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Get Off the Road!
Exploring Identity, Isolation, and Intimidation in the Rideshare Industry

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Communication

by

Gavin Lawrence Kirkwood

Committee in charge:
Professor Karen K. Myers, Chair
Professor Linda L. Putnam
Professor Ronald E. Rice

September 2021

The dissertation of Gavin Lawrence Kirkwood is approved.

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GAVIN LAWRENCE KIRKWOOD VITA

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Book Reviews

Kirkwood, G. (2016). [Review of the book *The mythology of work: How capitalism persists despite itself,* by P. Fleming]. *Kentucky Journal of Communication*, *35*, 49-56.

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Kirkwood, G. (November, 2017). *Hackers or helpers? Subverting corporate interests through satirical social media.* Paper presented in the Human Communication and Technology Division at the National Communication Association Convention, Dallas, TX.

Kirkwood, G. (October, 2017). *Reproductive futurism and parental glory: The privileging of traditional families in Russia.* Paper presented at the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender Conference, Omaha, NE.

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ABSTRACT

Get Off the Road! Exploring Identity, Isolation, and Intimidation in the Rideshare Industry

by

Gavin Lawrence Kirkwood

Rideshare workers who drive for companies such as Uber and Lyft experience tensions in their occupational identity. These tensions are a result of rideshare drivers being denied the benefits and security of employee status (such as healthcare or unemployment) while also being denied the freedoms of independent contractor status (such as the ability to set their own labor rates). These tensions were especially prevalent in California during the November 2020 election because Proposition 22 was an initiative to determine whether rideshare drivers would be legally classified as employees or independent contractors. Although some rideshare drivers ruthlessly defended their right to be independent contractors and urged voters to vote “yes” on Proposition 22, others considered employee classification a route to better working conditions, higher pay, benefits, and much needed legal protections. In this case study, I utilized a qualitative content analysis of rideshare forums on a counterinsitutional website to showcase a) how trolling behaviors were pervasive in rideshare online discourse; b) how trolling impacted sensemaking about the rideshare professional identity; c) how trolling paradoxically united while divided rideshare drivers; and d) how drivers exercised control over one another. The study found that trolling was used by drivers to make sense of their occupational identity and create in- and out-groups on the platform. Additionally, downward social comparisons in intergroup interactions were used as a control mechanism amongst drivers. Implications and future directions are also discussed.

Keywords: *Trolling, Professional Identity, Sensemaking, Intergroup Communication, Organizational control*

Get Off The Road!

Exploring Identity, Intimidation, and Isolation in the Rideshare Industry

I. Introduction

The Uberization of work has created many challenges for gig economy workers (Fleming, 2017; Rosenblat, 2019). Although factors such as global recessions, rising unemployment levels, and stagnant wages have driven people to try rideshare work, these forms of employment can make workers even more financially vulnerable (Rosenblat, 2019; Witt, 2019). Despite Uber's high valuation ($80-90 billion) and a reported $45 million salary for its CEO, Uber drivers only make an average of $11.77/hourly after expenses and fees (Witt, 2019). In addition to experiencing unique economic challenges, rideshare workers are also the most pervasive example of algorithmically managed employees. Lee et al. (2015) explained that in the rideshare industry, "Algorithmic management allows a few human managers in each city to oversee hundreds and thousands of drivers on a global scale" (p. 1). Algorithmic managers collect information on workers, influence work practices, facilitate interactions between different stakeholder groups, and create the infrastructure needed to facilitate the rapid growth of the share economy (Kellogg et al., 2020; Rosenblat, 2019; Sundararajan, 2016).

