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Uber Effort: The Production of Worker Consent in Online Ride Sharing Platforms

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## ABSTRACT

The rise of the online gig economy alters ways of working. Mediated by algorithmically programmed mobile apps, platforms such as Uber and Lyft allow workers to work by driving and completing rides at any time or in any place that the drivers choose. This hybrid form of labor in an online gig economy which combines independent contract work with computer-mediated work differs from traditional manufacturing jobs in both its production activity and production relations. Through nine interviews with Lyft/Uber drivers, I found that workers' consent, which was first articulated by Michael Burawoy in the context of the manufacturing economy, is still present in the work of the online gig economy in post-industrial capitalism. Workers willingly engage in the on-demand work not only to earn money but also to play a learning game motivated by the ambiguity of the management system, in which process they earn a sense of self-satisfaction and an illusion of autonomous control. This research points to the important role of technology in shaping contemporary labor process and suggests the potential mechanism which produces workers' consent in technology-driven workplaces.

Key Words: Workers' consent; Algorithmic management; Labor process

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According to a recent review on the gig economy (Smith 2016), 8% of Americans reported having worked for and earned money from the gig economy in 2015. Also referred to as the platform economy, the on-demand economy or the sharing economy, the sector is represented by platforms such as the ride-sharing platform, Uber and the home-sharing platform, Airbnb. Unlike traditional workplaces, the gig economy creates a hybrid workplace that combines independent contract work with online algorithmic-managed work. As increasingly more people participate in the gig economy, its impact on work could be far-reaching.

The workplaces in the gig economy differ from traditional workplaces in many ways. Work in the gig economy is usually independently contracted, geographically unbounded and remotely distributed by platforms such as Uber and Amazon Mechanical Turk. There has been a surge of scholarly interest on the “gig economy” in the past decade (Dillahunt 2017, Schor 2017, Morgan 2018). While previous research has explored the growing precarity and suggested the shift of financial risk from platforms to workers (Schor 2016, Kalleberg 2013), the subjectivity of workers, which situate their own experiences in social relationships, has been under-explored, leading us to ignore the crucial questions of how workers make sense of their work and the cultural meanings of working a gig job.

In this project, I explore the experiences of online ridesharing platforms workers. By studying cases of the two online ridesharing platforms, Uber and Lyft, through interviews with workers, I address the research questions of how contract drivers, with no direct supervision, end up consenting to the expectation of both the platforms and the riders. In simpler terms, do motivations beyond monetary rewards generate drivers’ efforts in the online gig economy?

This research is significant both theoretically and substantively. Theoretically, the research extends theories of labor process control, which has primarily been focused on traditional manufacturing jobs and service jobs into the context of online ridesharing economy, a critical form of economy in the post-industrial capitalism. Although the labor process in the online ridesharing economy differs from the traditional industries, I show that the outcome of labor control remains the same. That is, workers' consent to work in the ridesharing economy is still constantly produced.

Substantively, the research contributes to understanding how technology, specifically the online gig platforms, has transformed workplaces. It fills in the gap in the previous literature in the gig economy, which tends not to address workers' subjectivity in the labor process in the gig economy. However, it is not until we understand how workers make sense of their jobs that we can accurately depict the power structure of such a workplace. The findings suggest that technology, such as management algorithms, could occupy a dominant position in workers' conception of the job. Characteristics of such technology could greatly influence workers' work experience and define workers' routine. As more people enter the gig economy labor market, it is crucial for us to have a scientific understanding on workers' subjectivity in the labor process within this new market, in order to protect the rights of online gig workers.

To explore the production of workers' consent in the online ridesharing economy, the paper is organized as follows. I will start by situating the study of labor process control in ridesharing economy in the context of post-industrial capitalism and neoliberalism. Then, I describe my research procedures, which are designed to explore the subjectivity of workers in ridesharing platforms. In the findings section, I answer two questions: 1) To what are workers'

consenting? and 2) How is the consent produced in the labor process? To answer the first question, I describe drivers' efforts of working extended hours and providing quality passenger experiences. To answer the second question, I first explain the framing of driving as self-responsible entrepreneurs and the tension it creates among drivers, and then I explain the learning games drivers are motivated to participate in trying to resolve the tension.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Questions such as “Why do workers continue to work?”, “How does management achieve control over labor?” and “How does management increase the effort of laborers?” are not unique in the context of online ridesharing platforms. In fact, these questions about labor process control have been discussed by sociologists for a long time. In the section below, I first lay out the historical responses from sociologists on the topic of labor process control. Then, I identify the differences between workplaces structures in the gig economy and in the traditional economy, which could lead changes to the labor process that affect the mechanism of labor process control. Lastly, I identify the questions that current theories are unable to answer and explain how this project addresses these gaps.

