

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Life in the Driver's Seat: A Qualitative Analysis of Rideshare Drivers' Perspectives of Their Work and Well-Being Using Reddit Posts

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ABSTRACT

Background: Rideshare driving has become a common occupation within the emerging gig and platform economies. Despite offering a high degree of scheduling flexibility, rideshare driving provides little employment stability, an unstable income, and minimal employment benefits. This precarity, combined with the use of algorithmic labor management to guide drivers' actions, has garnered attention for its potential impacts on these workers' health.

Methods: To examine rideshare drivers' perspectives of their work and its implications for their well-being, this exploratory study examined posts ($n = 1034$) to the digital platform Reddit in the year 2024 using thematic analysis.

Results: Themes indicated that workers experience financial precarity but also appreciate the flexibility of rideshare driving. Drivers are also aware of the algorithms that guide their work and, at times, feel that these prevent them from increasing their earnings. Drivers posted about experiences with passengers—both positive and negative—while also discussing the mental stressors of ride sharing and concerns about their physical safety on the job.

Conclusions: These findings underscore the varied experiences rideshare drivers encounter in their workplace, while highlighting potential implications for their physical and mental well-being. Understanding these first-hand accounts may inform efforts to improve the well-being of platform-based workers.

1 | Introduction

The 21st century has seen new and emerging work environments and technologies, particularly within the evolving “gig” and “platform” economies. Gig work largely encompasses temporary employment arrangements in which workers, acting as independent, self-employed contractors, are hired and paid for individual tasks [1]. The gig economy offers workers a high degree of scheduling flexibility and independence, making

it an attractive alternative to standard employment [2, 3]. However, gig work also provides limited stability, uncertain payment structures, and minimal or no workplace benefits, making their employment precarious in nature [4–6]. Additionally, the modern gig economy frequently involves online, third-party apps, or platforms, which connect gig workers to customers seeking their services [5]. Within this emerging platform economy, the use of workers' data by digital,

nonhuman management systems to direct their actions in the workplace—a process termed algorithmic labor management—has gained increasing attention for its implications for worker well-being [7].

An increasingly common form of platform-based gig work is rideshare driving, in which consumers seeking transportation are connected to drivers via a third-party app. Rideshare work is similar to the traditional taxi industry in terms of its central function (i.e., transporting customers from one destination to another) and certain occupational risks, such as workplace violence [8]. However, it differs in several key respects. For instance, rideshare drivers use their personal vehicles on the job and are financially responsible for their maintenance and upkeep [9, 10]. Moreover, rideshare drivers' work is heavily influenced by algorithmic labor management [11], with location data and dynamic, demand-driven pricing models often presenting drivers with offers that will prompt them to drive in particular locations or for longer periods. This creates a work environment that likely has unique stressors beyond those experienced in the traditional taxi industry, by non-platform-based gig workers, or by precariously employed workers more broadly.

Social media data has been increasingly used to understand platform workers' perspectives of the unique stressors experienced in their workplace [12–14]. A major strength of using social media data is its potential to access these workers' unfiltered perspectives, which may provide a deeper view of their experiences. Despite the richness of this data source, to the authors' knowledge, social media data have not been used to assess the perspectives and experiences of platform-based rideshare workers, particularly their views on precarious employment, algorithmic labor management, or the effects of these workplace exposures on their well-being. Thus, we conducted an exploratory qualitative analysis of posts on Reddit, a widely used online forum, to explore rideshare drivers' perspectives on their work and its implications for their well-being.

2 | Background

2.1 | Rideshare Driving as Precarious Employment

The emergence of rideshare driving and other forms of platform-based gig work has occurred within broader shifts in labor markets and employment conditions, both in the United States and elsewhere. Throughout the 20th century, a growing and robust framework of employment protections resulted in the emergence of a standard employment relationship (SER), which was largely stable, provided adequate wages, and often provided workplace benefits such as defined pension plans [15, 16]. In the United States, workers in the emerging SER were further protected by their employment in industries facing little foreign competition; as foreign nations' infrastructures were rebuilt in the aftermath of the Second World War, manufacturing and construction industries in the United States faced little competition [15].

The SER has served as a benchmark of high-quality employment for occupational health researchers, who use it to study the effects of lower-quality employment arrangements on

worker well-being [17–19]. Beginning in the mid 1970s, the SER began to decrease in prevalence and was increasingly replaced by low-quality, or precarious, employment relationships [15]. While there are several definitions and operationalizations of precarious employment, the term often describes arrangements that are unstable, provide low or inadequate pay, and provide few or no workplace benefits (e.g., access to paid sick leave or employer-sponsored health insurance) [4].

In many countries, rideshare drivers are legally classified as independent contractors, and not employees of app-owning companies. As such, they are not provided with many of the positive attributes of the SER. Moreover, despite being legally classified as independent contractors, rideshare drivers lack many positive aspects of self-employment; they have limited control over their work environment (apart from scheduling flexibility) and little opportunity for engaging in self-directed or creative work. In this sense, rideshare drivers are neither “‘true’ employees or ‘true’ independent entrepreneurs” [20] and in many ways typify the experience of precarious workers in the 21st century.

