

On-Demand Labor: Tactics of Flexibility and Control

Abstract. This poster explores the perspectives of workers in on-demand positions managed through online platforms. Our interview-based study considers how Uber drivers perceive their employment status, how they view Uber's management tactics and how they modify their work practices in order to control their schedules and wages. We found that workers tended to view themselves as independent contractors and had strong understandings of the tactics used by Uber to manage the supply of drivers. However, we also found that they do not view their responses to these tactics as a form of resistance. Instead of seeing their employment status as a problem that calls for collective action, drivers were primarily interested in increasing their own wages.

Keywords: On-demand labor • Online platforms • Work practice

1 Introduction

Uber is a mobile phone application that connects people who need transportation with a pool of available drivers. New technological systems like Uber are currently changing how people work—for example, an ongoing debate concerns the employment status of Uber drivers, who the company claims are not employees but instead independent contractors (Chen, Mislove, and Wilson, 2015). A key question in this debate is the extent to which Uber controls its drivers, such as by encouraging them to work at specific times (Scheiber 2017). Rosenblat and Stark (2015), for example, introduce the concept of soft control in describing how surveillance and data collections practices allow Uber to covertly shape drivers' actions.

While drivers' employment status is a matter of active and ongoing debate (in courts and academic literature), few studies have considered the perspectives of workers in on-demand positions that are managed through online platforms. In order to contribute to this emerging area of interest, we present an interview-based study focused on Uber drivers' perceptions of their own employment status, as well as their practices in negotiating between the flexibility of on-demand work and the incentives used by Uber to control their work practices.

2 Methods

In order to understand Uber drivers' perceptions and practices, we conducted semi-structured interviews with current drivers. We employed a variety of techniques to find participants, including visiting locations where drivers congregate, posting to message boards for drivers and snowball sampling. We conducted 18 interviews either in person, via web conferencing or over the phone, with the duration ranging from 15 minutes to 45 minutes; the average interview lasted 18 minutes.

We transcribed the interviews and iteratively read and coded drivers' responses. After identifying an initial set of themes, we returned to drivers' responses in order to discuss the codes we developed and refine our schema. We ultimately focused our analysis on three topics: drivers' perceptions of their employment status, Uber's tactics to control drivers and drivers' tactics to retain control of their work.

3 Findings

The majority of participants did not see Uber as their employer, instead seeing themselves as self-employed independent contractors. However, despite this perception, most participants expressed a strong dislike of how Uber treats drivers. One driver, for example, expressed this frustration when saying "Oh, I identify them as an employer all right, [but] they may not identify me as an employee." Similar frustrations were consistent among participants. As we describe below, many participants had strong understandings of how Uber manages drivers in order to maximize profits, and, as a result, described their dislike of and resistance to Uber's tactics. As one driver said, "I feel like Uber ... I guess exploits drivers".

3.1 Tactics of Control

While classifying Uber drivers as independent contractors suggests that drivers have full autonomy over their behavior and choices, drivers described several ways Uber utilizes software algorithms to monitor, evaluate and track their performance in order to manage the supply of workers on the platform. The tactics described by drivers include motivational messages, surge pricing and driver ratings.

Drivers reported receiving emails, motivational messages and promotions meant to incentivize them to drive during specific times such as on a holiday or during a concert. In regards to emails, one driver reported that Uber employed a "psychological trick" by sending the driver an email stating that they've already made \$260 and suggesting that they "make it an even \$300," a tactic meant to motivate drivers to continue working longer than intended. Motivational messages sent to drivers often guaranteed a specific hourly rate if they met criteria such as accepting 80% of offered rides and averaging at least one and a half rides per hour. Another driver mentioned that Uber offered promotions if drivers worked during a designated time.

Drivers described surge pricing as another tactic used by Uber to control their work. Surge pricing is a feature of Uber's platform that raises ride prices in specific areas, for example charging riders more on weekend nights. Drivers often perceived surge pricing as incentivizing them to drive to areas in hopes of earning a higher fare and described it as a way to fill a shortage of drivers in an area. In describing Uber's tactics in relation to concepts such as supply and demand, drivers exhibited strong awareness not only of how they were being incentivized but also why.