### *Investing in Work*

The significance of labor process control cannot be discussed independently of the context of capitalism. According to Marx, the labor process in capitalism in which workers turn raw materials into useful objects is a product of class domination (Marx 1906). As a result, organizations disempower workers in the labor process through labor process control

mechanisms to guarantee the continuous accumulation of profit in capitalist production. Thus, labor is subordinated to the interest of capital, and organizations continue updating management technologies to control the labor process and ensure the maximum profit.

As a result, labor control remains a central and necessary component for contemporary social relations. Just as Marx said, “All means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination and exploitation of the producers.” (Marx 1906:708). As we are exploring the labor process in the online ridesharing economy in the 21st century, although the specific mode of production is not well captured by Marx, the fundamental logic of accumulation in capitalism does not change.

In concrete reality, the form of labor control shifts as the labor process changes (Burawoy 1983). In his original articulation of labor process theory, Marx considered coercion as the fundamental way of labor control. However, coercive power is not sufficient to motivate workers’ continuous effort, as workers can opt out the labor process and choose another site in the market. After the rise of mass production, Braverman furthered the argument by identifying the mechanism of labor control as deskilling, in which skilled workers are replaced by machines and the remaining unskilled workers have little control over production (Braverman, 1998).

These strictly materialist explanations of labor process control, however, fall short of providing a complete account, as they do not explain workers’ subjective consent, which “elicit cooperation in the pursuit of profit” (Burawoy 1979: 30). Agreeing with the necessity of labor control in the capitalist production process, Burawoy explained that labor control is completed through more subtle mechanisms in which workers’ consent is “manufactured” (1979). By giving workers a certain degree of control in their manufacturing work, organizations framed the



work process as a game of making out. In the machine shop Burawoy studied, workers were not only motivated by the financial reward of the piece-rate system but also motivated by the psychological satisfaction that they could gain by winning the game of making out. According to an interpretation of Burawoy by Occhiuto, “the game of ‘making out’ allowed workers to construe themselves as skilled laborers, which was significant in the context of the hierarchical relationship between workers and management” (2017:272).

Burawoy’s research emphasizes the importance of examining the labor process as two interrelated components, namely production activities, which affect the “transformation of labor power to labor” and production relations, which are the relationships that workers enter as they entering the job, both with co-workers and with managers. His research suggests that the social relations that workers experience in the production process shape the way they make sense of the work. Thus, worker consent is a collective product that works, in part, by creating a distinct social meaning of work to the workers. The meaning, however, is only created in the process of production, as workers enter and develop their social relations in the workplace. In other words, Burawoy points out that rather than only selecting workers who consent to the work before they start working, it is the process of making out and negotiating during the work that produces consent among the workers in manufacturing workplaces. More importantly, by playing the game, workers also consent to the rules of the game, which subjects themselves to the exploitative logic of capitalism.

The labor process further shifts in post-industrial capitalism. More recent studies extend the metaphor of the “game” into the context of the service industry. Similar to the manufacturing industry where Burawoy conducted his research, Sherman observed that doormen and

receptionists also subscribe to hotel “games” during their work (2007). Through playing the game of maximizing their tip and minimizing their work, service workers establish themselves as skilled and autonomous professionals. One change of the workers’ game in the service industry, however, is viewing the guests as the “agents of production”, which makes the labor process more unpredictable to workers (2007:112). The uncertainty in the labor process, which used to come from the behavior of the machines, is now created by customers’ actions and demands. Consequently, the labor relationship between service workers and managers also shifts from having contrary interests in the “game” to having aligned interests.

### *Transformed Workplaces in Gig Economy*

To understand the broad research question of how the rise of the online gig economy affects the labor process and worker subjectivity, it is essential to first understand how the gig economy provides infrastructure for labor that differs from traditional workplaces. Four criteria define platforms in the gig economy: (1) the use of information technology to facilitate peer-to-peer transactions, (2) the use of user-based rating systems, (3) flexibility in workers’ working hours, and (4) worker-provision of the tools and assets necessary to provide the service (Telles 2016). Although the definition is neither sufficient nor necessary (Schor 2017), it identifies some of the essential characteristics of the platforms, which helps us to analyze the research topic addressed in this project -- the work experiences of workers in the gig economy.

Among the four defining features, criteria (3) flexibility of working schedule and (4) investment of personal assets in work allow workers in the gig economy a degree of **structural autonomy**, which is not present in traditional workplaces. Criteria (1) the use of information

technology and (2) rating systems introduce the **algorithmic management** paradigm. Especially, the online gig economy often uses **algorithmic control** solely without any in-person managerial infrastructure, which differs from the traditional service economy.

As I will show below, both components of the labor process that were emphasized by Burawoy, production activities and production relations are altered in online ridesharing platforms, compared to traditional workplaces. It is thus important to answer the question of how the online ridesharing platforms might change the labor process and workers subjectivity. That is, how are workers motivated differently to commit to the work process in ways that facilitate profit?