A. *The Share Economy*

First, it is important to situate the context in which rideshare drivers operate. Although the terms Uberization, gig economy, and share economy are related and at points easily conflated I explain the distinctions of how these terms have been used in past research Graham et al. (2017) explained that many countries are turning to the gig economy as an economic development strategy because it allows workers to make money without requiring the traditional infrastructure needed to support careers and start businesses. For example, traditional transportation companies would need to purchase a fleet of vehicles, negotiate insurance contracts, and personally interview potential drivers. With modern technologies, a company like Uber can disrupt the transportation industry without having to purchase any vehicles or even meet the drivers they hire. Although the Uberization of economic sectors can lead to rapid expansion, Fleming (2017) argued that this type of growth and expansion is often at the expense of the working class. According to Fleming, the Uberization of economies demands more labor from employees, expects workers to absorb the costs for their labor (an example is that Uber drivers are expected to pay their own vehicle maintenance fees), provides less benefits, and creates more financial insecurities for employees.

In the gig economy, workers are paid for completing tasks or projects instead of filling a permanent role in an organization (Fleming, 2017). Gig economy jobs are also sometimes described as part of a share economy (Gloss & McGregor, 2016). The share economy is similar to the gig economy because workers are paid for projects and taskings, but in the share economy, employees utilize personal resources to complete their work. Although Sundararajan (2016) explained that there is not a cohesive definition of the share economy acknowledged by organization scholars, they offered five key characteristics of these systems including a) the marker-based landscape, b) high-impact capital, c) crowd-based networks, d) blurred lines between the personal and the professional, e) and blurred lines between full employment and casual labor.

Firstly, Sundararajan (2016) explained that the share economy is market-based and that business models in this environment succeed by exchanging goods and offering new services, as well as by lowering costs and improving processes. One example of how the share economy creates demands for services is Airbnb (Lee, 2018), which allows hosts to rent space in private homes that were not previously used for lodging. The second key characteristic of the share economy is that these systems facilitate high-impact capital, which allows assets and skills to reach greater capacities. An example of this characteristic would be the TaskRabbit platform which allows users to create listings for tasks that workers (called "taskers") can bid on. The tasks that can be requested widely vary (i.e., putting together furniture, completing household chores, etc.), which enables taskers to make both existing and new types of skills available for hire.

Another hallmark of the share economy is that it operates through crowd-based networks made up of decentralized individuals rather than organizations or institutions (Shirky, 2008; Sundararajan, 2016). The decentralized nature of these systems has important implications for workers. The first implication is that workers experience a blurring between personal and professional boundaries. Previous more personal activities, such as people who gave rides to others or offered space in their homes, are now marketed as legitimate forms of entrepreneurship and professional transactions (Rosenblat, 2019). Another implication that Sundararajan described was that the share economy often blurs the line between full-time employment and casual labor. Rosenblat (2019) also explained that the blurring of full-time employment and casual labor is especially common in the rideshare service, Uber, because drivers can have a variety of financial goals when driving for the platform.

In the rideshare context, individuals drive for Uber or Lyft to meet a variety of needs or goals (Rosenblat, 2019). According to Rosenblat (2019), some rideshare workers rely on Uber or Lyft to meet their entire income, some workers drive to supplement their income, and some workers drive to meet social needs or use the job as a hobby. Rosenblat explained that rideshare hobbyists identified several social needs that can be met when driving, including the opportunity to meet new people, network, gain more familiarity with a city, and learn about new restaurants and city attractions. Since the needs and goals of rideshare workers vary, drivers are likely to have different experiences with the platform and different perspectives on their work. Next, I describe common challenges that drivers experience in the rideshare industry.

B. *Challenges in the Rideshare Industry*

One prevalent challenge includes issues with overhead cost and take-home pay for drivers. Fleming (2017) argued that on-demand business platforms in the share economy are increasingly pushing overhead costs and typical organizational responsibilities onto individual workers (which is comparable to other historical trends such as feudalism or sharecropping). According to Fleming, the shift of responsibilities from organizations to individual workers is linked to "growing economic insecurity, low productivity, diminished autonomy and worrying levels of personal debt" (p. 691). In their ethnographic research on Uber drivers, Rosenblat (2019) found that many drivers were surprised how little their take-home pay was after factoring in costs for vehicle maintenance, fuel, and supplemental insurance. Issues with pay were exacerbated for rideshare workers who were leasing or renting a vehicle, including some drivers who were trapped in predatory contracts with rental companies (Rosenblat, 2019).

