

ALLIES OR ADVERSARIES?: MAKING MEANING OF THE GIG EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Task Rabbit. Doordash. Instacart. The on-demand or ‘gig’ economy is rapidly changing how work is organized and experienced, with algorithms taking on functions previously held by managers and workers separated from co-workers and managers. While emerging research has started to explore these structural changes around algorithmic management (Cameron, 2019; Curchod et al., 2019; Gray and Suri, 2019; Lee et al., 2015; Shapiro, 2017), we have yet to understand how these changes, notably the lack of workplace interaction, shape individuals’ experiences and meaning making at work. How do workers construct meaning in the absence of relationships with managers and co-workers? And how does this meaning construction affect the way they interact with technology, and view their employer? This paper goes beyond the dichotomy of “good job, bad job” (Kalleberg, 2011) to explore how those working in the algorithmic, organizationally sterile workplace make meaning of their work.

Meaning making is a fundamental human endeavor (Baumeister, 1990; Brief and Nord, 2000; Hall and Mirvis, 2004). Interpreting what work signifies and the role it plays in life has been encouraged by industry, business leaders, and in popular writing from the earliest days of capitalism to today (Hurst 2017). Prior literature has primarily considered meaning making in the aftermath of a trigger (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005) or in the event of the work that has significance or meaningfulness (Dobrow, 2012; Bunderson and Thompson, 2009) or both (Maitlis, 2009; Schabram and Maitlis, 2017). There has been little research that looks at the construction of meaning as an everyday activity. Further, features of on-demand work, specifically its decentralized and distributed nature, raise questions about how workers will construct meaning as these workplaces often lack of social and organizational cues that have been previously studied in the meaning literature (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2017; Dutton et al., 2016; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001;). Workers are classified as independent contractors with no long-lasting ties to the organization, often only communicating with algorithmic bots (Rosenblat, 2018). Tasks are micro-sized and devoid of organizational context (Irani and Silberman, 2013). To organizations these workers are “ghosts”, rarely seen and easily replaceable (Gray and Suri, 2019).

Considering their isolation, how do on-demand workers make meaning of their work? Drawing on a qualitative field study, including three years of participant observation and longitudinal interviews (n=107) of gig workers (ride-hailing drivers), I explore how workers construct meaning through interactions with two prominent features of their environment: customers and technology. These interactions lead drivers to understand their relationship with their work as either an alliance, in that the work system is aligned with their interest or adversarial, in that the work system is misaligned with their interests.. Over time these stances

towards the work culminate in different outcomes. This paper contributes to literatures in the meaning of work and customer service work.

RESEARCH SETTING, DATA COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

First launched in 2011, ride-hailing services, such as Uber, Lyft, Evercar, and Juno, have disrupted the taxicab industry. Algorithms, which serve to coordinate the work, are the core innovations that enable these services: Algorithms match independent, distributed drivers (working from their own cars) with customers within seconds, giving block-by-block directions. Fares dynamically adjust based on consumer demand, and driver performance is evaluated by customer ratings and driver acceptance and cancellation rates. Drivers have little direct contact with company representatives; even hiring and firing, euphemistically called activation or deactivation, is conducted online. Work requirements may vary, with most companies requiring clean driving records, no moving violations in the previous three years, state vehicle inspections, and, increasingly, despite industry protests in some cities, criminal background checks. Once hired, which can take from three days to three weeks, workers can go “online” and begin driving.

Given the emerging nature of on-demand work and my interest in theory development, I designed a multiple-sources qualitative study and spent three years in the field. I used three overlapping data sources, which I triangulated to bolster validity (Eisenhardt, 1989): participant observation as a driver ($n = 160$ hours),¹ participant observation as a rider ($n = 112$ rides), and semi-structured interviews in twenty-three North American cities ($n = 107$ interviews). While these three data sources form the bulk of analysis for this article, I also collected social and print media (e.g., discussions boards and newspapers articles), conducted focus groups with customers, and observed activities at collective organizing groups. I analyzed data using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Locke, 2001; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) with field observations, interviews, and artifacts collected from drivers as my primary data sources.

CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN THE ON-DEMAND WORKPLACE

Workers interact with three touchpoints in their environment—customers, technology, and the ride-hailing industry—ultimately making meaning of the work system and their position therein. In alliance mode, drivers drive because they find the work motivating, enriching, and enlivening. They are able to find and sustain positive meaning from their work, and they remain working. In contrast, those in the adversarial mode either continue working, while being active on driver forums and vocal about technical support and/or trying to outsmart the algorithm, or they stop working entirely because of physical pain from driving.

Alliance Mode: Viewing the Work System as Aligned with One’s Interests

Relational Practices: Building Rapport with Customers. In relational practices, drivers define their work as customer-service oriented driving and, in turn, focus their work activities on developing positive relationships with customers through offering physical and emotional support and designing the environment within the car to foster generative conversations. Before a

¹ One hundred of the driving hours were completed by the first author. As ride-hailing platforms restrict driving to the state where the car is registered, a research assistant completed the remaining hours in a different state.

ride begins, drivers attune for cues watching customers as they are walking to the car looking for conversation starters, such as a Redskins baseball cap or Macy's shopping bags. Another driver kept three phone chargers, water, an umbrella, two blankets, and gum among other snacks in his car "just in case." Using the car or props within create a shared experience is another way drivers build rapport and signal care. Music can also be a medium to create connections. On a Friday night ride, I got a ride with a so-called "party car":

The car was popping! Fairy lights on the floor. Tinsel garlands on the backseat. A globe and glow sticks on the dashboard. Top 40 music. I'd never seen anything like it – "It's a party car. I do it on Friday and Saturday - it's a hit on South campus [fraternity row]." Seems the car has quite a reputation. On the drive he told me several stories about how excited students were when they got inside and realized they got "the" party car. [Field notes - Sept 2018.]

The artifacts spark conversation and are tangible evidence that drivers care, having spent time and money to enhance the customer's experience. The car and its artifacts become a conversation starter and allows for rapport building between driver and customers.

Technology as Friend: Omnipresent and Benevolent. Even though drivers do not understand how the technology operates, in alliance mode drivers' view it as helpful in that it ensures they earn enough and reminds them of past interactions with customers. Drivers acknowledged that algorithms underpinned their work, although they were unclear exactly how. "I really believe it's God and the algorithm. I don't know how it works, not at all. But at the end of the day, it just works out. It's really weird, really weird" (Driver 37). Though unknowable, there is a general belief that algorithms are helpful in that they ensure drivers are treated fairly, receive accurate ratings, and are assigned profitable rides even when falling behind in their earnings. For those engaged in relational practices, the app became a physical reminder of positive service interactions, a primary component of how they judged their work. Customer compliments, badges, and ratings were easily accessible via their app on their phones as well as other performance indicators, such as telemetrics. During interviews, drivers would excitedly pull out their phones to show me their ratings or a recent customer compliment. "Look – I have a ton of these. People love me," Driver 57 described, pulling out his phone and scrolling through over fifty compliments including, "Best driver ever! Driver is a real jokester and made my ride to the airport fun"; "Cool car and good music" "Made my day—great conversation." In sum, the app offered constant affirmation that a driver was doing a good job, and this was reinforced by the continual checking of the app.

Industry Beliefs: Ride-Hailing as a Helper and Community Builder. Drivers in alliance mode tend to see the company and the work itself in a more positive light, viewing the company as helping them earn more, enabling enjoyable experiences, and perhaps serving society at-large. Suffering from multiple chronic illnesses, Driver 5 had not worked a steady job in more than fifteen years, and ride-hailing helped her "build myself back up to a person within a year" becoming financially independent. More generally, workers recognize the impact of ride-hailing on workers people "like them". A driver who balanced work with school said, "I can't complain and I don't think anyone can. It's very flexible ... and I make good money, which no job can

offer my with my qualifications” (Driver 23). Further, ride-hailing was seen as benefitting the local community especially those who lived in areas without public transport.

