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Experiences with COVID-19 among Gig Workers

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03 March 2022

Dr. Leon Salter and Prof. Mohan J. Dutta

Center for Culture-centered Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE)
Massey University

ABOUT CARE

The Center for Culture-centered Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a global hub for communication research that uses participatory and culture-centered methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to health and wellbeing. Through experiments in methods of radical democracy anchored in community ownership and community voice, the Center collaborates with communities, community organizers, community researchers, advocates, and activists to imagine and develop sustainable practices for prevention, health care organizing, food and agriculture, worker organizing, migrant and refugee rights, indigenous rights, rights of the poor, and economic transformation.

Dr. Leon Salter is working with CARE as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow on the Experiences with COVID-19 among gig workers proTect and was awarded the MBIE Science Whitinga Research Fellowship in June 2021 to chart the expansion of the gig economy in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Mohan J. Dutta is the Director of CARE and author of books such as Neoliberal Health Organizing, Communicating Health, and Voices of Resistance.

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Executive Summary

Gig work refers to forms of labour that are mediated by online platforms, which are contingent, piecemeal and individualised, offering little in the way of employment rights, protections or capacity for collective organising. It represents long-term trends towards the neoliberalisation of work, which until recently, have been disproportionately experienced by exploited, precarious workers in the global South. In the context of global North nations such as Aotearoa New Zealand, evidence has linked the growth of gig work with poor health outcomes for workers, particularly for ethnic minorities and women, outcomes which have been exasperated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently, little is known about the experiences of gig workers in Aotearoa New Zealand, including the nature and quality of their day-to-day work, or how they have negotiated the disruption and risk brought to bear by the COVID-19 pandemic. Largely erased from the conceptual frameworks examining gig work are the voices of workers. This white paper takes a Culture-Centered Approach (CCA) to gig work, seeking to co-create voice infrastructures in partnership with gig workers, attending to the classed, raced, gendered nature of gig work, and the ways in which the structural characteristics of gig work which ingrain precarity are exacerbated by the pandemic.

Drawing on 25 in-depth interviews with participants who are currently or have recently worked as rideshare or food delivery gig workers, this report argues that platformed work - organised and mediated through an online platform or app, is structurally distinct from traditional forms of work.

We find that platformed work has seven key structural features:

1. piecemeal
2. precarious
3. Individualised
4. Gamified
5. Dehumanised
6. Automated
7. Hyper-competitive

The findings are divided into 3 sections:

Nature of platformed work explores these seven structural features through the voices of the 25 gig worker interview participants. We firstly describe how the platform functions as the place of employment and site of production, creating piecemeal and precarious working conditions, whereby workers have no protections during periods of crisis. While the work does offer flexibility, workers are controlled by the techniques of algorithmic management, which replaces human contact, while deliberately withholding information and making it very hard to resolve disputes. The lack of information, combined with the unprofitable nature of many of their jobs means that they are forced to take on entrepreneurial qualities to survive.

Implications for collective organising discusses the unilateral relation that workers are forced to accept with the platform, whereby they have no collective bargaining rights and are forced to accept changes to terms and conditions to continue working. Further, workers do not regularly meet each other to discuss common grievances, and the individualised nature of the work makes it difficult for unions. Social media does provide a certain sense of community, but it promotes weak ties and is inconducive to collective organising.

Implications for health and wellbeing in a pandemic environment firstly discusses how incomes for rideshare drivers have decreased substantially since March 2020, with little protections. While food delivery became potentially more lucrative, this also came attached to increased risk for easily exploitable young people. The structural features of gig work means that risk and responsibility for purchasing PPE was shouldered almost entirely by individual gig workers, with the platforms only offering a minimal amount of support or guidance. Should a rideshare driver contract COVID, they would have little in the way of sick pay protections or other forms of compensation, increasing their likelihood of remaining driving while they may suspect they are infected and avoiding a test or self-isolation in order to avoid destitution. The result is that gig workers are likely to be significant contributors to the spread of COVID-19.

In order to mitigate some of this risks the interviewed workers offer the following 6 recommendations:

1. Compensation for precarity. We argue that gig workers should receive an additional levy to compensate for their precarity. Research has shown that contractors are usually 25-30% worse-off than employees when taking into account leave, pension, tax etc. This levy would allow them to save during periods of high demand, so that they are covered for periods of low demand.

2. A minimum hourly rate which matches the minimum wage. The platforms should ensure that drivers receive a minimum hourly rate which matches the minimum wage from the point that they log on to the app to the point they log off.

3. Algorithmic transparency. Decisions made by algorithms should be clearly explained to workers and they should have the right of appeal.

4. The option of becoming an employee. Gig workers should have the option of becoming an employee after working for a platform for 3 months.

5. Employment rights for gig workers. Those that remain contractors should still enjoy basic employment rights, such as annual leave, sick pay and pensions.

6. An independent advisory group. Peopled by gig workers themselves, this group would establish an infrastructure for articulation of their voices in wider society and act as the collective space for organizing.

Introduction

What has become commonly known as "Gig work" refers to forms of labour that are mediated by online platforms, which generate work that is contingent, piecemeal and individualised, offering little in the way of employment rights, protections or capacity for collective organising.[1] However, rather than being wholly determined by platform technology, gig work represents long-term trends towards the neoliberalisation of work,[2] which until recently, have been disproportionately experienced by exploited, precarious workers in the Global South.[3] In the context of Global North nations, gig work has seen exponential growth in the last five years, with recent estimates putting the proportion as high as 43% of the US working population as involved in the gig economy in some way,[4] and 14.7% in the UK.[5] Concerningly, evidence has linked the growth of gig work with poor health outcomes for workers, particularly for ethnic minorities and women,[6] outcomes which have been exasperated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[7]

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[1] 1. Graham, M., & Woodcock, J. (2019). *The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction.* Polity Press; De Ruyter, A. & Brown, M. (2019). *The Gig Economy.* Agenda Publishing; Gandini, Alessandro. (2019). Labour process theory and the gig economy. *Human Relations. 72*(6), 1039-1056.

[2] Barratt, T., Goods, C., & Veen, A. (2020). 'I'm my own boss…': Active intermediation and 'entrepreneurial' worker agency in the Australian gig-economy. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 52*(8), 1643-1661.

[3] Dutta, M. J. (2021). Neoliberal governmentality and low-wage migrant labour in India and Singapore. Journal of Creative Communications, 16(2), 139-152.

[4] Nandita Bose, EXCLUSIVE U.S. Labor Secretary supports classifying gig workers as employees, 2021, Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/us/exclusive-us-labor-secretary-says-most-gig-workers-should-be-classified-2021-04-29/#:~:text=As%20many%20as%2055%20million,rise%20to%2043%25%20in%202020.

[5] Spencer, N. H., & Huws, U. (2021). Background: how platform work is changing and growing. Seven ways platform workers are fighting back (pp. 9-24): TUC. https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/seven-ways-platform-workers-are-fighting-back

[6] Davis, M. E., & Hoyt, E. (2020). A longitudinal study of piece rate and health: evidence and implications for workers in the US gig economy. Public Health, 180, 1-9.

[7] Koonse, T., Herrera, L., Waheed, S., Shadduck-Hernández, J., Gonzalez-Vasquez, A. L., & Flowers, K. (2021). More than a gig? Ride-hailing in Los Angeles County. In B. Dolber, M. Rodino-Colocino, C. Kumanyika, & T. Wolfson (Eds.), The Gig Economy: Workers and Media in the Age of Convergence (pp. 34-46). Routledge; Apouey, B., Roulet, A., Solal, I., & Stabile, M. (2020). Gig Workers during the COVID-19 Crisis in France: Financial Precarity and Mental Well-Being. Journal of Urban Health, 97(6), 776-795; Indian Federation of App-based Transport workers (IFAT). (2021). Locking Down the Impact of COVID-19: Appraising State and Private Measures for App-based Transport and Delivery Workers. https://cis-india.org/raw/ifat-itf-locking-down-the-impact-of-COVID-19; Dutta, M. J. (2021). Neoliberal governmentality and low-wage migrant labour in India and Singapore. Journal of Creative Communications, 16(2), 139-152.

However, currently little is known about the experiences of gig workers in Aotearoa New Zealand, including the nature and quality of their day-to-day work, or how they have negotiated the disruption, increased precarity and health risk brought to bear by the COVID-19 pandemic. While qualitative work has been undertaken overseas,[8] largely erased from the conceptual frameworks examining gig work in the international literature are the voices of workers. This white paper takes a Culture-Centered Approach (CCA) to gig work,[9] seeking to co-create voice infrastructures in partnership with gig workers, attending to the classed, raced, gendered nature of gig work, and the ways in which the structural characteristics of gig work which ingrain precarity are exacerbated by the pandemic.[10]

The structural features of gig work as listed in the executive summary are not neutral, but reinforce an individualised and entrepreneurial subjectivity and orientation[11], which has unique challenges for collective organising and makes gig workers highly vulnerable to the kinds of economic and health risks which have come with the COVID-19 pandemic.[12] Whereas on one hand, the workers are often drawn to platformed work because of the promised autonomy and flexibility, on the other hand the, flexibility entraps them into insecure working conditions. At the same time the pandemic amplifies the everyday risks to health and wellbeing posed by the gig economy.

This report, through the amplifying the voices of gig workers, finds that a combination of economic precarity, health risk, lack of support and training and the public-facing nature of the work means that **gig workers are not only at increased risk of infecting themselves with COVID-19, but also the public.**

[8] Wells, K. J., Attoh, K., & Cullen, D. (2021). "Just-in-Place" labor: Driver organizing in the Uber workplace. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 53*(2), 315-331; Bellesia, F., Mattarelli, E., Bertolotti, F., & Sobrero, M. (2019). Platforms as entrepreneurial incubators? How online labor markets shape work identity. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 34*(4), 246-268.

[9] Dutta, M. J. (2021). Neoliberal governmentality and low-wage migrant labour in India and Singapore. Journal of Creative Communications, 16(2), 139-152; Dutta, M. J. (2020). *Communication, culture and social change: Meaning, co-option and resistance:* Palgrave Macmillan.

[10] Dutta, M. J. (2021). Singapore's extreme neoliberalism and the COVID outbreak: Culturally centering voices of low-wage migrant workers. *The American Behavioral Scientist, 65*(10), 1302-1322.

[11] Rosenblat, A. (2018). Uberland: University of California Press; Bellesia, F., Mattarelli, E., Bertolotti, F., & Sobrero, M. (2019). Platforms as entrepreneurial incubators? How online labor markets shape work identity. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 34*(4), 246-268.

[12] Brophy, E., & Bright Grayer, S. (2021). Platform organising: Tech worker struggles and digital tools for labour movements. In B. Dolber, M. Rodino-Colocino, C. Kumanyika, & T. Wolfson (Eds.), The Gig Economy: Workers and Media in the Age of Convergence (pp. 207-222): Routledge; Apouey, B., Roulet, A., Solal, I., & Stabile, M. (2020). Gig Workers during the COVID-19 Crisis in France: Financial precarity and mental well-being. *Journal of Urban Health, 97*(6), 776-795.

Moreover, the everyday insecurities of living such as securing food, securing preventive resources such as masks, and securing adequate housing are multiplied exponentially by the pandemic, in spite of the support packages created for the workers.[14]

While workers in the Global South have been subjected to precarious and exploitative working conditions for centuries, the precarity of gig work in the Global North must be set within the context of long-term neoliberalisation which has reconstituted risk and costs as the responsibility of individual workers,[15] and which has seen states increasingly taking a light regulatory approach to the labour market.[16] The "gig economy" does not therefore refer to technological changes, but captures "an economic transformation in which work in many sectors is becoming temporary, unstable and patchworked".[17]

Gig economy platforms, backed by billions of dollars in venture capital, have merely taken advantage of these long-term trends and regulatory holes, using the technology to facilitate a relationship between service consumers and workers, while extracting valuable data from the process.[18] Because workers are typically allocated work through the app on an on-demand basis, the long-term tendency towards reclassification as independent workers, solely and individually responsible for their own expenses, risks, health and financial wellbeing, becomes reified. The construction of the worker as a contractor is a critical element in the placing of the burdens of care on the worker while the platform reproduces its extractive reach.

[13] Rosenblat, A., & Stark, L. (2016). Algorithmic labor and information asymmetries: A case study of Uber's drivers. International Journal of Communication, 10, 27.

[14] Most of the workers interviewed did receive the wage subsidy offered for the National 2020 lockdown (29 March – 13 May) of $7,029.60 for a full time employee or $4,200 for a part time employee. However, following this Government support has been intermittent.

[15] Barratt, T., Goods, C., & Veen, A. (2020). 'I'm my own boss…': Active intermediation and 'entrepreneurial' worker agency in the Australian gig-economy. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 52(*8), 1643-1661; Fleming, P. (2017). The human capital hoax: Work, debt and insecurity in the era of uberization. Organization Studies, 38(5), 691-709.

[16] van Doorn, N., & Vijay, D. (2021). Gig work as migrant work: The platformization of migration infrastructure. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space,* 0(0).

[17] Graham, M., & Woodcock, J. (2019). The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction: Cambridge: Polity Press (p. 2).

[18] Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism:* Polity Press; Cant, C. (2019). Riding for Deliveroo: resistance in the new economy: John Wiley & Sons.

The gig economy officially began in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2014 with the arrival of Uber, which has since established the dominant model for platformed work as other smaller competitors have entered the market. Profit is generated primarily through externalising risk and cost onto drivers, customers and ultimately the taxpayer (who pay for accidents and the negative effects on health and wellbeing, while Uber employs tax-avoidance strategies).[19] In the case of driveshare (which has largely displaced taxis in Aotearoa New Zealand's urban centres) the app (or platform) functions to connect service providers (those with a car less than 10 years old and a passenger endorsement license) with service consumers (those that desire a cheap and convenient way to travel). Uber and the other gig economy platforms have repeatedly attempted to construct themselves as Silicon Valley tech companies that merely intermediate between providers and customers, rather than an employer, even though they set the terms of work and the rate of pay. Further, classified as contractors, New Zealand gig workers are not entitled to sick pay, holiday pay or time spent waiting in between jobs. Neither are they entitled to "robust health and safety systems, the right to lodge a personal grievance [or] the right to bargain collectively".[20]

Studies on the effects of this precarious employment arrangement on worker health and mental wellbeing have begun to emerge internationally, with evidence linking it to poor health outcomes, particularly for ethnic minorities and women.[21] With few protections but with mounting expenses and debt, since the onset of the pandemic evidence has emerged that gig workers feel the pressure to ignore the risk of contracting and passing on the virus "to keep their vehicles on [the] road for daily earnings".[22]

The devastating global effects of the pandemic on gig worker earnings, health and wellbeing "has toppled the argument"[22] that drivers are independent contractors, providing more impetus and new innovative strategies for worker organising and resistance.

[19] A recent report (see Ward, J. (2021). Estimating Uber's tax gap in Aotearoa. Centre for International Corporate Tax Accountability and Research. Retrieved from https://cictar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Estimating-Ubers-tax-gap-in-Aotearoa-17-11-21.pdf) estimates that Uber is extracting substantial profit from Aotearoa, which is funnelled through opaque offshore accounts. While claiming that it remains loss-making, the report calculates "that Uber's tax payments should have been close to $6.4 to $12.8 million in 2020" (p. 8), on revenue of $230 million.

[20] Rosentreter, A., & Miller, E. (2021). Gig work in Aotearoa: Challenges and Options (p. 8). FIRST Union. Retrieved from https://mcusercontent.com/d0c5542325e2a9c7c28f45e48/files/ed3c75ab-db49-2b31-1d03-c142c798c443/Gig_Work_in_Aotearoa_report_by_FIRST_Union_July_2021.pdf

[21] Davis, M. E., & Hoyt, E. (2020). A longitudinal study of piece rate and health: evidence and implications for workers in the US gig economy. *Public Health,* 180, 1-9.

[22] Indian Federation of App-based Transport workers (IFAT). (2021). *Locking Down the Impact of COVID-19: Appraising State and Private Measures for App-based Transport and Delivery Workers* (p. 11). Retrieved from https://cis-india.org/raw/ifat-itf-locking-down-the-impact-of-COVID-19

Such methods increasingly involve the courts, and there have been landmark decisions in California,[23] the UK[24] and Europe[25] in favour of gig worker's employment rights which indicate that Uber's exploitative model will not be tenable in the long term.

However, these new forms of collective organising have not yet reached Aotearoa New Zealand in a sustained way. Nor have the courts yet ruled in favour of gig worker's employment rights.[26] One contributing factor has been the lack of research and engagement by the New Zealand academy which provides gig workers with a voice to highlight the exploitative conditions and provide recommendations on how they could be improved. This research, drawing on the CCA that seeks to co-create voice infrastructures at the margins,[27] is aiming to begin to address that gap.

The Culture-Centered Approach (CCA)

The Culture-Centered Approach (CCA) situates inequalities in health amidst communicative inequalities, inequalities in the distribution of communicative resources, both information resources and resources for voice. Communicative inequalities are constituted by material inequalities, "which are further entrenched amidst crises such as COVID-19".[28] Co-creating voice infrastructures at the margins of neoliberal economies forms the basis for articulation of transformative registers for social change.[29] Through the voicing of the challenges to health and wellbeing, those at

[23] Court cases in California are ongoing. Proposition 22 legislation was passed in 2020 which over-ruled a previous court ruling which classified gig workers as employees. Then in August 2021 a California judge moved to invalidate Proposition 22, which is now under appeal (see https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2021-08-25/after-prop-22-ruling-whats-next-uber-lyft).

[24] In February 2021 the UK supreme Court famously dismissed Uber's appeal against a lower court decision that it's drivers should be classified as workers, and entitled to annual leave, sick pay, pensions and union representation. This was the culmination of a 5-year legal battle. See https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2019-0029-judgment.pdf

[25] The Courts have recently ruled that Uber drivers are employees in the Netherlands (see https://socialeurope.eu/another-win-for-workers-uber-drivers-are-employees), Spain (see https://www.reuters.com/business/sustainable-business/gig-economy-riders-spain-must-become-staff-within-90-days-under-new-rule-2021-05-11/) and France (see https://knowledge.leglobal.org/france-paris-court-grants-employment-rights-to-uber-driver/#:~:text=The%20Paris%20Court%20of%20Appeal,model%20of%20the%20American%20company). There is also EU level legislation in the pipeline which intends to ensure gig workers "enjoy the same labour rights as other traditional employees" (see https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/12/09/new-eu-rules-could-turn-4-1-million-gig-workers-into-regular-employees).

[26] See Arachchige vs Rasier New Zealand Ltd (2020, December 17), as an example of a judgement where the courts ruled that the contract between an Uber driver and Uber was not an employment agreement. However, FIRST and E tū Union launched a class action lawsuit in July 2021 against Uber in the Employment Court. A legal decision is yet to be made.

[27] Dutta, M. J. (2018). Culture-centered approach in addressing health disparities: Communication infrastructures for subaltern voices. Communication Methods and Measures, 12(4), 239-259

the raced, classed gendered margins of colonial, capitalist structures co-create solutions for transformation.[30] Voice is placed amidst the interplays of structure, culture and agency. Structures refer to the forms of organising that shape the distribution of risks and responses to health and wellbeing. Cultures are reflected in and reflective of locally articulated meanings, and agency is enacted in the negotiations of meanings. In the realm of precarious work, the expression of worker agency in making sense of the organizing structures of work forms the basis of organizing to transform deeply unequal structures.

In this white paper, we explore the ways in which worker agency in gig work is negotiated amidst the organizing structures of platform capitalism, and the registers it offers for potentially transforming those structures (despite the worker's seeming domination). The negotiation of worker agency amidst COVID-19 foregrounds the transformative registers for interrupting the organizing logics of platform capitalism.

Method

Recruitment & Participants

The 25 interviewees were recruited on social media, between June 2020 and September 2021 (15 months). A poster advertising the research project was posted to various Facebook groups (including specific groups for Uber drivers, as well as general community groups), with the project title, a brief description, and the contact details of Leon Salter. Further, an incentive of $40 in Countdown vouchers was offered as koha, compensation for their time. If they expressed an interest in taking part, prospective participants were emailed the information sheet, which details the aims of the study, the interview process, our data management practices, ethical clearance and their rights as participants.

Despite the incentive, recruitment proved quite a slow, incremental process whereby some posts would receive significant interest, while others would receive barely any. Some of the interviewees were asked what they thought the reasons were for this, and it was generally acknowledged that drivers were afraid to speak out. This was confirmed though correspondence with drivers in arranging interviews, who often asked us to confirm that the interview process would be fully anonymous. In future studies involving gig workers we therefore recommend that guarantees of the anonymity of participants should be included in any advertising material.

[28] Dutta, M. J. (2014). A culture-centered approach to listening: Voices of social change. International Journal of Listening, 28(2), 67-81; Dutta, M. J., Moana-Johnson, G., & Elers, C. (2020). COVID-19 and the pedagogy of culture-centered community radical democracy: A response from Aotearoa New Zealand. *Journal of Communication Pedagogy,* 3, 11-19.
[29] Dutta, M. J. (2021). Communication Inequality, Structural Inequality, and COVID-19. In *Communicating COVID-19* (pp. 85-98). Palgrave Macmillan.
[30] Elers, P., Elers, S., Dutta, M. J., & Torres, R. (2021). Applying the Culture-Centered Approach to visual storytelling methods. Review of Communication, 21(1), 33-43.

The snowball method was attempted and did yield a few extra participants, but as described in the analysis below, due to the isolation of gig workers from each other this generally proved to be not a suitable recruitment method.

Of the 25 participants, 23 were currently working as delivery or rideshare drivers, with the other two as having recently halted their gig work because they had found other work. 14 were rideshare drivers (either solely working for Uber (7) or in combination with one or more of Uber's competitors: Didi, Ola and Zoomy (7). Of the 11 food delivery drivers, 4 worked solely for Delivereasy (a New Zealand owned company), while the remaining 7 either worked only for Uber Eats (3) or Uber Eats and Menulog (4), an Australian-based company which has only entered the New Zealand market during 2021. The minority, 11 of the 25 drivers relied on gig work as their sole income, while 14 undertook it as a "side hustle".

In terms of gender balance, 6 of the 25 interviewees were female (24%), while the other 21 were male (76%). 5 of the 6 female participants worked currently or formerly in rideshare, with only 1 female delivery driver interviewed. At one stage purposive sampling was attempted to increase the proportion of female interviewees, where female drivers were identified in Facebook groups and sent direct messages, but this yielded only 1 extra participant. That participant was also asked to contact other female drivers she knew, but no others were interested in participating. Nevertheless, the 76% male figure does not differ substantially from the findings from the recent FIRST Union survey of gig workers, which found that almost 70% of respondents were male.[31] Furthermore, a similar figure of 68.4% male was found in a large recent survey of gig workers in the UK[32] (a figure which had actually substantially risen in the last 5 years).

In terms of location, 5 were based in Auckland, 4 in Christchurch, 14 in Wellington and 1 each in New Plymouth and Hastings. The high figure for Wellington was partly due to one of the authors being based there and utilising the community Facebook group *Vic Deals* for advertising the research.

Details of the participant's age, sexuality or ethnicity were not asked nor confirmed.

Interview process

Interviews were held over Zoom and the format was in-depth and semi-structured, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews followed a schedule of themes which was flexible enough to allow for the articulation of anecdotes from the participants, which were often not only highly insightful but also aided the building of rapport, meaning they would later become receptive to more probing questions.

[31] Rosentreter, A., & Miller, E. (2021). Gig work in Aotearoa: Challenges and Options (p. 18). FIRST Union. Retrieved from https://mcusercontent.com/d0c5542325e2a9c7c28f45e48/files/ed3c75ab-db49-2b31-1d03-c142c798c443/Gig_Work_in_Aotearoa_report_by_FIRST_Union_July_2021.pdf
[32] Spencer, N. H., & Huws, U. (2021). Background: how platform work is changing and growing. Seven ways platform workers are fighting back (pp. 9-24): *TUC.* https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/seven-ways-platform-workers-are-fighting-back

With some of the younger, quieter participants the schedule could be referred back to to keep the conversation going, while with some of the more talkative participants it could be referred back to to keep things on track, but not all of the questions had to be addressed should the conversation go in interesting directions. Additionally, the schedule was used to make active notes so that further questions linked to the progressing discussion could be written while the participant was talking.

Question order also aided the building up of rapport and the immersion of the researcher into the context of the participant, in line with the Culture-Centred Approach of "deep listening with humility and reflexivity".[33] Hence, questions at the beginning of the interview simply asked the gig workers to describe their work, the city they are located in, which apps they work for, etc. Towards the middle of the interview, questions veered towards more personal, probing or significant topics such as platform rating systems, earnings, their rights and protections as contactors and the impact of COVID-19, while more politically charged questions connected to unionisation, co-operative worker-owned platforms and their recommendations for regulation and legislation were left towards the end (not all participants were asked these if it was felt from their earlier responses that they would not be receptive).

Method of Analysis

Following participant consent, interviews were recorded to the Zoom cloud which is held for 90 days before automatic deletion. As the interviews were held on Zoom we also made use of that platform's auto-transcribe function, which is generated automatically when recording to the cloud. Transcripts were then checked and amended for accuracy before being sent to the participant for comment, who then had the right to request any deletions or amendments.

The 25 transcripts (totalling 693 pages) were then compiled into a single file and placed on *Google Docs*, so that they could be shared between the two authors and the codes verified. Coding followed a similar process to that described by Sarah Tracy,[34] whereby we went through two successive phases of coding. The first phase was simply reading and immersing ourselves in the data, which was important for the aforementioned foregrounding of gig worker voices. Following this, primary descriptive codes emerged which related to the topic of conversation, while secondary codes were more analytical, where we would attempt to find lines between the descriptive codes, amalgamating some, and re-categorizing others, drawing from theoretical concepts.

To respect their anonymity, while ensuring we articulate the voices of the workers directly, participants have been given culturally appropriate synonyms next to quoted extracts from interview transcripts.

[33] Elers, P., Elers, S., Dutta, M. J., & Torres, R. (2021). Applying the Culture-Centered Approach to visual storytelling methods. *Review of Communication, 21*(1), 33-43 (p.36).

[34] Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact.* Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Results

Nature of platformed work

Drawing on the voices of driveshare and delivery drivers interviewed as part of this project, we argue that work organised through a platform is structurally distinct from traditional forms, that goes beyond gig work's piecemeal accumulation and precarity (piecemeal and precarious work has been in existence for centuries). Hence, we use the term platformed work in the active verbal sense (rather than platform work or gig work which use it in the more passive nouned sense) to denote the transformation of work through its facilitation through digital apps.

While enveloped in the ideology of flexibility and autonomy, we concur with Gandini's[35] that the driver is not a contractor, but a worker, and the platform, as the (digital) place of employment and economic production, is a far more sophisticated, totalising and effective disciplinary space than the factory ever was. Not only does the platform collect data on everything the driver does, but its artificially intelligent algorithm is able to dictate the terms, monetary rate and location of all the driver's transactions, therefore shaping the behaviour and subjectivity of the worker, while keeping the reasoning for those decisions totally opaque.

The platform as place of employment and site of production means more total control than the factory because it is all there is for the driver – the sole means of interaction is as an individual(ised) worker/consumer communicating with a dehumanised and automated interface. There are no spaces for informal interactions with colleagues which may lead to acts of micro-resistance (except the Facebook groups – discussed below), nor any boss to antagonistically organise against or complain to (the manager is an AI algorithm which is ambivalent, unaccountable and opaque). Should a driver attempt to make a complaint or dispute a decision, in Uber's case they have no way of contacting a human decision-maker and are instead invited to 'chat' with AI bots who provide an exasperating array of generic answers or links to FAQs.

Despite their real status as workers, rather than contractors, the drivers we interviewed often internalised the ideology of flexibility, autonomy and entrepreneurship. While we are not going to deny here that gig work really does offer autonomy and flexibility in comparison to traditional work, our focus here is on how that ideology is reproduced through the coded interface of the app, which locks in a hyper-competitive (rather than collegial) approach to their work. As has been noted by media studies scholars,[36] the coded platform is not neutral (much as its Silicon Valley proponents would argue it is), but both reflects and reproduces dominant norms. In the case of platformed work, the norms of neoliberal capitalism are those that are reproduced and embedded on a daily basis.[37]

[37] Ens, N., & Márton, A. (2021). "Sure, I saw sales, but it consumed me" from resilience to erosion in the digital hustle economy. *New media & society, 0*(0),

Not only this, but because platformed work is individualised, and the platform's decisions cannot be challenged, the considerable pressure to become more efficient and profitable must be internalised by the individual worker. As Michelle Foucault foresaw over 40 years ago, in the age of neoliberalism the individual worker, as an 'entrepreneurial self', replaces the factory as the site of capital investment and production. As a result, the worker must become a micro-business making investments in order to make themselves more valuable and efficient, thereby increasing their human capital through constant tweaking and attempting to gain a competitive edge through gaming the system.

In summary, we argue that platformed work has seven key structural features:

1. Piecemeal
2. Precarious
3. Individualised
4. Gamified
5. Dehumanised
6. Automated
7. Hyper-competitive

In the following passages we detail evidence from the interview transcripts which support this structural argument.

Firstly, *piecemeal* and *precarious;* gig work is by nature oriented towards supply and demand – the driver is paid for each micro-transaction, rather than a wage. When a customer orders a ride or a food delivery and the job is completed, the worker receives a payment for that job, made through the app. The temporary contract is between the customer and the worker for the delivery of a specific service, with no payment made to the worker for time spent waiting for work, or for time spent travelling to the job. Resultantly, there are absolutely no guarantees of a steady income, which can often make paying steady expenses like rent and food problematic. While this is not so much of an issue when demand is high, gig workers are extremely vulnerable to shifts in demand (such as that caused by a pandemic – discussed in the *Implications for health*

[38] Foucault, M. (2008). The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979 (G. Burchell, Trans.). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

and wellbeing section). This includes more traditional lulls, such as January and February, when New Zealand's urban centres are much quieter. Jorge estimated that they make just "$10 an hour" after expenses during these lull periods, as opposed to "$20 an hour" normally (still less than the current minimum wage of $21.20). As described by Isaak below, piecemeal work means that they do not get paid for time spent waiting for jobs to come in:

> *…it's just just how how many hours do you work is...Just...How much money you get I guess. But yeah, sometimes it's really quiet. It's not even worth…You know turning your car on for so…Yeah, it just basically just waiting until...Up until you know there's gonna be demand.*

Gig work's piecemeal and precarious structure also means gig workers have no sick pay or annual leave entitlements. If they are to have time off they must save and plan for this eventuality (increasingly difficult when their margins are so low – discussed below). As put by Hayden, "it's up to that individual to put that money aside and into a savings account to pay for sick pay, to pay for annual leave".

While this piecemeal, precarious aspect does offer flexibility, with the ability to fit around other commitments, the lack of guaranteed income means it is mostly only attractive to those with another income stream or other form of support. Many of the Delivereasy workers were students or schoolchildren living at home, and the majority of participants (14 out of 25) did not work in the gig economy full time and were using gig work as a supplementary income.

The mediation of gig work through a platform company which denies it is an employer but must still find ways to control the actions of their workers, leads to gamification (structural characteristic 4, defined below). One of the first questions we asked in the interviews was for them to describe the work that they do and how they receive jobs through the app. The below passage is from an Uber Eats driver (Kadeem), who is describing what happens after they first receive the notification on their phone. They detail how they have to make a very quick decision (within 30 seconds) on whether they accept the job. To inform this decision some information is provided (such as distance in kilometres, minimum payment, the name of the restaurant and "the suburb for the delivery".

> *…as soon as you click on go, you have you do these two steps, and then the app starts looking or finding your trips, depending on the location you are. And then let's say you match them they send you a match of the place nearby. And then they say they ask you, if you want to accept the order they give you all the instructions like this is the name of the restaurant, this is how much you will be paid and this would be the suburb for the delivery. And if you feel like if everything is OK, for you, you accept the order and you get 30 seconds to accept or decline.*

One thing that is striking from this account (apart from the very short time allowed to make a decision) is that while some information is provided, other information that the driver could use to make informed decisions is deliberately withheld by the platform (such as the exact location of the restaurant and the food that the customer has ordered). This lack of information not only impacts their ability to make accurate decisions on whether to accept or reject jobs, but also their ability to properly prepare for their work (e.g., gauge how large a delivery it will be and what kind of food, as confirmed by another Uber Eats driver, Amelie, below):

> *…so you know you can expect how big a delivery it's going to be how many thermal bags, you might need. But uber eats you get no information whatsoever.*

This information deficit from the platform necessitates the requirement for strategies to increase self-efficiency. As related by a third Uber Eats delivery driver, Ronnie, these strategies come with experience:

> *You have to be quite switched on, you have to be wired in and okay I'm working with this location, what sort of restaurant, is it? What's the type of meal or where it's probably going to be, you can accept it and see more details […] But yeah sort of the way that you work you have to it's like a drive to the bottom, like you have to work [..] really efficient to max. You know. You have to move fast, you know.*

The driver is indicating here that the lack of explicit information from the platform requires them to build up a reserve of tacit knowledge in order to make a profit. The withheld information means that some deliveries will be loss-making, necessitating high volumes, so that the overall average will then become profitable. As discussed earlier, the driver is acting as a self-entrepreneur, investing in themselves by making short-term losses to build up a knowledge base which can then be exchanged for capital (profitable jobs). As indicated by both FIRST Union's recent survey, and corroborated by our interview data, gig workers earn close to or often below the minimum wage after expenses (discussed in more detail below). Making efficiencies to ensure high volumes of jobs when demand is there is one of the only levers they have through which to increase their wages to a liveable amount.

The same issue of information paucity was present in the interviews with Uber rideshare drivers:

> *And it's the ability to see the […] trip destination and […] the duration before you accept the trip, 'cause with Uber when we accept trips we're not told what the destination is […] So yeah, […] all we get told is how many minutes away is the pickup […] destination from where we are. So it might be 2 minutes away, 3 minutes away and what the rider's rating star rating is um and that's it, so we don't know where they're going until after we pick them up and then when we start the trip. That's when we find out. [Isaak]*

As is evident here the only information the Uber driver receives upon accepting the job through the app is how far away the pickup point is from the driver's current location and the star rating of the passenger. Seemingly crucial information such as the passenger's destination, or even the length of the proposed trip, is absent from their decision-making base. This information is deliberately withheld by Uber, as they know that drivers will be less likely to accept shorter trips, or those that lead them away from population-dense areas, as these are less profitable. However, if the customer was unable to secure an Uber ride for these kinds of trips, they would turn to one of Uber's competitors (thus impacting market share). As related by another driver, this information inequality rather makes a mockery of the status of Uber's workers as contractors, as unlike most contractors who should understand the terms before they sign an agreement, each time drivers accept a job through the app they have "no idea what the actual terms of engagement is" [Sid].

Often the driver's only option is to accept the job through the app to receive more information (such as the passenger's destination), only to cancel it before pick-up if they gauge that it would not be sufficiently profitable. However, this then affects their cancellation rate, which if it gets too high, will prompt "an email like a warning from Uber saying you're cancelling too many trips. And if you cancel too many…they can just deactivate you" [Isaak]. In other words, Uber is acting as an employer by disciplining the driver for cancelling jobs, threatening deactivation, which in effect means being fired, as they will no longer be able to use the app (again contradicting their status as independent contractors).

Furthermore, Uber operates a driver reward system called 'Uber Pro', with one of the key qualifying metrics being a cancellation rate of 3% or below.[39] With four 'status tiers' (Blue, Gold, Platinum and Diamond), Uber clearly states on the web page that 'See trip duration and direction' only becomes available as one of the listed benefits of attaining Gold status and above. In other words, Uber tries to entrap the driver in a Catch 22 - to attain the information that the driver needs to ascertain if a prospective job will be profitable, they have to accept 97% of their jobs, thereby necessarily accepting that a significant proportion of those will be unprofitable.

Reward and punishment systems such as these are recognised in the literature as forms of *gamification*[40] or *algorithmic management*.[41] Gamification is the analysis of data (which Uber collects from every transaction on their platform) to ascertain what might work as incentives, in order to introduce game-like rewards for drivers. In the words of van Doorn and Chen, gamification "attempts to manipulate their flexible labor supply in an agile and cost-effective way—to thereby elicit higher productivity".[42]

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[39] Uber (2021). Introducing Uber Pro. https://www.uber.com/nz/en/drive/uber-pro/

[40] van Doorn, N., & Chen, J. Y. (2021). Odds stacked against workers: datafied gamification on Chinese and American food delivery platforms. *Socio-Economic Review, 19*(4), 1345-1367.

[41] Rosenblat, A., & Stark, L. (2016). Algorithmic labor and information asymmetries: A case study of Uber's drivers. International Journal of Communication, 10, 27.

[42] van Doorn, N., & Chen, J. Y. (2021). Odds stacked against workers: datafied gamification on Chinese and American food delivery platforms. *Socio-Economic Review, 19*(4), 1345-1367 (p. 1345).

Algorithmic management is a related but broader term which points to the dehumanised (structural characteristic 5) and automated (structural characteristic 6) nature of platformed work. Despite purportedly enjoying autonomy through lacking a human manager, the interviewed gig workers still found themselves having their behaviour subtly directed (through mechanisms such as Uber Pro and surge pricing, discussed below). As well as direction, there is the harder hand of discipline – and this is used in more subtle and more regular ways than threats of deactivation (most commonly through the rating system, discussed below).

However, half of the interviewed rideshare drivers resisted Uber's gamification by not wanting to be part of the 'Uber Pro' loyalty scheme (introduced by Uber to try to dissuade drivers from driving for one of their more recently arrived competitors: Ola, Zoomy and DiDi). Those seven drivers chose to practice what we call here platform swapping, a form of resistance to gamification which seeks to maximise returns for drivers by taking advantage of the different affordances and commission rates on the different platforms. According to the participants the differences in commission rates were substantial, with Zoomy the cheapest at 15%, Ola taking 18% and Uber 28%. This means that from every dollar earned by Uber rideshare drivers, 28 cents goes immediately to Uber, meaning rideshare drivers have a considerable incentive to drive for one of their competitors. In the extract below Jorge describes how he keeps both the Uber and Ola apps on simultaneously, with preference going to any Ola trip that he gets a notification for, as they are more profitable:

> *…if i'm driving I would keep both apps (I don't drive for Zoomy anymore). I keep two apps on, I keep my Ola on. So if I get an Ola trip and if it's surging I would take the Ola trip because the Ola trip is more lucrative for me as in its 18% Commission and especially on a surge trip it's more money for me. So I would take the Ola trip, but if both of them were on and there weren't any surges, I would still take the Ola trip because it's still more money for me, regardless.*

Hence, if it wasn't for Uber's considerable market dominance (in both rideshare and food delivery) their high commission rate would make them very uncompetitive as an option for workers. This dominance is mostly due to their longevity (having been in New Zealand since 2014), their brand recognition and familiarity (passengers have been using them regularly in multiple locations over that period and so are likely to have the app on their phones), the quality of the app and their considerable resources for marketing campaigns.

Uber's surge pricing, as described by Jorge above, is the emblematic form of automated algorithmic management in gig work. During periods of high demand from passengers, drivers are enticed to make themselves available for work because "the algorithm will

temporarily raise fares for a particular geographic location".[43] Such surges, particularly when a popular sports event or pop concert is happening, can lead to fares which are three or even four times the normal rate. It therefore becomes a particularly crucial part of the competitive knowledge of the rideshare driver to be able to predict when and where these surges may occur, as due to Ubers high commission rate, drivers tend to only just about break even on regular-priced fares.

However, due to the opacity of the algorithm, with Uber never sharing their data and therefore exactly how these surge areas and rates are specified, being available to take advantage of surge pricing is never an exact science. Indeed, there was some suspicion among drivers that surge pricing would be advertised on Uber's map to entice them to pick up rides at high demand locations and times, but then the platform would not apply those prices to their fares. But because of the lack of transparency around Uber's decision-making process, "there's no ways for us to prove to Uber that I could see it on my map but then job comes in, and he doesn't have it" [Cairon]. Consequently, surge pricing, while seemingly a source of great profit for drivers, masks considerable information and power asymmetries.

As described by Amelie, an Uber Eats driver below, drivers spend considerable time and resources discussing the possible patterns of judgement or reasoning behind some of the decisions made by the algorithm, only to realise with experience that there is no judgment or reasoning behind decisions made by an artificially intelligent system. In fact, as with many machine learning systems in the contemporary era, decisions made by AI adaptive systems, informed by vast data points, are often even beyond the understanding of the coders and computer scientists who design them. As the experienced delivery driver puts it, to ask why can be analogised to asking how long is a piece of string:

> *I remember when I first joined I said so what's the rules around the algorithms does it […] and this guy who I know has been around forever, basically says like 'how long is a piece of string'? And I think that's the golden question, because no one knows what the algorithms are…*

The dehumanised nature of the drivers' interactions with Uber extends beyond surge pricing, to also include instances when they need to contact the company with a query or dispute. Uber formerly provided physical 'Green Light Hubs', based in urban centres, where drivers could speak to staff who were employed to answer queries and check the documentation required to sign up as a driver. However, these have now been closed down and any queries need to be resolved through phoning a call centre (based offshore), which is only available to those who join the Uber Pro loyalty system at Blue tier or above.

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[43] Rosenblat, A., & Stark, L. (2016). Algorithmic labor and information asymmetries: A case study of Uber's drivers. *International Journal of Communication, 10, 27* (p. 3766).

[44] Andrejevic, M. (2019). *Automated Media*: Routledge.

Those that don't join the loyalty scheme have to submit their queries to AI bots, which provide generic answers which say the "same thing […] over and over again" [Amelie]. This opacity causes considerable frustration for rideshare and delivery drivers, who waste considerable unpaid time attempting to resolve disputes, which often result in them going round in circles. The more experienced drivers learn not to bother contacting Uber, instead resolving queries internally through the driver Facebook groups, or to cut corners. As an example below, Karam, an Uber Eats driver, recounted how they threw a customer's food away because the app crashed and they were left completely in the dark as to what to do:

> *So I cannot actually go back to the restaurant give it back to them, so I was really confused what to do. So I tried to contact them [Uber], the problem is that they don't have a contact number, the only way to contact them […] just by messaging and that, too, if nobody is there to chat with you, you are left with no one right. So I was not sure what to do, then I actually read there is like a long actually FAQs […] and then that they had this point that if you have picked up the delivery and the APP is taking you back to the homepage that means today and the delivery has got canceled and you can dump the food wherever you want. So I just parked the car and I dumped the food.*

Here the driver is attempting to do the right thing, but soon learns (this experience was within their first 50 deliveries) that to be efficient and therefore profitable in their job they should not waste unpaid time in attempting to contact a dehumanised and unresponsive company such as Uber. The Geographer Mark Graham has termed this lack of human presence as "a way of being simultaneously embedded and disembedded"[45] in the locations from which they extract profit. While being embedded in terms of their market dominance and control over drivers' incomes and behaviours through data capture and artificial intelligence, at the same time they remain physically "disembedded to avoid significant accountability".[46] in the locations from which they extract profit. While being embedded in terms of their market dominance and control over drivers' incomes and behaviours through data capture and artificial intelligence, at the same time they remain physically "disembedded to avoid significant accountability". It is worth quickly noting here that Uber is not registered as a company in New Zealand (Uber BV is officially based in the Netherlands), with their operations funnelled through a subsidiary, Rasier New Zealand Limited.

Another algorithmic management mechanism which works to discipline drivers is the various rating systems. All of the apps which the participants worked for, including Delivereasy, Menulog, Ola, Zoomy and DiDi had some form of rating system (while Uber's seems to be the most sophisticated). As Neal commented, "Uber, Ola and DiDi

[45] Graham, M. (2020). Regulate, replicate, and resist – the conjunctural geographies of platform urbanism. *Urban Geography, 41*(3), 453-457 (p. 453).

[46] Ibid. (p.456).

[driveshare platforms]have a mutual star rating system where I [the driver] can rate the customer [and they] can rate me". Hence, after every taxi ride, the driver will rate the customer out of 5 stars, and vice versa. While seemingly equal (both parties can rate each other), this hides a fundamental power imbalance, as the drivers alone are reliant on a high average rating to maintain their income (they can be deactivated if their average goes below 4.2). This leads to a general atmosphere where the customer is always right (perpetuated by Uber themselves who will normally take the customer's side in a dispute), where drivers are likely to have to respond to mistreatment and even verbal abuse from passengers with a smile. One driver based in Hawkes Bay even provided bottled water and sun block at their own expense, in order to boost their ratings.

Such expenses are just one part of a whole litany which the interviewed gig workers, especially rideshare drivers, must subtract from their earnings, after the platform's commission. These include petrol (the cost of which has recently increased), insurance (for rideshare this is the more expensive comprehensive commercial kind with passenger liability), GST, ACC levies, income tax, vehicle purchase, depreciation and maintenance (for rideshare the car must be under 10 years old), phone and data package (the apps must run on smartphones), passenger endorsement licensing (for rideshare), criminal records checks, and for Uber Eats the purchase of a bag to carry food. The accumulation of expenses, when considered together, constitutes a significant and risky investment in their self-capital by the gig workers, made yet more risky by the knowledge that they could be deactivated and lose their income at any time. Several Uber rideshare workers recounted horror stories whereby drivers they had heard about through social media had been deactivated because of a single customer complaint. Because the drivers are not employed by Uber, there is no transparent disciplinary process which has to take place before losing their livelihoods.

That they are solely responsible for all of these expenses and risks further reinforces the idea that gig workers are *individualized*, entrepreneurial selves, or micro-businesses, *competing* (structural characteristic 7) against other drivers. And like businesses, they have to find everything out for themselves, with the aforementioned opacity of Uber providing them with very little helpful information. Several Uber drivers commented that while Uber asks for proof of insurance, they do not state that this needs to be comprehensive commercial, rather than standard. This means that drivers would be very likely to take short-cuts in this area, only to find themselves personally liable were they to have a crash with passengers on board. In regard to Delivereasy, the interview evidence indicates that they do not require or even advise their delivery workers (most often young men and some school-aged children) to purchase any kind of insurance.

Gig workers are therefore reliant on the Facebook groups for information on how to survive as micro-businesses. Responsible for completing income tax returns, many turn to specialist gig-worker accountants (who charge a fee) to complete them. Some who have experience in running businesses from other arenas hence have a competitive advantage. For example, Ronnie, who was born in New Zealand and spoke English as

as his first language, possessed the knowledge to run themselves as a registered sole-trader, retaining all of their receipts to claim back GST. Neal, who was Pakeha, knew how to claim back for their car park and home office space against their mortgage. Possessing this esoteric knowledge is a significant *competitive* advantage, one that a recent migrant who has English as a second language is much less likely to hold. This is what we mean by *hyper-competitive:* while most workplaces have elements of competition, the composition of the gig economy as a series of individualized micro-businesses whose income is so dependent on fluctuations in supply and demand and who receive very little in the way of training or support accentuates this aspect considerably.

In summary, the seven structural features of platformed work: piecemeal; precarious; individualized; gamified; dehumanized; automated and hyper-competitive reinforce an isolated, atomized subjectivity and way of working for driveshare and delivery drivers. Highly vulnerable to shifts in demand and platform-enforced changes to working conditions, gig workers must act as an entrepreneur in collecting often esoteric information to give themselves a competitive advantage through improving their efficiency. The next section examines the implications of this for the collective organizing of gig workers.

Implications for collective organising

As mentioned, gig workers in Aotearoa New Zealand are classified as contractors and therefore have no right to unionise or to collectively bargain for better pay or conditions. When Uber or the other platforms change their pay or conditions, this either happens through a subtle tweaking of the algorithm without the worker's knowledge, or through a change to the terms and conditions on the app, to which they either click 'yes' or 'cancel'. Rather than a bilateral bargaining relation (as traditionally takes place in work sites), the relation of the gig worker to their employer is identical to the unilateral relation of a consumer using a social media app on their phone such as Facebook. Gig workers are also platform users who are faced with a stark choice: either accept the change to the terms and conditions or stop using a platform which is pivotal to their ability to make an income.[47]

While rideshare and delivery workers could complain and offer each other support on social media, this would be very unlikely to have an impact on the platform's decisions. They can also complain to Uber, but they would be subject to the aforementioned dehumanised dispute structure. As Findlay describes below, there is a recognition amongst workers that they have absolutely no democratic right to question anything, partly because there is no human to aim a question towards:

[47] Internet Governance Forum. (2015). *10th Internet Governance Forum: Recommendations on terms of service & human rights.* Retrieved from https://www.intgovforum.org/cms/documents/igf-meeting/igf-2016/830-dcpr-2015-output-document-1/file

> *You know this and and you don't question that. That's kind of like this is how it is for you. If you're part of it, then you're part of it. You know this is how things are going to be. So, and there's no, and there's no point questioning it because there is no human component to it, so there's no one to question.*

Furthermore, because the gig economy platforms hold all of the power in the relationship, with no transparent disciplinary processes, if they do find a human to question, they face the very real prospect of being deactivated. Many drivers commented on the widespread fear of speaking out in their community, both publicly on social media, or privately by contacting the platforms, which, as mentioned, created some difficulties in recruiting gig workers, who may have been worried that Uber was monitoring social media. Uber includes nondisclosure and non-disparagement clauses in their contracts which drivers sign, contributing to the fear that they will be punished for speaking out.

Aqeel even equated Uber's anti-democratic, bullying behaviour to the Taliban. And, as put by Sian below, the significant financial investment involved, particularly in driveshare, created a real fear of suddenly being "cut off", leaving them with substantial debt and no way of paying it back:

> *And, probably because they know that they can just cut people off, they would be worried that if they if they found that […] they [could] just get cut.*

The interviewed gig workers were asked specific questions as to whether union representation, collective bargaining or collective action (such as strikes) could work to level the playing field a little and force Uber and the other platforms to listen to their concerns. Many commented on their isolation from other drivers, whereby because they acted as individual micro-businesses, rather than colleagues, and partly due to the piecemeal nature of gig work (it takes place at home and private transport), they had no regular physical contact with others who did the same job (especially after the closure of the Green Light Hubs). As mentioned, when trying to use the snowball method to recruit more drivers, many of them only knew one or two others at best.[48] Unlike taxi drivers, it is difficult to recognise another Uber driver, as their car has no clear markings on it.

This isolation from co-workers is very well summarised by this long quote from Kate, who was a former Uber rideshare driver:

[48] Some did employ a buddy system, whereby drivers would keep in contact with another driver by phone so that if one got in trouble they could notify the other.

> *The taxi guys know each other well enough that they've sort of done their own thing, but the Uber drivers don't really get any way to contact each other. […] So I think there definitely needs to be thing to bring these drivers together, because a lot of them are getting screwed over in the same way, so they don't realize that. There are these different things happening and I think they do need a union of some sort. But the thing is that Uber, because everyone's contractors and everyone is working from home, people have no idea who another Uber driver is. And that's one of the biggest things I need...Feel like they need to be unionized for. They need to know who else is working with them and that way they can see if their problems...If they're having the same problems as these other people where they don't even get that opportunity at the moment. If they have a problem with deal with it themselves. So a union would be just a great idea for them.*

It therefore becomes a 'chicken and egg' situation, where the physical contact and informal chat required to build relationships between drivers and therefore a sense of shared interest and common problems which could lead to collective organising and action is precluded by the structural constraints of platformed work. At the same time, it becomes difficult for a union to move in and convince gig workers to join and pay dues without locating a density of drivers in common spaces who have that sense of shared interest. As discussed, this isolated, individualised and hyper-competitive work relation reinforces neoliberal norms and values, and some confessed to retaining a sense of scepticism around the motivations of unions, who they saw as often motivated by enlarging their own power and influence. While others saw union representation as potentially protecting and enriching other, less efficient and productive gig workers, at at their own expense.

Hence, the most promising attempt at organising gig workers was a non-union affiliated grassroots organisation, the Rideshare Drivers Network (RDN), which was run by drivers themselves. The RDN was established in 2017 and successfully organised a stop-work event in 2018 (actually striking is illegal for contractors) together with conducting a survey, both of which successfully attracted some media coverage to the issues they face,[49] and saw them invited to some discussions with government. However, the time commitments involved in leading such a group took their toll (on top of the demanding schedules of performing gig work), and the two key actors found less precarious, more rewarding and sustainable employment. This meant they were no longer able to devote the time needed to drive the organisation forward, nor were they so grounded in the lived realities of gig work.

[49] Leahy, B. (2018, May 13). New Zealand Uber drivers plan Monday strike over low incomes with ride-sharing app. *New Zealand Herald*. https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/new-zealand-uber-drivers-plan-monday-strike-over-low-incomes-with-ride-sharing-app/VC6SMRCBYHH62Z6HB3R5W5A6MI/

This points to another key barrier to collective organising gig workers: its precarity and lack of long-term sustainability means that most of the interviewees either did it as a part-time job (14 out of 25) or perceived it as a temporary stopgap, while they were looking for other work. This means that they are under-invested in the future sustainability of the sector and are often unwilling to spend the time participating in a collective action group such as the RDN. Such transience is not really a problem for Uber and the other platforms, who have a supply of new workers ready and willing to join the ranks, particularly in a post-pandemic economy where many people have lost their jobs. Indeed, without the requirement to provide much in the form of training or other support, the platforms have proved willing to flood the market with new workers (even providing incentive offers for new drivers), as this is likely to mean that their wait times and prices are lower for customers in comparison to their customers.

Another related issue is that it is very difficult to organise a stop-work event in such an environment where there is no way to communicate apart from through social media (which not all drivers would be aware of or want to join). Uber is the only organisation that would have contact details for all its drivers, and it cannot currently be forced to share its data. Further, the logic of competition is so dominant and ingrained into the design of the app, that should some drivers stop working for a day, this would mean that it necessarily becomes more profitable for others who choose to work. As discussed, surge pricing, which for rideshare drivers makes their work economically sustainable, becomes enacted when there is a shortage of available drivers compared to demand in a certain location. The financial situation that many gig workers face is so desperate means this would be highly tempting for them to take advantage of.

Social media does provide a certain sense of community and, to an extent, acts as a space for the formation of collective interests. There are several Facebook groups, including large national ones for Rideshare and Uber Eats, as well as local groups for the larger urban centres. The interviewed gig workers mostly talked about these groups in positive terms, whereby they were able to find out information that was not supplied by the platforms, tips on where and when to find busy locations, as well as general support from others in similar situations. The groups also provide a place for drivers to create community through venting their frustration at the lack of support from Uber and their precarity and exploitative conditions, as well as sharing funny stories and memes. However, as communication scholars have previously noted, social media can be effective at networking with a large amount of people, the ties between them tend to be weak and the commitment for action tends to be low.[50] Additionally, the lower stakes of social media communication tends to promote harsher criticism and ruder behaviour than face-to-face communication. As described by Neal below, this can reproduce the individualised, competitive logic of platformed work, rather than collectivism:

[50] Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society, 15*(5), 739-768.

> *To be honest I find it quite combative, you might put a discussion point out there and you have a whole heap of sarcasm come back at you and like yeah, why do I bother type situation? Yeah, so yeah, that's why I...so part of the reason why I came off is that you know that that I was finding myself, potentially getting into arguments with other drivers and I had to bite my tongue and so like, yeah there there. Like I said there is no collective spirit or anything that it is, every man for himself.*

Others corroborated this perspective, adding that criticism of Uber and the other platforms can be dampened down by some users acting as gatekeepers, who "defend Uber at all costs for some reason. Then basically anyone that criticizes Uber for anything, they just... They just say, their go to line is OK: Go get another job leave" [Isaak]. Hence the competitive logics that redefine any shared problem as one of individual inefficiency, are not only reproduced through the platform function but also within these social media spaces.

In summary, the nature of platformed work, combined with New Zealand's regulatory environment and employment law, creates substantial barriers for collective organizing. As entrepreneurial selves, or micro-businesses, who find work on phone apps and who conduct that work on private transport, rideshare and delivery drivers are very much on their own, up against the might of multi-national corporations such as Uber. Their interactions with Uber as app users, rather than workers with bargaining power, reinforces an individualized relation which is not conducive to the formation of collective interests or solidarity. This is further strengthened through their lack of physical interactions with other drivers, which also contributes to a 'chicken and egg' situation where the possibility of union action is impeded by a lack of previous collectivity. While the Rideshare Drivers Network did achieve some success in forming a collective identity, this was limited by the transient nature of gig work and the nature of social media communication.

The final section of the analysis will discuss the implications for health and wellbeing of platformed work, where the worker is isolated and powerless in a pandemic environment, with potential impacts for both their health and others

Implications for health and wellbeing in a pandemic environment

As the name of this study *Experiences with COVID-19 Among Gig Workers* suggests, the impact of the pandemic on the income, health and wellbeing of participants was a major focus of the interviews. What was revealed was stark: for rideshare drivers their income was often halved in comparison to pre-lockdown levels, while their expenses and risk both increased substantially. While food delivery became potentially more lucrative, this also came attached to increased risk for easily exploitable young people. And because of the previously discussed structural characteristics of platformed work, the responsibility for mitigating that risk was shouldered almost entirely by individual gig workers, with the platforms only offering a minimal amount of support or guidance. The result is that gig workers are likely to be significant contributors to the spread of COVID-19.

Earnings have declined significantly for rideshare drivers because of the piecemeal, precarious and hyper-competitive nature of their work, which ties their earnings to fluctuations in supply and demand. While precarity and income insecurity were major issues to negotiate for gig workers before the pandemic, with their negative impacts on health and mental wellbeing, these tendencies have been greatly exasperated by the COVID-19 environment,[51] because demand from customers has decreased, while the supply of drivers has increased (more people moving into gig work after losing their jobs). Demand has decreased with the reduction in people travelling to and from work, the loss of international tourists and restrictions around sports, music events and nightlife (from which they would derive much of their most profitable surge-priced work).

To provide some evidence of this decline in earnings, we have included some interview extracts below. Melissa estimates that her earnings have halved:

> *I've been, God probably averaging about $20.00 an hour, and that's before all my expenses. So yes, the hourly rate has changed these days. I think I think because of COVID […] I'm not earning what I was doing before COVID, definitely not. I'm earning probably half of what I was earning before COVID.*

Nawal comments below that the best daily earnings she's had pre-COVID was $150, whereas after COVID during the quiet post-Christmas period her earnings (before expenses) had declined to $300 a week:

[51] Apouey, B., Roulet, A., Solal, I., & Stabile, M. (2020). Gig Workers during the COVID-19 Crisis in France: Financial Precarity and Mental Well-Being. Journal of Urban Health, 97(6), 776-795.

> *…when I started driving […] I'd say 150 dollars a day I would probably give it as a benchmark is what I've made is the most in a day […] whereas across after Boxing Day in 2020 up until 2021 valentine's day it's become super quiet to where you could go with with maybe around 300 bucks a week…*

While the above rideshare driver is describing differences between earnings at peak periods and off-periods, which would normally be something that they would need to negotiate, either with savings, another job, or a supportive partner, the pandemic environment has exasperated these already stressful fluctuations in demand. And while the majority of the interviewed rideshare workers received the wage subsidy during lockdowns, this only covered periods at Levels 3 and 4 (which have been comparatively brief outside of Auckland), with significant declines in customer demand and increases in supply of drivers manifesting in Levels 1 and 2.

Another rideshare driver, based in Hawkes Bay, and therefore more vulnerable to shifts in demand from declines in tourism and seasonal workers, describes an even steeper decline in earnings:

> *Uber X in Hawke's Bay usually on a regular on a good day with Uber X, I can \ make $200 a day during the weekdays and about $300 or $400 a day on weekends. At the moment weekdays I'm making $45, $80 maximum. So yeah weekends its $150-$200 a day so it's a lot less than I usually make.*

Weekend earnings have approximately halved while weekday earnings have declined by up to three quarters for this driver. This decline in earnings has been coupled with an increase in expenses: not only has the cost of petrol increased recently, but drivers are responsible for purchasing masks and sanitiser (the cost of which increased substantially during the first lockdown due to low availability). While the drivers were instructed by Uber and the other platforms to wear masks and to provide masks and sanitiser to customers, as micro-businesses, they had to shoulder the expense for those items themselves, highlighting a dangerous grey area between their status as contractors and workers. Uber did offer to provide refunds for sanitiser after the first lockdown, but this was for just $20, and there was a lengthy process involved in claiming the rebate, involving photographing receipts and uploading them to the website. And as previously described and related by Jorge below, any dealings with Uber's dehumanised machinery results in frustration from automated answers, obfuscation, and delays:

> *…so Uber had promised us that they would they would refund us for hand sanitizer, so I took hand sanitizer, kept the receipt, email them a few times, I mean the photographs and everything [and they] didn't really refund us any money back, I didn't I didn't end up getting any money back. I've tried contacting them they made some automatic generated answer stating or we have not received something like that, or you missed the cutoff and the deadline and i'm just like. You know, they just make up stuff I mean they did promise us money back for hand sanitizer including product but didn't do anything.*

Other drivers corroborated this story, whereby automated messages for extra information or of driver's ineligibility for the refund were sent out until the driver gave up wasting time that could be otherwise be spent earning money driving. Only 1 of the 14 interviewed rideshare drivers were successful in their attempts at receiving the $20 refund for sanitizer.

And due to the disembedness, or lack of human presence of Uber and Ola in Aotearoa New Zealand, the only guidance drivers received from Uber on how to mitigate COVID risk was emails advising them to wear masks and not to turn on their air conditioning:

> *We yeah we got emails and stuff saying you know wear a mask and hand sanitizer and um obvious the suggestion not to use your air conditioning or to have air coming from outside rather than being circulating inside the car. And yeah, and just. They also, I think on the app before you sign on. I think during the Level 2 when masks were required. They'd get you to take a photo with a mask on your face, so then the app would recognize that the driver had a mask on so and I had all these things like you'd have to tick that you'd have hand and sanitizer masks all these other things. [Isaak]*

Uber thereby required workers to prove that they were wearing masks through an artificially intelligent facial recognition system and a tick a box to attest that they used sanitizer, but did not supply them with those products, adding to their already substantial expenses list. Unlike other nations such as the UK, none of the interviewed rideshare workers reported that plastic shields had been provided to protect them from infection by passengers.[52]

[52]Araujo, C., Murakawa, F., Butler, S., Bonhomme, M., Arriagada, A., Ibáñez, F., . . . Clark, E. (2020). The Gig Economy and COVID-19: Looking Ahead. Retrieved from https://fair.work/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2020/09/COVID-19-Report-September-2020.pdf

Gig workers have functioned as essential workers during the global pandemic, delivering food and other essential items to households, thereby allowing them to work from home and reduce transmission. However, the same protections have not always been extended to gig workers themselves, who do not have the option of working from home. While contactless delivery could be enacted for Uber Eats, Delivereasy and Menulog food delivery workers, driveshare workers have to work in close proximity to the customers in the enclosed space of a car. Many of the interviewed drivers related stories where customers would refuse to abide by the advice from Uber of keeping all rides to a maximum of three passengers, with no passengers permitted in the front seat next to the driver. The driver has the right to refuse the job, but not only would this mean they would not be paid, but they were also constrained by the aforementioned 'customer is always right' ethos within gig work.

Furthermore, within the current polarized climate around COVID restrictions, gig workers are quite likely to encounter customers with strong anti-mask views, who may not be vaccinated, thereby increasing risk:

> *…especially at the beginning of the first COVID happening, a lot of customers didn't really want to wear a mask so things like and I was wearing a mask obviously. But there's some of them tried to reach for my mask and trying to make me take it off and being abusive and all this kind of things. And it's just you know you call Uber and they then the customers who don't complain same time but somehow yeah nothing that's been done. [Cairon]*

Should a rideshare driver contract COVID, they would have little in the way of sick pay protections or other forms of compensation, increasing their likelihood of remaining driving while symptomatic and avoiding a test or self-isolation in order to avoid destitution. As a report by the *Fairwork* organization put it on the situation in the UK last year, drivers could be "faced with the impossible choice between penury and infection".[54] So far Uber has not offered any form of financial assistance for COVID-infected drivers in New Zealand as has been offered in other nations such as the US or South Africa.[55] Coupled with Uber's thus far refusal to mandate vaccines for their drivers,[56] gig workers have the potential to significantly increase the spread of COVID infection in the community.

[53] Cherry, M. A., & Rutschman, A. S. (2020). Gig Workers as Essential Workers: How to Correct the Gig Economy Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic. ABA *Journal of Labor & Employment Law* (2020).

[54] Ibid, p. 2.

[55] Uber Blog (2020, April 16). An update on COVID-19 financial assistance. https://www.uber.com/en-ZA/blog/update-COVID-19-financial/#:~:text=We%20will%20continue%20our%20policy,payment%20will%20differ%20by%20country

[56] Humphries, Matthew (2021, August 6). Uber Decides Not to Make Vaccinations Mandatory for Drivers. PCMag Australia. https://au.pcmag.com/news/88671/uber-decides-not-to-make-vaccinations-mandatory-for-drivers

Delivery drivers, as mentioned, are a little bit less exposed, due to the enactment of contactless delivery to customers. However, this does not mean their exposure is minimal. Interview participants relayed how, while in theory their food pick-ups from restaurants were contactless, the reality of a busy workplace struggling to cope with the onset of orders during a shift from Level 4 to 3, was very different. Ronnie relates this experience below:

> *…unfortunate thing is, it should be contactless, but when I go to a restaurant there's gonna be half the time contact, because you know I people are sociable and they'll hand me the bag and then I don't care I'm just going to take it, you know this, that risk it's a compounding risk. At the business at the customer customers hungry they've already waited at Level three you know I'm looking at these delays, because I get away, though with every order I'm going wow it's been half an hour, since that person's put their order through and i've been assigned, and you know. People getting more hungry and* and impatient. So when I arrive people just want to grab the food and eat it you know?

The driver is relating here how, at both ends of the process, pick-up and delivery, there are pressures which counteract the official advice for socially distanced, contactless service. And again, much like the rideshare drivers, advice on best practice came not through training which had to be completed in order to carry on working for the platform, but via a long email:

> *…uh wouldn't say training, but we got a big email from like the boss about how how Delivereasy was going to be run during level three and during the lockdown sort of thing, and that was just all about maintaining like personal hygiene, which we already had to do was just reiterating that personal hygiene's like essential. Especially and just the whole process of contactless payments and how it would work. [Keenan]*

The lack of rigorous procedural guidance should also be put into the context of the age and gender of many food delivery drivers, coupled with aforementioned built-in incentives to take risks by finding efficiencies and cutting corners. Of the 11 interviewed delivery drivers, 10 were young men, and many of them (particularly those who worked for Delivereasy) were university students or schoolchildren. Their experience and perception of risk would therefore be likely affected, made worse by the recent spread of COVID-19 misinformation in New Zealand.[57]As this Ronnie related, he is under the false impression that COVID cannot affect young, healthy, vaccinated individuals:

[57] Hannah, K., Hattotuwa, S., & Taylor, K. (2021). *Working Paper: Mis- and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand from 17 August to 5 November 2021*. Te Pūnaha Matatini. Retrieved from https://cpb-ap-se2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.auckland.ac.nz/dist/d/75/files/2017/01/working-paper-disinformation.pdf

…I'm not really worried about that virus thing. I've had vaccinations and I move around quite a lot I wouldn't be surprised if I encounter it. Looking at the information for someone who's young and healthy, I'll be fine. Some other drivers are a bit worried, you know they're like I'm not healthy I've got some immune system problems stuff like that so…

Conclusions

This report has argued that what we call *platformed work*, work facilitated by online platforms or apps, which is contingent, piecemeal, and casual, has distinct structural characteristics which differentiate it from other kinds of work. Drawing on the voices of 25 interviewed driveshare and delivery workers, we argue that *platformed work* has seven inter-linked structural features: 1) piecemeal, 2) precarious, 3) individualised, 4) gamified, 5) dehumanised, 6) automated, 7) hyper-competitive.

The structural features of the work are not neutral, but reinforce an individualised and entrepreneurial subjectivity and orientation, which poses unique challenges for collective organising which aims to improve the pay, conditions and safety of workers. Added to these challenges are the one-sided power relation the platform has with its workers, their lack of employment rights or protections, and the harsh conditions which do not promote any sort of investment in the work as a long-term profession.

Finally, we argue that the structural features of platformed work, coupled with their almost non-existent right to bargain for better pay and conditions, means that gig workers are highly vulnerable to the kinds of economic and health risks which came with the COVID-19 pandemic. Rideshare drivers' incomes have decreased dramatically since March 2020, meaning that they find it harder to pay for necessities and service their debt. With no sick pay or ability to work from home, they must take risks to increase their income, which would include permitting unmasked customers to enter their cars, going without safety equipment such as plastic shields, and working while they feel unwell or following advice to self-isolate. Further, partly due to their status as contractors they are not provided with sufficient safety training or instructions. The implication is that they increase the risk of infection not just of themselves but the wider community at large.