Algorithmic managers are built into rideshare platforms to make a variety of real-time decisions such as how to pair drivers with passengers. These decisions are made based on a variety of factors and can make the decision-making opaque for drivers. While the passenger pairing process is opaque and confusing for rideshare drivers, it is clear that algorithmic managers are designed to preference the needs of passengers rather than ensure profitability for drivers as evidenced by the number of rides assigned that are not profitable (Chan & Humphreys, 2018; Rosenblat, 2019). Not only are algorithmic managers not designed to ensure profitability for drivers but features of the platform do not even give drivers the autonomy to decide which rides to accept (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). In a case study on Uber drivers, Rosenblat and Stark (2016) found that the app does not let drivers know where their passengers want to go until the driver accepts the ride. This limitation means that drivers might end up having to drive out of their way for trips that are not profitable. One of the participants in this case study explained that they had to drive 15 minutes for someone who needed a 5-minute ride, which meant that they had lost money when factoring in their overhead expenses.

Ultimately rideshare workers may find that they must accept more rides, work longer hours, and work during busier periods to make up for financial losses (Chan & Humphreys, 2018; Rosenblat, 2019). The extra effort needed to make a profit may come as a disappointment to rideshare workers who were promised a flexible and lucrative opportunity through Uber recruitment campaigns. For instance, rideshare workers who value flexibility may be forced to drive during surge periods, which are periods where customer demand is high, increased wages are offered, and normally occur during rush hour traffic periods (Rosenblat, 2019). Many rideshare workers find that the financial pressure of rideshare work undermines the work-life balance that attracted them to the share economy in the first place.

Another challenge that rideshare workers experience is their employment classification as independent contractors as opposed to organizational employees. Uber and Lyft set low barriers for entry when recruiting drivers and they discursively frame drivers as consumers of proprietary technology rather than employees (Rosenblat, 2019). This means that financial challenges are exacerbated for drivers who need health insurance, unemployment, or other common employment benefits and protections because these drivers are not considered employees, so the company does not have to offer these resources. Although some drivers value their independent contractor status, others actively advocate to be recognized as employees by rideshare companies (Witt, 2019). One major obstacle that drivers experience when trying to advocate for better working conditions is the isolation that these workers face, as it is uncommon for workers to interact with any other humans in their organization through official channels (Rosenblat, 2019). Thus, organizing and collaborating is difficult. As official channels rarely afford human interaction in the rideshare context, drivers often turn to unofficial channels including counterinstitutional websites such as Uberpeople.net to share information and knowledge about rideshare work, compare work experiences, and work towards improving working conditions.

In unofficial channels, rideshare drivers can interact and collectively make sense of their work. Weick (1995) explained that sensemaking involves multiple actors co-constructing meaning through communication. According to Weick (1995), the sensemaking process is also a fundamental part of identity construction, as employees attempt to understand how their role relates to other organizational members. Although employees across all industries are likely to engage in sensemaking daily, sensemaking is even more crucial in the rideshare context due to the significant challenges rideshare drivers face.

Sensemaking strategies are likely to differ in counterinstitutional websites from traditional organizational channels. Some of the major differences stem from the decentralized nature of rideshare work. For example, organizational research has found that managers in organizations often help shape the process of meaning making through a process called sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), but rideshare work is marked by an absence of human leadership. Other key differences between sensemaking in unofficial channels such as Uberpeople.net from traditional organizations stem from changing norms in online and offline behavior. For instance, trolling behaviors are likely to be prevalent in Uberpeople.net but not common in face to face (FtF) interactions. By trolling behaviors, I am referring to the contextual phenomenon in online environment by which a user or group of users engage in communication towards a specific target to accomplish a variety of anti- or pro-social goals including humor, attention seeking, disruption, entertainment, or collective action. Although trolling behaviors were originally conceptualized as antisocial and disruptive (Herring et al., 2002) more recent research has uncovered collective and supportive dimensions of trolling that nuance original understandings (Kirkwood et al., 2019). In this case study, I explore how trolling behaviors impact online interactions on Uberpeople.net between rideshare drivers, including how they make sense of their professional identity, how intergroup dynamics function in these unofficial channels, and how these drivers exercise influence or control over one another.

In the next chapter, I review past research on professional identity, sensemaking, humorous communication, intergroup dynamics, and trolling. After providing the rationale for the research questions that guided this case study, subsequent sections detail the methodology, the findings from this project, and why these results are meaningful considering past research and organizational theory.

II. Literature Review

In the previous chapter I explained how the share economy is a substantial part of the gig economy sector and situated the rideshare industry within the share economy. I also briefly introduced aspects of rideshare work that created challenges for drivers including issues with pay, lack of organizational membership, and isolation between workers. Rideshare workers can be described as isolated because they have little to no human interaction with other drivers or humans that work for rideshare companies through official channels (Rosenblat, 2019). Although rideshare may be a relatively new type of industry when compared with traditional organizations, there is still a plethora of existing organizational theory and research relevant to this context. In this chapter, I review prior research on occupational identity, sensemaking, and trolling to a) draw connections between past research and the rideshare context and b) provide a rationale for the research questions that guided this study.

A. *Occupational Identity*

Occupational identity is a rich, complex, and multifaceted concept in organizational communication (Cheney et al., 2014; Trice, 1993; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). According to Cheney et al. (2014), conceptualizations of identity in organizational research have been heavily influenced by social identity theory (SIT; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) which explained how individuals view themselves and the social categories with which they most heavily identify. Tajfel and Turner (1986) leveraged a social-psychological perspective to posit that individuals classify themselves according to social categories and use the prototypical characteristics from these categories to guide identity formation and behavior. Examples of social categories include organizational membership (either work or non-work related), age, physical characteristics, one’s familial role, etc. These examples showcase that a) social categories vary across individuals and b) the behaviors associated with these social categories are contextual in nature.

SIT has been a heavily influential theory across multiple disciplines including organizational communication (Cheney et al., 2014). In their seminal piece connecting SIT to an organizational context, Ashforth and Mael (1989) argued that occupational identity can be conceptualized as a type of social category that guides identity formation. Ashforth and Mael explained that prototypical organizational behavior likely guides social group categorization and influences how individuals view themselves both on a personal and professional level. Given that organizations can be composed of individuals and groups who have different types of expertise, perform different functions, and have different stakes in the success of the organization, there are likely to be intergroup dynamics across multiple levels of any organization.

Tajfel and Turner (1986) argued that when social classification occurs in SIT, individuals can a) segment and order the social environment in which they operate and b) locate themselves in the social environment (including to whom they belong). The idea that social identity is relational, comparative, and negotiated is fundamental to the psychological underpinnings of this theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For instance, an individual classifying themselves as either young or old is dependent on the context. If an adult finds themselves in an environment surrounded with children, they may be more likely to identify themselves as “old” whereas in a different setting such as a retirement community, they may classify themselves as “young” given they are much younger than their counterparts. This example also showcases the different factions of social identity in any given situation, which can facilitate intergroup dynamics. In SIT, intergroup dynamics focus on in-groups (i.e., groups to which an individual identifies), out-groups (i.e., groups in which an individual does not identify), and how group affiliation impacts interactions between groups.

Some key distinctions in the rideshare industry may impact how individuals conceptualize and enact their occupational identities. In contrast to workers in most other organizations, rideshare drivers are not socialized by Uber or Lyft and are not given clearly prescribed prototypical behaviors for their roles. Although Uber and Lyft may institute some basic rules associated with ridesharing. there is a lack of organizational guidance for professional conduct among rideshare drivers. In place of norms, policies, and training, Uber and Lyft leverage social accountability between drivers and passengers to guide behavior (Rosenblat, 2019). Rosenblat (2019) explained that if a rider deems a driver's behavior to be inappropriate, then they have the option of complaining or giving that driver a low rating. In these situations, it is up to the customer to decide what is or what is not professional or proper behavior, which means that there is no standardized protocol to guide driver behavior (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). At times, passenger norms and drivers' professional norms can conflict with one another.

Given that occupational identities in the rideshare industry are unstandardized and vary based on driver experiences and passenger interactions, it is important to consider what factors may permeate and influence how drivers navigate their professional identity. In the next section, I discuss factors that are relevant to the rideshare driver identity shaping process, including how status, stigma, and discourse influence an individual's sense of professional identity.

1. Status

Status is a key factor that is likely to influence how rideshare drivers cultivate a sense of professional or occupational identity. When referring to status, I am referring to social status both inside and outside the work context, including a) the socioeconomic status of rideshare drivers and b) types of status that separate rideshare drivers from one another.

We know from past organizational communication research that an individual's socioeconomic status, including their access to education, which careers they have seen modeled growing up, and level of financial freedom, shapes how they perceive different forms of work. Clair (1996) unpacked some of these distinctions in her study on the ontology of the work and the socializing outcomes of the colloquialism: "a real job." In her study, Clair asked 34 college students to write an essay detailing what a "real job" means to them and their personal career aspirations. According to Clair, the participants detailed several characteristics of a real job including a lucrative salary, opportunities to advance, attaining a certain level of prestige or status in an organization, and having high levels of autonomy and control over one's career. In contrast to "real jobs", other forms of work were considered unprofessional because of factors such as poor management, part-time scheduling, or having to deal with rude customers. Clair explained:

> A real job evidences a sense of relativity, not only for the individual who views it changing over time, but also historically and across socio-economic systems. The construction of a real job, although relative, maintains a strong influence from the dominant ideology. That is, as a job's realness changes, for these college students, at least, it seems to move in a direction toward organizational, managerial, and more economically focused positions and away from part-time, seasonal, and unskilled positions. (p. 262)

It is interesting that although the entire participant pool for Clair's (1996) study was college students, there was still variation on core beliefs about the nature of "real work." Clair recognized that this study had a small sample size and, therefore, a participant pool from outside a college environment may add more nuance to these findings.

In a replication of Clair's study, O'Connor and Raile (2015) explored how the criteria that college students use to classify "real jobs" had changed overtime. According to O'Connor and Raile, half of their participants viewed real jobs as a rite of passage after completing college and considered a real job as a mark of distinction that signaled a) the desirability of the job itself and b) a sign of a mature job seeker. O'Connor and Raile also found that their participants viewed a real job as a position that paid a living wage and offered benefits this contrasted with the lucrative pay and prestige that Clair's (1996) participants had described. More surprisingly, half of the participants in O'Connor and Raile's study rejected the notion of a "real job" and considered the concept as a) relative based on an individual's goals, desires, and time of life and b) an arbitrary concept that could be insulting. Ironically, even the students who had an inclusive conceptualization of a real job still considered a college education necessary for obtaining one.

Similar to Clair's (1996) study, O'Connor and Raile's findings were bounded to a college environment and there is likely to be much more variation from participants who are not actively earning college degrees. For instance, individuals who chose not to go to college may not consider a college education as a necessary condition of a "real job" or professional work in general. In fact, the participants in Clair's study recognized that socioeconomic status made a difference in how “real jobs” were perceived. An example of this was when one participant who worked as an assistant pharmacist thought advanced college education was necessary to get a “real job” but felt the need not to share his perspective with his coworkers, who considered shiftwork at a drugstore as their “real job”. Clair described another participant who worked as a landscaper while attending school who stated that his coworkers, “would think I was stuck-up if I flaunted my hopes for a ‘real job’ in front of them” (p. 263). According to Clair, the inherent tensions of class divisions and resentment from unskilled laborers spotlighted the sensitive and political nature on the ontology of work and resulted in conflicting perspectives of which types of work are legitimized as respectable careers.