Adversarial Mode: Viewing the Work System as Misaligned with One’s Interests

Transactional Practices: Customers as Disrespectful Fares. In transactional practices workers define their work as getting a customer safely to their destination, thus focusing their efforts on making each ride as efficient as possible. To do so, drivers create social distance from customers by setting emotional, mental, and physical boundaries to pre-empt unnecessary conversations and requests for additional ride-related services. In transactional practices workers define doing a good job as getting their customers safely to their destination and earning money. “All I know is that I need to get you to your destination ‘cause that’s my mindset, get you to your destination in a fast, safe way so I can get my money and you can get out of my car” (Driver 40). At best, customers are seen as faceless fares that need to be transported; at worse, as self-centered monsters that drivers must continually defend against. By avoiding emotional engagement, making no eye contact, eschewing conversations, and not offering help, drivers create psychological boundaries to protect themselves. Towels on the backseat, floor covers, and signs requesting customers to wipe their feet and refrain from eating and drinking or slamming serve as reminders for riders to behave.

“What’s that?” I asked pointing to dry erase board in the back pocket. [The driver] quickly went into a long rant, her voice getting louder and angrier. “I had to make it cause people were misbehaving. They trifling. This one woman spilled coffee all over my backseat—and didn’t even say sorry!” [Swings arms open. I get nervous as she’s driving.] “So I made the sign. But then people started touching the sign. And messing it up. **No.** [Voice gets even louder.] You don’t need to touch the sign to read it, so I had to make a new sign.” [The first line on sign is, “Don’t touch the sign.”] “Is it okay if I touch the sign?” I asked. “Yeah, but don’t mess it up.” (Fieldnotes - Sept 2019).

By reinforcing boundaries about what customer behavior is and is not permissible, drivers define their work emphasize what parts of the work, earning money, have meaning for them.

Technology as Foe: Conspiracies and Misleading Information. Similar to how drivers see customers, technology is viewed with suspicion and as another part of the work that must be managed. Drivers consistently assessed that the matching algorithm was not assigning the most optimal (lucrative) rides. Indeed, drivers often interpreted the algorithm as “out to get them” by not assigning better rides.

I swear there was a conspiracy because in the afternoons - I logged it every single day at 4:00 - I would get a long ride that would take me out of the city in the opposite direction towards the airport. And then right after I get out of the city, it would light up like a Christmas tree [on heatmap]! I swore it was a conspiracy because I did very little, if any, prime-time rides. Because I’m always sent in the opposite direction. (Driver 60)

Overall the algorithm was perceived as not being aligned with drivers’ interests instead thwarting them from earning the most money in the shortest period of time. Some drivers believed the app

transmitted false messages about changing work conditions and pay as surge often disappeared when a driver arrived in a new area. The frequency of the messaging, the not-so-subtle priming cues, and the challenges of earning enough led some drivers to question the veracity of the app's messaging and, at times, the entire business model. The work "is not as easy as they advertise" (Driver 17) and the companies "do a lot of false advertising" about pay (Driver 4).

Industry Beliefs: Ride-Hailing as Depleting and Corrosive. Drivers blamed ride-hailing for damaging their bodies and cars. During routine workdays drivers reported physical distress such as "dizziness because your eyes are working all the time (Driver 6)" and exhaustion from "having to be in a high state of attention" (Driver 46). Drivers felt that information about surges, bonuses, and pay was misleading and caused them to work grueling, almost inhumane, hours in order to meet the advertised pay. Some drivers believed that ride-hailing favored the customers to such an extent that the entire business model was designed to exploit drivers.

There's no such thing as a major corporation like Ride-hail whose board members will sit around and go, "Oh, we're taking a huge loss this month. Let's just keep doing what we're doing." No. They're going to steal it from the rider or the driver. It's not going to be the rider because riders pay attention to a dollar difference in fares. To think that a corporation has the best interests of its drivers [at heart] is ridiculous. It's just not happening. (Driver 60)