*Structural Autonomy - the flexibility of work hours and locations:* The flexibility of work hours and locations is one of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of the gig economy. Drivers of Uber and Lyft are legally independent contractors who receive a 1099 form, the payment report form that IRS requires businesses to use for non-employees (Smith & Leberstein 2015). In practice, neither of the platforms explicitly restricts workers' hours and working locations (Uber 2018, Lyft 2018). Drivers drive in their own cars and can start accepting rides whenever or wherever they open the mobile app for the corresponding platform. Once they indicate in the mobile app that they are willing to start accepting rides, the app will assign a nearby passenger request to the drivers. The contract between drivers and the platforms does not start until they accept a ride and each contract often only lasts for less than an hour. The platforms also do not mention the possibility of deactivating drivers' accounts after a certain length of inactivity (Uber 2018, Lyft 2018). As a result, workers can choose to be "on-demand" based on their own availability of time and location.

The formal structural autonomy of the ridesharing platforms attracts drivers. In a survey conducted among Uber drivers in 2014, 87% of the participants indicated that they choose to drive for Uber “to be my own boss and set my own schedule.” Moreover, 85% chose “to have more flexibility in my schedule and balance my work with my life and family” (Hall & Krueger 2018). In fact, multiple empirical studies have also reported that the flexibility of work schedule and location is a primary motivation for drivers to choose ridesharing platforms as either a full-time job or part-time job (Lee 2015; Raval & Dourish 2016). In-depth interviews with Uber drivers showed that workers value both the temporal and location flexibility offered by the gig economy because it facilitates the combination of gig work with other alternative employment (Wood et al. 2018).

The structural autonomy that Uber and Lyft give to their drivers significantly changes the labor process, precisely the production relations. As independent contract workers, Uber and Lyft drivers are removed from the network of managers and peer workers, which commonly exists in traditional manufacturing and service jobs. Consequently, common features thought to produce workers’ consent—peer competition and an internal labor market—do not apply for ridesharing workers. In fact, Sallaz suggests that independent contract workers in call centers only show short-term effort towards their work, rather than long-term consent, precisely because they are not situated in a hierarchically structured workplace (2015). In his study of taxi drivers in New York, Occhiuto also argued that the schedule flexibility gives drivers structural autonomy, which generates drivers’ effort, not through the social relations within their workplaces, but their personal social relations - driving a taxi allows them to fulfill other aspirations for personal development (2017).

Although previous studies have discussed the way independent contract work changes the mechanism of labor process control, they have not addressed the change with consideration of the specific production activities in the ridesharing economy. The relations of production and production activities, however, are “concretely inseparable components” of the labor process (Burawoy 1978:15). Thus it is integral to consider how the specific combination of the two in the gig economy affects the mechanisms of labor process control.

*Algorithmic Management - work assignment algorithm and rating system:* The productive activities in Uber and Lyft, driving, are primarily organized by the management algorithms that distribute, manage and evaluate the work process. Both Uber and Lyft assign rides to drivers through their work assignment algorithms. The algorithms are proprietary and not transparent to drivers, but one feature the algorithms include is driver’s ratings. Drivers are rated by passengers after each ride, based on passengers’ subjective satisfaction. Besides the regular earnings for each ride, drivers also have chances to get rewards from the platforms. The rewards might be doubling the amount earned for a particular ride or providing a particular dollar value bonus for completing a given number of rides. However, the assignment of the rewards continuously changes and is also decided by algorithms.

While the adoption of algorithmic management appears arbitrary and seems to be a natural result of the advance of technology, I would argue that the gig economy platforms’ increasing reliance on algorithmic surveillance technology is, in fact, a reflection of the accumulation logic in a capitalist society. The computer-mediated process enables platforms to collect “pervasive and continuous” data from workers (Zubuff 2015). Furthermore, the Internet

connects different sources of data, allowing an “assemblage of surveillance” which could accumulate information from different surveillance sources (Lyon 2001).

The use of algorithmic management might intensify the exploitation in the labor process. On a micro level, the work assignment algorithm, which is widely adopted in the gig economy platforms, appears to be optimized based on a supply-demand relationship but fails to address workers’ feeling and pace of work (Lee 2015). On a macro level, sociologists demonstrate that algorithmic management facilitates and legitimates exploitation by creating information asymmetries that disempower workers in the bargaining process with both platforms and customers (Rosenblat & Stark 2016, Wood et al. 2018, Graham et al. 2017).

Zuboff uses the term “surveillance capitalism” to illustrate the fact that with the help of surveillance technology, the company has more power to control, define and make a profit from the labor process (2015). In the case of Uber, with the constant flow of data recorded by the platform as part of algorithmic management, the platform not only monitors drivers who fail to achieve production goals, it also easily tracks those who exceed the production standard, which gives companies information to adjust personalized production goals to make profit from labors most effectively (Lyon 2001).