2.2 | The Platform Economy and Algorithmic Labor Management

Although the prevalence of precarious employment is apparently increasing in the United States and elsewhere [21, 22], it has arguably been a feature of labor markets for centuries [23, 24]. A novel feature of many contemporary precarious employment relationships, however, is their position in an emerging platform economy, in which workers perform tasks assigned to them by other people via online platforms (e.g., a ride-share driving app connecting a driver to a passenger), often making use of their personal property (e.g., a rideshare driver's personal vehicle). The platform economy developed in the 1990s and has since expanded significantly with the emergence of ride sharing, housing, and other platform-mediated markets [5].

A key feature of employment arrangements and work environments within the platform economy is algorithmic labor management. While traditional labor management techniques involve human managers monitoring and directing workers' tasks, algorithmic labor management uses digital models—trained on data collected from workers themselves—to direct their actions [25, 26]. Among the key features of algorithmic labor management are the sophisticated and technologically advanced methods used to scrutinize and direct workers' actions, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms; the massive quantities of data collected from workers, which may be collected and fed into these algorithms on a near-continuous basis; and the ability of platforms to direct workers without any human involvement [25, 27]. Moreover, workers are often not aware that their data are being collected, stored, and used to direct their actions in the workplace, creating an asymmetry in which workers in the platform economy have little to no autonomy within their workplace [25, 28, 29]. Additionally, because algorithmic labor management lacks the human-facing interactions of traditional labor management systems, workers have few opportunities to contest decisions or

practices that they find unfair, unappealing, or otherwise disagree with.

Algorithmic labor management influences workers' actions via both direct and indirect mechanisms. Direct forms of algorithmic management include methods typically associated with traditional labor management, such as determining compensation or administering sanctions based on poor performance [26]. Indirect algorithmic control encompasses mechanisms targeting workers' "unconscious" modes of thinking. This includes "nudging" workers or directing them to perform certain tasks without explicitly being instructed to do so (e.g., a ride-sharing platform presenting drivers with rides in specific areas more frequently than others or presenting them with a financially attractive ride moments before they usually stop working each day). Another form of indirect algorithmic management is "gamification", in which performance is tied to achievements and other goals [30]. These can include virtual badges, leaderboards, and other competitive mechanisms aiming to increase productivity via merits tied to performance.

2.3 | Rideshares Drivers' Health and Well-Being Within the Platform Economy

Some characteristics of rideshare drivers' employment relationships and work environment may have negative consequences on their health and well-being, including their position as precariously employed workers. Research across occupations and industries suggests that precarious and other low-quality forms of employment are associated with poor self-rated health [17, 19], as well as specific health outcomes, such as increased body mass index [31] and risk of cardiovascular disease [32]. Precarious employment also has impacts on workers' psychological well-being, including a higher prevalence of poor self-rated mental health [33, 34] and increased self-reported stress [35]; research has noted a dose-response relationship between increasing levels of precarity and a higher prevalence of poor mental health [36, 37]. The mediating pathways between precarious employment and poor mental health are numerous and likely include stress related to financial uncertainty, social isolation due to increased attention focused on one's occupation, and a lack of autonomy in the workplace [38].

Algorithmic labor management can also be a significant source of stress in platform workers' lives. Algorithmically managed workers are theorized to perform extra cognitive and emotional labor to "pacify" the algorithms managing them [39]. For instance, rideshare drivers may put in extra effort to appease their riders—regardless of their perception of the interaction—to avoid negative ratings that might adversely affect their future earnings. Similarly, they might forego reporting adverse experiences with clients or leveraging formal complaints to their "employer" to avoid marking their account with something that might cause the algorithm to pass them over for opportunities; this can also lead workers to worry that they won't receive rewards (e.g., performance-based bonuses). Confusion surrounding these systems and the opacity of how they work is a further source of anxiety for platform workers, who are frequently unaware of the reasons they do or do not receive rewards [40]. This may be compounded by this system's lack of

human managers to leverage complaints to or interact with; platform workers frequently report a lack of response when complaints or queries are made [40, 41].

2.4 | Social Media Data to Understand Workers' Experiences, Health, and Well-Being

Data from social media platforms may offer a window into workers' health and well-being. In contrast to traditional survey methods, where responses may be influenced by social desirability bias or limited time for providing in-depth responses to open-ended items, social media posts can capture direct, sometimes unfiltered thoughts that provide insight into a poster's state of mind and personal experiences [42]. For instance, previous studies have used data from Twitter (now X) to examine the mental health and well-being of frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, construction workers, and nurses [42].

Researchers have also used the digital platform Reddit to study workers' perceptions and experiences. In comparison to other social media platforms in which users' posts are typically viewed only by those who follow them, Reddit is organized into "subreddits," or separate forums each devoted to a specific topic. Reddit also does not require users to submit demographic or personally identifiable information, giving its users a high degree of anonymity. This facilitates discussion of specific topics of interest to users, including users' occupation or industry of employment. Reddit has therefore garnered interest for its potential to provide insight to the perspectives of specific groups of workers. For instance, published research has used Reddit to investigate workers' experiences navigating workers' compensation systems; digital couriers' (i.e., platform-based delivery workers) safety and health concerns pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic; and platform-based food delivery drivers' perspectives on speeding within their occupation [12, 13, 43].