Expectations of a bleak future were common. The future was "black" (Driver 19) as drivers were "a cog in a money making machine" (Driver 34). In sum, those in the adversarial mode found themselves enmeshed in an exploitative relationship where ride-hailing "is the pimp, the riders are the johns, and we just open our legs" (Driver 4).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The meaning of work literature has generally constrained itself to looking at single, largely intrapersonal, antecedents of meaning (e.g., Brief and Nord, 1990; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), within traditional organizations with managers and co-workers (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2017; Dutton et al., 2016). Necessarily, this limits our understanding of how workers make meaning in the on-demand workplace with algorithms as managers and without co-workers. This study shows how individuals make meaning in the absence of clear interpersonal and organizational cues, in a way that aligns with their own personal identity and needs. Specifically, I propose an understanding of meaning making based on two unexplored features of the work setting: customers and smart-phone technology. This integrated model answers calls for researchers to examine the interconnectedness of meaning from multiple contexts - individual, social, and contextual (Rosso et al., 2010).

How social interactions shape meaning making at work is an area of emerging research and, to-date, has largely focused on co-present organizational members, such as managers (Podolny et al., 2005; Ashforth et al., 2017) and co-workers (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978; Dutton et al., 2016). Though interactions with customers lack the duration and depth of exchanges with managers and coworkers, I find they facilitate meaning making. This study adds to research that poses workers as motivated to actively construct meaning in their environment (e.g., Wrzesniewski et al., 2001; Sonnenshein et al., 2013; Dutton et al., 2016). Yet, in contrast to

research, I find that workers use their own beliefs and values to make sense of their interactions with customers and craft their activities accordingly. Drivers either expand work activities, offering comfort items and emotional support, or constrict work activities, enforcing boundaries on where customers should sit and limiting conversations. Building on approach-avoidance orientation (Elliot, 2006; Gable, 2006), these findings extend the job crafting literature which has primarily focused on role expansion as a way to create positive meaning at work (e.g., Berg et al., 2010; Tims et al., 2013; Wrzesniewski et al., 2013). Though adversarial mode is associated with disengagement from others it does not necessarily lead to withdrawal from the work itself and is instead often associated with workers crafting and trying to do their work more efficiently. By extension, these findings show that job crafting is more broadly related to meaning construction as opposed to just positive meaning (Zhang and Parker, 2018).

Furthermore, workers' orientation towards crafting was associated with practices and beliefs about technology. An alliance mode, approach-orientation was associated with drivers who reported that the algorithm reminded them of prior positive customer service experiences and helped them secure more lucrative rides. Conversely, an adversarial mode, avoidance-orientation was associated with drivers who reported that the algorithm was out to get them and deliberately provided misleading information. In other words, the interactions with the technology reinforced already held orientations. This study provides more contextualized and nuanced theorizing of meaning making than research that has focused solely on interactions between individuals (e.g., Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001; Dutton et al., 2016) or interactions between individuals and technology (e.g., Mazmanian et al., 2013; Dietvorst et al., 2016).

This study's sample—lower-skilled workers with a job orientation—offers insight for the meaning of work literature, which has been criticized for privileging higher-skilled individuals and/or those pursuing meaningful work (Brief, 2008; Brief et al., 1995; Rosso et al., 2010). Although all drivers were, to some extent, financially dependent on ride-hailing, I found that these motives did not crowd out other sources of meaning. Some drivers continued to strive for meaningfulness, framing work as a service to customer and community and job craft by expanding work activities. Others, however, found meaning in completing work efficiently, as the economic value of work is more salient, and job craft by reducing their work activities. This finding addresses questions of whether fundamental assumptions of meaning making still hold in low-income workforces (e.g., Leana et al., 2009; Leana et al., 2012).

Lastly, this study provides insight into how on-demand workers construct meaning. Research presents an array of reasons why workers are drawn to on-demand work: financial independence, a lifeline after an unexpected job loss, flexible work that allows workers to sustain other meaningful identities, social connections with customers, or connections to “virtual” co-workers on-line (Rosenblat, 2018; Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017; Gray and Suri, 2019). While important, these meaning types are limited as they only link workers' backgrounds to their present-day meaning making. This study takes a dynamic perspective, capturing the interlocking touchpoints around which meaning is made. In offering a richer and more specific theoretical framework, my findings suggests there is more coherency in the meaning construction on-demand workers than previously theorized.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR