me that seeking out information from other drivers through online spaces was a "vicious" process,

> *mainly it was trial and error, you know, because when you're trying to get any information out of other drivers, it's vicious. It's cutthroat because we're basically all in competition with each other, which is hard, and then it depends. But yeah, it was trial and error.*

Most participants did not have a negative experience with online forums, and many expressed how online spaces like Facebook groups and Reddit forums were important to ask questions and learn about the job from other people's experiences (see figures 8 and 9). For example, Eric, a college student in the New York area who had recently started

shopping for Instacart in addition to delivering for Uber Eats, told me how engaging with online forums helped him to figure out the job,

> *I just started recently, and I haven't really done a ton of them [before] and the first one, I chose, which was a mistake, was a three-batch order and I had to get like 50 items and it was a real mess, because some of them [were] ice cream and yeah it wasn't the best, I should have just done a smaller one first. But watching Reddit more now I know which orders to accept and which not to accept.*

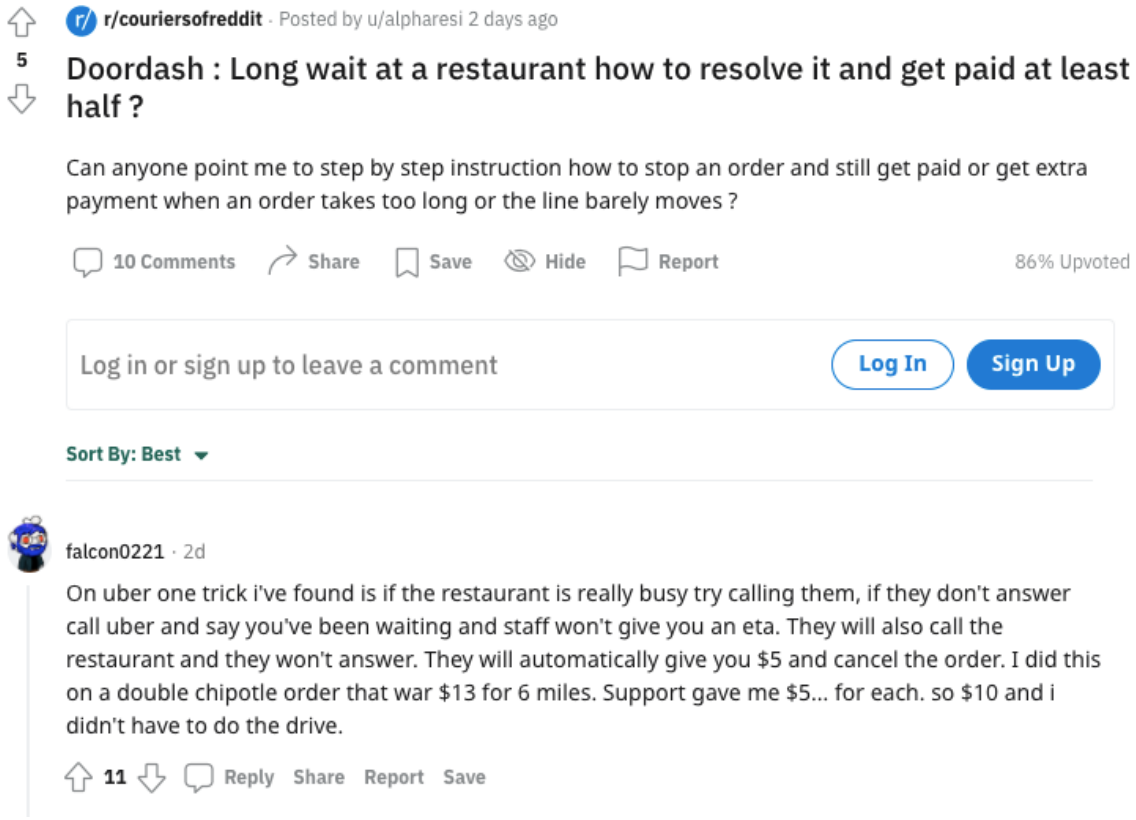

Figure 8. An example of how delivery workers use online forums to learn how to do the job and troubleshoot. Screenshot taken by the author November 2021.

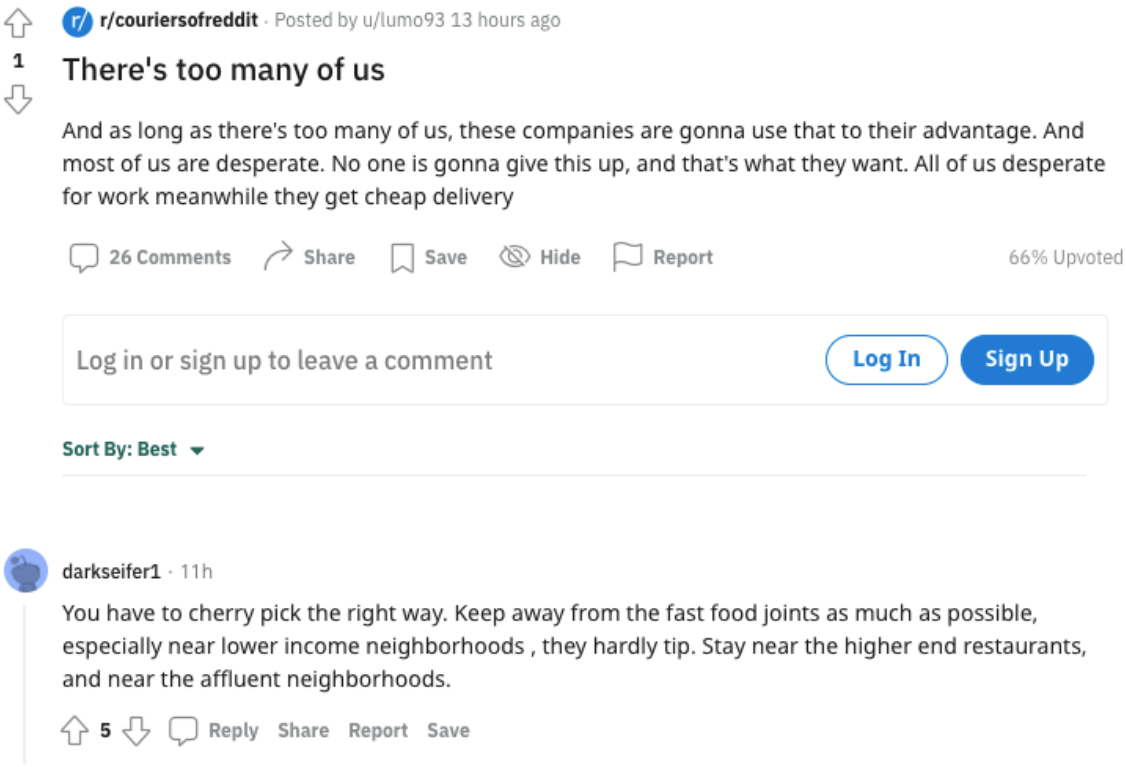

Figure 9. An example of how delivery workers use online forums to offer each other tips and tricks on how to make the job profitable. Screenshot taken by the author November 2021.

Because there is no training, drivers end up doing the work the way they think it will be most profitable for them. For Eric, this meant taking larger, potentially more profitable, but challenging orders. For Pat, this meant "literally dashing",

> *I was just accepting everything, the more I accept the more I made in my mind, right? I just took all the orders, and you know what I was doing? I was running. So I would wear running shoes like workout clothes, and I would run all my orders literally, to maximize my time as much as possible, so I would run into the store and then, if they didn't get it to me in 10 minutes, I cancel the order and I move on and I would run my deliveries like I was actually running and going as fast as I could and driving as fast as I could.*

Before Pat knew any better, he accepted every order and moved as fast as possible, believing this to be the most efficient way to make money. Overtime, though, he stopped doing this as he learned which orders to accept and reject based upon,

> *...my experience in it and also speaking with other dashers. I determine the places that I like to drive that are more worth my - I feel more worth my time, because you got to calculate gas into this and mileage on your car etc.*

What Pat and Eric's remarks reveal is that over time and through consulting other workers, delivery drivers are better able to make decisions that serve their financial needs and preferences. However, before they learn to account for the built-in costs of doing this work, such as car related expenses, they have to incur those costs. This sentiment of losing money and assuming the cost of the financial burden during the self-training process was expressed by Mark, who when I asked how he learned to do the job cited,

> *...experience, I swear to God, just experience like, I've driven every hour of every day of the week of every day of the year,* ***it's just going out there and figuring out alright, I'm making shit money.*** *Now I need to go back home. And that's how I did it to start because, you know, I was new to it. I didn't know what I was doing.*

He elaborated on the cost of not having proper training, when I asked him if he is able to make ends meet with this job,

> *At the start, no, not unless you're doing like, 50-60 hours [a week]. Now, I've done it for over four years, and I just know how the apps work, what areas to drive in, how the algorithms going to operate.* ***And I just know how to make it work for me. I definitely wouldn't recommend other people to lean on thi****s, especially with very little driving experience or knowledge of your city or neighborhood because it's taxing on the car. It's taxing on your body. And it can get very expensive very quick.*

Mark articulates the cost of self-training in food delivery by detailing how many hours he estimates you must put in before you know how to do the job in a way that is profitable. While he admits that he can make this situation work for him, he would not recommend others "lean on this" kind of income without certain experience. This advice, to have a particular knowledge set before entering the gig contrasts with the positive characterization of the low barriers to entry espoused by the companies. Roberta also

echoed Mark's comment about the wear and tear delivery can have on the body. She was able to stop working for Uber Eats for a few months during the height of the pandemic, when her online sales job was able to provide her with enough income. She described those few months as a "physical relief", as she did not have to endure all the running around and physical exhaustion that comes with food delivery.

Deborah credited Reddit for filling in the gap left by Instacart while expressing her confusion as to why there was no training provided,

> *They will send you a video, and [tell you] like, 'Oh, you have to do this and this', but they don't train you. So, your first orders, they send you good orders, but your first orders, you're just guessing what to do. That's why I joined Reddit because I was like, clueless, I don't know what to do or how to proceed. So [with] Instacart my idea is that they don't want you to succeed. It's crazy. I don't know why. So, I was making mistakes. And I was getting these poor ratings. I didn't know why.* ***And I was reading, like everybody's experience, so I could improve my service.***

Deborah's husband was familiar with the online forum, and suggested she seek out a community thread for Instacart shoppers. Without the online community, Deborah said she would have been "clueless", highlighting the significance of pooled knowledge among workers.

Moreover, her point about poor ratings is significant, as many platforms require that reviews and ratings are maintained at a certain threshold in order to continue using the platform. As discussed in Appendix A, the customer ratings are the most important piece of this, with ratings below a 4.5 on a 5-star scale considered "low" and therefore puts workers at risk of deactivation. Some of this information is available on the platform's websites, but oftentimes workers become privy to this knowledge through interacting with and communicating in online forums. Additionally, all platforms offer

the chance to have low ratings removed from their profiles when they receive high ratings, both requiring and ensuring drivers to deliver more, but without an explicit explanation of what caused their poor rating in the first place. The lack of training in combination with an opaque ratings system therefore puts the workers' financial security and ability to use the app at all in jeopardy, all the while shaping their behaviors.

Deborah's comment about having "good orders" in the beginning was also expressed by other drivers, who saw that these types of orders lasted only for the first month or two of work. This is what Deborah called the "honeymoon phase",

> *When you first start, they gave you the best batches every day, and you're like in this honeymoon phase with them. I remember I had one batch and they paid me $20 to deliver one bottle of tequila. I was just like, oh my god, this is the dream, so easy. But of course,* ***when they see that you really need to work with them, they start giving you reality****.*

The challenge to learning how to do the gig is a combination of a lack of training and being intentionally misguided during the first weeks of work with high paying orders that do not accurately represent the true nature of the job. Some workers, like Deborah, saw this as intentional on the part of the companies, who used these better orders and batches to get workers to rely on this income before giving them "reality."

In addition to seeing more high paying, lucrative orders in the first weeks of work, the "honeymoon phase" also entails new driver promotions. New driver bonuses typically offer a few hundred dollars to drivers after completing a certain number of trips within a certain number of days. The price of the bonus can vary, but most workers said it was usually between two and three hundred dollars. Eric, the college student who primarily delivers for Uber Eats, told me that he used to try and go for those bonuses because he "didn't know any better", but now, when he sees promotions, he doesn't try to get them

because he is "thinking more about miles and prices", telling me, "…they'd have to pay me a lot more to accept every single order."

Similar to the way the ratings system works with the promise of erasing low ratings through more deliveries, new driver promotions in the honeymoon phase incentivize workers to drive more, emphasizing the quantity of deliveries, leaving workers to risk accepting orders that may not be financially worth it to them. Moreover, when the promotions and honeymoon phase disappear, workers must adjust and figure out how to make this job profitable under new conditions, including a newfound realization that there can be high cost to doing the job. The knowledge that workers accumulate to learn how to navigate the job rely upon their own ingenuity, collaboration, and ability to assume the risk for tasks previously shouldered by businesses and companies. Many workers became aware of this over time, and according to a recent study, one in five gig workers surveyed felt that the job places too much financial burden on workers (Smith, 2016). In the next section, the details of the strategies workers developed are explored, as the workers explain how they enacted what they learned, further revealing the cost workers incur and disrupting the façade of flexibility.

Strategies

Even before the new delivery-driver promotions disappear, many workers must rely upon their own creativity to figure out how the job works and how to make it work for them. In a typical work arrangement, things like trainings and sufficient wages, or at least, a minimum wage and/or salary, are the responsibility of the business or company. However, in food delivery, it becomes the duty of the driver to navigate this territory, without a road map or flashlight to guide the way. While workers are left to their own

devices, literally through their smartphones, platform companies are able to profit off of their ingenuity; as workers find ways to become more efficient at the job, the company becomes more efficient, too. This efficiency is important for the platform companies to demonstrate because none of them have turned a profit. The only exception is DoorDash, which "reported a profit of $23 million for the first time in its history during the second quarter of 2020", when demand for at home delivery skyrocketed as millions were mandated to stay home due to the pandemic (Sen, 2020). Because platform companies are not yet profitable through their own operations, they mainly operate off of venture capital investments. In order to attract investments, platform companies need to continue to show there is demand for their service, deliver on that demand, and grow, so they can demonstrate to investors that there is a promise for future profitability. The strategies workers come up with then, are not only paramount to their own individual financial success, but it in many ways the financial success of the platforms they work for, too.

"Filtering" as Strategy

The strategies workers employed while on the job were a result of building knowledge through their own trial and error as well as talking with other drivers, typically via online forums. While the types of strategies and frequency of use depended upon each driver's specific circumstance, they all stemmed from what they called the "wage to mile ratio" and filtering out what are considered to be "undesirable orders." Recall that the 'base pay' for deliveries is calculated based on the distance, time, and desirability of a delivery. This, in combination with the tip attached to the delivery, makes up the guaranteed pay for the delivery. Workers use this estimation in concert with their own calculations about costs of gas, wear on their cars, and what they deem

acceptable pay. These calculations were indicated by their responses to how they determine what orders to accept or deny:

> *Yeah, I don't take anything less than like $7.50 per order. And I like to see a short distance. I want to see that average mile be like $2 a mile. (Rodger)*
>
> *The standard now is I won't take anything less than $1 per mile. (Scott)*
>
> *I just keep declining everything like under 9,10 bucks. I like shooting above the 9–10-dollar mark. However, I'll do like $8 $7 if it's really short and close. (Mark)*
>
> *I get delivery requests for like $2 for more than a mile which is not at all worth my time, even if I'm on a bike I still wouldn't take that. (Eric)*
>
> *My hard and fast rule is going to be the mileage for the money for sure. And I usually won't take anything under $6 in my area. (Maura)*
>
> *I'm not taking a 12-mile round trip for $3 that's crazy. (Pat)*

The wage to distance ratio is important for each driver, as they all have their own individual threshold of what they will and will not accept depending on their geographic area, how slow the shift is, or what their mode of transportation is[1]. As Roberta explained to me,

> *...if there's ones that are like $1.50, like, that's just unreasonable. But, you know, if it's like $2.50 or $3, and it's slow, and I just want to keep going, I'll usually do that.*

Roberta reveals that "hard and fast rules" for what workers see as acceptable can fluctuate, and that depending on the conditions of the day they will accept orders below what they normally do. While workers were adamant about not accepting "low-ball" orders, that they sometimes chose to take (or were required to take), was still seen as their

[1] All participants used a car to make deliveries, except Eric who would occasionally use his bike when traveling into New York City to work.

individual choice, an exercise of their freedom and autonomy as a food delivery gig worker.

Not everyone can afford to deny low paying orders, though. This was most clearly seen with Maxime, who left her job at a university media department to deliver across a range of platforms full-time. Maxime lives in a small town in rural Iowa with "not as much opportunity" when it comes to deliveries. A lot of the advice in the online forums instructs drivers not to accept low paying orders indicating that it would end up costing drivers more in gas to complete the delivery. Maxime said that this advice did not align with her circumstances,

> *It's hard to look at the stuff where people are talking about, like, you just need to refuse all these orders, you need to cancel them, [because] those are all the orders that happen. I can't afford to refuse a $3 order because I have to make rent next month.*

Maxime and her partner solely rely upon delivery for the household income, and given the geographic area they live in, they were prevented from saying no to low paying orders. She explained that because of where they live, they sometimes have to drive 25 minutes after making one delivery just to be within range of getting another one. When I asked what her main strategies were to maximize her profits, she told me,

> *Sometimes if it's really bad weather we like to have ourselves go out because people don't want to go out, and, yeah, mainly just like working a lot is our main strategy for earning.*

For Maxime, working "a lot" means working multiple, twelve-hour days per week. She and her partner prefer to do a few, very long days together, with the hope that they can have two days off per week, depending on how profitable the orders are. They also prioritize going out in "really bad weather", which could potentially put her and her

partner at risk for accident or injury in a job that does not provide health benefits nor auto insurance. Many drivers see inclement weather as a money-making opportunity, as demand for at-home delivery increases during these times. Drivers try to take advantage of busy hours, even when conditions can be deadly, as evidenced by DoorDashers making deliveries in deadly flood waters in New York City in September 2021 (Leon, 2021). Delivering in bad weather not only puts workers health and safety at risk, but it can also increase their chances of getting into an accident. This was the case with Deborah, who was driving to Costco to fulfill an Instacart order while it was snowing,

> *I remember I was driving to Costco to fulfill an order. It was snowing and I hit black ice and I got in an accident. Thank God, it wasn't like a big deal, but I couldn't tell the insurance company that I was doing Instacart. I had to say, "Oh, I was just driving" because I won't get covered by my insurance if they know that I'm a gig worker. I think you have to have a special insurance to do that, so your regular insurance doesn't cover Uber, Instacart, DoorDash, anything.*

While some drivers are able to say no to certain orders and create and maintain thresholds to what they can and cannot accept, workers like Maxime and Deborah demonstrate this is not always the case, and that sometimes workers have to assume more risk, even to their personal health and safety, in order to make this job profitable for themselves.