Rosenblat and Stark identify the specific ways such profit-maximization algorithm management is reflected in the Uber driver app (2016). Such ways include requiring drivers to accept ride requests blindly, controlling the surge pricing, and using rating systems in the work assignment algorithms. As a result, under algorithmic management, drivers can work whenever they want, but the information asymmetry between platforms and workers induces workers in a

competitive market to drive during certain hours and locations through monetary rewards (Rosenblat and Stark 2016, Wood et al. 2018).

As the traditional labor control mechanisms including coercion and deskilling seem to lose their effectiveness, algorithmic management has been argued to be the alternative to the labor process management strategy in the gig economy. However, such arguments seem to rely on the assumption that only monetary rewards can motivate workers. The analysis emphasizes that the system relies on monetary rewards and takes it for granted that drivers will follow the surge pricing or accept rides blindly because they want to maximize their earnings.

Paradoxically, more than half of the gig workers appear not to be dependent on the earnings from driving. According to the Pew research center, 44% of gig workers have full-time jobs outside the gig economy (Smith 2016). Also, analysis of Uber's data reveals that the average pay for an Uber driver is \$13.25 per hour in three U.S. major cities, which is only slightly higher than minimum wage (O'Donovan & Singer-Vine 2016).

As indicated by Burawoy, workers' consent in the labor process might be produced by something other than financial gain. Workers' cultural understanding of the work also plays a role in continuing to motivating drivers. For example, evidence shows that some drivers report the fun of meeting new people as well as the desire to give back to the community as more important reasons for driving than the extra income they make (Lee 2015).

Overall, the online ridesharing economy creates a unique workplace for us to reassess the concept of workers' consent. However, the extant literature is unable to provide a complete account of the labor process control mechanism in the ridesharing economy, as it fails to consider workers' subjectivity in the context of the particular production activity. Thus, the

current study extends Burawoy's account of manufacturing consent to the gig economy by studying the case of Uber and Lyft. When both the relations of production and the nature of production activities change significantly, do workers still consent to the labor process? If it is still the case, how is the consent produced similarly or differently?

## DATA AND METHODS

Employing the extended case method (Burawoy 1998), I use the case of online ridesharing platforms, specifically Uber and Lyft, to reassess the theory of the production of workers' consent. Following the analytical framework of "manufacturing consent" described by Burawoy (1979), I examine the case of Uber and Lyft by collecting data on workers' subjectivity in the labor process and analyzing data in the context of their relations of production and production activities.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the subjectivity of platform drivers, I collected data for this project by interviewing Uber and Lyft drivers. Interviews allowed me to focus on the process of production, where workers' consent is produced (Burawoy 1979), rather than the prerequisite and the outcome. Interviews also allowed me to investigate how people "experience themselves as good, valuable, worthwhile people" in the labor process (Lamont and Swidler 2014:159). In the interviews, I asked drivers about their decision-making process in driving, their relations with passengers and their perceived relations with the ride-sharing platforms. These questions allowed me to focus on the nuanced emotions of platform drivers and addressed questions such as how drivers make sense of their work.



In his original research, Burawoy collected his data from participant observation as a worker in a manufacturing factory. However, I purposefully chose to collect my data through interviews rather than participant observation, considering the particular work routine on the online ridesharing platforms. Uber or Lyft drivers drive in their own cars and decide when to work based on their own schedules. Thus, it would have been unrealistic to find any consistent time and location to observe drivers' work activities. Moreover, the labor relations involved in the online ridesharing work are not only between drivers with passengers but also drivers with the management platforms, which would have been hard to observe without asking drivers to describe the relations explicitly. In comparison, interviews are more effective in getting drivers to answer why and how they consent to the job.

To recruit interview participants, I adopted a mix of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. I started with drivers in my personal network. Then I posted a recruitment flyer in multiple public Facebook groups, including a neighborhood Facebook group and the Uber/Lyft driver Facebook groups in the city I reside in. I also invited drivers whom I met after taking Uber or Lyft rides. For all interviewees, I also asked participants to recommend other drivers who may be willing to participate.

I conducted all but one interview in person in a coffee shop. Since customers' ratings for drivers after each ride can directly affect drivers' reputation and thus consequently affect drivers economic gain (Lee 2015), I intentionally decided to conduct interviews at a separate time from a ride. Removing the conversation from the power dynamic of me being a customer improves the likelihood that the answers I gathered are genuine, rather than intentionally crafted in desirable ways.

In October 2018 and March 2019, I conducted nine interviews in total. The participants' ages range from 21 to 60, and careers range from students to retired professionals. Seven participants identify as male, and two identify as female, which is representative of the population of Uber/Lyft driver as a whole (Hall & Krueger 2018). Due to my sampling methods, drivers in my sample are all part-time drivers, driving 10-20 hours each week. All of them, except for one identify as middle or upper middle class. Thus, the sample is biased towards drivers who do not depend on Uber as their only income source. However, since the current research is meant to investigate the cultural motivation of engaging in the gig economy, a sample that does not drive Uber for necessity will likely to elicit more significant responses.

## FINDINGS

Uber and Lyft drivers are entirely on their own to decide when to start driving and how to complete each ride. However, it is surprising that all drivers in my interviews are motivated to commit to driving. In the first part of the findings section, I describe the ways that drivers commit to their jobs by driving for extended periods of time and giving good services to their riders. In the second part, I explore why drivers follow such a consistent normative standard. I argue that consent is produced through a learning game where drivers seek to discern the workings of the platform. I show that the structural autonomy in the platforms allows drivers to internalize a rhetorical discourse of self-responsible entrepreneurship. However, the obscure algorithmic management in the ridesharing platform contradicts with drivers' desire to be self-responsible, which is framed by the entrepreneurial discourse. The tension thus motivates drivers to continue to engage in the learning games curated by the ridesharing platforms, through

which the rules of the workplace become seemingly discoverable. As a result, by participating in the learning games, drivers generate consent to driving, to be emotionally engaged in driving and to the logic of exploitation.

*Investing One's Self in the Online Gig Economy*

I observed that drivers in the two online ridesharing platforms consent to work in two ways: 1) they commit to driving regularly for a substantial number of hours and 2) they aim to provide quality service to riders.

*The time commitment to driving:* Among the eight participants I interviewed, people drive for 15 hours, on average, each week on top of their busy schedule of full-time professional jobs or college life. Although the specific time of the day when drivers choose to work varies from person to person, the amount of time they spend in driving Uber/Lyft, however, invariably occupies a significant amount of time in their life. It is typical for my interviewees who have full-time jobs to drive Uber/Lyft for 6-30 hours each week. As one participant complained about the change of lifestyle that driving Lyft brought to him, "I don't have a lot of free time. I don't have a lot of free time, to begin with. I spent a lot of time driving and put a lot of miles on my car." He would usually drive during weekday nights, holidays or weekends, which, in the past, had been the time to spend with family before he started driving Lyft. For weekday nights, he usually goes back home, changes, gets the car ready and goes out to drive. In some ways, he is voluntarily extending his working hour outside the 40-hour regular standards, which many organizations in the traditional workplaces have failed to do.

Drivers not only choose driving over family and leisure time but also choose it over other on-demand jobs that might have a higher or equal pay compared to Uber/Lyft. Participants mentioned they have also tried other platforms such as UberEats or Grubhub, but they did not like it and decided to continue with Uber or Lyft.

*Personalized quality service:* Another observation that illustrates drivers' consent to the work is that almost all drivers I interviewed strive to create "the best experience" for riders. In other words, drivers not only consent to drive continuously and regularly but also consent to provide personalized quality service to passengers.

In my interviews, almost all Uber/Lyft drivers go beyond the basic service that they are required to provide for passengers. In preparing the car for service, some drivers intentionally keep the vehicle clean and smelling good; some provide phone chargers; some provide snacks. From the drivers' perspectives, driving for the platforms is an integrated performance where there is both the technical component of driving safely, but also the service of making riders feel good. In explaining how she prepares her car before taking rides, one driver describes:

I would always dress up, I would dress like this or better. And I would do nice things like in the dead of winter, I would have a little pile of blankets what we call lap blankets, because when I would pick up young women in downtown, who have been clubbing, they don't wear a coat because it doesn't go with their cute little dress. But when it's seven degrees below zero, even if you're just running from the club to the car, it's freezing cold. And the guys too - they don't wear coats and I would just say "there's a pile of lap blankets there, feel free to get yourself warm" and people were astonished that I would do that and I would just think about my own children doing this and how I would want them to be warm under these conditions.

In comparing passengers to one's children, the driver also compares the relationship between passengers and her to a parental, caring relationship. Although the intimacy levels may vary significantly, both relationships are the ones that she cares generously and the ones for which she is willing to go beyond the required service.

The service is also highly personalized. Drivers define the standard of good service differently depending on the particular characteristics of passengers. Almost all participants mentioned the importance of "reading riders". As one participant phrased it as follows.

What I found important is, what I called, reading the passenger. You will have some passengers that they don't want to talk. They just want to be on their phone. And I also have some passengers who want to talk. So being sensitive what is best for them, that's what I will do. And that makes life better for them. They would tip more and feels better. Neither driving regularly nor 'reading riders' is explicitly required by Uber or Lyft as of the job descriptions. However, drivers invariably perform the production activities that align with the interest of the ridesharing platforms.

Admittedly, the tipping system set up by the online ridesharing platforms might be interpreted as one of the motivations for drivers to invest their valuable time into working. However, financial motivations cannot fully explain the reason for such time and emotional commitment in working, as the financial gain is not as appealing as we would expect in drivers' perceptions. After accounting for the gas and vehicle maintenance, the financial incentives provided by Uber/Lyft are not that great. As indicated by an Uber driver, who has been driving for a year and a half and drives for 20 hours each week on average

Financially, I think it's a big toss-up whether it's worth it financially or not. If more people tipped it would be, but as I said, it's unusual for people to do so. I figure after all

expenses I may be making ten or eleven dollars an hour. Is that worth it? I don't know.

It's more than I earn watching television, I guess. But, yeah, I think it's a question.

For drivers, the ridesharing platforms are more than the sites where they passively accept and complete tasks to earn money. By describing the driving activity in comparison with watching TV, the driver is indicating a sense of her personal investment in the work of driving. Without direct supervision and required minimum driving hours, Uber and Lyft are sites where drivers are willing to invest a significant amount of time from their weekly schedule to as well as provide personalized quality services for passengers.

### *How is consent produced?*

Intensive personal and emotional investment in driving is common for Uber and Lyft, despite not being part of their job requirement defined by the platforms. Why do drivers invest more than the minimum effort required by the platform? In other words, what are the relations of production and production activities in the labor process that produce workers' consent in the online ridesharing platform? I will answer the question by describing two perspectives drivers use to make sense of their driving experience. First, the driving experience gives drivers structural autonomy by providing a flexible work schedule, which creates an entrepreneurial discourse that encourages drivers to be self-responsible. Second, the platforms, however, do not provide enough support and transparency to allow drivers to experience themselves as entrepreneurs. As a result, drivers continue to participate in a learning game in which they hope to ultimately be able to master the game rules. The consent to platform driving is thus produced in the process of drivers trying to overcome the uncertainty of the system.

*Structural autonomy produces a self-responsible entrepreneurial discourse:* Uber and Lyft drivers drive in their own vehicle and can control when and where they want to work. The structural autonomy becomes one of the most important attractions to drivers because it allows drivers to fulfill other aspirations in their personal development (Occhiuto 2017). However, the significance of structural autonomy lies in not only its flexibility but also the sense of control over life that it creates for drivers. Compared to traditional workplaces which have rigid structures, the loose structure of Uber and Lyft gives drivers a sense of agency, the feeling that they have self-control over their work and life.

The nice thing about Lyft or Uber is that you set your own hours. I don't have to call anybody and ask, "May I drive? I need more hours and need more money, can I work this weekend?" If I decide that I want to drive, I get in my car and I drive. If I'm tired and I think I don't want to do this anymore, I stop. It doesn't matter what time it is, I stop. So again I have decision-making control over when, where, mostly where, where to start, where to stop, how much.

The structural autonomy that Uber and Lyft give to drivers, including control over working time and working location is precisely the thing that management controls in traditional workplaces. Other structural characteristics such as the piece rate system and the fact that drivers own their car also contribute to shaping drivers' agency over their driving experience. Drivers not only appreciate how much they earn, but how they earn it and the fact that they can choose when to earn it.

When ridesharing platforms give drivers decision-making authority of when to work, drivers feel like they own their work. Driving becomes a business that drivers can self-manage and self-control. It is in this sense that drivers see themselves as entrepreneurs in their own

workplace. In my interviews, most drivers do not see themselves as part of the platform. As a result of the rhetoric of self-control entrepreneurs on the ridesharing platforms, drivers also feel entitled to make decisions in their daily interaction with passengers. A participant describes how she picks up passengers as,

I am driving in my own car, and so it is a familiar space and a comforting space for me. I have the right as a driver to make a decision of whether I am going to pick up an individual, so if I drive up and they are very very drunk, for example, or sick I don't have to pick them up. So I have the legal right to make somebody get out of my car. And so that was helpful as well.

Drivers appreciate the structural autonomy which gives them self-control over their work.

However, structural autonomy also legitimizes the need to be self-responsible. Uber and Lyft drivers consider themselves to be responsible for dealing with all situations in their driving experiences. They feel the responsibility for things as small as keeping the car clean and finding the right route to as big as whether the passenger has a good experience or not. A participant describes how he decides his working hours. "what I found is if I don't see myself in the mood, I won't go out driving. Because it just won't be as enjoyable for them or for me." Not only the physical space is important, but the relational interaction is also important for defining a good passenger experience. Internalizing the rhetoric of self-responsible entrepreneur, drivers question their work when they cannot take full control over the work.

Beyond daily interaction with passengers that drivers feel they need to be responsible for, drivers also feel self-responsible for getting enough rides, although it is technically not their responsibility, but the algorithms' responsibility.



The structural autonomy that ridesharing platforms provide not only encourages drivers to take self-control over their work, but also creates rhetoric of being a self-responsible entrepreneur, which drivers internalize. Drivers say that they “are not working for the platforms, but for themselves.” They feel like they need to be self-responsible for their work. “The characteristics of neoliberal entrepreneurship are repeated in various forms of compulsory individual self-management and self-administration” (Hardt & Antonio 2017: 210). However, being self-responsible for work is not at all an easy thing for drivers. Drivers find themselves need to constantly deal with the uncertainty created by the algorithmic management system on ridesharing platforms.