2.5 | The Present Study

Work in the platform economy, particularly rideshare driving, has expanded both geographically and in its share of the labor market [44]. Accordingly, researchers have become interested in studying the employment quality, health effects, and well-being of this emerging group of workers [8, 45]. This includes qualitative investigation, which can aid in generating hypotheses and documenting the lived experience of understudied populations (e.g., platform workers and rideshare drivers). Although Reddit has emerged as a useful data source for qualitative studies of workers' perspectives [13, 43], to the authors' knowledge, this data source has yet to be used to study the perspectives and well-being of rideshare drivers on precarious employment and algorithmic labor management. As social media data (particularly "pseudoanonymous" platforms, such as Reddit) offer users the opportunity to directly post their unfiltered thoughts, this data source offers a unique opportunity to study rideshare drivers' perspectives and experiences, expanding current understanding of workers' experiences within this emerging industry. Within this context, this study sought to explore the working lives and work-related experiences of

rideshare drivers. Specifically, we aimed to use publicly available social media data to qualitatively examine (1) rideshare drivers' experiences and perspectives of their work, and (2) potential effects their work has on their well-being, particularly as they pertain to precarious employment and algorithmic labor management.

3 | Methods

This study used data from the social media platform "Reddit" [46], a free and publicly available digital forum in which users share content and engage in discussions on a variety of topics. Reddit is organized into individual forums, or "subreddits," each of which is devoted to a specific area of interest. The platform has been previously described as "pseudoanonymous" as users are not required to connect their name or other personally identifiable information to their account [47, 48]. Thus it is not possible to discern a post's geographic or national context (e.g., policies regarding rideshare driving) unless its poster explicitly provides it.

3.1 | Data Collection

Data were collected in 2024 from two rideshare-specific subreddits, r/uberdrivers and r/lyftdrivers, which correspond to two platforms that constitute a large portion of the global rideshare market; neither subreddit is specific to any single country, and to the authors' knowledge, posts may be contributed from anywhere in the world. One year of post titles and text were extracted from each subreddit using the RStudio package "RedditExtractoR" version 3.0.8, a webscraping application that identifies posts based on keyword search [49]. Keywords were selected using previous literature describing keywords related to emotional well-being in a social media context [50]; precarious employment [4]; and algorithmic labor management within the context of rideshare driving [11, 20, 25, 26] (Table 1).

3.2 | Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis was conducted using QDA Miner Lite version 3.0.6 and used an inductive, codes-to-theory approach [51, 52]. The lead author (E.W.L.) began by reading through and familiarizing himself with the extracted data. He then proceeded with an initial round of inductive, descriptive qualitative coding, beginning with posts nearest to the date of data extraction and working retrospectively. Double coding, in which a single segment of text is permitted to be coded more than once if it corresponds to two separate codes, was permitted. Only text pertaining to the experience of rideshare driving was coded; posts from food delivery workers and passengers were not coded. Images and videos were inspected to provide additional context for understanding posts, when necessary. After examining one month of posts, the author discussed preliminary codes and findings with the research team, and it was determined that thematic saturation had been reached (i.e., no new codes were necessary to describe the posts being analyzed and further coding would have been redundant); thus, the ultimate sample assessed was composed of this one month of posts. The lead author then iteratively adapted and condensed codes as

needed and grouped them into emerging themes based on their similarity and shared meaning. Two co-authors (B.L.H. and K.D.H.) then reviewed themes, codes, and associated individual quotes from the one month of assessed posts, providing feedback and alternative explanations for the lead author's initial findings. These were incorporated into a final revision of the themes by the lead author.

3.3 | Ethical Considerations

This activity was reviewed by CDC, deemed public health surveillance, and was conducted consistent with applicable federal law and CDC policy (see e.g., 45 C.F.R. part 46, 21 C.F.R. part 56; 42 U.S.C. §241(d); 5 U.S.C. §552a; 44 U.S.C. §3501 et seq.). Scholars have raised concerns that the use of social media data may be identifiable when publicly reported in research manuscripts; this also applies to Reddit, despite the platform's "pseudoanonymous" nature [48, 53]. Thus, all quotes reported here were anonymized and paraphrased. We also do not report the precise dates during which posts were made, extracted, or analyzed to further ensure users' anonymity.

3.4 | Reflexivity

The lead author is a male researcher and epidemiologist by training. Approximately five years before project initiation and for less than one year in total, he worked as a rideshare driver in the Appalachian region of the eastern United States. He is not an active member of any rideshare-related subreddits but is familiar with the function and structure of Reddit, as well as the general culture of its user base. The two co-authors who reviewed codes are female researchers who do not have previous rideshare driving experience. One is an academic researcher with expertise in the use of social media data to study perceptions of health, and the other is an occupational health researcher specializing in transportation safety; both have previous experience with qualitative data analysis.

4 | Results

Approximately 70% of 1035 total posts in the month of extracted posts were deemed relevant and analyzed. Posts that were not analyzed included those from digital couriers or riders, as well as posts without codable/relevant information. Five themes emerged (Table 2), each of which is described below; italicized text represent paraphrased quotes associated with each theme, and the term "poster" refers to the Reddit user from which the text originated. One cross-theme code that was noted upon co-author review was that posts often seek advice on situations encountered while rideshare driving, including issues related to payment, passenger interaction, and maintaining an adequate passenger acceptance rate.

4.1 | Drivers Experience Aspects of Precarious Employment but Appreciate Their Position's Flexibility

Posters discussed the generally precarious nature of rideshare driving. For instance, posters noted the contractual nature of

TABLE 1 | Keywords used to search ride-share-specific Subreddits for posts related to emotional well-being, precarious employment, and algorithmic labor management.