Some workers understood that just because they were able to be selective with their orders, not everyone was able to do so. Deborah, who is from Guatemala originally but is an American citizen, told me that she sees a lot of folks who are “new” here. She explained that when they joined Instacart they probably did not know they were getting swept up in “the system” and getting “taken advantage of.” Deborah expressed anger when she saw such low paying orders getting picked up,

> *So how are you going to define what's fair, right? What is fair to me, maybe, is probably not for you. So, I see these batches, but they're gone. So, somebody is*

> *taking them. Of course, probably somebody who has a less rating that I have, somebody that probably needs to pay the rent, so they have to do 100 batches per week. So, like, when you really think about that, it makes me angry. Because thank God that I can say no to that, because it's not fair, but there's people that they need to take it, right?*

"Batch" is another word for order with Instacart, and sometimes batches can contain multiple orders, with the aim of reducing trips back and forth to the same store. Batches vary on the number of orders within each, and the items associated with each order, so it is difficult to put an exact time on how long it would take to complete one hundred batches. However, Deborah's point about one hundred batches is important because that is how Instacart shopper's customer ratings are averaged. Like Uber Eats and DoorDash, Instacart takes the reviews of the last one hundred batches to compute an individual worker's customer rating. So, when shoppers want to increase their rating to avoid deactivation, they must complete one hundred batches to do so. Here, Deborah encapsulates the unfair nature of food delivery, not just that some orders are too low to accept for some, but that there will always be people who are forced to accept those orders, no matter how unfair they may be.

Discrimination as Strategy

Part of "filtering" orders also had to do with where the deliveries were coming from and where they were going to. Nearly every worker mentioned that they prioritized affluent areas when delivering. Rodger, a supplemental earner in Rochester, New York, told me that he would deny orders that would take him to "the inner city",

> *I'll even go so far as to filter out orders to take me out of that area, even if it's a good order. So, you know, if an order said 30 bucks to go into the inner city, I'm not going to take it purely because it's taking me out of the good area.*

Mark echoed this sentiment telling me that once he begins to see a lot of apartment complexes as drop-off destinations, he stops driving,

> *...after 10pm, you're going to get like Filiberto or McDonald's or Jack in the Box. You know, not to generalize it, but most of those orders are going to go to like apartment complexes where they don't tip as much, you're going to have more work involved, driving further distances, so that's when I'll go home.*

Some workers, like Mark and Robert, associated fast food, late hours, and apartment complexes with low-paying, unprofitable orders. Eric said he avoided lower income areas because it increased the chance of getting "tip baited," a phenomenon where customers include a high tip when they place the order as an incentive to get their order picked up and delivered faster, only to go back into the app once the order has been completed and adjust the tip, even to zero sometimes. As Eric explained,

> *...usually if you get like a $25 order that's going to, and I don't want to be like rude or bias or whatever but usually if it's going to like a housing complex or like a lower income area, then you already know, ahead of time like, I'm about to get tip baited because you know, it's just something that you learn as time kind of goes on, the more experience you get with it.*

Nearly every worker agreed that more affluent areas and higher end restaurants were the best areas to prioritize when delivering. The one exception to this was Roberta, who found the opposite to be true. She actually avoided more affluent areas because "They suck at tipping. It's like the higher the socioeconomic base of an area the worst they tip." When asked if this surprised her, she replied, "No, because I tip well", suggesting that she sees herself as part of the same socioeconomic class that she prefers to deliver to.

Car Maintenance as Strategy

Another key strategy for workers was making decisions that kept car-related expenses low. Workers consistently brought up strategies that involved their cars when

telling me how they attempted to maximize profits and lower costs. When I asked Eric if he was able to make ends meet on the job, he replied yes, in part because "I do my own maintenance and stuff for my car, so you could have those skills and save a lot of money." Mark, who bought a used Toyota Prius last year to better maximize his income delivering food by saving on gas costs, also told me that over the years he has begun to do as much of his own maintenance as possible,

> *…I change my rear brakes, my drum brakes, I do it on my own. That's why it's going to cost $100 not, you know, $255 for breaks and 50 or 40 bucks for the oil change. I need to find a way to do that on my own. And I've learned that throughout the years through YouTube videos and just doing it on the cars myself.*

For workers like Mark and Eric, self-training on skills like car maintenance become essential responsibilities of food delivery, responsibilities that in a typical employment relationship are usually assumed by the business or company. While doing their own maintenance is seen as a strategy, not all drivers have the time to dedicate to learning those skills to offset the costs of delivery driving. Mark said that this can be a hard lesson to learn for new drivers,

> *Not having that knowledge or information, you're going to have other people run into problems and hardships. New drivers aren't going to know that, hey, driving my Hummer around is not profitable, driving my lifted truck is a bad idea. You know, I'm going to go make all this money, I'm going to pay my bills and then when it comes time for the maintenance or repair bill to get paid, I'm not going to have enough money to do it. Because* ***I've been just borrowing money out of my car this entire time****, so to speak.*

Many drivers brought up gas mileage, traffic, fuel efficiency, and general wear and tear on their cars as things they needed to strategize around. Three drivers told me they had to purchase an outside app to track gas mileage to help them file their taxes. Jamie, who is attending EMS classes while delivering for DoorDash, pays $8 a month for

her mileage tracking app and told me she is looking into buying a more fuel-efficient car for this job,

> *I drive a pickup truck, right, because that's what I have, hopefully, I'm going to get a new car soon, not brand new, but you know, new to me, that gets better gas mileage, but for right now, if it's under $1 a mile, I do not touch it at all, like I can't, like if the base pay and tips don't add up to $1 a mile, I can't take it because of the truck.*

Before committing to buying the app, Jamie was keeping track of her gas mileage and income from orders on paper, and then an excel sheet, which became unmanageable. A few other workers talked about making these calculations in their heads. Roberta, who has been delivering for Uber Eats for nearly 5 years, says she can look at an order and do an "instant calculation" to know if it's worth it for her to take, but acknowledged that this has only come through years of doing the gig. Moreover, she spoke about getting family members, like her son, to do her car maintenance to help cut down on costs and boost her earnings. On and off the job, workers are constantly making choices and calculations to ensure that the orders they take do not end up costing them money. Many drivers have invested a lot of time and money into this temporary, flexible job, in both small ways like learning how to do their own oil changes, and large ways like major auto-repairs and buying specific cars to do the gig.

Multi-Apping as Strategy

Despite all the new knowledge cultivated on the job and in online forums such as how to accept profitable orders and deny other low-paying ones, purchasing apps to assist in tracking gas mileage, and learning how to do their own car maintenance, workers still struggle to earn a living, stable wage. This is evidenced by another strategy that nearly every worker mentioned to me, even if they did not actively do it themselves yet - using

multiple apps simultaneously. Workers referred to this as “multi-apping.” Even though Rodger only relied on delivery in a supplemental capacity, he shared that he worked for two platforms, often simultaneously toggling between them during delivery because “there is no way you can make decent money” without “multi-apping.” He also noted that when he is going between multiple apps is when he tends to make more mistakes while delivering. Pat also said he multi-apps, and that it is standard for gig workers to have to rely upon multiple apps, and that “if we do one of them, we do them all.” Only four out of the twelve workers interviewed worked for just one platform, and one of them had already signed up for another and had it “ready to go”, just in case she began to see her income decline on DoorDash. So, in addition to having to learn the ins and outs of food delivery generally, many workers then have to learn the nuances of the different apps they add to their schedule, just to make a living wage.

Information Asymmetries

The main reason why workers struggle to learn how to navigate the gig is due to an imbalance of information, where the company possesses more and better-quality information than the worker, putting the worker at an inherent disadvantage. As workers stay on in the gig and learn to navigate it, they begin to understand this asymmetric relationship, the implications it has for their livelihoods, and the way it shapes their behaviors on the job.

Many food delivery gig workers enjoy the flexibility of the job and the ability to make decisions about their working lives, especially when they work and how long they work, without having to answer to a boss or manager. While this is true of many self-employed and independent contractors in other industries, this does not always prove to

be true with food delivery gig workers. As explored above, workers have begun to reveal that they do not always get to experience the autonomy that they were promised while delivering for platform companies. Key to this shaping of behaviors while maintaining the illusion of autonomy is the algorithmic, or app-based management system that food delivery gig workers interact with. As workers are not interacting with a human person, but rather an app, they are under the impression that they really do have autonomy on the job, but it is precisely through this medium that the information asymmetries can make an algorithmic manager resemble a typical manager and shape behaviors of workers.

Seeking out knowledge about how to do the job and developing strategies stems from the asymmetrical relationship the companies establish with their contractors. As demonstrated by the above sections in how drivers are left to figure out how to navigate the job and make strategic choices to ensure they aren't losing money every time they go to work, it is clear that the company possesses the better data in this relationship. Through obscuring how to do the job, they can actively shape workers' behaviors in ways that prioritize value and profits for the company over the wages and conditions of the workers. Importantly, this obfuscation results in confusion among workers about the rules of the job, particularly over what will and will not lead to deactivation, leading workers to accept orders that they normally would not and deem unprofitable.

Workers who were newer to the program were not always clear on which metrics were the most important for being able to remain active on the platform. Anthony, a 29-year-old who delivers for Uber Eats in New Jersey, told me that even when he sees low paying orders,

> *I have to take it because if I don't, the score would go down, my rating would go down. So, it's not really an option if I want to keep delivering.*

Workers like Anthony, who got into the work to be able to work whenever they want and earn extra money, were also aware that doing whatever they wanted was "not really an option", contrasting with the flexibility they were promised. Anthony's understanding of scores and ratings differed from what others knew. Pat said the acceptance rate does not count against your overall rating, and "right now, I've got like 78% because I'm sick of it." The lack of transparency on the part of the companies and the withholding of important information like what will get you deactivated creates the conditions in which some workers will accept low paying orders over fear of not being able to work anymore. Anthony had only been with Uber Eats about two months when we spoke, and Pat had done it for about a year, indicating that over time, and through accepting potentially unprofitable orders during that time, workers better understood how the app works and what will and will not count against their rating. Jamie articulated this lack of transparency most clearly when she said,

> *So, from my understanding, it's not legal for them to tell us that we have to have a certain acceptance rate level, like, you know, you have to take 70% of our orders, but* ***they strongly give the impression when you sign up for it that that is the case that you will be penalized for it, and if it wasn't for Reddit, I wouldn't have known that.*** *I can let that baby drop, like all the way to zero and they're not going to be able to fire me for it.*

The information asymmetry embedded within food delivery gig work pressures workers to accept orders under the guise that they can be fired if they do not keep percentages like acceptance ratings at or above 70%, metrics which have no real bearing on their potential to be deactivated. As Jamie mentions, the collective knowledge produced, sorted, housed, and accessed in online forums and communities for gig

workers can fill the gaps left by the companies and be a critical source of information for workers to avoid being taken advantage of.

In addition to the lack of transparency on what effects ratings, the app will also make it appear that orders must be completed quickly. Deborah explained that the Instacart app will tell her when she's taking too long to complete an order,

> *If I'm communicating with a customer and that customer doesn't answer, I have to wait. I have to give them options. And I take a little bit longer and [the app] starts like getting the numbers on red.* ***At the end, it doesn't matter because I'm going to finish the batch and I'm just going to deliver it, but they want you to be fast****. So, you know that you are taking more time that you're supposed to, it doesn't mean anything at the end. I try not to check it because I like to work fast and I like to work clean. But sometimes I take my time because I can't find something, or I need to ask the customer, I need to call them I need to text them, I need to send photos and Instacart is telling me that I need to hurry up.*

Even though she knows the notification does not mean anything, the app is attempting to pressure her to work as quickly as possible. This stands in contrast to the autonomy workers believe they have in this line of work, as well as going against how Deborah likes to work, "clean", which means as free from mistakes as possible. In order to ensure this, she overcommunicates with the customer, making sure she is transparent about the entire process. Documenting her orders to this this extent is not something that is required by the platform. She began working in this way in order to defend herself against customers who claim they did not receive items or did not get the items they wanted and give her poor ratings because of it. She told me that she is constantly stressed about the possibility of poor ratings while working,

> *I'm just like always praying like, 'Oh, please, don't mark this like you didn't get it or it was damaged or something'. But I never know what happened. Everything was good. I mean they don't tell you why, they play with you. It's complicated.*

Even when Deborah documents her orders, and thinks things went smoothly, she is not presented with any information about why she got a bad rating. Her comment that it is "complicated" is about the ratings systems. After an order is delivered, a customer is then able to rate the driver and the experience with the store or restaurant. It is in this latter category that customers report dissatisfaction with the quality of items, or items that were missing. Platform companies claim that workers are not penalized for the reviews of stores of restaurants, but because this information is not made available to the workers, they have no way of knowing for sure. Moreover, not all consumers understand how these ratings work, or that the mistake that occurred might not be the fault of the driver, but some other factor. For example, during the pandemic, many restaurants began sealing to-go bags to prevent the spread of germs from person to person. With the bags sealed, workers could not always check the content of the order, nor ensure that no items were missing before delivering an order.

The lack of transparency surrounding ratings makes it nearly impossible for workers to know what went wrong and where. Workers said they were often left in the dark about why they received poor ratings, and because their manager is an algorithm, had no one to talk to, or anyone to explain to them what went wrong or how to improve their service. Workers told me that the companies will typically provide the date and time of the delivery that resulted in the bad rating, but no other specific information is provided, leaving workers to figure out what went wrong on their own and amend it going forward. Due to the algorithmic management system and the information asymmetries embedded in food delivery gig work, workers feel pressured to work in contradicting ways: work fast but make sure you take the time to communicate

with the customer; don't make mistakes but if you do, we won't tell you how to prevent them in the future. Another worker, Maura, the mother who left her warehouse job to delivery full-time, also expressed how the conflicting demands of the app and the metrics which could get her deactivated cause her to work in ways that go against her "sensibilities of customer service",

> *I think certain things are set up for the customer to not be happy. I've gotten orders from Little Caesars and I'm already waiting but because another order has come in and I'm there and it wants to give it to me. Now, if I don't take it, it counts against my acceptance rate, but if I do take it, the first person's order has to sit there the entire time the second person's order is being prepared. Nobody likes that. I don't use the service, because I know the ins and outs of it but yeah, it goes against me to not take it, but it goes against my sensibilities of customer service to take it, you know what I mean?*

Maura's comment reveals that the asymmetrical information and algorithmic management results in a lose-lose situation; if she accepts the order, she risks the customer's food being cold and therefore could impact her tip and rating, and if she does not accept it, it counts against the metric that determines her eligibility to use the app.

Many workers cited the use of support lines during their deliveries to help solve issues. While the driver support line is different than the customer support line, the two are both accessed through the app. Drivers are presented with some options for their issue, and these can sometimes be addressed directly in the app, or through the assistance of a customer service representative through a chat feature. There is also a support line to call, which will connect drivers with a customer support representative over the phone, many of which live outside the United States. Maura did not find the driver support to be very helpful, especially because the representatives were not familiar with the nuances of how the restaurant industry works in the United States. She had an issue

with a delivery, where the restaurant wanted her to walk through the kitchen to pick up the order. Maura had previously worked in food service and did not feel safe going into a kitchen with sharp knives, flames, and no protective shoes or a hair net. Trying to explain her reasons for not wanting to continue with the order were not translating to the customer support representative, who kept encouraging her to just go pick up the food to complete the order,

> *They just kept telling me, 'They said it's their policy', not understanding that we don't just allow people to go into cooking kitchens like that, it's not food safe, it's not safe safe, it's not any of those things, but it didn't seem like that was really understood*.

The driver support line was widely understood by workers to not be very helpful in resolving issues on the job, and instead many used it as a form of protection from possible deactivation. Most workers found driver support to be useful only in situations where they addressed the issue or contacted support before the customer. As Roberta told me,

> *One of the things that I have found with doing this for so long is if you even suspect that the customer or passenger or whatever is going to report you, you better get on it first. If a customer reports you first, for whatever reason, trying to get a free meal or whatever, yeah, they're going to take the customers word over the driver every time.*

Jamie said contacting customer support is necessary in order to keep her job,

> *It covers my ass. I wouldn't say they're always super helpful, you know, but it's just making sure that if something does go wrong, just transparency and kind of protects your position, you know?*

Because of the asymmetric informational relationship in food delivery, workers are forced to seek out fundamental information on how to do the job and develop strategies to make it profitable for themselves. Central to this knowledge accumulation is

that workers must navigate an opaque job situation, and in return provide the companies with complete transparency through strategies like contacting driver support, just to ensure that they can remain active on the platform.

Despite knowing that the app was intentionally misguiding workers like herself to accept unprofitable orders, overall, Jamie had a positive opinion about food delivery,

> *I know some people don't know about the acceptance rate not being grounds for deactivation, and therefore they feel pressured to take $3 orders, and I know they're losing money on that, and I think that people should be paid a living wage…but honestly, I think that it does open up opportunity for people that don't have that option elsewhere. Generally, I'd say it's a good thing.*

Jamie's recent divorce from her partner who did not allow her to work led her to rationalize these conditions, as it afforded her the ability to have a job and earn money when she did not have a lot of options.

The difficulty of learning and navigating the job lies within the built-in asymmetrical relationship between the company and the worker and the digital management system which obscures the extent to which workers are in control. That workers can make decisions on the job, particularly around filtering orders and scheduling, is part of how the companies get workers to believe that they are in control of their financial circumstance. These individual decisions made by workers obscures the reality that their choices on the job are limited and dictated by information and systems they are in no way in control of. Some workers knew this, like Pat, who despite investing time, energy, and money into finding the best way to maximize his time and earnings admitted,

> *…it's not 100%, like* ***my own algorithms for my success don't always work,*** *you know you're really at the whims of the people ordering honestly. I think a lot more people will do this job if people just tipped, that's my biggest problem. But also,*

> *we can get into if DoorDash paid more on the base pay, then it wouldn't matter right?*

Pat captures the true cost of information asymmetry in gig work, that even in the best of circumstances, when workers can figure out the necessary information in order to do the job in a profitable way, nothing is guaranteed nor really in their control because he is ultimately at the "whims" of customers and being paid a substandard wage by the company he works for.

Due to the lack of training in food delivery, workers were left to navigate how to do the job and how to make it profitable. While many relied upon their own experiences, they also sought out help from others through online forums. Workers were generally able to figure out strategies to eke out enough hours and wages to make the job worth it, but not before spending time, money, and even developing new skills in order to do so. The strategies that workers developed were reflective of both workers ingenuity and the constraints to the freedom of food delivery. The way in which the work is designed, with minimal onboarding, lack of a human manager, and ability to accept or deny orders, works to advance the image that the promise of flexibility and autonomy is being fulfilled. However, the same elements of the job also work to shift more responsibility onto workers, who possess few resources to address them. Workers were generally aware of how the platform operated to their disadvantage, trying to control and influence their behaviors, but they still valued the flexibility, level of autonomy, and choice they had over their working lives doing food delivery. In the next section, workers more clearly articulate their critical view of the company, as they describe how they are aware of how they are being exploited through the "freedom of choice."

Understanding Food Delivery: "In and In and In"

As workers learned to navigate the gig and spent more time delivering, they gained a more critical understanding of food delivery and their place in it. They saw that the business model was designed not to retain them, but instead to keep a steady stream of workers "in and in and in." Workers began to see how fundamental their status as independent contractors were to support the business model of generating value and profit for investors and shareholders while keeping operational costs like worker pay low and benefits nonexistent.

The independent contractor status drew on the ideological notion of freedom and autonomy or "flexibility" that lured many workers into the job in the first place, but perks such as controlling their time or being their own "boss" were further unraveled as their understanding of and experience in food delivery demonstrated the opposite. Despite this knowledge of how the company operated at their expense, workers seemed to accept these conditions, some out of necessity, others because they valued the control over their time, and many through some combination of the two. The themes which emerged around their understanding of the companies and their places in it were challenges, essential work(er), relationship to company, and being my own boss.

Challenges

Service work like food delivery is generally characterized as a "low-skill" job that requires little prior knowledge and/or training to get into. However, as the previous section indicates, food delivery is anything but easy and requires a wide range of skills to complete. Many workers spoke about how difficult they found food delivery to be. As Maura said,

> *I mean, it seems very straightforward you pick up the food and you deliver the food, but there's so many variables, because you are dealing with so many other people and situations. I can't let my defenses down because I gotta get in my car and get directions, I text my customer at that point, and then drive, and I do not want to get into an accident while I have a customer's order.*

Workers have to juggle a lot of logistics and situations while delivering, including dangerous road and driving conditions that require them to keep their "defenses" up. Additionally, workers feel pressured to complete orders quickly, as indicated by a 2018 survey from the University College of London, that found that 47% of couriers interviewed said they felt pressured to drive over the speed limit while on the job and 73% said that they have had to take action to avoid getting in an accident while working (Christie & Ward, 2018). While some platform companies provide auto insurance, their policies often come with high deductibles and stipulations that can make it difficult for drivers to access. For example, DoorDash provides commercial auto insurance but will only cover drivers during "active deliveries", meaning the driver has the food in possession. Uber Eats insurance policy covers drivers from the time they accept the order until they complete it, but drivers have to pay a $1,000 deductible before they will cover any repairs, while Instacart requires that drivers have their own insurance policy (Metz, 2021).

Workers also talked about the dangers they could encounter outside their vehicles, like Maura, who stopped accepting orders from Chick Fil-A after they began requiring drivers to go inside to pick up the order instead of having a staff member bring it out to them. Maura did not feel safe walking through the "crazy" parking lot because she did not have a reflective vest that would make her visible to other drivers, something the staff would wear when they used to deliver the food to her.

Another challenge workers talked about was the "glitchy" app-based navigation system that would often not bring them to the correct location. This usually led to stressful situations that workers then had to navigate. As Maxime said,

> *...middle aged or older people do not understand how the app works or how much control you have. They just kind of expect it to be like, you're a delivery person, you will come to my address. No questions asked. Whereas like, the app sent me to the wrong location.* ***It does not bring me to your apartment. I find your apartment.*** *I think a lot of times customers don't know that, like, a lot of things go wrong that they don't know about.*

Workers stressed how finding destinations, especially when they are apartment buildings, can be extremely difficult, because of the confusing numbering system. Workers are unable to rely on GPS navigation for this portion of the delivery and must therefore use their problem-solving skills and communicate with sometimes angry customers, who "don't understand necessarily how to use the app." The lack of understanding about the difficulties or level of control workers have over the delivery leads to frustrated customers and stressful situations for workers. Maxime explained how stressful a drop off she recently completed was when the GPS navigation took her to the wrong location,

> *They were yelling at me, and I quickly gave them the food and I just ran away because I was just like, I cannot deal with this anymore. That was one of the worst experiences where it was just so hard to find the apartment and being yelled at like that, was just so so horrible.*

Workers become the target when issues go wrong during a delivery, as customers often do not understand that delivery workers generally have very little control over aspects of the delivery. These misunderstandings, which can directly impact the livelihoods of workers when customers leave bad reviews or even lead to a suspension or deactivation, reveal how much risk the workers must assume to do the job, what little power they have to control it, and how much power consumers have over them.

An inconvenience for a customer can have devastating impacts on a worker, like Pat, who was suspended when a drop off didn't go as planned,

> *It was the middle of the night, it was late, I was in a trailer park with very little lighting, and somebody wanted me to hand the order to them, but also said leave it at the door or something like that, and there were dogs that ran out after me. So, I dropped the food right outside the gate,* ***I was afraid, and I jumped in my car and took off and I got flagged for that, because the person said that they didn't get their food because I didn't put it where they wanted it*** *and my account got disabled and at the time that was my only income. So, my account got disabled for 24 hours because somebody claimed that I didn't deliver their food and I didn't feel safe to complete the steps, but there's nobody to talk to you about these things. It was really stressful. I was like, I am such a good dasher like my numbers were so good, I was super-fast,* ***I was doing crazy amounts of deliveries every hour and I literally had such high ratings as high as 4.9 or something like that I was like how could you guys believe this person? I was being attacked by a dog.***

Pat's experience reveals the extent to which workers are actually in control of their working lives, and how despite having great ratings and being an otherwise "model" employee, workers are always at the whims of customers and the algorithm. Moreover, Pat's experience highlights the inherent dangers to delivering food, as workers can find themselves in unfamiliar spaces with poor lighting, where they can sometimes become targets for robberies and assaults. A recent report on app-based couriers in New York City found that couriers were often targets for attacks, with over half of those interviewed reporting they were victims of bike theft, and 30% of those workers reported they were physically assaulted during a robbery while delivering (Figueroa et al., 2021). The increase in robberies and assaults and lack of protections workers have on the job has led delivery workers to coordinate their own nightly watches and travel in groups in areas known for robberies, especially around dimly lit entrances and exits to bridges and tunnels (Marcos, 2021). While no other workers experienced as dangerous a situation as

Pat's, his experience is indicative of a larger trend of dangerous working conditions for delivery workers. Overall, workers did not fear for their safety on the job, but some were acutely aware of the inherent dangers and even admitted to me that they carry protection, like pepper spray, and sometimes a gun while making deliveries.

Reliance on Tips

Aside from the logistics and dangers inherent in food delivery, workers also talked about how making sufficient income was challenging. Indeed, part of what makes so-called "low skill" labor so difficult, is in part that the pay is not reflective of the effort required to do the job. In food delivery, workers are often receiving below minimum wage from the company through base pay, and are largely reliant upon tips from customers, who often don't understand how essential the tip is to the income of the worker. Workers argued that customers generally did not tip well, if at all, and that this might be due to a misunderstanding of how they earned money on the job. Workers also expressed that the base pay was not as important to their income as tips were, with nearly every worker arguing that tips were how they made their money. But as Pat explained,

> *The sad thing is a lot of people don't tip. I think that it's not advertised or I'm not sure what the issue is with it, but I think that people think that we're getting paid more than we're getting and already the platform is so expensive to order from that people can't really afford to tip, and so, a lot of times I don't get tipped at all. I don't agree with the way the platform presents tipping. That's really just the main thing I mean this could be so* ***lucrative if every single person tipped me $1, the difference would be huge****.*

Pat understands that customer ignorance on how integral the tip is to their income is to some extent, the responsibility of the company, who does not present this information accurately. Deborah also understood that her difficulty in earning a living wage was a

combination of the lack of understanding from the customer and the configuration of the gig platform,

> *So, you don't feel special at all, right?* ***Sometimes I feel like I'm doing this job and people don't care about me, like people don't see me. Sometimes, I get these tips and I'm like, I give more to the guy who delivers my pizza than these people****, who aren't driving to the store - I'm buying their stuff, I'm putting it in my car, I'm delivering it in front of your door, and you don't appreciate this. And Instacart recommends leaving a 5% tip. Why is that?*

Deborah knew that the platform is in some part responsible for why customers tend to leave low tips, but she also expressed frustration that customers did not tip her more given all of the work she put in to delivering their groceries. For workers like Deborah, to feel seen, valued, and cared for on the job meant being paid adequately for the time and labor by both the company and the consumers.

Insufficient Funds

In discussing the difficulties of the job, some workers also revealed that despite making this job work for them, they recognized that relying on this work for a full income is in many cases, extremely difficult, or simply not possible. When I asked Pat if he found that the job provided him with enough income to meet his needs, he said,

> *No, absolutely not, you could never…I tried to survive off of it and there's just no way. I do it now, because I manage a bar and I'm paid well for the industry, but versus the cost of living, it's just not enough so that's why I DoorDash still. I just do it because I have to you know, and I can cash out every day, so* ***it's instant money.***

Without the additional income from his other job, Pat would not have been able to survive off food delivery and when he did rely on food delivery for his full income he was "miserable." Amanda, a live-at-home college student, had a similar answer when I asked her if she made enough from food delivery,

> *Honestly, no. One of the main reasons that I am able to, you know, kind of compromise with a job like this is that I have savings. If I didn't have the savings, I don't think this would be a livable form of income.*

That Amanda refers to food delivery as a "compromise" indicates that she is knowingly giving something up, i.e. stable, good wages, for flexibility and control over her working life. The idea that this job is not enough to make ends meet unless it is "purely supplemental" was echoed by most of the workers. Rodger, for example, said,

> *Would I be able to live on these wages? No. It's purely supplemental for me, I think overall it's a good job for a lot of people but it's just one of those things where it can't be a sole source of income.*

Anthony had a similar response, telling me he thought it was "very promising to people, a lot of immigrants do it" and while they can make a career out of it, "I never viewed it as an option, I never saw it as a secure choice." Anthony seemed to believe that depending on food delivery for a full income is acceptable for immigrants, but not for himself, a white U.S. born citizen, because it would be too insecure a choice. Interestingly, Anthony mentioned during our interview that he was considering leaving his part-time job at a pizza shop to deliver for Uber Eats full-time, suggesting that even if he did delivery in a full-time capacity, because of his whiteness and citizenship, it would be acceptable, or an exception to his view on the work overall.

A majority of the workers, however, did find that the money they made from delivery was enough to meet their needs. This was mainly due to the fact that only three depended on this income full-time, while the rest of the participants had another source of income or lower costs of living as they were living with family or lived in a dual income household. Moreover, that a few workers did find the job to be adequate as a full source of income does reveal that despite the instability and inconsistency with wages, some

workers are able to live off of this work. For example, while Maura lives in a dual income household, she was able to support the family for a few months after her partner lost his job and before he found a new one. After several years in the gig, Mark is able to make enough doing food delivery to support himself, but still, he described trying to make ends meet in this job as a "vicious cycle",

> *by the time you've covered all your necessities for that month, it's time to start driving to save up for rent money. It's a vicious cycle where people are just stuck. It's no longer living week to week.* ***It's living day to day.***

Workers revealed that even though some make it work for them, the consensus is that surviving off these wages can be extremely difficult unless it is from a supplemental standpoint.

After some time in the gig, usually a couple of months (or sometimes sooner depending on how frequently one is driving), workers began to see that there is a ceiling to how far they can go in the job; there are no promotions, no chances for upward mobility, the only option they have is to drive and deliver more. At this point, the façade of flexibility and the ideological notions of freedom that lured so many into the job begin to crack, revealing themselves to be a raw deal, where the companies can have their expectations met and continue generating value at the expense of a workforce that can only expect to work more to remain exactly where they are, all the while navigating difficult and sometimes dangerous working conditions. This critical understanding was also reflective in how workers spoke about being designated "essential" workers and working during the pandemic, where the expectation was to potentially put themselves at risk of contracting a deadly virus for a paycheck.

Essential Work(er)

Essential work became a buzz word during the Covid-19 pandemic. As industries and entire nations shut down to keep people safe from being exposed to an airborne virus, certain sectors of the economy, jobs, and people were designated "essential", indicating that their work was necessary to the functioning of daily life. Essential workers were permitted and oftentimes required to continue working, while others practiced social distancing, through staying home or maintaining a six-foot distance from others with a mask on.

Workers up and down the global supply chain, especially in the food sector, were deemed essential– including food delivery gig workers. What these demarcations of essentiality laid bare was how fundamental many "low-skill" jobs like delivery were to the functioning of a global economy. Some essential workers were offered hazard pay to compensate them for the risk they put themselves and their family at in contracting the virus, but this did not always extend to service sector jobs, like food delivery gig work, leaving workers to rely on the generosity of customers in lieu of hazard pay. As the pandemic wore on, the essential designation took on new and multiple meanings. Many state officials designated a range of businesses as essential in an effort to keep more of the economy open and running during the pandemic. The essential categorization that was once synonymous with hero, therefore became associated with all types of work, that sometimes took away from that original meaning.

Many workers felt indifferent about being designated an essential worker. Some of this was rooted in how they understood the service, with some citing it as necessary and others categorizing it as a luxury. Maxime told me she saw it as necessary and that

she and her partner thought people “really appreciated it”, and “understood that it was like a big thing for people that can't get out of the house.” Jamie also saw the service as essential, based upon the specific items she delivered,

> *when you've got an order for herbal tea and a thermometer and like cold medicine from Walgreens and you're dropping that off, and those are always like, leave it at the door orders or like, for a kid's fever reducer and Gatorade and things like that, you know, like that really does make me realize, like, hey, a lot of people aren't able to go out. Just yesterday, I dropped off to a customer who told me that they didn't have a car right now. And she's like, "I'm starving. You know, thank you so much. Like, I don't have a car right now. I don't have any groceries or anything." So, I didn't know exactly how I felt about that essential worker designation until I actually started doing deliveries and saw people do need this service.*

The types of items delivered, such as cold medicine and fever reducers, influenced how some workers understood the job and in turn, themselves as essential. Moreover, some workers understood that the necessity was not just for those who were sick, but also for people who had difficulty accessing food. This opinion contrasted with other workers, who primarily saw this as a luxury service, like Deborah who said, “If I serve 10 customers, one of them will be super grateful. For the rest of them it's a luxury service. They don't care.” Most workers however, expressed indifference at the designation, and many told me they saw it as a money-making opportunity for themselves. Eric talked about the essential worker designation as an opportunity,

> *I didn't really think much of it, I just thought it was a really good time [to work] because no one's driving, less traffic.* ***I just saw it as a money-making opportunity.***

Other workers also remarked that being essential while others had to stay home meant less congested streets and the ability to make more deliveries in faster time. Roberta

characterized her time working during the pandemic as “financially lucrative.” When she spoke about the early days of the pandemic she said,

> *The incentives were off the chart amazing. I had some weeks where I averaged $50 to $60 an hour. In like March, April, May, June of last year, I was out there a lot and between the incentives and people actually tipping me, I mean it was nothing to see a $20 tip on McDonald's.*

Similar to the companies they work for, the understanding of the essential designation expressed by the workers was rooted in their ability to profit off it. With less congested streets and high demand for delivery, workers saw the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their earnings. Roberta’s emphasis that people were “actually tipping” speaks to both the difficulties workers faced previously with maintaining a living wage in food delivery, as well as the effect the pandemic and the “essential” rhetoric had on customers, who often demonstrated their appreciation of the risk workers took by financially compensating them.

Despite the generosity of some customers, Amanda told me that the essential worker distinction felt like a “joke” to her,

> *It kind of feels like a joke considering like, I get it, people got to get their food and it is an important service but* ***being designated an essential worker doesn't really have much of an impact on me. It's not like we're getting hazard pay****, or like getting paid better, or like actually financially compensated for being essential.*

While some workers saw the designation as a money-making opportunity, mainly through generous tips, Amanda’s focus was on the base pay and how the company treated and compensated her, noting that those had not changed and therefore did not make her feel like an essential worker. Despite agreeing that the service is important, that the pay did not reflect this led her to feel that the designation meant nothing.