Finally, drivers also described ways that the driver rating system affected their work practices. As participants noted, receiving ratings below 4.5 could result in the deactivation of drivers' accounts. As a result, many drivers stated that they modified their

behavior to be more customer-centric by, for example, providing customers with water bottles or helping with their luggage. One driver tries to be “happy and upbeat” as a way to earn five stars from passengers. Another driver complained that the rating system “forces drivers to make extra stops for passengers for the fear that a passenger will give them one or lower on their rating.”

3.2 Maintaining Control

We found that drivers used a variety of tactics that decreased Uber's control of their work practices, including keeping the app on while relaxing at their homes and simultaneously using multiple on-demand employment apps. However, while participants demonstrated a strong awareness of how Uber encourages them to work at specific times and locations, they did not describe their tactics as direct resistance. Instead, they focused on how they were able to make more money or better integrate their work for Uber with their other activities.

A main tactic taken by drivers is to manipulate the rides they accept in order to receive higher fares. For example, while Uber assumes that drivers will keep the app turned on when they are willing to accept rides, one driver described strategically leaving it off: “One tactic that I kind of picked up was, before I turned the driver notification on to let riders know I’m available, I would drive to a busy area.”

Other drivers described their practice of strategically refusing rides. When drivers are offered a ride, they have limited information that would allow them to predict how profitable it will be—however, once they have accepted the ride, they are able to make a judgement. Some drivers described how, although Uber discourages the practice, they will selectively reject rides they have accepted as a way to increase their earnings: “When I started I would accept every ride that came along. Now I probably won’t accept rides that are over ten minutes away. Before I was more likely to allow over four passengers into my car and now I’m very strict in not letting that happen.” In this way, drivers are also able to maintain their ideal driving range.

The most common tactic described by drivers was driving away from areas of surge pricing. As one driver stated, “Rule number one: always do not chase the surge. Ever. If you see a surge area, don’t drive toward it, drive away from it.” The driver went on to argue that, because surge pricing changes frequently, drivers likely arrive too late to take advantage of increased fares. Other drivers expressed the same opinion, noting that less-experienced drivers were likely to crowd the area around the surge and quickly cause fares to return to normal. While drivers understand that Uber uses surge pricing to manage the supply of drivers, many bluntly expressed their unwillingness to go along with this tactic, with one driver calling it “an Uber scam to get drivers to certain areas.”

4 Discussion

While we describe drivers' practices as resisting Uber's tactic of control, it's important to note that they primarily describe their actions only as increasing their earnings. Despite expressing a strong awareness of how Uber "exploits" drivers through various incentives and surveillance practices, drivers, in the end, accepted the flexibility of the work offered and, for the most part, only wanted to make more per hour.

Driver's perspectives contrast with the way on-demand employment is discussed in other contexts. For example, while class-action lawsuits contesting the classification of drivers as independent contractors have received considerable attention, the drivers we spoke with don't describe desires to organize or engage in large-scale collective action. Instead, they often describe tactics that, while not beneficial for Uber, are probably also not necessarily beneficial for other drivers. Rejecting a low-paying ride, for example, only puts that ride back in the pool to be accepted by other drivers. In this respect, drivers do behave as independent contractors, interested in being treated fairly—but fairly as individuals and not as a collection of employees.

5 Conclusion

Drivers have complicated relationships with Uber. They don't see the company as their employer, but they do feel as if they are exploited for their work. They don't necessarily oppose the strategies Uber uses to manage its workforce, but they often take issue with the specific ways those strategies are implemented. And drivers resist efforts to control their behavior not by rejecting the platform and looking for other work or by collectively organizing but instead by finding ways to manipulate the platform's rules in their favor. As work is increasingly performed through on-demand platforms, it's important to understand how workers maintain control of their time and income. As the drivers we interviewed indicate, new technologies may result in new and unanticipated forms of resistance.

References

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