Category	Subcategory (if applicable)	Keywords
Emotions	Anxious	Apprehension, apprehensive, anxious, anxiously, anxiety, jittery, antsy, nervous, restless, concerned, worried, fretful, uneasy
	Addicting	Addicted, addicting, compulsion, tempt, tempting
	Fear	Frightened, fearful, scared, afraid, fear, skittish, jumpy
	Terror	Terrified, desperate, terror, horrified, horror, horrible
	Disappointment	Disappointment, disappointed, disheartened, frazzled, hopeless, overwhelmed
	Lonely	Lonely, dateless, loveless, desolate, friendless, rootless, loner, solitude, lonelier, forlorn, loneliest, loneliness, lonesome
	Sad	Unhappy, distraught, upset, sad, melancholy, morose, sadness, pensive, grief, grieving, depressing, depressed
	Remorse	Remorse, guilt, guilty, embarrassed, embarrassment, ashamed, shame
	Disgust	Disgust, disgusted, boredom, boring, bored, loathe, loathing
	Contempt	Contempt, impatient, frustrated, grumpy, offense, offended, offensive
	Anger	Angry, rage, sullen, anger, annoyance
	Aggressive	Aggressive, aggressiveness, agitated, suspicious, paranoid
	Anticipation	Anticipation, eager, excited, eagerly, excitedly, vigilance, vigilant, alert, attentive
	Proud	Pride, proud
Precarious employment	Submissive	Submissive, hesitant, reluctant
	Job stability	Scheduling, schedule, autonomy, planning, replaceable, demand, fired, suspend, suspended, terminate, terminated, unemployed, unemployment
	Material benefits	Pay, tips, hourly, salary, expenses, expensive, insurance, health insurance
Algorithmic labor management	Workplace rights, benefits	Pension, retirement, retire, maternity leave, paternity leave, vacation, freedom, union, organize, organizing, discriminate, decision-making, violent
		Rate, rating, star, stars, algorithm, manipulate, manipulating, nudge, nudging, surge, surging, boost, boosting, boosted, incentive, incentivized, promo, promotion, track, tracking

their employment arrangement and that this arrangement lacks employment benefits:

We work every single day of the week but don't have any benefits or paid time off.

While some posters reported that rideshare driving was their primary job, others reported it was a side gig or extra job. Other posters reported working as a rideshare driver because they recently lost their primary form of employment or initially began working as a rideshare driver with the intent for the position to only be temporary or to be performed seasonally. More broadly, some posts dealt with the low pay associated with rideshare driving, stemming from not having enough rides, not receiving tips, or a lack of surge pricing or challenge opportunities.

Some posts noted that, while it is possible to make seemingly adequate income by rideshare driving, this is often offset by the cost associated with using one's personal vehicle. In addition to

paying costs associated with using their personal vehicle, posters noted that paying for insurance can be costly and frustrating to deal with while trying to make money rideshare driving. A lack of upfront pricing in certain areas compounds these issues, while also adding a layer of uncertainty to the economics of rideshare driving. This can be further complicated when drivers rent a car to drive, which can also be a significant cost:

I do dozens of rides but still can't pay for food. I rented a car after mine stopped working.

To ameliorate the financial precarity of rideshare driving, posters discussed several strategies for receiving higher fares, more tips, or more rides. This included working specific hours and maintaining a favorable environment for riders while driving them. Another often cited method was "cherry picking," in which drivers only accept ride offers with favorable attributes. This included only accepting offers in desirable areas or with relatively high ride fares. This occasionally allowed drivers

TABLE 2 | Themes with corresponding codes and exemplary quotes^a used in a thematic analysis of posts to rideshare-related forums on Reddit.

Theme	Code	Exemplary quote
Drivers experience aspects of precarious employment but appreciate their position's flexibility	Being classified as a contractor	<i>Everybody thinks rideshare drivers are employees but we aren't.</i>
	Issues with insurance	<i>After decades of documented good driving, my insurance company is bumping up my rate hundreds of dollars?!</i>
	Keeping track of earnings or miles through computer software	<i>Do you save money to use later for taxes? Is there a specific software you use?</i>
	Lack of surge/boost pricing, games, or challenges	<i>Why haven't I seen a ride challenge for weeks?</i>
	Low take-home pay relative to other expenses	<i>I recently had to pay thousands for car repairs on top of regular maintenance.</i>
	Lost rideshare work, deactivated account, or difficulty getting/staying approved to drive (or concerned about these)	<i>[Company] contacted me and informed me that I am deactivated after a rider reported me for not accommodating their mobility equipment.</i>
	Need for a union, collective action, or policy reform	<i>Previous strikes got people looking but there needs to be more.</i> <i>Sooner or later, the state will do a lawsuit.</i> <i>They need to treat us like contractors and let us decide what to charge passengers or give us employee status if they want to act like we're their workers.</i>
	No workplace benefits	<i>I'd earn more (and get benefits) working fast food or retail.</i>
	Not getting tipped/not tipped often enough	<i>Started driving again after a long break. Did riders stop tipping?</i>
	Not paid enough/low ride fares	<i>The app gives me trips that pay less than five bucks, which is annoying. That doesn't buy much.</i>
	Not enough rides	<i>Started driving during a busy time but didn't have many rides.</i>
	Positive experiences—Good pay, bonuses, tips, or scheduling flexibility	<i>I like being able to work the hours I want, make quick cash, and not get involved with office drama.</i> <i>It is refreshing not to report to a boss or have them tell me what to do.</i>
	Renting a car to drive for rideshare	<i>I told them I have insurance through the rideshare company. The rental company said okay but the insurance coverage doesn't come all at once.</i>
	Rideshare driving is a dead-end job or getting worse over time	<i>Rideshare driving was a tiring and nerve-racking way to make money. Now, after searching for other opportunities, I have a less stressful job without anxiety about unsafe riders.</i>
	Should stop rideshare driving and get another job	<i>You should all go and find other work. You can't drive rideshare forever.</i>
	Strategies for getting higher fares or more rides	<i>I could increase my earnings significantly if I drove at the right times and drove more frequently.</i> <i>If you play one type of music instead of playing what you want to hear, you will get more tips. It's important to play music that passengers like.</i> <i>I started cherry picking quick rides only in the center of town. This decreased my acceptance rate but I think it increased my earnings.</i>