When I asked Mark about being essential, he told me how his fear of Covid kept him from returning to delivery work. He believed he had contracted Covid in January 2020,

> *I was totally afraid of getting sick again. I have never had the flu in my life and I fucking couldn't breathe. It was terrible. Worst thing in my life, I thought that if that was the flu, I don't want to get Covid. But if that was Covid, I don't want it again. So I stayed away, collecting unemployment.*

Once the additional unemployment benefits ran out, Mark looked for a non-delivery job where he felt his chances of contracting the virus would be lower. He began working for a medical company but soon returned to food delivery because,

> *...compared to the market as it is right now, you know, $400 or $500 a week isn't enough. So, I just recently segwayed back into food delivery. And this Covid market for food delivery has been doing really well. There's been a huge surge and people are tipping better.*

He expressed disbelief when recounting this, saying, "I don't know how I can go from making medical devices, working 12-hour shifts, but I'm making more money delivering food." For some workers like Mark, the fear of contracting Covid was not great enough to keep him from capitalizing on the financial benefits to an increase in demand for food delivery, particularly when his other options did not pay enough.

Workers also found that whatever messages or personal protective equipment (PPE) they did receive from the company did not convey any feeling of gratitude or value for their work and risk they took in doing the job. As Deborah told me,

> *Instacart is always sending us like this newsletter like, 'oh, you're important, blah, blah, blah' and no, we are not important. I don't feel like I'm an essential worker. I took my vaccine. I just did it when everybody did it. So yeah, I don't feel any special.*

Similar to how Amanda felt that the designation was a joke, because they weren't being financially compensated by the company for their labor during this time, Deborah felt

that any word from the company about her importance did not make her feel either essential or important. Most workers said they did receive a small package of PPE, but the quality of it was something to be desired. Maxime said the mask she received from Postmates which was recently acquired by Uber Eats, was “horrible”,

> *It was the worst mask I've ever seen. I think we kept it because it was so bad. It was like literally like a thin piece of fabric, like not even like sewed or anything.*

The quality of the PPE received by the workers reflected not only the risks they took with their health to stay on the job, but also how little the companies they were working for seemed to care for their health. Maura expressed disbelief and frustration at certain drop off practices that did not seem to reflect the severity of working during a pandemic,

> *Okay, we have been in a pandemic, for how long? Why does DoorDash still have ‘hand it to me’ as an option? There's no reason I should be handing food to anybody at this point.* ***So, yeah, they sent me a mask, but they also sent me within six feet of multiple customers.***

Not all workers agreed upon whether the service they provided was essential or not, but regardless of their differences in that respect, many generally agreed that the distinction did not mean much to them.

Platform companies routinely offer incentives to get workers to complete more trips, and sometimes these incentives were seen as worth it particularly during the pandemic when the demand for at home delivery skyrocketed. In the later months of the pandemic, companies like Uber also began incentivizing workers to take passengers, as states began to ease restrictions, businesses reopened, and in-person gatherings resumed. Roberta was offered an incentive of $2,050 by Uber Eats to complete 145 orders in 30 days, but with just three days left to complete 25 orders, she was only presented with passenger rides, not deliveries, a move she saw as intentional on the part of the company,

> *…the app would not send me any delivery orders. It was right after their CEO had gone to the media, being frustrated that there was such long [rider] wait times and it felt very intentional…every driver that I talked to said that, you know,* ***it felt very intentional. They were trying to push us to take passengers.*** *So, when I contacted Uber, they said, 'It's just a glitch, you can complete it, just take passengers' and I'm like****, 'I don't want to take passengers, one of my kids has health issues. I can't take passengers'*** *and two days after the guarantee expired, all of a sudden, I can get deliveries. And I'm like, 'are you guys going to give me those three days back?' and they're like, 'Oh, well, you had 30 days to do it' and I'm like, 'No, I had 27.'*

Overall, workers requests to keep themselves and their families safe from Covid were either not taken seriously or were overtly flouted by the company in the pursuit of profits. Platform companies like Uber depend upon drivers to fulfill certain demands, but there is not much incentive to keep these drivers happy nor retain them due to the "revolving door" business model of workers "in and in and in", where if one worker walks away, there are many more to fill their place.

While some workers saw that the service was essential, many did not feel this way by the companies they worked for, as they did not seem to take their risk of contracting the virus seriously and offered no additional hourly pay. Still, many saw it as an opportunity to make more money, because there would be fewer people out on the road and more people may be tipping generously, appreciative of their willingness to risk contracting Covid to deliver their food. That most workers looked at this as a money-making opportunity reveals their struggle to sustain a living wage in food delivery gig work in pre pandemic times. The essential worker designation was at odds with the experiences of most of the workers, who felt neither important nor essential. These discussions around essential work revealed to workers how little the company values

them, something they all came to discuss as they explained how they understood themselves as replaceable and expendable.

Relationship to Company: "Set Up for Failure"

As workers stayed on in the gig long-term, they began to understand how the companies have no incentive to retain them, and how that impacted their work life. Many recognized that they were being used to generate value for the company, while getting very little besides the opportunity to make money in return. Through this more critical understanding, workers saw themselves as highly replaceable, as evidenced by their responses when I asked them how they thought the companies saw them,

> *Just a worker in their cog, you know, or a cog in their machine. (Robert)*
>
> *I feel like they probably see us like one player in the game that can be like replaced. (Maxime)*
>
> *Honestly, we're just a tool for them to make more money. (Scott)*
>
> *Well, they don't care about us. They see us as a number. (Deborah)*
>
> *Very expendable, like, at the drop of the hat, if it inconveniences them or anything, they will drop a driver. (Mark)*
>
> *I think that they see us as a profit source. (Amanda)*

That workers see themselves as replaceable and as a means or a tool for profits, is not necessarily a unique perspective to food delivery workers, as many people generally become aware of power dynamics in their initial work experiences. What is important about this shared sentiment among gig workers thought is that it reflects some degree of their recognition and acceptance of this dynamic despite being independent contractors, who are told that they are their own "boss." For some workers, especially those who did not rely upon this income full-time, their expendability was clearly acknowledged and

accepted as part of the job. For example, Rodger, who uses his delivery income to make investments, said,

> *You know, they're helping me achieve my goals. I think they're just as indifferent to me as I am to them. I could be with Grubhub, DoorDash, Uber - I don't care. All I care about is the bottom line, and I think they're of the same idea.*

Scott, a retired school principal who does this work for "fun", acknowledged that "the people at the top" are profiting and taking advantage of delivery workers, but this wasn't enough to make him "want to stop doing it." Scott found food delivery to be a suitable retirement activity, as he was able to discover new places, make some extra cash, and have a schedule that allowed him to spend time with his family. The acceptance of the way that gig platforms operate at the expense of delivery drivers in the pursuit of profits, was most clearly seen among workers who did not rely on this work for full-time income, like Scott who is at the end of his working life or Rodger who only relies on this income supplementally. Workers who had access to benefits such as health insurance from other family members or had low costs of living due to living with parents while they were in school, were less likely to critically evaluate their exploitation on the job than those who had different material conditions and levels of investment in the job. For workers whose material conditions allowed them to not depend on this income for their livelihood, it was in some ways easier to accept that this is how things are.

For other workers who relied on the platforms for their livelihoods, their "acceptance" was similarly based not only on wanting the income, but more specially on needing it. As Deborah told me about Instacart,

> *They don't pay you benefits. You don't have vacations. You don't have insurance. My husband has my kid under his insurance, but if he adds me it's going to be so much money. I had like this medical thing and thank God I was able to have like a*

> *special Medicaid. But I felt like oh my God, what's my value? I feel super devalued; I don't feel like my work matters. I've been dealing with that lately.* ***I don't do this to feel important, I do it because I need the money.*** *And people above you, like he's getting richer and richer and richer, which is awesome because he had the idea and he had the resources, but I see ourselves as like, just his way to become rich, right?*

When workers are confronted with a health or financial crisis, their role as a tool for others to get rich while getting nothing in return, becomes starkly apparent. Deborah understands that the companies are profiting off her labor in part through the denial of benefits like health insurance, so when she has to resort to state assistance to pay for a medical procedure, despite having a job and a spouse who has health insurance, she begins to question her value. Deborah articulates that those feelings of value are rooted not in gratitude expressed by words of the customer or company, but in her ability to live off these wages and take care of her health needs. Through connecting how the company operates to profit at her expense, workers like Deborah can come to internalize this exploitative model as a reflection of their own value, because despite being aware of this dynamic and how it makes her feel, she is forced to participate in it because she needs the money. Many who rely upon this income are forced to accept these conditions of gig work. As Pat put it,

> *Gig work is a spiral, it sucks in certain types of people that are desperate, need money, or find enjoyment in the gig, and that's enough to keep them quiet and doing it over and over again. It just takes a certain type of worker to be in this life. You know and it's mostly just the people that just need to get in and get out* ***we choose not to think about it****.*

Workers were keenly aware that to keep the spiral spinning, food delivery platforms need a steady stream of available workers. As Maura said, she thinks the success of delivery apps is entirely built upon this idea,

> *...ultimately the turnover doesn't mean a darn thing to them because it doesn't cost them really anything to bring people on, there's no training, there's no nothing.*

Workers recognized that the low barriers to entry were integral to how these apps operate, which can afford to absorb the cost of high turnover due to the absence of training or any onboarding process. Jamie referred to this as the "revolving door",

> *they don't really care for the contractors that work for them so much as ensuring that they have a steady stream of people that even if we stop working, someone else will come in and fill in the place.* ***To them, it's a revolving door, and they don't feel like putting a doorstop in.***

Jamie, who mentioned earlier how important the low barriers to entry were for her to regain her financial independence post-divorce, also recognized how the revolving door process established her as replaceable and diminished her value as a food delivery gig worker. This replaceability of workers was common knowledge. Deborah explained that she believed Instacart pushed you to refer friends to work for the company "because you're like leaving soon, right?" She felt that the companies just "want more people in and in and in." Eric said that he thought the companies were "preying on newer drivers" to "fill some of the lower orders", ones that someone like himself with experience on the job would not take. Roberta bluntly stated,

> *Uber doesn't take care of the drivers. We are dispensable because if a driver walks away, there's two or three more who don't know the culture that are right there to sign up and take our place.*

The revolving door aspect to gig work is not necessarily different than other so-called "low skill" jobs, where the work is designed to capture workers who may be desperate or struggle to get into jobs that possess higher barriers to employment. What is different about this aspect to gig work is that high turnover is baked into the way the

company is designed. Other forms of work, like restaurants or other service industry jobs, do not necessarily see high turnover as something that they should strive for, as the hiring and training process can be costly. Gig work, however, depends on high turnover, which ensures that newer workers will continue to become a part of the program and accept low paying orders at relatively no cost to the companies due to their status as independent contractors.

Workers understood that the companies did not value them nor their labor and were designed not to retain them. They knew that gig work not only depended upon low training costs and high turnover, but also intentional obfuscation of how the job functions to workers as well as customers. Maura criticized DoorDash for not being transparent with customers about how orders are accepted based upon the size of the tip offered to the driver, leading customers to have

> *…a bad opinion about DoorDash because their order took so long, but DoorDash will never tell you like, 'Hey, generally, you know tips this size will get your order picked up faster.' It is not set up for a good customer service situation, like at all. Ultimately, I do not think that these things are for the customer, which is what the customer expects. Like, you order food, and you are expecting to be treated like you are at the restaurant as the customer and* ***there's just too much of this that is set up for failure*** *in those respects.*

Maura's understanding of the gig reveals that both workers and customers are "set up for failure." The company distorts the true nature of the transaction to appeal to customers who do not want to pay more for the service but expect a certain level of quality, which the delivery worker ultimately has no control over. Generally, workers did not feel valued by the companies they work for and saw themselves as inherently expendable while also integral to making profits for those higher up. Despite this understanding and recognition of exploitation on the part of the platform companies, many workers accepted these

conditions either because they needed the money, whether it was supplemental or their full income, or they valued the flexible way in which they earned the money.

In 2018, Mark briefly worked for DoorDash at the corporate level, helping with the onboarding orientation process for new drivers, an in-person-program which the company no longer operates. After six months he left the job because,

> ***It just wasn't paying enough for the work and the responsibilities of the job.*** *I asked for a raise and benefits and was kind of told no. So, I put in my two weeks, and then they offered me everything I wanted. I still left because you know, I shouldn't have to put my job on the line just to get what I was promised.*

And even though he was told that the purpose of acceptance rates was,

> *…to get drivers to accept more orders. You don't give them these ratings to help them. You give them these ratings to get them to drive more. I'm scared, I'm scared what's happening to our workers' rights in front of our eyes, because like,* ***I'm making money for now, but I'm also probably contributing to the problem.***

For workers like Mark, by the time they understand how they are being used as part of a larger system that erodes workers' rights, they have already become financially dependent upon the income and the way in which they earn it. Due to Mark's long-term experience delivering, his brief stint at corporate DoorDash, and his activity in driver strikes and organizing activities, he was keenly aware of how the way platform companies operate is to the disadvantage of workers and undermines existing worker protections like a minimum wage, paid time off, and health benefits. While Mark is "scared" of what this business model is doing to workers and knows his participation in it is a "problem", being able to make it work for him for now, is grounds enough to accept these conditions for a paycheck.

Workers reveal that they understand that the company operates to generate value at their expense, while offering them very little in return. After a few months, workers

understand that they are one of many circulating through the revolving door of food delivery where there is no upward mobility, no opportunity for advancement, and no real stake in the company. Workers also understand how the promise of a flexible job, of "being their own boss", operates in tandem with the independent contractor status that is so central to the business model, to hide the true nature of the job, which is more controlling and restrictive of their time than what they were told or expected.

Being Your Own Boss

Similar to the word essential, the term "boss" has come to stand for and mean a variety of things as it pertains to work. Boss has been floated around as a way to describe someone who is in charge, someone who hustles, someone who works for themselves, an entrepreneur, or simply, a badass. The different meanings of boss as it pertains to work culture all draw upon and play into the freedom ideology that dominates food delivery. Workers are given a level of autonomy through decisions made on the job, that lead them to believe they are truly independent, while the fact that they are always embedded within and dependent upon a larger political and economic system is hidden from them.

Platform companies appeal to this ideology through their use of "be your own boss" as part of their recruitment to prospective drivers. On the Uber Eats website, before filling out an application to deliver, the platform doubles down on the flexibility as boss narrative; "Instead of traditional food delivery jobs where the hours aren't flexible, try becoming your own boss with Uber Eats" ("Become a Delivery Driver", n.d.). Most workers seemed to associate being a boss with having some discretion and decision-making power, but not all agreed which decisions qualified as "boss." Workers generally

hesitated when asked if they felt that they were their own boss, replying with a mix of "yes" and "no", as Maura told me,

> *Oh yeah, if I am just done working then I'm done working. If I'm done with an individual assignment, then I'm just done with that assignment. I feel like I am more in control of myself. But I don't feel like my own boss in that I can be deactivated at any moment without recourse or without you know, like a real proper ability to defend myself or whatever.*

Maura, who struggled with maintaining jobs due to her mental health condition, feels she is more in control of herself in gig work, but she is quick to acknowledge that this control has limits, particularly in terms of the possibility of deactivation at any time. She went on to say,

> *I certainly don't feel like I have a boss, but, again, when I think of a boss, I think of the thing that I have created, I am in control of what happens to it, and my opinion is a thing, and none of those are in play here; you know it's just my ability to control what I do and what situations I am in, which was something that was very difficult for me in like traditional jobs, you know.*

Maura does not have control over whether she keeps the job or of things that would qualify as a "boss" in her opinion, but she is able to control the times and places she works, which is a welcomed change from her previous work experience in "traditional jobs" and works to justify the precariousness of deactivation. When I asked Pat if he felt like he was his own boss, he also said yes and no,

> *Yes, because nobody tells you where to go, nobody tells you what time to login, nobody tells you how long to work. I can listen to whatever music I want or podcast or whatever. So, there's those aspects of it, I suppose, but* ***my days are dictated by money and the money is dictated by the area, so it's all of the unspoken things that sort of force you into a box****. I mean, it is what it is, we're in a box, in a box for the man, just like any other job.*

Pat acknowledges there are some aspects to the job that make him feel like he is his own boss, like scheduling, listening to music, and not having someone tell you where to go,

but like Maura, he quickly undercuts the "boss" value of these choices through his own explanation of how the job works; that it is dictated by things completely out of his control that force him to do the job in a particular way, which in the end is no different than any other job where one is not their own "boss." Amanda, who could compromise with food delivery because she was partially living off of her savings, cited the flexibility of deciding when to work and filtering orders as aspects to the job that could make her feel like her own boss, but ultimately, "It does not really feel like I'm my own boss because it's not like I'm making all the money, I'm not being paid for the value of my labor." Jamie said she felt like her own boss "to a good extent" even though she finds the app itself to be,

> *…super bossy and demanding. It's like a toddler because it's constantly yelling at you. It sends you constant notifications, like, 'Hey, it's busy, you should go dash right now'. I would say that yes, I do feel like I'm my own boss. But there's a lot of pressure from the company, not only to accept lowball orders, but to work the hours they need.*

Jamie's admission that the app tries to get people to work hours and accept orders that they need reveals that the extent of control and decision making on the job does not always align with the "be your own boss" narrative.