*Navigating the uncertainty of the algorithms by engaging in a Learning Game* Drivers’ self-management, however, is not as easily achievable as it appears to be on the surface. While Lyft and Uber give drivers the full right to decide when to start driving and where to start driving, the specific passenger that drivers pick up is assigned by a work assignment algorithm. While drivers may develop a set of guidelines for themselves in interacting with passengers, the actual pay of each ride is completely dependent on what ride is assigned to them by the algorithm. A bonus system also complicates the earnings on the platform. The ridesharing platforms periodically release various form of bonuses, such as an earnings guarantee after completing a certain number of rides. These bonuses then become important parts of the drivers’ work strategy.

Despite its importance to Uber/Lyft drivers’ income and driving experience, Uber and Lyft never release details of their work assignment algorithms, making it a black-box. In Uber’s video guide for drivers on how to take trips, by stating “The app automatically finds your ride

requests, so it's easy to find your next trip.”, the platform omits details on how the rides are assigned. This low level of transparency drastically sacrifices certainty in the driving experience. Drivers have little information about the destination of the next ride, who is coming into the car, and how much exactly they are going to earn after each ride. Based on the demand for rides in a certain geographical area, both platforms adjust the rate of each ride. Drivers naturally want to pursue the surge zones where they get a higher return for each ride. This is not always possible, according to a driver:

I drove one Friday night and really didn't like it. It was hard! I thought I would go out and make a lot of money, but it was frustrating because you would pick someone up downtown or something which has just gone out and they're in the surge zone but they may ask to go to like Place A or they might ask to go to Place B wherever. And then you're out of it and then you would get linked to someone who's like way out in the suburbs. And it's hard to get back downtown, so I found like on those nights it was just really chaotic. The algorithm or something must not have been very good.

The work assignment algorithms create uncertainty in the driving experience, which frustrates drivers. In fact, drivers play a very passive role in picking rides. In both platforms, the app gives drivers 15 seconds to decide when a request got matched with the driver. However, only the estimated time of the ride is given in the 15 seconds, not the actual destination of the ride. It is only after drivers accept the ride that they know where they are going. Drivers complain that the 15 seconds is not enough for them to make the decision, especially when they need to make the decision while there is still another passenger in the car and they are still driving.

These uncertainties in the driving experience contradict strongly with the self-responsible entrepreneurial rhetoric which they have internalized through the experience of structural

autonomy. A driver who has worked in the service industry describes the difference between the two jobs,

So with Lyft and other gig economy things, you have to be pretty independent. You don't have a manager you can go to; you don't have a set schedule of hours guaranteed; you don't have a guaranteed income based on your hours.

He describes driving Lyft as full of uncertainty and the instability, which creates frustration. To counter the frustration created by the tension between structural autonomy and algorithmic control, drivers engage in a learning game, trying to figure out ways to circumvent the uncertainty. A participant, who has been driving for Uber and Lyft for two years, finds certain times during the day can give him more certainty in the face of uncertainty.

I'll get out at about 6:30 or 7:00 and drive till about 9:30 and then go out again at around 4 till about 7. In this way, I can get more frequent demands. Because you don't know the length of the ride, that cannot be part of the calculus, but what is in the calculus is what are the odds of you getting a ride.

He reports regularly going to a drivers' Facebook page to read and participate in the discussion around driving strategies. He also keeps track of his driving income in a spreadsheet, which allows him to find out the number of rides he completes each hour (two and a half rides, on average). By learning and trying to figure out the patterns of the algorithm, drivers gain extra certainty to their work. In learning the game and playing the game, drivers perceive themselves as competitive players, who try to win the game and understand the system. In this learning game, what matters to the drivers is how much they understand the algorithms and how well they can take advantage of the algorithms.

In playing the game, drivers also learn to take advantage of the bonus system. Leveraging the rules that they learn about the algorithm, drivers are able to develop strategies that increase their control over the driving experience.

What this is saying is that, if I take 25 rides during this period of time [of an earning guarantee bonus], they will guarantee that I make \$225. So for instance, if you think about the math, 25 rides then that comes out to about \$9 per ride, even a short ride.

Without this, it only pays me three dollars and 37 cents each ride.

Drivers learn the rules quickly by doing calculations or experimenting. Through trial and error in more and more driving experience, drivers learn the rules and start to be able to align themselves with the self-responsible entrepreneur. However, Lyft and Uber regularly change and adjust their management algorithms. Whenever changes happen, drivers need to relearn the game.

It [the earning guarantee bonus] stopped now. For the last two weeks I haven't gotten them and I've been talking to the Lyft people that I know I said it because it's completely arbitrary whether or not they will give the bonus to you. They claim they base it on your driving record but I haven't seen anything in the last two weeks, and I'm upset, because this is an important part of the strategy.

In the pursuit of self-control over their work, the learning games for drivers never end. In learning the game and playing the game, drivers perceive themselves as competitive players, who try to win the game and get the most out of the system. They are not competing with other drivers. Instead, they are competing with themselves in a sense that the more experience they have driving, the more likely they desire to become the true entrepreneur. They come up with strategies that can maximize their outcome and minimize their effort. For example, they develop knowledge on the profitability of certain destinations. They learned that more attention should be paid to more picky passengers, since they have a higher chance of give low ratings. However, it

is at the same time that they engage themselves in the system of labor process of ridesharing economy, where the uncertainty never goes away. In the process of searching for a particular way of optimizing earnings from this work assignment algorithm, drivers do the calculation and perform production effort.

## CONCLUSION

Through my interviews with nine Uber or Lyft drivers, I found that drivers consent to the working process by working extended hours and providing quality services. The mechanisms of the production of consent, though, varies from Burawoy's observation in the manufacturing factory. Ridesharing platforms leverage the rhetoric of being a self-responsible entrepreneur and carefully curate a workplace where drivers align themselves with the rhetoric as they engage in the labor process intensively and learn the rules of the platforms. The constant contradiction between the illusion of control and the algorithmic uncertainty becomes a continuous motivation for drivers to stay engaged in the labor process.

Forty years ago, Burawoy observed the way manufacturing factories manipulate the production relations to produce workers' consent to organization's profit-making process in the context of industrial capitalism. In Burawoy's term, "The significance of creating a game out of the labor process, however, extends beyond the particularities of making out. The very act of playing a game generates consent to its rules." (1979: 82). Forty years later, the current research shows that although the specific production relations and the production activities have changed in post-industrial capitalism, the outcome of the labor process remains the same. While the online gig economy is appearing to give workers structural autonomy that is unprecedented and

positively valued by workers, the labor process is still subject to the logic of accumulation in capitalism and exploiting the works in the system. No matter how the specific means of production changes, the labor process is subordinated to the interest of capital and the control of labor process is in place to ensure the reproduction of class relations (O'Neill 1986).

The mechanism of producing workers' consent, though, changes dramatically as we shift into the labor process of online gig economy. The management algorithm that drivers work with on a daily basis can have a profound impact on drivers understanding of the work, coupling with the rhetoric of self-responsible entrepreneurs. However, unlike the peer social network that produces workers' consent in traditional manufacturing factories, management algorithm can be much more easily scaled and constantly adjusted and thus affect millions of workers in the nation. Furthermore, the use of a management algorithm hides the managerial purpose of the corporate platform and eliminates access for workers to bargain with managers, who used to work with the workers together in traditional workplaces.

It is thus important to go beyond the elements of evaluating work quality that has been theorized traditionally, such as pay rate, work hour and office dynamics etc. In refining regulation for these emerging workplaces, it is important for policymakers to look at the labor process more comprehensively and in a more relational way. Questions such as, what power structures are the workers subject to become an important question to ask in improving workers right. Take the example of online ridesharing platforms: when algorithms become the dominant source of management, it is not enough to consider drivers' pay rates. Rather, policymakers should also consider the accountability and transparency of the management algorithms to give more protection to drivers.

There has been a constant debate on whether the labor model that emerges from the online gig economy produces good jobs or not. Scholars endorse the labor model in the gig economy for the flexibility it allows for individuals (Occhiuto 2017) but criticize the labor model for its low pay and irregular hours (Wood et al. 2018). However, what is missing from this debate is the consideration of workers subjectivity. The finding for the current research adds complexity to the debate by showing that workers in gig economy consent to the labor process by giving meaning to the work they do. By taking workers' agency into consideration, the research suggests that the evaluation of whether the gig economy produces a good job or bad job should not be simplified to two extremes. The features claimed to make the jobs "good" such as autonomy also are the features that give rise to the characteristics that make the jobs "bad."

The limitations of this study suggest productive directions for future research. First, the fact that I have only interviewed part-time drivers might give reason to pause about how much we can generalize the findings. The tension between the value of autonomy and the uncertainty in the system might be more salient to my interviewees, who do not rely on Uber or Lyft as the primary source of livelihood, compare to drivers who driver Uber or Lyft on a full-time basis.

Second, while the current study examines workers agency in their workplaces, I did not manage to situate their subjectivity in their informal workplace network due to the limitations of my research methods. Burawoy suggested that workers' status among peer workers on the shop floor is significant in the production of consent. Although drivers do not have peer workers in their formal workplace network, they might develop informal networks outside their daily driving experiences. Multiple drivers mentioned their use of Facebook group in exchanging information about driving. Thus, future research could observe the social dynamics in such

informal networks, which might add more nuance to the understanding of the labor process. For example, once we can observe the labor process in workers informal social network, we might find that the dominant position of management algorithm in producing workers' consent is not universal. While some personal social network might enhance the effect of management algorithm on producing workers' consent, the other might weaken it.



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