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Theme	Code	Exemplary quote
Drivers are aware that their labor is algorithmically managed	Talking about strikes or collective action	<i>I joined the strike in solidarity with drivers. The companies are exploiting us. Let's keep the pressure up.</i>
	Upfront pricing or lack thereof	<i>My area doesn't have upfront pricing, so I have to accept rides without knowing what I'll be paid. It doesn't come out to much after factoring in other costs.</i>
	Waiting to get paid/Issues getting paid	<i>Whenever I get a new card, it is so hard to get paid. They finally get back to me and I now I have to wait?</i>
	Working Rideshare Part Time/As an extra job	<i>Thankfully, this is only a part time gig for me. I don't know how full-time drivers make ends meet.</i>
	Working rideshare because unemployed or recently lost job	<i>I started driving because I recently became unemployed and might be for a while, which is common in my line of work.</i>
	Algorithm/App keeping drivers from surge, promo, etc.	<i>They don't want me to hit the high paying tier and are making sure I don't</i>
	Algorithm/App manipulates to drive in certain location, work longer hours, or take longer rides	<i>My algorithm started offering trips farther away once I hit a certain number of trips.</i>
	Algorithm/App sets fares, prices, tip limits	<i>Do you think that [company] feeds our driving habits into their algorithm and sets bonus parameters so we can't achieve them?</i>
	General awareness of manipulation, tracking, or surveillance by company/algorithm	<i>Don't forget that [company] is recording and storing your data and tracking you at all times. It's used to make money from drivers.</i>
	Maintaining certain acceptance/cancel rate	<i>I don't drive in an area with upfront pricing, so I try to keep my acceptance rate high.</i>
Drivers express negative opinions of rideshare companies and note a lack of transparency	Resisting algorithm, general disdain for algorithm	<i>What the heck? I hate this algorithm</i> <i>You can increase payment if you develop methods to work against the algorithm.</i>
	Technological app errors and app-based annoyances	<i>I keep getting cutoff from the app and can't get back in. Time I spend fixing it, I'm not getting paid.</i>
	Worried about ratings	<i>Got less than three stars from a passenger. Do you think I need to be concerned about this?</i>
	Disdain for rideshare companies	<i>These companies are garbage.</i>
	The employer is greedy	<i>They nickel and dime us despite raking in millions.</i>
	Employer not honest	<i>They've made a lot of false claims but the [percent of rider's fee] guarantee is the worst one yet.</i>
	Employer taking other misc. fees	<i>I looked at my tax document from driving and don't understand what [company] is taking this money out for. Why was this deducted from my wages?</i>
	Employer taking tips or wages from driver	<i>The passenger sent me a tip and showed it to me on the app at the end of the trip. Then the app gave an error, and I got paid out without the tip... the passenger wasn't happy about it when he saw. I tried to talk to support but it was just a text bot. Finally got a supposedly real person and only then I happened to get a tip notification show up.</i>
	Employer taking too much of ride fee	<i>[Company] almost took 80% of the fare. That is disgusting.</i>

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Theme	Code	Exemplary quote
Drivers experience health and well-being-related effects of rideshare driving	Lack of employer support	<i>Does anybody know how to get through to [company] support? They aren't saying why I don't see promotions or the amount I should get paid. They aren't helpful.</i>
	Tax issues	<i>Are any other drivers waiting on their tax document from [company]? I can't file until I get it.</i>
	Car crashes or other car issues	<i>I keep getting rides with distant pickup locations. It has caused me to put a bunch of miles on my car... hundreds in a day, even.</i>
	Physical toll of rideshare driving	<i>You're constantly looking around, looking over your shoulder trying to make sure that you don't hit another car. There are so many times you have to stop, turn around. Plus talking to passengers all day. It's exhausting.</i>
	Rideshare driving is dangerous	<i>I can't just pull over to pick up a passenger, that's dangerous. I try to find somewhere to pull over.</i>
Drivers experience both positive and negative interactions with passengers	Stress, anxiety, or worrying	<i>I'm concerned about getting paid... feeling low.</i>
	Working long hours	<i>I work way more than 40 h a week... I've doubled that, even.</i>
	Accused of Mistreatment/dangerous driving by passengers	<i>Passenger claimed I was intoxicated even though I wasn't.</i>
	Don't want to drive passengers with low ratings, minors, or other types of passengers	<i>A while back I rejected a request from a passenger who was younger than high school age.</i>
	Difficulty accommodating passengers	<i>It's annoying to ensure that passengers can access the doors.</i>
	Enjoying passenger interactions	<i>Passengers have bought me both food and a [non-alcoholic] drink.</i>
	General comments/concerns about safety	<i>When passenger's account doesn't have a picture, do you hesitate to accept the ride?</i>
	Having to clean up after passengers/ comments on cleanliness	<i>This person squashed some sort of beauty product and covered my upholstery.</i>
	Intoxicated passengers	<i>Driving drunk guys that didn't end up getting laid... nothing worse.</i>
	Misc/odd passenger interactions	<i>I couldn't help but notice that this passenger was feeding her child.</i>
	Mistreatment or rudeness from passengers, including excessive waiting on pickup	<i>This person got mad that I wouldn't speed even though the weather was bad.</i>
	Passenger left phones/other items in driver's car	<i>I saw that they forgot their [item] after they were gone.</i>
	Private rides/deal to circumvent wage reduction	<i>After I told the passenger how much [company] takes in fees, they got my cell and texted me next time they needed a ride. Paid me in cash.</i>
	Scam passengers	<i>They called in a ride to one destination then added a stop. At the stop, they just got out and left.</i>
	Solidarity from passengers	<i>A rider said they think we are essential workers. They're starting to see our worth.</i>
	Using dashcams or internal cameras	<i>I got in a crash but did have a dashcam.</i>