Deborah, on the other hand, was one of the emphatic "no's" when asked if she felt like her own boss,

> *Oh, no, I feel that it's flexible. If I don't want to work, I don't work. If I want to take a vacation with my family, I just don't open the app. That is true. However, Instacart is my boss. The customers are my boss. So, everything that I do, I do it under stress, because I'm stressed out that something's going to go wrong, the app is not going to work, the customer is going to report that their strawberries were too ripe, or the bananas weren't the color they wanted, like, anything can happen and if you get a bad rating it's going to effect your income.* ***Instacart and the customers are my boss, because they're going to effect the way that I make money.***

Deborah does not link flexibility with being her own boss, because for her, being a boss means that she is in control of how much money she makes, not her schedule. Her description of why she feels that the company and customer are her boss is in line with much of what the other workers have said throughout their interviews, that despite having the choice of when to work, once they begin working "anything could happen", which could affect their income and ability to use the app. Mark felt similarly arguing that he is not his own boss because,

> *…they send me the deliveries. I'll have the app on, sitting sometimes for 30 minutes without a single order. How is that my own boss? I don't get forecasts ahead of time…I am my own boss because* ***I get to choose whether or not I starve.***

For Mark, who repeatedly tried to leave the gig but came back because of the freedom and earning opportunities, felt like the only real choice he has in food delivery gig work is to participate in it or not and suffer the consequences.

Some workers, though, still consider the control over their time and schedule to be on par with being their own boss, or at the very least, things that they are willing to compromise for. Robert, who saw himself as a "cog in the machine", also saw control over choices as the main reason why he did believe he was his own boss,

> *Absolutely. I can call it a night anytime I want. I can work anytime I want. I don't have to go out. Nobody's going to fire me, nobody's going to suspend me. There's no issues at all. I get to choose all my orders. There's no one saying you need to take that $3 order. It's purely on me, I get that choice. I get that reject button. 100%. If I wanted to sit in my car the whole time and reject all the orders? I could do that. I can do whatever I want in my car. Nobody's here to tell me 'No'.*

Rodger's response stood out from the others, as his emphasis on the ability to control nearly all aspects of the work did not line up with the experiences of the other workers, nor the reality of how the app works. His statement that "there's no issues at all", is

rooted in the fact that he is not dependent upon this income, and because of that he is not fully aware that for other workers, the consequences of rejecting orders are too great to bear. Roberta was the other worker who also felt that she was truly her own boss on the grounds that she can make choices about when she works and what orders she takes,

> *Absolutely. I mean I am 100% in charge of my schedule; I am 100% in charge of what orders I do and don't take; you know?*

Like the others who saw the ability to choose when and how long they worked as an indicator that they were their own boss, Roberta talked about scheduling and filtering as the reasons why she "absolutely" felt like her own boss. Even though she had a lot of negative things to say about working for Uber Eats, and spent a majority of our conversation telling me she thinks the company "sucks" and tries to screw over their workers, ultimately,

> *... it's worth it. I can deal with a little bit of crap because* ***I'm my own boss, I make my own money. And I can be where and when my kids need me.*** *I can drop everything for emergencies. I have a son who is in and out of the hospital all the time and that is worth more than the crap I have to put up with.*

For Roberta, the ability to control her schedule so that she can take care of her kids is the ultimate form of control and therefore, being her own boss. Given her circumstances, the flexible aspect of the job is of a higher value to her than other workers, who do not necessarily equate controlling their schedule as being their own boss. While food delivery doesn't make up her entire income anymore, she is still entirely invested in the job due to the flexibility that food delivery affords her to be able to "drop everything for emergencies." Her previous work experience as a health care administrator was too restrictive when it came to the realities of her life, and because of that she can deal with "a little bit of crap" in exchange for being her own boss.

As workers discussed how they understood their jobs and their place in it, they revealed a more critical understanding, further unraveling the promise of flexibility that drew them into this job in the first place. Their understanding that they are at the whims of both customer and company have led some workers to acknowledge that a lot of the control they are able to exercise on the job is constrained and relegated to lower-level choices like scheduling and accepting or denying orders. On some level, the workers seemed to accept the reality of the work, the obvious exploitation, dangerous and challenging work conditions, and subpar wages in exchange for being able to control when they worked, when they didn't, and what orders they did or did not except. For others it was a forced acceptance due to their dependence on the income.

This more critical understanding of the work revealed that workers knew how central their status as independent contractors were to the business model of food delivery platform companies. The classification as an independent contractor plays into and reinforces the freedom ideology that many workers have come to associate with gig work. Even though some have come to see the cracks in this façade, they still value the flexible aspects of the job, and some still considered themselves to be their own boss. Some workers became so invested in the ideology of their freedom and independence as gig workers, that being an employee was seen as more restrictive, despite the protections it provides to workers that are notably absent in the gig. Even those who suggested that they made compromises doing this job and saw gig companies as an exploitative system, suggested very little enthusiasm to change these conditions.

Changing Food Delivery: "It Feels Like a Waste of Time"

Despite many workers understanding their position within the company to be "cogs in the machine" to generate profit for the companies they work for, few workers expressed a desire to take action to change their conditions. Given the state of organized labor in the United States, it is not surprising that there was not a more fervent enthusiasm among workers to organize for change as fewer working people today are a part of unions or even given the opportunity to join them.

As of 2020, the union membership rate, or the total percentage of wage and salary workers who were members of unions, was only 10.8% compared with 20.1% in 1983 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). With fewer unions in existence, many people remain unexposed to and uneducated about what they can do and what they can offer to workers. In part, the reason for the decline in unions and subsequent lack of education, comes from a concerted attack on labor which sought to undermine the power of unions and the working class through adopting 'right to work' (RTW) laws. RTW laws in tandem with the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 make it difficult for unions to help employees bargain for rights such as better wages and working conditions. The main way this is achieved is through hamstringing unions funding sources, i.e., membership dues, through prohibiting unions from requiring a worker to pay dues, prohibiting employees of unionized workplaces to be forced to join the union, and requiring that non-union employees get the benefit of union guidance and bargaining power. Importantly, the rhetoric around the RTW laws is highly politicized and couched in ideological notions of freedom, that get workers to consent to more precarious working conditions.

As unions and organized labor have become a political flashpoint, so has the gig economy. Platform companies are actively fighting legal and regulatory attempts to classify their independent contractors into employees and doubling down on the messaging that independent contractor status gives workers more freedom and employment takes those freedoms away. As gig workers are confronted with the diminishing returns to their jobs as independent contractors, state and federal agencies have reacted by imposing legislation like the AB5 bill in California, which actively deters platform companies from misclassifying their workers. Despite this bill being passed into law in 2019, platform companies were able to secure their workers as independent contractors in 2020, after spending hundreds of millions of dollars on their ballot initiative in California, Prop 22.

As a result, the waters of organizing the gig sector have become muddied from several different angles, leaving an already decentralized and isolated workforce that much more fragmented. When discussing the possibility of organizing food delivery gig work, workers mainly discussed the barriers they saw and the role of online forums in organizing. While many focused on how they didn't see organizing this sector as a possibility, their comments do reveal that there are some potential avenues for creating change.

Barriers to Organizing: Experience

Aside from two workers, none were very familiar with unions or the notion of organized labor more broadly. Of these, six expressed interests in having conditions of work improved and understood their strength as a collective but stopped short of saying they thought gig work should be unionized. The lack of experience with unions impacted

the way workers felt about organizing more broadly and organizing gig work specifically. Many workers admitted they knew nothing, or not enough as they'd like, about unions, organizing, or their history, and almost none had any direct experience being a part of a union except for Pat, who had been part of a union as a paramedic,

> *I've only been a part of one union ever in 14 years of work but no…no organizing of any kind never, never, ever, not for gig work.*

Pat had described his time living off food delivery wages as "miserable", but he was hesitant to say he would be on board with unionizing the industry based upon his experience as a union member. His main concern was with the power that union reps can have over workers, noting that if you got a bad one, it would be a "not great" working experience. Rodger was similarly weary of unions, characterizing them as "criminal", based not on his own experiences, but those of the people he knew,

> *I know people who are in a union purely because the dues were going to come out of their paycheck anyway. I think that's criminal. If I don't want to be part of your union, you shouldn't be able to collect my dues, even though I'm not part of your union. That seems crazy to me.*

Despite not having a bad experience with a union himself, Robert leans on the ideological notions of freedom, and the hearsay from others, to justify his stance on unions. His comments also reflect the confusion and miseducation about labor law generally, as per the Taft Hartley Act and RTW laws, unions are not allowed to require workers to pay dues, unless they take a vote in favor of that system. Scott, the retired school principal who grew up in Michigan, was the most familiar with unions and what they could do for workers, as many of the adults in his life had been a part of one. He is pro-union and thinks they are a good idea but,

> *I don't see how they have a place with [gig work], because if we have a union, we'll become employees and the gig is no longer a gig at that point…. I think it potentially could be a little bit more confining and restrictive.*

Even though Scott had a good grasp on what unions could do for people and considered himself pro-union, he was hesitant to say he supported unionizing the gig industry, citing the potentially restrictive ramifications it would have for workers. Workers like Scott, who even admitted that "people don't get paid enough for service tasks like these", reveal the tension that exists between perceptions of gig work as a fundamentally different kind of work than other forms of employment. While he agrees that certain parts of the job, like pay, would benefit from unionization, he does not want to compromise the flexibility of gig work.

Conversely, Amanda, the college student living off her savings and food delivery earnings, had no prior knowledge to what unions could really do, but she knew that there was more power to create change as a collective. She expressed interest in learning more about organizing efforts and even being a part of an organization, but she "didn't know where to begin" because "none of us have really had any experience with a union before." The varying degrees of experience with unions, or knowledge of unions, impacted workers differently when it came to thoughts about organizing gig workers, and proves to be a pivotal challenge to food delivery organizing and organizing labor more generally.

Isolation and Independence: "I'm all by myself on an Island"

Many workers described the job as isolating and saw this as a main challenge to organizing or creating connections to other drivers. As Maxime said,

> *I really do think that gig workers should be communicating more and talking about conditions and pay and stuff and trying to mobilize to change things. It feels extremely hard because **it feels very isolating** a lot of times on the job because you don't need to communicate with anyone if you don't want to.*

Workers were quick to point out their alienation from others, and that the individualized nature of the job made communicating with other workers more difficult. This idea that the highly individualized work would be a barrier to creating change was also echoed by Jamie,

> *I would love to see some organizing on behalf of gig workers, it's tough because we are so isolated, you know what I mean? **Like, it's kind of a solo job**. It doesn't feel lonely because you have quick interactions with people all day long, and if I do conversate with another dasher person, it's going to be for 10 seconds while we're waiting at Chick-fil-A or something. There's just not enough time to really build the rapport, I think to be like, workers of the world unite!*

Not only are workers aware of their isolation and how it can impact things like organizing for better conditions, but the pressure workers are under to complete deliveries quickly is also a barrier to establishing connections to one another, especially in person. When I asked Maura if she spoke to other delivery workers while on the job, she said,

> *No… it's not terribly often that I'm in a restaurant waiting with an easily identifiable fellow delivery person.*

Maura's comment highlights that many workers are not even aware of each other in the physical spaces where they work together. Part of the start-up package workers receive when they sign up for the platform includes items like an insulated bag and lanyard with the logo of the service, but not everyone uses or wears these things. Maura mentioned how sometimes wearing the "swag" draws ridicule from other delivery workers,

> *I hate when people make fun of like people that dress in DoorDash stuff because I look like me and I'm allowed to go to all the places and that's not the same for*

> *everybody, you know what I mean? I get really upset when people are like that… that guy probably needs everybody to know what they're doing and everything.*

Food delivery gig workers are not required to wear anything that indicates they work for the company, allowing their work to remain hidden to others, including to fellow workers. Maura's comment suggests that there is a stigma associated with wearing or having platform gear that comes from the fellow drivers, which can further isolate food delivery gig workers from each other. Maura, a white woman, says that "I look like me" and suggests that people who do not, may have to make it known they work for the company, as they do not have the same ability to enter and exit spaces without being questioned. When workers did recognize each other, they expressed that their in-person interactions remained very surface level, if they happened at all, as Pat said,

> *I don't think I've ever exchanged anything personal with any DoorDasher at all. We all complain about it, but we always go 'Oh nature of the gig' you know and just sort of move on, it kind of feels like there's no way to change it, I guess.*

The isolation workers experienced on the job was cited as one of the major barriers to possibly creating change in the gig, but not all workers saw isolation as an inherently bad thing. Some workers associated it more with the independence they experienced in the gig, which they were invested in maintaining.

The workers who emphasized the independence over isolation were those who were either not in favor of making changes to the gig sector, indifferent towards, or anti-union. Rodger, who thought some unions were "criminal", described himself as "pretty anti-union", saying,

> *If I don't like something, I'll tell you about it. If I didn't like this job, I tell them why I'm leaving and that'd be it. And I go to the next thing, you know?*

Rodger's lone-wolf, hyper-individualistic stance was echoed by, Anthony, who disagreed with any calls to organize the gig sector,

> *I've seen articles on the internet, but I don't agree with it because I don't view it as a main source of income, and I think that's ridiculous for people to think of it as that. So, I almost kind of dismiss any effort to do that. Because you know,* ***you can take it or leave it****. I've always found that pretty ridiculous, to be honest. There's other jobs out there.*

Part of Anthony's rationale is informed by his personal-responsibility outlook to work more generally, but it is also because he does not see food delivery as a source of full-time income.

Both Anthony and Rodger are only invested in this job in a part time, supplemental capacity, and therefore instead of trying to make changes, claim they would sooner leave it for something else if it no longer worked for them. Moreover, other workers saw any efforts to organize the gig sector as a non-starter because it went against the very idea of what it meant to do the job as an independent contractor, even when they were more dependent upon the income. Roberta, who spent a majority of her time discussing how badly Uber has treated her, was also against organizing the industry,

> ***I'm doing this because of the way it's structured.*** *Would I like to see Uber pay us better? Absolutely. But you know, I also can just turn off the app when they're not paying me well and I went and found something else.* ***I don't want it to affect the whole gig economy.***

While the level of financial dependence is a factor in opinions on unionizing or organizing gig workers, the workers investment in the independent contractor status and the flexibility that it grants is seen as something to be protected, particularly from the more restrictive employee classification, further complicating organizing efforts.

When Rodger was asked if he had ever been approached by someone to join in an organizing effort for gig workers he said with a smile, “Nope, I’m all by myself on an island.” Workers like Rodger don’t see the job as isolating because part of why he signed up in the first place was to avoid having another boss or anyone telling him what to do. Moreover, Robert didn’t see unionizing gig workers as possible because he felt that unions are only necessary when workers are being abused. To illustrate this point, he spoke about how Amazon workers in Alabama (the interview occurred shortly after the Bessemer Warehouse vote in April 2021), were right in seeking to be part of a union because they were “being paid poorly to do their deliveries.” When asked if he thought food delivery gig workers were being abused by the companies, he said,

> *I’m not getting abused. I’m happy, I make money, you know? I think my experience would have been a lot different if I had to rely on it strictly as a sole income, but because it wasn't and I didn't need it, that's what really helped it be not a negative experience for me.*

It is interesting that Robert was able to see the “abuse” of delivery workers more clearly when it involved another company and another group of workers, despite holding a very similar job himself. Again, he emphasized his supplemental dependence on the platform as the main reason why he would not be in support of a union for food delivery gig workers, but behind that justification is the ideological notions of individuality and independence, demonstrating that the way workers see the work as individual or isolating can therefore influence opinions and actions around collective organizing.

Other Barriers to Organizing

Aside from experiences or lack thereof with unions and organizing, or differences in perception about the fundamental nature of the work, workers also mentioned a few

other reasons why they thought organizing the gig sector would be a challenge. For example, Jamie cited exhaustion as a reason there was not more engagement from gig workers to change conditions,

> *I think that people that are engaging with it are serious about it, they're passionate about it, and they do want to work on it. I think that the reason that that gets lower engagement is probably, I mean,* ***people are tired, this has been a hard time for everybody.*** *People are just tired, you know, it's exhausting. And a lot of people are working a lot of hours, I don't know how much energy they have left over to give to, like social change, you know?*

Other workers felt similarly, like Pat who thought that a primary reason people weren't more engaged in this kind of work was because they were too busy working,

> *I think that the reason why nobody does it is because* ***it feels like a waste of time*** *because we're working so much you know you don't have a lot of time to dedicate to certain things, so I guess I would need to feel like something could actually happen with my efforts.*

For workers like Pat, who is already working a lot of hours between food delivery and his job managing a bar, he does not feel moved to spend his down time on any organizing efforts, because he does not feel like the effort would be worth it. Scott also emphasized the importance of being able to show prospective union members that their efforts will pay off, and that if they join a union, "you will get this benefit, you will earn this much more money, you can possibly get health insurance." Without being able to demonstrate that it is not a waste of time, many over-worked and underpaid food delivery gig workers will be less inclined to join in any organizing effort.

Moreover, workers did not feel moved to engage because they did not see themselves doing the work much longer. Deborah, who has been in the gig for a year, much longer than she anticipated, agreed that something needs to be done for Instacart workers. She said that they deserve "justice" but also, "I feel like I don't care, because I

hope I'm not going to stay." The same allure of an easy entry and a temporary stay that gets workers into the delivery job is also, in this instance, working against getting some workers on board with changing and improving working conditions. This kind of mindset, that I plan on leaving, but I haven't been able to yet, actively undermines the efforts of those who are seeking to change the gig.

Another challenge workers talked about around organizing food delivery gig workers was how spread out they were from one another, with no "watercooler" or physical workplace where they could gather. While the individual and digital aspects of the job do hinder workers ability to communicate and create community, digital spaces like online forums and social media groups have become a way to try and bridge this gap. As discussed in the previous section on learning and navigating food delivery, these spaces primarily served as spaces to trade information on how to do the job, but they have also been known to be social spaces and spaces of activism and organizing for better working conditions. These forums, while cited by many as important to bridge the gap in information on how to do the job, stopped short of calling them organizing spaces, and some even pointed out how they could be hostile to these efforts.

Online Communities and Forums

Given the digital, decentralized nature of food delivery, the primary way workers have been able to create and maintain contact with each other has been through digital means such as Reddit forums, Facebook groups and WhatsApp chats. These online spaces have allowed workers to remain connected and trade information in an otherwise isolating job. The total number of workers engaged with online forums is unknown, with some groups containing a few hundreds and others, tens of thousands. The forums are

sometimes specific to region, while others are specific to the delivery platform. As I found out in my recruitment process, many of these groups have now implemented gate-keeping policies, barring the general public from joining the groups and requiring that specific criteria be met and reviewed by administrators of the groups before letting in new members. The groups are important to helping workers understand the basics of the workplace, as well as creating a space for workers to bring attention to concerns they have about the job. While an analysis of these forums is outside the scope of this project, my brief look at a few of them during and after the recruitment process shows that it is a mix of workers sharing concerns over pay and conditions, jokes, positive experiences, tips and tricks, and sometimes calls for formal organization.

Online forums and groups were mainly seen as spaces to trade information on the job, but some workers also saw them as social, community building spaces. Jamie said that while she has seen some "people calling for more organized union type action, it's mostly memes and laughing at some of the ridiculous orders." She is a self-described "lurker", meaning she watches more than engages in comments on the forums, but that she still gets "social value from the interactions." Roberta also saw the groups for delivery drivers that she was a part of to be socializing spaces, even though she said she has left many over the years citing their toxicity. She said she has been able to find people with similar interests and that *"*we actually meet up; we go out to lunch, and we go out to dinner. We actually have become friends in real life." Roberta was unique in this respect, as many other drivers who engaged with online forums and groups did so in a limited capacity, "lurking" or learning from the comments, but rarely making the leap to meeting in person.

Not all participants were highly active in these spaces, but most were familiar and had visited them at least a few times during their time as delivery drivers. Scott, the retired school principal, regularly engages with online forums for delivery drivers and said posts about organizing gig workers or creating some sort of gig worker organization were "very rare." The comments that he did see were "one-off comments, and then there'll be like, 15 or 20 people saying what a bad idea it is." In his experience, this anti-union, anti-organization sentiment was common on the forum,

> *In this particular group? Probably yes. I mean, I don't know if they really understand what unions will do and everything like that. More of the people that I see that are very prominent on Reddit are, you know,* ***this is as good a job as they've had****, and I don't want to sound condescending, but I don't think there's a lot of master's degrees on DoorDash, does that make sense? Except settled retired guys.*

Scott's comments points to a number of challenges when it comes to trying to organize digital workers and at its core is that the population of workers who engage with these forums and do this kind of work, are not as educated or aware about what unions can do. Moreover, his comment that for many, "this is as good a job as they've had", suggests that he thinks in addition to not having prior knowledge of what unions can do for workers, a lot of their previous working experiences might have been so bad, that this job – without basic protections like a minimum wage or benefits, is considered good, and worth keeping as is. The hostility towards comments of unionizing or organizing was also mentioned by other workers, like Jamie who said,

> *...people see the word union and go, 'Woah', like, without understanding what it is. It's a word that shouldn't have that particular kind of political charge, but it does. There's a lot of misinformation going on and no way for people to knowledgeably fact check like, what information they're getting, so, I think if we were able to have a conversation that somehow got rid of these charged words, I*

> *think that people would be more into the ideas. It's just that they hear union and they're like, 'Oh, union bad.' You know?*

Similar to the way workers talked about their lack of experience or understanding with unions as a challenge to organizing, the way this (mis)information plays out in online spaces is an additional barrier to having conversations about making changes to the gig industry.

Mark, the 5-year self-described "veteran" DoorDash driver from Phoenix, had direct experience with battling the misinformation on organizing that can appear on online communities and forums. He has been very active in the online community, constantly engaging with other drivers over issues of unionization and employee vs. contractor classification,

> *Anytime I argue on these pages, I get a lot of pushback, like, 'Oh, no, I'm an independent contractor', 'No, if you make us employees, we won't have the freedom, we won't get paid as much'. And what people don't understand is* ***they've been goaded into believing that if they become employees, it'll be worse for everyone, it'll be more expensive, they won't make as much, you won't have as much freedom when in reality, it'll just be better…*** *anytime I bring it up, it gets shot down by the conservative crowd, like, 'Oh, take that back to California' or, you know, things like that. It's not only getting pushback from the corporate side from the Overlord entities, but it's from our own drivers, where they don't understand like, you're accepting a contract, you should be able to see where you're driving, who it is, how much you're going to be making, things like that, so that you're not just taking orders and it not being profitable. It just, it's not fair.*

Mark's comment illuminates how politicized labor and organizing have become, especially in right to work states like Arizona. Right to work states are extremely hostile to the 'Californication' of rules, laws, and norms, and associate anything that would compromise individual rights, as part of a progressive, and therefore restrictive agenda. Mark points out that this rhetoric is not just used by the corporations, or the "Overlord

entities", to push their agenda and divide workers, but workers themselves become invested in this ideology, and use it to argue against making changes to the gig economy.

That most workers did not see these online groups as organizing spaces did not mean that it was not happening or does not have the capacity to happen there. As Jamie said, she did not see a lot of calls for direct action or union forming, but did see a lot of what she calls "informal organizing",

> *There's not as much talk of actual organizing, but there's a lot of talk of 'no tip, no trip', that's something I see over and over again. So, I call that a lot more informal, right, than actual organizing, but there is that push in, you know, in that direction.*

That Jamie characterizes declining orders, like refusing an order under a certain amount of money per mile, as informal organizing, is a connection that other workers did not always make. She likely made this connection because she understood that when one worker denies an order enough, the algorithm will raise the base pay to incentive workers to grab the order. Moreover, these strategies were being shared, encouraging workers to not accept what the platform wanted, evoking a type of resistance strategy. While this was typically practiced by workers as a way to benefit themselves, it was also seen as a way to "cheat" the algorithm into paying workers a higher wage. While the online forums were seen as social spaces, and spaces of knowledge accumulation on how to do the job, very few recognized this exchange and behavior as an "informal" type of organizing, as many were focused on the individual financial return of such behavior. This kind of behavior, though, when done on a collective scale, can augment the wages of a vast group of workers, as evidenced by some attempts from gig workers in recent years.

Digital Organizing

Over the last few years there has been a lot of activity in the United States and around the globe on organizing gig workers and regulating the gig economy (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018). This includes actions taken by workers to make demands upon the companies for better pay, benefits, and working conditions. Sometimes there is an in-person component to these events, where drivers gather, like in May 2019 when Uber drivers from across the world gathered in front of Uber headquarters ahead of the company going public to protest wages and working conditions (Conger et al., 2019). Mainly, though, strategies gig workers have used have often been digital. The main digital action gig workers take is through digital "walk-offs" or strikes, where they don't turn the app on, as a way to call attention to the companies' policies, and pressure the companies into heeding their demands. For example, Instacart shoppers went on a three-day strike in December 2019 to protest the change in the default tip option back to 10 percent after it was lowered to zero in 2016, and then raised to 5 percent in April 2018 (Tiku, 2019). Workers have also called on consumers to delete the apps in solidarity with the workers, as Instacart shoppers did in their strike to bring attention to their dismal working conditions in October 2021(Barnhart, 2021). As discussed earlier, workers share with each other how to effectively filter orders to increase their own individual wages. This was common practice with many workers, but when coordinated with multiple workers simultaneously, it can raise the base pay and increase wages for all workers in the area. One such collective attempt was the #DeclineNow movement.

#DeclineNow

In October 2019, two men in Philadelphia created the Facebook group, #DeclineNow which encouraged DoorDashers to strategically decline orders to make themselves more money. The group called for a blanket denial of all orders under $7, which would then cause the algorithm to increase base pay as an incentive for workers to accept the orders (Streeter, 2021). As of early 2021, there are now over 26,000 members part of the group, working collectively to deny low paying orders in an attempt to earn living wages (Ongweso, 2021). When I asked workers if they had heard of this kind of action, many responded that they had not, but that they routinely denied low paying orders on an individual basis. Some were familiar with the group, like Maura, who heard about the movement through the online forum she is engaged with,

> *Yeah, these guys came out with their video…and I don't fully understand what they were doing to manipulate things, because like, you take the orders, you want to take, and then you don't take the orders you don't want to take. I get where they were coming from, but I don't fully know what they were doing, I was just making financial decisions for myself…I'm not taking any order anywhere for $3 and that's that.*

Maura's comment echoed what many other workers said about declining orders, that they did it out of personal financial decisions instead of as a way to improve overall pay structures for themselves or other workers. Her comment also reflects that the isolated, individual nature of the job has ramifications for organizing, mainly that it is difficult to conceive the individualized, independent nature of the job as a broader collective experience, even in digital spaces where workers interact. Maura put it this way,

> *It's* ***like trying to like hold Jell-O in your hands*** *because we're just not together and there's always going to be new eligible people all day, every day. I think you're going to have to do a lot to get an algorithm to change.*

Maura's comments on the #DeclineNow movement demonstrates that there will always be new workers added to the program, who don't understand how the job works, therefore disrupting these actions for change. Moreover, workers are at a disadvantage because they are dealing with a black box algorithm, which they only know from the user side, making it more difficult to predict what behaviors and actions will have an effect. She also talked about the lack of a meeting space, physical or otherwise, and how that prohibits workers from sharing information,

> *We aren't in the same building getting the same information. I mean, we are intentionally kept apart from each other. There's no DoorDash internet lounge or anything like that. They don't want us talking to each other to figure these things out. Which is like anywhere else, like okay guys make your little video but I don't think that it really helped anything.*

Even though Maura was aware of #DeclineNow, she pointed out that the information on these kinds of actions and the impact they can have were not always readily available to workers, even in online forums and digital communities.

That information like this is not always reaching all eligible drivers was brought up with other workers as well. Jamie admitted that the posts she has seen about actions or organizing have been "very isolated" and "that there's probably more than I'm seeing, it's just harder to find it because we don't have a watercooler if that makes sense." Maxime talked about how it was difficult to imagine something like #DeclineNow working,

> *It's just hard because people are constantly becoming a part of the program. There's not really like a sense of community with us, it's very like, one-off stuff. It's hard to think of like this area getting organized, or just like any area getting organized enough that like everyone rejects it.*

Moreover, Maxime said that while she is in favor of change because she is dependent upon this income and would like to see better conditions, "it would feel kind of

hypocritical, I can't afford to refuse orders even though I do want change, it's just hard." When the main mode of action against the company involves risking their livelihood, some workers will be unable, or unwilling to participate.

Mark commented on the constant stream of new drivers as an issue to organizing actions like #DeclineNow, as well as the issue of not having every driver engaged with online forums and communities,

> *In the Facebook community, we've lost a couple groups over time through just absolute bullshit… it's hard, because we can't really unionize, there's no workplace to gather around where we can all communicate in person…so using social media is a good avenue to try to do this, but even then, only a third of the drivers here in our market are on it.*

While many workers did say they were engaged with online forums, because the business model of these companies is founded on a steady stream of new drivers who will be more likely to accept low paying, unprofitable orders, the likelihood of accessing all drivers to coordinate some sort of action or even conversation is seen as impossible. Mark explained how frustrating this can be, trying to build up community and culture and improve conditions,

> *…we've tried explaining these tools, these methods on how to get the algorithm to help you make more money, how to improve the community, and culture for all of us. But no matter what, these apps thrive on a revolving door kind of onboarding process, where most of your drivers don't last more than a year…it's only going to meet so many eyeballs and so many ears and they're only going to be around for so long. So, there's always new drivers coming on, that are willing to accept these low paying orders. We have guys that just accept every order and they'll take screenshots of these just ridiculously paying orders and it's like, why are you guys out here accepting you know, 45 minutes' worth of work for $2.60?*

The combination of the structure of the job, like the "revolving door" of new drivers and the inability to reach all drivers, leaves workers trying to fight for change at a disadvantage, as they are often undermined by those who have an interest in maintaining

the nature of the gig, or who are new to the program and more willing to accept low paying orders.

Surveillance

Moreover, some workers talked about the surveillance of their online communities and fear of the repercussions of being involved in actions like #DeclineNow. As Mark said,

> *…they have employees in these groups, they are monitoring us. We had an incident where we lost a group of several thousand members on Facebook. We were able to retain a good amount of them on other pages, but we did lose a page that was around for several years…. we try to build up the community and try to build up information, a wealth of knowledge, you know, saved in one kind of medium and it gets taken away.*

While digital forums have been crucial to helping workers bridge the gap in training and knowledge of how to navigate the apps, when they become spaces for organizing, they can become targeted by the companies and jeopardize the community. The fear of being recorded or surveilled was conveyed by several workers. Prior to our interview, Mark asked to see my social media pages so he could verify who I was. He explained when we met,

> *I was a little wary of coming into this because I didn't know if after this was done, I try to jump on my app and now like, I don't have that avenue to make money anymore. So, I find myself having to check my back and see what I say and what I do to make sure I don't just get immediately cut off because these companies will.*

When I asked Deborah if she was interested in seeing some of the articles about gig workers organizing, she said sure, then laughed and whispered, “I don’t know if Instacart is listening to my conversations.” While she was slightly joking, her comment reflects the degree to which workers feel (or know) that they are being constantly monitored by the companies. Even Roberta, who was adamantly opposed to organizing the gig economy,

cited surveillance as a reason why she would never participate in something like #DeclineNow,

> *I know that's how the system works that every time a low order gets denied, it will increase…I know that it happens, but I'm not aware if anybody is intentionally doing it. I don't because it's unethical as far as I'm concerned. I will decline if it's not profitable for me, but I'm not working with other drivers to try to raise the rates. Although I can see why some people would do it…**but if they find out, they will deactivate me for it. And I need these jobs, these gig jobs to pay my bills. I'm not going to jeopardize it.***

Roberta understands why some workers would participate in #DeclineNow, and even though she would never do it on the grounds that she finds it unethical, her fear of being deactivated and losing her income is incentive enough to prevent her from participating because she needs this job. Moreover, she saw strikes as advantageous to her financial position,

> *…there's people in these groups that strike and the rest of us are just like, 'Ok, if you want to be in a union, you want to be an employee, go get a job where somebody else is your boss and telling you where, when, and how to be.' There's been so many times that I've seen, 'Oh, we're going to strike on this day.' Okay, fine, three quarters of the drivers are going to strike, surges are going to be high and I'm going to be out there because I have bills to pay. And **your agenda is not my agenda because I signed up for this with my eyes open. I'm staying with it with my eyes open.** Yes, the pay has gone down. But I am choosing to turn that app on. That's my choice.*

Like strikebreakers, Roberta sees collective actions as opportunities to work and earn more. Roberta's comments capture not just the challenges to digitally organizing delivery workers, but how the employee vs. independent contractor debate plays out in attempts at organizing as well. As she mentioned earlier, Roberta does not want to affect the gig economy, and even though she is aware that the companies treat and pay people poorly, she appears to justify this mistreatment because she made a choice to do this work and "signed up for this with my eyes open."

Hypothetically Speaking

Roberta felt that this was the working arrangement she signed up for, and while unhappy with certain aspects of it, it was her choice to enter and remain in it as it was designed. Maura said something similar when asked what a union or organization would have to offer to have her be interested in supporting or joining it,

> *I don't want to have somebody to tell me when I have to work…but I'm usually of the idea of not classifying people as employees as a way to like you know not treat them in a good way is not good, but I also don't really want to be an employee right now...ultimately, I have no protection and if there was a group or organization that wanted to offer that, I would be interested in having conversations about it….if they could offer tax advice that might be helpful, access to self-defense classes, yeah I think there's a lot of services that could be offered for people who deliver for the service,* ***but again I don't want to be an employee so it's all kind of a moot point.***

Maura recognizes that there are a lot of services that workers do not have access to because they are not employees, particularly protection from deactivation, but she is willing to forgo that in order to not "have somebody tell me when I have to work."

Still, some workers do envision how improvements could be made with a union. Eric, who said he wasn't really interested in any unionizing because he plans to leave gig work soon (he has been in it for two years now), mentioned fare transparency and recourse for deactivation as services that would hypothetically get him interested in a union,

> *I noticed that Uber…they'll say like $12.58 and then when I'm done with the order I will notice that, like there's 50 cents to 90 cents missing. So, if there was a way…the Union could analyze all the orders and then kind of bring that up to Uber directly instead of me having to jump through all the loops to deal with that, I think that would be a nice benefit or like if I get deactivated for, again hypothetically, just for reasons I'm not sure of, and no one's trying to help me from Uber, but the union could help deal with it… if I felt like I was under threat of being fired constantly from Uber, then I think I would go through a Union to get help with that, then I would join it.*

Eric's comment suggests that he is interested in services that unions typically offer to their members, like fighting for wage transparency and protection from unlawful firings. Many of the services or benefits workers talk about as things that would get them interested in joining a union or organization are the very things that employee status guarantees, that gig worker organizations are fighting for, and that unions offer to their members. Anthony, who thought unionizing the gig sector was a "ridiculous" idea because it's not meant to be full-time work, told me he would be hypothetically interested if they offered "benefits and good pay." When I asked Roberta about hypothetically joining a union, she said, "the only thing that I have ever been interested in as far as a collective group is access to insurance". However, even then, she doubled down on her anti-unionization stance towards food delivery gig work,

> *I'm not an employee. Right? Pure and simple. I don't want to be an employee. I can look at the bigger picture, I can look beyond the here and now to what the ramifications are in the future**. I like being in charge of my life.** I was an employee most of my adult life. I have a master's degree in Health Administration and **I'm doing food delivery because I get paid better and because I'm in charge of my own time**, and my time, my monetary value of my time is worth more than physical money. So, **they can't pay me what I'm worth anymore.***

For Roberta, the freedom that comes with a job like food delivery gig work is worth more to her than all the benefits that come with being an employee, even access to health insurance, unionized or otherwise. She admits she is getting paid better than she was as an employee, but her comment suggests that it is the control she has over her time, her money, and being in charge of her life that is just as, if not more important than the wages she makes.