^aQuotes have been paraphrased to protect posters' anonymity.

to meet quotas for production-based bonuses at the cost of a reduced ride acceptance rating, which is a measure of the percentage of ride offers a driver accepts.

Some posters indicated that working as a rideshare driver was becoming so financially unsustainable that broader changes were necessary. Proposed solutions included strikes, class action lawsuits, and policy changes aimed at reclassifying rideshare drivers as employees, as opposed to independent contractors. Moreover, some posters stated that they obtained or were seeking employment elsewhere due to rideshare driving's unstable nature and low pay; some suggested others do this as well:

Drivers in a tiny market are going to go for hours without rides if they don't have a good tactic. I'm begging you all to find something more financially secure.

Posters also noted positive employment attributes of rideshare driving, such as the flexibility of gig work and not having to report to a superior. Some suggested this was a good enough attribute of their work that other posters should stop complaining about the aspects they don't like, while others posted about positive or unique experiences receiving numerous trips in a single day, large bonuses, or driving during a high surge, resulting in high pay.

4.2 | Drivers Are Aware That Their Labor Is Algorithmically Managed

Posters discussed their experiences and perceptions of the collection and processing of their data. They noted that this data was often used to set fares, and some felt that the algorithms themselves were used to drive down drivers' earnings:

These companies need to stop using algorithms and do fair, standardized payouts.

This includes awareness of how the collection of their data is subsequently used to direct their actions while driving. Posters felt that surge-based pricing was presented to them to get them to drive towards or within a specific geographic area. Once they neared or entered the area, they noticed that the incentive disappeared. Similarly, posters felt that although their rideshare driving apps frequently present them with productivity-based incentives, they were prevented from achieving them.

Posters were also aware that their various metrics, such as the proportion of ride requests that they accept or their overall driver rating, could have an impact on their future earning potential. For some, this was cause for concern and a source of worry. Some openly expressed disdain for algorithms or calls for resisting them, while others noted the need to develop a strategy toward working around the algorithms to improve earnings.

4.3 | Drivers Express Negative Opinions of Rideshare Companies and Note a Lack of Transparency

Posters broadly held negative views of rideshare companies. Some posts were general in nature, while others explicitly called

out what was viewed as dishonest behavior. For instance, some posters indicated skepticism about one platform's policy that drivers are guaranteed a prespecified percent of the fee charged to riders. Other posts specifically noted that rideshare companies were greedy, noting a perceived discrepancy between drivers' earnings and rideshare companies' revenues. Posters noted other fees that rideshare companies take out of their pay, including insurance, cancellation fees, and service fees. Some expressed confusion about the purpose of certain fees and were not aware of them until they observed them in tax documents.

Several posters noted circumstances in which they suspected that riders' tips were either not paid to them or were reduced. This included instances in which riders told drivers that they were tipping them—or showed them that they were tipping them—but the tips still did not get paid out to the driver. Some posters reported that, in these instances, the tips were paid out only after contacting the app's customer support service. However, posters also posted that these customer support services did not provide adequate information when contacted. This occasionally caused significant stress or worry for posters, particularly when the perceived lack of support was in the context of trying to receive payment or getting a deactivated account reactivated:

I am antsy to drive again but I'm deactivated am barely getting any responses back from support.

4.4 | Drivers Experience Health and Well-Being-Related Effects of Rideshare Driving

Posters discussed the physical and mental health effects of rideshare driving. Physically, posters noted that rideshare driving is tiring, particularly when considering some of the ergonomic and mental tolls their occupation can have. Posters also noted the long working hours they spend driving, with many working more than 40 h per week or driving for several hours straight. Some posters noted that, despite this intense schedule being necessary to increase pay, the material rewards of rideshare driving remained low. One poster explicitly stated that their pay was still below minimum wage *despite* working nearly triple-digit hours in a week.

In addition to the gradual physical toll of rideshare driving, posters noted that it is generally dangerous work with potential for traumatic injuries. Some noted the high risk of car crashes or reported experiencing crashes themselves, which involved or were attributed to road conditions, animals, and other vehicles. Among drivers who posted about their injuries, some noted difficulties receiving workers' compensation payment while they were recovering:

Even though I was working when I was injured, [company] says I wasn't and won't pay workers' comp.

Posters also discussed the effects of rideshare driving on their mental health and psychological well-being. Some expressed worry about their physical safety or the lingering physical and psychological effects of car crashes and other stressful events,

such as interactions with passengers that were rude or perceived as dangerous. Moreover, some posters noted that they have difficulty standing up to rude passengers due to anxiety in these situations.

Posters also expressed anxiety about their pay and the potential to lose their ability to drive. For instance, some noted that rideshare driving was their only source of income and worried that, were their account to be deactivated, this could eliminate their income. Some posters were explicitly worried about their account being deactivated based on metrics that are tracked on the rideshare platform, such as the number of trips that they canceled. Similarly, some drivers posted about rider ratings and inquired about whether they should be worried about the possibility of receiving low ratings:

How do you keep from worrying that passengers are going to give you a low rating?

4.5 | Drivers Experience Both Positive and Negative Interactions With Passengers

Posters noted their experiences involving interactions with rideshare passengers. This included passengers' accusations of mistreatment, rudeness, or dangerous driving on the part of the poster. This sometimes led to concerns that these passengers may file a complaint and have the driver deactivated. Conversely, posters often expressed their own annoyance with passengers. This included driving passengers who were intoxicated or who left messes in their vehicles. Posters also discussed experiences with passengers who left items in their cars, often cell phones. Beyond neutral or merely frustrating experiences, other posters noted experiences where they feared for their own safety. Other posters felt that the unsafe conditions they experienced were not worth the positive aspects of rideshare driving:

You shouldn't rideshare— it's not safe. Don't get tempted by not having a supervisor.

Similarly, posters expressed not wanting to pick up passengers deemed potentially unsafe. Other reasons for not wanting to drive certain passengers included riders being too young or having too low ratings. Another undesirable situation was being scammed by passengers. This included situations where passengers scheduled, accepted, and were given rides to a destination, only to somehow leave drivers' vehicles without paying. As a level of protection against potentially unsafe situations, some drivers reported installing cameras in their vehicle:

I told support that I had a video of the incident while talking to them about getting a cleaning fee. It's great that I had one.

However, not all experiences with passengers were considered negative or dangerous. For instance, posters noted enjoying speaking with passengers and learning about their lives; some reported enjoying receiving small gifts (e.g., lunch). Some

passengers sought to arrange rides with drivers outside of the app to minimize passengers' fees and maximize drivers' pay. Other times, passengers expressed sentiments of support for rideshare drivers.

5 | Discussion

In this exploratory qualitative study, we used posts to the digital platform Reddit to characterize rideshare drivers' perspectives of their work and its impact on their well-being. Findings highlight a unique combination of features characterizing drivers' work lives, including precarious employment and algorithmic labor management. Drivers also posted about varied experiences related to the passengers they drive and the companies that they drive for. Finally, drivers discussed the negative effects of their work on their physical and mental well-being. These findings—based on posts made by drivers themselves—highlight these workers' varied perspectives of their work and experiences as precarious workers within the emerging platform economy.

Some posts related to rideshare drivers' employment quality, including posts about employment stability, receiving low or inadequate pay, and lacking employment benefits. It is somewhat unsurprising that these aspects of rideshare driving were frequently discussed given these workers' employment arrangements are widely recognized as precarious [28]. It is worth noting, however, that other aspects of these workers' employment arrangements are likely specific to rideshare driving and extend beyond the experience of other precariously employed workers. For instance, riders reported having to spend much of their own money on car-related expenses. Similar concerns were reported in a qualitative study of US rideshare drivers from Louzado-Feliciano et al., in which drivers reported stress related to wear and tear on their personal vehicles [10]. These costs likely compound drivers' position as precariously employed workers since they are not remunerated without driving more passengers, which would necessarily increase use of their personal vehicles. This highlights the unique dynamic in which rideshare drivers and other precarious platform workers might be considered neither “true” employees nor “true” independent entrepreneurs” [20]; despite having limited input regarding their work (e.g., they do not negotiate prices or decide what routes to drive passengers to their destination), they ultimately bear the financial costs of using their personal vehicles [9].

Results also highlighted the centrality of algorithmic labor management to the experience of rideshare driving. Similar experiences among rideshare drivers have been previously reported, particularly “gamification,” or platform-presented surge pricing, bonuses, and other challenges reported by drivers in our sample [30]. Drivers reported both working *with* these games, as evidenced by their elation when surges, bonuses, etc., present themselves, and working *against* them by devising their own strategies to improve earnings, such as cherry-picking rides. Previous literature has termed these work modes “grinding” and “oppositional play,” portraying drivers' acceptance and suspicion of algorithmic labor management, respectively [30]. Potentially compounding some drivers' suspicion was a perceived lack of support from platforms when

encountering adverse events, technological challenges, or issues receiving pay. Previous literature has reported that, without human managers or other human resources within their employment structure, workers had trouble seeking help when they encountered problems, potentially contributing to stress [40]. This stress and frustration, in addition to a perceived lack of transparency about certain aspects of their work, could explain why drivers in our study expressed negative views of rideshare companies and felt they were unsupportive.

Drivers noted that the nature of their work takes a toll on their physical health and can result in stress or anxiety. A previous qualitative study of US rideshare drivers noted that drivers report exhaustion associated with increased stress, long working hours, and concerns for safety related to risk of car crashes [10], all of which were reported by drivers in our study. Drivers also posted about experiences with passengers, some of which cause them to fear for their safety. Comparable experiences and concerns have been reported in studies of taxi drivers [54], whose work environment is similar to that of rideshare drivers apart from the latter's direction via algorithmic labor management. As to the health of rideshare drivers more broadly, previous research has noted that drivers report weight gain due to the generally sedentary nature of driving [11]. While the health and health-related beliefs of transportation workers have been studied extensively [55–58], the health of rideshare drivers specifically merits further research given the unknown implications of algorithmic labor management on their occupational health status.

Previous research has suggested that algorithmic labor management is associated with psychological distress [7, 59]. In a sample of drivers in the Swedish logistics industry [60], the authors contextualized this association within the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model [61], which posits that workers' potential for burnout is a product of both their job's demands (i.e., the roles, responsibilities, and tasks required of them in the workplace) and the resources they have to accomplish tasks, ameliorate issues they encounter, and engage in personal development within the workplace. Within this framework, rideshare drivers may be at particularly high risk for burnout and job stress. For instance, in addition to long working hours and increased stress related to rider-driven ratings, drivers in our sample noted that platform support systems do not adequately address their problems. Moreover, some drivers discussed high levels of distrust in platform companies themselves. Within the JD–R model framework, these dual facets of algorithmic labor management—high demands paired with a lack of perceived support and organizational distrust—may compound the stress rideshare drivers experience on the job and may be why some posters in our sample suggested that rideshare drivers should seek more stable employment.

The use of social media data to examine workers' perceptions is an area of emerging research, offering new insights into experiences that are often difficult to capture through traditional methods. To the authors' knowledge, few studies have used Reddit to examine how platform-based gig workers perceive their unique and dynamic work environment. One exception from Meyer et al. used Reddit posts to examine how platform-based couriers discussed the risks of their work during the COVID-19 pandemic [13]. In contrast to the relatively few

studies on work-related topics, Reddit has been used extensively to examine perceptions and experiences related to mental health [62–64] and physical health [65–67]. This broader application highlights social media's potential as a rich data source for research on occupational health—particularly related to how workers perceive the mental and physical impacts of their working conditions.

This study is subject to a few limitations. First, our sample is composed of drivers who posted to two rideshare-specific subreddits. Our findings are therefore likely biased towards Reddit's user base, only one-third of whom are aged 45 years or older [68]. Although precariously employed workers themselves tend to skew younger [18, 69], an increasing proportion of the labor force, both in the United States and elsewhere, are working past typical retirement age [70, 71]. It may, therefore, become difficult to capture the experience of older workers using social media platforms such as Reddit. Similarly, we were unable to verify that those posting to these subreddits were in fact drivers; this is a limitation inherent to studies using Reddit posts as a data source. Second, we did not seek to study differences in drivers' experience as they relate to other demographic factors or the country in which drivers work. Third, although our analysis reached thematic saturation, our study ultimately consisted only of one month of posts. This timeframe limits our findings' temporal generalizability, particularly against the backdrop of a rapidly changing policy landscape regarding gig and platform work. Fourth, as we did not maintain username data for ethical and privacy reasons, we cannot estimate the number of unique users our sample represents. Despite this, the subreddits used had thousands of active users at the time of data extraction, limit. Moreover, a recently published study using Reddit to investigate the perspectives of digital food delivery drivers reports that 90% of posts were from unique users [12]. Finally, our analysis is limited to posts containing the keywords we selected a priori. Although these were literature-informed, we likely omitted terms or phrases that drivers use to express opinions about their work—particularly on social media platforms, which have unique cultures, such as Reddit. It may be beneficial for future studies to examine how workers, including rideshare drivers, discuss precarious employment and algorithmic labor management using social media, as well as how to leverage these discussions to understand these workers' lived experience and occupational health.

6 | Conclusion

By using rideshare drivers' posts on the publicly available digital platform Reddit, this study provides unique insight to these workers' perceptions and experiences. Findings highlight these workers' position as precariously employed workers guided by algorithmic labor management, making their experience unique within a changing landscape of emerging workplace technologies. These results present an opportunity to better understand rideshare driving as an occupation while opening potential avenues for future research. By improving knowledge of rideshare drivers' lived experience, digital platform companies, policymakers, and worker advocacy groups are well-positioned to improve the physical and mental well-being of this growing segment of the labor market.

Author Contributions

Eric W. Lundstrom downloaded the data used in this study, conducted all analyses, and drafted the manuscript for submission. Beth L. Hoffman and Jason B. Colditz provided methodological and subject matter expertise related to the use of social media data within public health studies. Jacqueline Sivén and Michael A. Flynn provided methodological and subject matter expertise related to anthropological perspectives of work and employment. Beth L. Hoffman and Kyla D. Hagan-Haynes reviewed qualitative codes, providing feedback and alternative explanations that were incorporated into the final results. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript before submission.

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Disclosure

The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Ethics Statement

This activity was reviewed by the CDC, deemed public health surveillance, and was conducted consistent with applicable federal law and CDC policy.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in Reddit at <https://www.reddit.com/>. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: Reddit, <https://www.reddit.com/>.

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