Other workers were not as clear as Roberta on their affinity for contract work, but they were hesitant to say they wanted employee status or to unionize the gig sector. Not all workers were against or dismissive of unionizing attempts, eight out of the twelve said they were open to learning more before making any decisions and two said they would "absolutely" join if given the opportunity. While the workers' responses and feelings about organizing gig work differed and mainly focused on how difficult and challenging it would be, they did reveal there are some possibilities where changes could occur.

Possibilities

Organizing gig workers faces a number of challenges stemming from the structure of the work, the decline of organized labor, and the politicized debate over whether gig workers are independent contractors or employees. However grim this outlook may be, there are components to the ways that workers do the work that suggest there is more of an avenue to create community and possibly bring change. Online forums and communities have become de-facto workspaces, where workers can communicate about the job and create a work culture in the absence of one being provided by the companies. In addition to communicating digitally, workers did admit that they also spoke to each other in person, albeit less frequently.

Earlier, workers said that they did not really talk to each other in person, but nearly every worker also said that they did help others in person when it looked like they were struggling, or they had a question. Maura, who enjoys the job in part because she gets to work alone, gets "excited" to help others,

> *I've literally never felt like I wanted to approach somebody that I thought was a dasher and start talking to them, but I'm fully excited to help them if they do have a question.*

She explained that she helped a new worker understand that accepting every order was less profitable than being more selective. Roberta also said she helped new workers,

> *I have gotten to the point where I could really tell if somebody's fairly new, and I'll give them tips and tricks so that they don't have to stumble as much as I did.*

This desire to help newcomers avoid the pitfalls was expressed by almost every worker, even Pat who saw the job as highly competitive,

> *I'll help them, you know, like how to use the app, some people just aren't as good at that technology, so I'll show them, or I'll give them tips and stuff but you don't want to give too many tips, because then they are in your area, can't be too nice.*

While most workers said in-person communication was a rare occurrence, that many of them spoke about helping other workers out while on the job suggests that there is more communication occurring between the workers, and therefore more opportunity to create connections and forge solidarity. These comments, that many viewed as small, fleeting moments, suggest that workers are not always as isolated or alienated from each other as they may feel on the job. If we look at sharing tips and tricks as informal or decentralized forms of organizing, as Jamie did, it may point to other possibilities to create solidarity among workers.

Additionally, a few workers said that while they may not have communicated much with fellow delivery drivers, they did talk to the people who worked at the restaurants they picked up from, or the stores they shopped at. Anthony said when he has tried to talk to other delivery workers, they usually "shut down",

> *No one's very talkative to be honest with you. They just kind of want to get the food and get out of there. But I talk to the employees that work at the places a lot. That's kind of a cool thing.*

Maura mentioned that she has become so friendly with a few workers at the restaurants that she frequents in her town that when she goes in to eat there, she gets "phenomenal service." Deborah loves to go to Costco for her Instacart orders because it's close to her house, she knows the store, and "I know the people that work in the store, so I feel super in my element, in my zone there." These comments that workers make about employees at the stores and restaurants they pick up from and shop at suggests that there may be connections to be made that expand beyond the delivery workers themselves and into the larger supply chain of food delivery services.

Despite all their issues with surveillance, misinformation, and divisiveness, online community spaces have been crucial to organizing digital workers like food delivery gig workers. For example, the strikes held by Instacart shoppers mentioned at the beginning of this section were organized by the group, Gig Workers Collective, which began as a group of three women who created a Facebook group for Instacart shoppers in the Bay Area, which has now grown to "about 14,500 members, representing more than 10 percent of all Instacart's workers in the United States and Canada" (Tiku, 2019). In the absence of a physical, collective workspace, gig workers rely upon social media spaces to connect and sometimes create organizations to change the industry. One participant, Mark, shared with me his aspirations to create an organization through social media for Phoenix-based delivery drivers.

Having been involved in multiple social media groups for drivers and delivery workers over the years, Mark and another driver began talking about creating their own group. His top priority was to create the group as free from surveillance as possible. He described his process for recruitment as a two-pronged strategy, first getting all drivers to

become part of the page, and then filtering "in the rideshare people we want in the union, or the collaborative group or whatever we're going to call it." His motive behind filtering in members is,

> *...just so that we don't have Uber employees reporting back what we're doing or when we're going to strike, right, things like that. My biggest fear is to have this group, and then fuck up and invite a snake into the group, and now they have the list of all the drivers that are taking part in whatever things we do, and then we all just get a blanket deactivation for manipulating the market or something.*

Mark's concern here reflects the extreme power imbalance and information asymmetry that gig workers who are trying to organize for change are up against. Platform companies like Uber not only possess all the information on how the platform operates, leaving workers to turn to online spaces and each other for support, but they also can easily access information on drivers. Mark's idea about the group is more akin to a mutual aid fund than a union fighting for employee rights, as he explained,

> *...it's going to be more in supporting the driver community. Sometimes we'll get desperate drivers, who say 'Hey, I just need 20 bucks. I just need gas money. I'll flip it. I'll pay back today.' So, we want to kind of provide a group that was like, 'Hey, are you living paycheck to paycheck? Did you just get a flat tire, and you can't afford it? Come to us and we'll give you a slip, go get a new tire, make your money real quick and pay us back', and if you don't pay us back, it'll be like Spider Man, everybody gets one. But if you're able to pay us back and tip us, like we could keep providing these services for you, and eventually we could accept dues and have a clubhouse. But it's a slow kind of growth thing.*

Mark believes that there need to be changes made to the industry, particularly around the independent contractor classification, but as he described his vision for me, he spoke not about altering their conditions from a regulatory perspective, more akin to a union mission, but of providing the resources needed to fill in the gaps that independent workers were struggling to meet, more like a mutual aid organization. That Mark's vision

for a drivers' group revolves around meeting the immediate financial needs of drivers speaks to how many drivers are suffering from not being paid a living wage.

While Mark does believe the industry needs to be regulated and they should be classified as employees, his primary concern is helping workers avoid a crisis, which is sometimes only one encounter with car trouble away. He admitted that it has been a "slow growth" kind of thing, and the main issues are the time it takes to dedicate to running one of these groups, lack of funding, and the onslaught of push back from drivers and the companies,

> *…it's tough because our efforts keep getting pushed back. I'm not a millionaire, I don't have access to all this free time or these resources or this social media know how. I'm also not the most professional person I use a lot of vulgarity and obscenities you know, especially when I get hot headed. So, I'm not the perfect guy for this. It sucks because a lot of people, day after day with these posts, 'Hey, guys, don't do this', 'Hey, guys do this', 'This is what you need to do for more money', and it just feels like it goes through one ear and out the other…and then you have the opposite side, which is like the companies, and you have those people posting on our pages proposing the opposite stuff like 'Hey, just take order', 'Oh, it'll average out', 'Keep your numbers up', 'Look at the bonuses, you'll get it'.* ***It's like working against the tide coming in, one step forward, but you're floating three steps back.***

Like many other workers, Mark is aware that there is a lot of investment to keep delivery workers ignorant of the real cost of this work and invested in the independent contractor status, and that the balance is not in the favor of workers. However, he still holds out hope, "It's going to happen. It's not if it's when. I just hope we could do it soon enough."

The state of disarray of organizing food delivery gig workers is reflective of many things; the steady decline of organized labor in the United States, the political divisiveness over unions and the employee/independent contractor classification, and the powerful freedom ideology that convinces gig workers to have a stake in their own

exploitation. While the challenge is uphill and may seem impossible, workers understand what is at stake as the gig economy remains unfettered. As Deborah put it, it's important to make work fair in this sector of the economy because,

> *... you see women, you see men, you see older people, you see younger people, you see families, you see people in wheelchairs, like it's so diverse. Which is another reason why it's an important area to focus on* ***because it's everyone.***

Workers were not of one mind when it came to changing food delivery, with some adamantly opposed, fervently for, and a majority somewhere in between. For workers, even those in favor of organizing, it seemed like an impossibility, given their alienation from each other, surveillance from the gig companies, and disagreements with coworkers on exactly what the change should be towards. Despite these disagreements, specifically on the employment vs. independent contractor status, workers agreed that their conditions could be improved, and that there were basic protections that they wanted to see implemented. However, given the varying degrees of investment in the work, previous work experiences, and worldviews, the consensus that conditions need to be changed is not enough to galvanize food delivery gig workers to action.

For many, when presented with the choice between the "freedom" and flexibility of delivery work and the protections of employment, they seem to gravitate towards the ideological notions of freedom, despite struggling to earn enough money and enduring poor treatment. Previous work experiences for many who do delivery work had been so restrictive, that the ability to control minor aspects of work like scheduling is given outsized importance, obscuring the fact that workers do not have to make a choice between the two, but can and should be able to have both flexibility and good, stable wages.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

In this final chapter, I present a discussion of my findings, my overall conclusions, implications and address one or two areas for future research. I begin with a discussion of how the results from my study align with or diverge from the findings of previous studies on gig work, presenting them according to the major substantive thematic categories, which organized the study. The following section lays out my major conclusions, addressing what gig work says about the labor market and the more significant findings of the role of ideological notions of freedom in the modern work environment. After this, I address some implications of the research, offering both policy and practical solutions to addressing the conditions of gig work. I conclude with what I think should be the next steps of this research project.

Discussion

Overall, the findings in this study are consistent with the results of previous studies on the gig economy. Like other work, I focus on the experiences of gig workers, but not just to present that their working conditions are deteriorating and producing low wages, but that there is an ideological construct that draws workers into food delivery and makes them complicit in and even have a stake in a system that exploits them.

In the first section, Pathways to Food Delivery, the findings reveal that the job attracted workers due to its flexibility. The motivations to work for participants varied based on their individual circumstances, but all participants viewed flexibility as something they valued about the job and felt that they did not have, or could not find, in other work (Chen et al., 2019; Dean & Auerbach, 2018; Katsnelson & Oberholzer-Gee,

2021). Flexibility allowed participants to work around other jobs and responsibilities, which was of particular value to the women in the sample, many of whom indicated that they needed flexibility to care for children and fulfill familial obligations. This is consistent with other studies (Milkman et al., 2020) that show that women seek out flexible jobs like gig work, sometimes leaving elevated forms of employment and professional careers so that they can take care of family responsibilities and children. Moreover, this finding points to how the gender division that exists in the broader labor market, also exists in the gig economy. The findings also indicate that flexibility was viewed as an important source of income protection, especially for participants who had existing physical and mental health conditions or family members who did.

Additionally, participants expressed that they valued flexibility because it afforded them to go about their work without being told what to do or directed by a manager, confirming the significance of autonomy to the meaning of work (Crowley, 2012). The findings surrounding participants' attraction to the job were mainly positive, despite their admission that wages and hours could be unstable and unpredictable, mainly due to their previous work experiences. Many found that the level of control they could exert over their time doing food delivery was something they valued, leading many participants to accept an exploitative working situation, despite understanding the precarity of the job.

In the second section, Learning and Navigating Food Delivery, the findings indicate that participants had to assume more risk and responsibility to do the job through self-training and developing strategies that made the job profitable (Hacker, 2006). Responsibilities and risks that employers and businesses once assumed are now

contracted onto the worker, who must bear the risk of making mistakes, sometimes at the cost of losing their income entirely.

The strategies workers developed for the job came at their own expense and were bound up in the individual, independent contractor rhetoric. In other types of employment, there is also an unspoken, untrained aspect to the job that workers usually learn overtime or on their own time. The key difference here is those unlearned aspects tend to be extraneous to the essential responsibilities of the job, whereas, with gig work, workers are left without training on the fundamental elements of the job that directly impact their livelihood. That platform companies presented these strategies as individual choices obscured that they were ultimately dictated by processes like algorithmic management, information asymmetries, and obfuscation about how the job works. These findings of learning and navigating the job evoke the one-way-honor system (Pugh, 2015), where workers must comply with and meet the needs of employers with getting very little in return besides wages.

These findings are consistent with the results from other studies (Veen et al., 2019; Ge et al., 2019; Rosenblat, 2017, Rosenblat & Stark 2016), which indicate that despite being told they are their own bosses, the behaviors and decisions of participants are actively constrained by a technologically mediated management system, that obscures the level of control and power they have on the job. This finding suggests that the degree of freedom on the job was obscured under the guise of personal responsibility. While benefiting their individual circumstances, these "choices" also worked to uphold the status quo, successfully gaining their consent to exploitation through the illusion of choice.

The study also found that how workers made choices or decisions on the job to maximize their income reinscribed existing inequalities of the traditional labor market space, contrary to the hypothesis of gig economy supporters (Sundararajan, 2016). That workers used their cognitive schema and sometimes, biases to discern which orders they want to take is in line with other research that finds despite the espoused neutrality of the app and ability to decrease inequality, platforms often facilitate peer-to-peer discrimination based on race and class (Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017; Thebault-Spieker et al., 2015). How participants prioritized wealthy areas over those that they perceived as low-income is consistent with the findings from Thebault-Spieker et al.'s (2017) study, where they found gig workers did not accept requests for services in lower-income areas in Chicago, which they perceived to be high-risk areas for crime and less financially lucrative. Moreover, in line with Milkman et al.'s (2020) results, the findings of this study indicate that gig workers, especially women, typically resented the class entitlements of customers they saw as privileged.

In the third section, Understanding Food Delivery, the findings suggest that many workers were aware of the bargain they were making – trading stable wages and hours for a degree of control over their time. Not all participants saw it this way; for some, it was not a trade-off, but an overall improvement based on their other work experiences. However, these participants recognized how challenging it was to make ends meet with this job, even in a supplemental capacity.

That many workers stayed on in the job despite struggling to earn decent wages suggests that many made a Faustian bargain with themselves when it comes to gig work; in exchange for control over their time, they accept unstable earnings, precarious terms of

employment, and mistreatment by both customers and the company (Milkman et al., 2020; Veen et al., 2019; G et al., 2019). This study also found that conditions for gig workers are declining and consist of unstable earnings, hours, and dangerous working conditions (Figueroa et al., 2021; Ravenelle, 2019; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). While participants expressed an understanding of what they were choosing and the costs to these choices, especially in terms of the erosion of workplace protections, for many, the jobs they previously held were so incompatible with their needs for decent wages and flexibility that gig work is seen as a better option.

Moreover, my study suggests that freedom to make choices in food delivery which workers have come to value, can in part be understood as a mechanism of control built into the platform, as per Burawoy's (1979) hegemonic control theory. Despite having to navigate poor conditions and low and unstable wages, because participants can exercise a degree of autonomy over their working life, they became invested in the job and how it is structured. Even when the exploitation was made clear to and by them, they still justified doing the job because of what it afforded them – the ability to be there for their children, drop everything for emergencies, control their schedule, and feel independent.

The way participants viewed choice and the level of control it offered them differed and were ultimately informed by how dependent they were on the income from gig work. The finding is consistent with other studies which demonstrate that level of investment or dependence in the job determined the overall experience of workers. Generally, those who relied upon this job in only a supplemental capacity had a more positive experience and less critical perspective on the company than those who

depended on the earning for most, if not all, their income (Ravenlle, 2019; Rosenblat, 2017; Schor, 2020). However, this was not universally true, as some supplemental earners were highly critical of the exploitation by the companies, and some wholly dependent earners viewed it as overwhelmingly positive.

These differing points of view and levels of critique participants expressed about the company and their treatment represents the contested, contradictory, and complicated experiences of food delivery workers. While there was some consensus, many variables and factors influenced how workers understood and experienced the job. This was exemplified in participants' responses about being their own "boss," which indicated no unanimous position on whether they are or not or what level of control qualifies as being a "boss." Whereas some participants equated decisions about time and orders to be the quintessential characterization of a boss, others saw the job's features as controlling, again echoing Burawoy's (1979) control theory. Participants also expressed that employment in the traditional economy could no longer meet their wants or needs. Even though they were disappointed with conditions and wages at times during gig work, participants noted that generally, they could make more money in food delivery and on their own terms, which some valued more than the "stability" they experienced in the traditional economy.

In the final section, Changing Food Delivery, the findings indicate that these contradictions workers embody about the job can create obstacles to collective organizing among gig workers. Participants expressed contradictory views on this matter, as they wanted more protections but did not want to give up their flexibility for employee status (Dubal, 2019). Unsurprisingly, except for one participant, no one had participated in any

collective actions. Any actions they did join in were almost always relegated to the individual level and considered just a tool to enhance personal earnings (Veen et al., 2020). Participants cited fears of retaliation by the company for participating and not believing their efforts could bring about any change.

This study found that the use of digital spaces proved to be a vital tool for workers to learn how to do the job, create community, and help to reduce the instability of the job (Rosenblat, 2017). Contrary to the findings of Maffie (2020), which found that more engagement with online spaces led to more favorable views on organizing, my findings seem to suggest the opposite, and that online engagement may lead to a less favorable opinion about organizing, as participants characterized online spaces as hostile towards ideas of unionizing or organizing.

Overall, this study found that participants have become attached to both the ideology of freedom and the level of control they have over their working lives and do not want to, or cannot afford, to give it up. Regardless of the issues that gig work presents for working people, earnings below minimum wage, lack of health benefits, and no protection against being fired, it can and does meet the needs of working people, needs that they can no longer satisfy in the traditional labor market. Therefore, participants are willing to compromise for a job that has no investment in them, has no upward mobility, and is just a downward trajectory of working to live.

Conclusions

In conclusion, my study reveals that while many food delivery gig workers faced poor working conditions, unstable earnings, and exploitative practices by the platforms they worked for, they often remained in the job, unwilling or unable, to give up the

flexibility of food delivery. The non-gig options are so insufficient in meeting the needs of workers that they accept a job that appears to give them freedom and control while simultaneously undermining it. As canaries, food delivery workers are signaling that both the "traditional" non-gig labor market and the gig economy are insufficient for most working people. While the decisions they make re the labor market are always financial, the notion of choice, control, and autonomy are playing an increasingly important role in how workers navigate the economy. More broadly, food delivery gig workers reveal that the way society is organized around work as the best and only means to provide for their basic needs is creating and perpetuating a more precarious society.

The way in which ideological notions of freedom are drawing people into gig work is signaling a deeper crisis, not just in our economic system, but in the shifting landscape of what freedom means today. The ways in which participants spoke about wanting to have a flexible schedule, or more freedom and control, was not so they could pursue hobbies or interests, read a book, or appreciate art; instead, they required and desired flexibility so that they could fulfill responsibilities, like working another job, caretaking for children, or prioritizing their own health needs. This reveals to us that as society and work become more precarious, the grounds of freedom have shifted towards “unfreedom” in the modern work environment and society.

As neoliberal economic and social policies have hollowed out the social safety net and created a fragmented, contract-based labor market, people’s perception of freedom has shifted. They are still invested in the ideological notions of freedom and what that means, being autonomous and in control of their decisions, yet the need to be able to control their time stems from the fact that they are increasingly responsible for more

aspects of their daily life, with fewer resources to meet those needs. Therefore, ideological notions of freedom only work to convince people to consent to their own exploitation because life has become more precarious. The ideological notions of freedom, choice, personal responsibility, and autonomy have become the justification used by the platform companies and the workers themselves to get workers to accept situations where the only freedom they can exercise is the freedom to participate in the perpetual cycle of precarity.

Food delivery gig work operates under the guise of technological innovation and autonomy to present itself as "new," as a remedy to a situation that it ultimately perpetuates and takes advantage of. The instantaneousness of gig work through digital platforms, and the freedom workers experience as independent contractors represents a new iteration of people consenting to their own exploitation. Moreover, the choices workers make in their pursuit to make ends meet leads them to accept, and even defend, a working situation where they consent to their exploitation. This consent to exploitation through “choice” demonstrates that workers are seeking out ways to evade or cope with the alienation and estrangement upon which the capitalist system rests.

With the promise of flexibility, gig work presents itself as a solution to this alienation. Workers have control over their time and are better able to prioritize family and health needs, earn extra income, and ultimately achieve a better "work-life" balance. For some, this escape from alienation is a success; for others, food delivery perpetuates the cycle, as workers have to navigate a flexible schedule in sometimes unpredictable ways, seek out strategies to keep up with declining wages, and pivot around ever-

changing rules. This "freedom" workers experience is an illusion, a façade, packaged as flexible and independent but is restrictive, unstable, and precarious.

The decisions delivery workers make on the job are made under algorithmic control, duress, stress, and fear of constantly being fired for violating agreements that are always changing and never transparent. This "freedom" does not contain any power or control over their labor or value they create but is merely a tool used to manufacture consent to a working situation where workers are exploited. Their freedom is not entirely false, though, as they can decide when they work and what orders they take. This tells us that autonomy, even if only at this low level, is important enough to workers that they sacrifice stability in hours and wages for it.

Ultimately, food delivery gig work represents the adaptability of capitalism to renew the working relationship so that "unfreedom" is re-packaged as freedom. The insidious nature of gig work lies in the reality that, in many cases, it does benefit people but only because the labor market and economy are so defunct. Traditional, non-gig jobs are so ill-suited to the realities, needs, and wants of working people that food delivery, with few protections, unstable wages, and the illusion of choice, is seen as a good and even desirable source of income. The appeal and lure of having control, of being autonomous beings, is so foreign to many in the capitalist system that the prospect of getting it, even at a cost, is something many workers are willing to bear.

Workers are re-evaluating how they want to spend their time both in and outside of work. In many ways, gig work is becoming part of the larger conversation around the idea of work and our changing relationship to it, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the pandemic continues, workers have been forced to pivot careers due to

mandatory shutdowns and lay-offs. Many others have taken the opportunity to pursue a different career path, one where they can have a better work-life balance or work from home to keep themselves safe from the virus. Still, others are leaving the labor market altogether, in what U.S. economists are calling “The Great Resignation.” While the reasons for the mass exodus of workers from the labor market is hotly debated and probably due to a confluence of factors, like additional government aid due to the pandemic. However, that many are shifting career choices and life choices when it comes to work more generally, suggests that we are at a crossroads when it comes to the relationship between labor and capital. That people are leaving jobs from all sectors of the economy in search of more flexible work arrangements is an indication that the state of precarity is becoming the norm for more significant segments of the population and calling into question the very idea of work as a viable path to meeting basic needs. Unless we change something about our labor market fundamentally, exploitative working situations like gig work that offer “freedom” will continue to thrive and generate the buy-in from workers themselves, further fueling the spread of precariousness across the economy and society.

The extent to which workers are willing to consent to exploitative working conditions in exchange for control over their time is cause for alarm. However, it also provides an opportunity to change the relationship between labor and capital. While food delivery gig work indicates that the standard relationship between labor and capital is adapting to "meet" the needs of workers while ushering in a more vicious form of exploitation, it is also signaling that we have an opportunity to make work, work for

people, to tip the scales in a way that makes work better for everyone, where choices between stable wages and control over time are not choices at all, but givens.

Implications

The most obvious path towards making food delivery gig work better for workers is to expand employment protections to apply to independent contractors. Similar to the suggestions of other researchers (Dubal, 2019), I would suggest this needs to be done in such a way that preserves what workers enjoy about or need from the job – flexibility. According to the participants of this study, flexibility was not something workers were able to nor willing to compromise on and should therefore be incorporated and upheld in any policy which attempts to provide protections for gig workers. In choosing flexible work arrangements with no protections over "traditional" employment with basic rights, workers indicate that the way work has been constructed is no longer working, and laws have to adapt to what workers need.

However, implementing a policy that would extend employment rights to independent contractors while adding flexible scheduling would require a systematic overhaul to labor policy, which does not seem probable with the modern two-party system. Laws that already exist to classify contract workers as employees often go unenforced and are undermined by platform companies who have the power, political connections, and resources to craft legislation to ensure their workers remain classified as independent contractors. The policy avenue should not be abandoned, though, as it is still the most effective way to create change for the most people. This study suggests that in addition to policy efforts that safeguard and extend worker protections to all employment classifications, policies that focus on rebuilding the social safety net through legislation

that guarantees a basic universal income, universal childcare, and universal health benefits should also be pursued. Policies such as these will alleviate the need for people to seek out "flexible" work arrangements like food delivery gig work in the first place and ultimately make them less dependent upon their labor to meet their basic needs.

This study also suggests that despite the fragmentation concerning collective organizing, there are still instances of shared experience and solidarity among gig workers. The experiences of food delivery gig workers vary according to their investment and socioeconomic backgrounds. These differences informed the conflicting positions on collective action and pursuing employee status. However, regardless of these differences, all workers in this study agreed on some basic truths about the work; that it is an insufficient source of income at times and could stand to be improved through better wages, conditions, and benefits. While workers could not agree upon whether this economic sector should organize or not, their shared understanding of the downsides to app-based delivery work suggests that there may be more opportunity for solidarity among workers than is often associated with the gig economy.

In addition to pursuing connections among and between food delivery gig workers, gig worker organizers and labor activists should seek to incorporate restaurant workers into organizing efforts. In this study, workers expressed how difficult it is to overcome the alienation and isolation from one another given the organization of the job. Even though they sometimes connected with other workers in person or through online forums, many found these to be weak connections. However, many workers cited that they communicated with others who worked in the restaurants more than their fellow

delivery workers, suggesting this would be a promising avenue to foster solidarity across "users" of the app or within the food delivery supply chain nexus.

The other user, or part of this nexus, is the consumer, to which attention should also be paid for building alliances for better wages and working conditions. While customers were often seen as the enemy, a lot of their behavior stemmed from the lack of understanding of the conditions of delivery gig work and the degree of control they exert over the workers, which participants in this study recognized. Today's consumers care about the politics, morals, and behaviors of the companies they support, indicating that seeking alliances with consumers and bringing awareness to the conditions of food delivery gig workers would be a worthwhile avenue to possibly change the conditions of gig work. Even if this only changed conditions at the consumer behavioral level, this would impact the lives of delivery workers, who are often left to the whims of customers to determine their income. In the words of food delivery worker Pat, "this could be so lucrative if every single person tipped me $1; the difference would be huge."

For example, conducting this research and learning about the experiences of the workers changed the way that I use delivery apps. During the study and especially during the writing process, I used food delivery and grocery delivery apps more frequently. I felt conflicted at first, given what I knew about the exploitation workers experience on the job and that I was contracting out the risk of exposure to the virus. Still, this understanding also made me use the services differently. When I placed an order, I understood that it was technically a bid or an incentive to get workers to respond to and accept my request. Due to this understanding, I began to include above-average tips for each order, especially if the distance between the restaurant and my location was far. I

would also meet the delivery person outside, with a face covering, so they would not have to spend time searching for my apartment. I also tipped extra in cash when I could. I had always included high reviews and ratings before doing this research. However, even when items were missing or incorrect, I still issued the highest ratings possible, knowing it was probably not the driver's fault and that their ability to use the app and earn money was essentially in my hands. If more consumers understood how these platforms operated, perhaps they would advocate for regulation and better protections for gig workers. Still, they would at least be equipped with the complete, transparent picture to become better consumers of these services.

This research also changed my overall outlook on food delivery services more broadly. While I still maintain that the platform companies are ushering in a new iteration of exploitation that can have far-reaching and potentially dire effects on the future of work and needs to be reformed, I also understood how valuable these services were to the busy consumer, like myself, who was able to have groceries, or a hot meal delivered at my convenience. Similar to how food delivery gig workers experience and navigate the tension and contradictions of the job as both emancipative and restrictive, both an economic relief and exploitative, I came to understand that the consumer experience can sometimes replicate this tension, in wanting not to support exploitative working practices but wanting to enjoy or needing to use the services.

While the claim that gig work is the future of work can be troubled as it can and often does resemble older modes of exploitation consistent with an earlier industrial era, the reality is that this sector of the economy has altered how people think about work and is shaping their behaviors in the labor market. The gig economy will continue to

proliferate as the services and opportunities it provides to workers and consumers become valuable, desired, and necessary to the lives of many people. Bringing together all of the platform "users" would then help to expose both the conditions of the delivery workers and how the companies use consumers as a stand-in for management without their knowledge or consent.

Part of the success of platform gig companies is their ability to shield important information and power dynamics from all those involved in the process and render respective groups invisible to one another. In turn, this splinters any organizing or consciousness from developing and all but guarantees maintaining the status quo. Any actions that would expose these connections are an opportunity to disrupt the status quo and reveal how the platform is taking advantage of all those involved, and how platform companies can render the respective groups invisible to one another. While bringing transparency to the state of food delivery gig workers and their conditions in the hopes of changing consumer behavior is not a replacement for a policy that better protects workers, it is at least a step in the right direction in changing the material conditions of workers, as well as raising the awareness of the working conditions of this sector.

Recommendations

From an organizing perspective, future research would benefit by extending this study to bring in the experiences and perspectives of both restaurant workers and consumers. Understanding the role that each group plays in the proliferation of the gig economy would help further this line of inquiry into labor market sense-making and uncovering the power dynamics behind the food delivery supply chain nexus. A study such as this could pave the way for a new block of organizing among gig workers and

even have nascent impacts on the macro food supply chain. As alluded to above, there are options for solidarity and leveraging the power of all the app users to advocate for regulation, better working conditions, or even the development of a delivery system that exists outside of third-party apps, like Uber Eats, DoorDash, and Instacart. From the perspective of the changing notions of freedom and how that is playing out in employment relationships and the work environment, the next step in this research would be to extend the study to include people who work for the platforms in a corporate capacity. Understanding how they see and understand the gig economy, their role in it, and their role in the changing landscape of working relations, would further add to the discussion of the freedom ideology and its implications for the future of work.

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APPENDIX A

PLATFORM BASICS

All food delivery platforms operate in more or less the same way regarding how the worker interacts with the app, their payment structure, and how ratings and reviews operate, with some differences between them. Their basic structure revolves around the platform serving as an intermediary for consumers and workers. The consumer orders via the app, which gets sent to the restaurant or store to prepare. Once the order is near completion, the platform connects a delivery driver to the order, who then goes to the restaurant or store to retrieve the order and deliver it to the consumer.

The process to become a delivery driver is minimal and consists of a simple online application where workers enter relevant information about their vehicles, insurance policy, and driver's license, before consenting to a background check. Once the application has been approved, workers can begin delivering. To indicate that workers are ready to start receiving orders and delivering, they open the app. Workers are then given an option to accept or deny the order, based on the proposed payment and distance, shown to the driver (see figures 10 and 11). The total amount presented is a combination of what is referred to as "base pay" and customer tip. Base pay across these platforms is determined by duration, distance, and desirability of the order. This means the total is calculated based on the estimated time it takes to travel to pick up the order and deliver it, the number of miles traveled, and how high the demand is for the order, which can increase when there are fewer drivers and more hungry customers. In essence, each platform has a starting rate, which increases depending on the difficulty of the delivery.

The fare breakdown is not always transparent to workers, nor is it widely available through their websites. According to DoorDash's website this base pay can range from $2-$10, depending on the previously mentioned factors ("DoorDash

Customer Support", n.d.). While Uber Eats uses the same metrics, they offer no estimated range of base pay nor hourly earnings on their website ("A guide to how earnings work", n.d.). Instacart, the grocery delivery platform, is slightly different in terms of pay structure, in that it factors in number and type of items as well as "effort involved in shopping and delivering" per batch, but like Uber Eats, offers no information on its website about the range of the base pay ("Become an Instacart Shopper", n.d.).

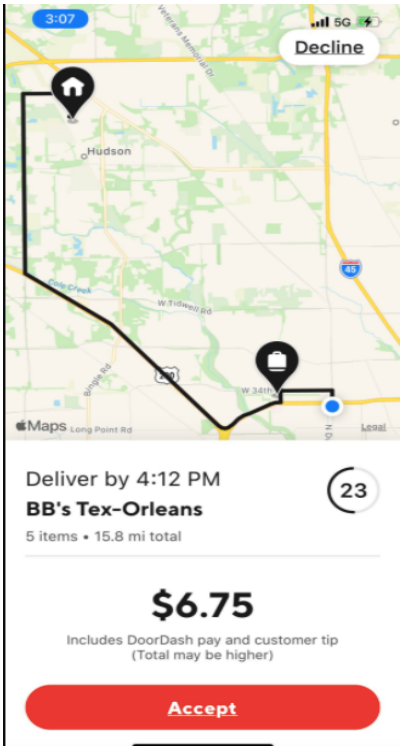

Figure 10. Screenshot of a DoorDash order posted to an online forum. Screenshot taken by the author November 2021

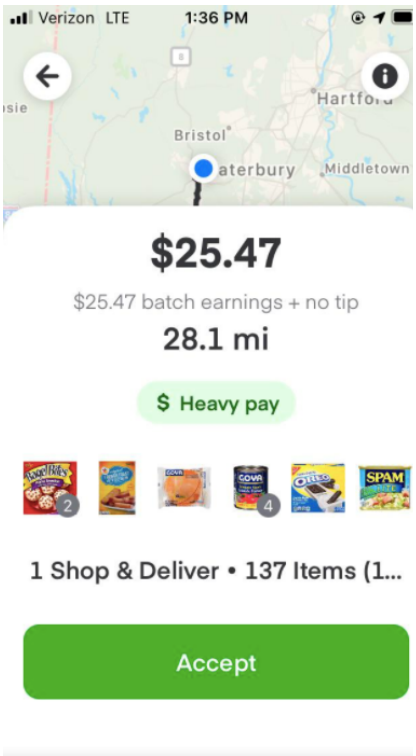

Figure 11. Screenshot of an Instacart order posted to an online forum. Screenshot taken by the author November 2021.

"Batch" is another way to say order, except sometimes there will be multiple orders in a single batch. The idea of including numerous orders in a single batch is that it saves the worker multiple trips to the same store and can maximize their time and, therefore, earning potential. DoorDash and Uber Eats practice a similar concept of assigning

multiple orders to workers from one place, what workers refer to as “stacked” orders, with the same rationale in mind; the worker is already there picking up one order, they could make more by taking two or three at once rather than making multiple trips.

As per the terms of service agreement which workers have to agree to when they sign up via the app and before beginning to deliver, the metrics used by the platforms to determine pay per order are subject to change. For example, Uber Eats changed its payment structure in spring of 2020 and no longer presents to workers how much of their pay came from each of the metrics mentioned above and has rolled them all into one (“Uber Help”, n.d.). In exchange, they have lowered the base pay and now included a “trip supplement” to every order, which is meant to make up the difference if the amount presented to them when they accept the order ends up smaller. The amount presented to workers when they take the order can end up smaller when they complete the order if the duration or distance of the trip ends up being shorter, or the customer changes the tip upon receiving the order. Uber claims that it had to lower base pay (and hide the fare breakdown) to create the trip supplement to ensure that all drivers can have more stable payment and that it “helps to make every delivery worthwhile” (“Uber Help”, n.d.).

While the rating systems vary from platform to platform, they all more or less follow a similar formula to determine if workers can remain active, putting the most importance on customer ratings. DoorDash requires that customer ratings (ratings from 1-5 stars that a customer leaves after their order has been delivered) stay at 4.2 or above, and their completion rate does not fall below 80% (“DoorDash Dasher Support”, n.d.). The completion rate is the percentage of completed orders once they have been accepted by the driver. Drivers have the option to cancel an order after they have accepted it, but

doing so too frequently could comprise this rate, particularly after they have picked up the food. Instacart and Uber Eats follow a similar formula, where falling below a 4.5 customer rating on either platform puts you at risk for deactivation. Both companies say that the completion rate is vital to remain eligible for deliveries, yet neither platform communicates precisely what the threshold is. Similar to the fee structure and fare breakdown, the ratings and reviews are also part of the terms of service agreement, meaning they are subject to change. In the later chapters, I revisit these basic functions as the workers talk about how they interact with the app while also addressing and expanding upon other app functions as they came up through my conversations with the workers.