Lucas (2011) explored class distinctions and perceptions of work by interviewing participants who identified as blue collar in a mining community. In their interviews, Lucas focused on work-related values, attitudes related to work, and experiences with workplace dignity. The participants emphasized that all jobs are “real jobs” because both high and low status work are necessary for organizational or societal goals, that dignity lies in a job well done rather than the status of a role, and that respect (both given and received) is vital to maintaining a certain pride in one’s work. When asked about in- and out-groups across different types of social status, the participants in Lucas’s study tended to view themselves in the middle of two vague out-groups (one associated with high-status work and the other associated with low-status work) rather than being steeped in one particular identity. According to Lucas, this juxtaposition of high-status and low-status outgroups enabled participants to redraw the boundaries around a new, broader, more inclusive category of working people and created a safe space from which they can advocate for more dignity and respect in their work.

Thus far, I have focused on social status at either the individual level, such as how individuals perceive “real work,” or the societal level, including how the status of a job impacts how individuals are treated. Similar to the blue-collar participants in Lucas’s (2011) study, rideshare workers are also likely to wrestle with issues of workplace dignity that could have a fundamental impact on how they perceive their occupational identity. However, occupational identity is also likely to vary based on whether a driver pursues rideshare work for their main income, side income, as a hobby, or for social needs (Rosenblat, 2019). We can easily see how drivers trying to make a living from rideshare work would have more of a vested interest in having their work be respected (despite the unskilled nature of the work) by others when compared to drivers who are working for fun. Given differences in why and how often rideshare workers drive, status between rideshare workers may also be important for understanding how these workers perceive and enact their professional identity. In early organizational research, status between employees was conceptualized as a form of control to a) motivate employees to work hard and b) to lure employees into working up a hierarchy (Dreyfuss, 1968). Dreyfuss (1968) termed these status differentials as “prestige grading” and argued that these differentials were artificially created by management. Dreyfuss explained prestige grading when they stated:

> The rank order gives the employee his definite and fixed position within the organization. This position confers upon him rights and duties and determines his technical function. It also decides whether or not the employee, in his occupational activity, can satisfy the urge for social recognition and such impulses as in the ordinary course of his life remain unsatisfied. This opportunity, however exists to a far greater degree under

> the system of "artificial" differentiation than under one in which "artificial" influences are eliminated and the gradation is made according to the strict requirements of the organization. By "artificial" differentiation we mean the gradations of the hierarchy caused by social and psychic factors, in contrast to the "real" differentiation which is determined by the technical requirements of work. (p. 145).

A major implication of prestige grading is that some employees feel superior to their counterparts because of the level of responsibility given to them in the bureaucratic structure rather than differences intrinsic to the role (such as level of education needed to do the work, the technical requirements of the role, or work practices).

Although rideshare is markedly different than traditional bureaucratic organizations due to the a) decentralized nature of rideshare work, b) lack of hierarchy, and c) isolation between workers, there still may some forms of prestige grading that shape how drivers identify. In the case of the rideshare industry, prestige grading would not come from rideshare organizations, but rather from synthetic criteria that help some workers feel superior to their counterparts. If this is the case, then prestige grading between rideshare drivers could impact how drivers perceive their occupational identity and how they perceive in- and out-groups in their industry.

2. Stigma

Another important factor relevant to occupational identities in the rideshare industry is the stigma of unskilled labor. In Lucas's (2011) study on blue collar workers, participants expressed that the stigma of unskilled labor or lack of education can make it difficult to maintain respect and dignity in their work. According to Kreiner et al. (2006), forms of work with stigma often fall under the category of "dirty work", which refers to occupations considered to be degrading, disgusting, or demeaning to the individuals and groups that perform them. Kreiner et al. (2006) explained that while certain types of work have more stigma than others, the dirtiness of work is often a continuum which means that any work can involve tasks that are more stigmatized than others.

Although stigma is normally associated as something that negatively impacts an individual’s self-esteem, it can also have a bonding effect for occupational groups (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lynch, 1987). In their seminal piece on “dirty work,” Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) explained the stigma associated with dirty work means that interpersonal level interactions can also have intergroup implications. Ashforth and Kreiner explained:

> The putdowns, intrusive questions, and so on are predicated on perceptions of what the occupation entails, thereby cuing the occupational identity. Thus, the negative interactions are lodged not merely at the interpersonal level (between individuals) but at the intergroup level (between role occupants, with the individual personifying the occupation) (p. 419)

According to Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), workers in stigmatized labor can develop strong subcultures that allow for social support, high levels of entitativity, and group-level validation between occupational members to mitigate negative interactions. The strength of the occupational subculture may help explain why workers in stigmatized groups still demonstrate high levels of esteem. For instance, in a study on prison guards, Jacobs (1981) found that most guards felt the public was more sympathetic to inmates than guards but that only 5 percent felt embarrassed or ashamed of their profession. In contrast to the “dirty workers” that Ashforth and Kreiner described, rideshare drivers are not likely to interact with their colleagues, which means that a subculture is unlikely to emerge in official channels. This is important because it means that rideshare drivers have little opportunity to foster social support and group-level validation in their occupation, which puts the onus on the individual to mitigate the negative identity effects of "dirty work."

Kreiner et al. (2006) created a typology of different types of stigmas that impact how work is perceived by others including pervasive stigma, compartmentalized stigma, diluted stigma, and idiosyncratic stigma. *Pervasive* stigma includes occupations that are socially defined by strongly stigmatized tasks or work environment, such as embalmers. *Compartmentalized* stigma refers to occupations where only some tasks are stigmatized, such as reporters who have to visit crime scenes to report stories. *Diluted* stigma included occupations where stigma may be widespread but mild in nature, such as bartenders. Finally, *idiosyncratic* stigma refers to occupations where tasks are not strongly stigmatized, such as upper management positions. According to Kreiner et al. (2006), the type of stigma involved in certain occupations can impact whether employees identify with an occupational in-group, disidentify with their counterparts, or become ambivalent and simultaneously identify and disidentify with their counterparts.

Out of all the types of stigma that Kreiner et al. (2006) described, rideshare work is most associated with diluted stigma. Rideshare work has compartmentalized stigma because the stigma is rooted in specific tasks when compared to some other occupations. Rideshare drivers may be stigmatized because of a multitude of factors, such as a) the low barrier for entry, b) the poor pay associated with this work, and c) a driver letting strangers in their vehicle. For instance, Uber and Lyft both charge a cleaning fee if riders damage or dirty the vehicle, including when drunk riders vomit during a ride. Although the cleaning fee was instituted so drivers could hire someone to clean their vehicle (such as an auto detailing service), the driver can still be associated with the mess in a negative way. According to Kreiner et al. (2006), workers in diluted stigma occupations cannot isolate the source of stigmas as readily in their work and are associated with mild ambivalent identification. The main implication for rideshare drivers is that there are likely to be a) differences in identification strategies across differ workers and b) this may include a mix of in-group and out-group affiliations.

3. Discourse

The above sections on status and stigma showcase the complexities involved in occupational identification, which is why context is so important when exploring these phenomena (Cheney et al., 2014). It is also important to consider how communicative interactions and discourse impacts how workers navigate their occupational or professional identity. According to Cheney and Ashcraft (2007), professional identities are "constantly negotiated through discursive activity" (p. 165). This perspective spotlights the act of meaning making that occurs in interactions between organizational members and impacts how professional identities are perceived and enacted. Another theoretical concept that also involves discourse, interaction, negotiation, and meaning making is sensemaking, which is fundamental to understanding occupational identification at individual and collective levels (Weick 1995; 2001). In the following section, I define sensemaking, explain how sensemaking likely differs between members of traditional organizations and the rideshare industry, and explain how sensemaking functions in communicative interactions.

B. *Sensemaking*

Sensemaking is synonymous with meaning making and is often described by Weick's (2001) famous quote "How can I know what I think until I see what I say" (p. 189). Weick (1979) originally conceptualized sensemaking as a process in which individuals retrospectively assign meaning to past experiences, but more recent conceptualizations of sensemaking recognize the communicative nature of this process (Weick 1995; 2001). According to Thomas et al. (1993), sensemaking is an interactive process in which individuals seek cues, assign meaning, and move to action with one another. Communication scholars now recognize that sensemaking is also a discursive construction and that this form of meaning making can be negotiated in interactions (Kramer & Miller, 2014; Lewis, 2014; Tracy et al., 2006).

In an organizational context, employees often engage in sensemaking in order to understand their identity and how they fit in with the work of the organization. Schwandt (2005) explained that identity sensemaking is "an intricate combination of self-identity of the actor and the identity of the organization forms and sustains the socially constructed meanings assigned to events" (p. 18). In her research exploring how flight attendants make sense of their identity and roles during emergency situations, Murphy (2001) showcased instances in which the organizational identity of airlines interfered with the flight attendant's ability to enact safety protocols. For instance, Murphy found that the organizational framing of flight attendants as friendly and accommodating hindered their ability to be authoritative in emergency situations. Another example that Murphy explained was that flight attendants have to privilege reassurance over safety.

1. Sensegiving

In addition to sensemaking that happens at the individual level when workers interpret their roles through organizational values, leaders can have an important impact on the ways that employees make sense of their roles. In addition to organizational culture and identity, leaders can also contribute to sensemaking processes in the workforce (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In a study of an organization going through a strategic change, Gioia and Chittipeddi found that the CEO engaged in a process called sensegiving. Gioia and Chittipeddi explained sensegiving when they argued that the CEO, "was now in a mode of making sense for others, of supplying a workable interpretation to those who would be affected by his actions" (p. 443). Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) described sensegiving behaviors including frequent meetings with important stakeholders, held meetings explaining key initiatives, and explained intentions for strategic change by talking though hypothetical scenarios.

In contrast to traditional organizations, the rideshare industry is marked by an absence of human leadership. Instead of a human CEO or manager who can communicate a vision for the organization, rideshare drivers are managed by algorithms designed to track, influence, and optimize their behavior. In practice, this means that algorithms assign rides to drivers, present feedback to drivers from customers (including complaints, compliments, and ratings), and reward or penalize drivers (Rosenblat, 2019). Although there may be some behavioral cues featured in the application, there is an overall lack of sensegiving sources for rideshare drivers including a lack of a) messaging from human leaders in rideshare organizations, b) opportunity for rideshare drivers to interact with one another, and c) official channels for rideshare drivers' interaction. According to Rosenblat (2019), rideshare drivers are purposely isolated from one another, but can and do leverage counterinsitutional websites and social media to overcome that isolation. In the following sections, I explain how counterinsitutional websites can open up the discursive space needed for sensemaking at a collective level and how the nature of online communication may impact these processes.

2. Space for sensemaking

The lack of organizational norms, values, cultures, and human leadership coupled with the isolation of geographically dispersed workers mean that rideshare drivers do not have the discursive space needed to engage in sensemaking processes. In lieu of interactions in the workplace, rideshare drivers have to leverage unofficial channels to communicate with one another.

Counterinstitutional websites allow for ongoing interactions where individuals can co-construct and negotiate meaning (Lewis, 2014). Another feature of counterinstitutional websites is that they are not officially sanctioned by the organization, which means that members anonymously engage in sensemaking based on plausible information rather than accurate or complete knowledge (Weick, 1995).

One of the most prevalent unofficial channels that rideshare drivers use is the counterinsitutional website called Uberpeople.net. Gossett and Kilker (2006) explained that "Counter-institutional Web sites can provide an important mechanism for overcoming discursive barriers within the organization and enable members to take part in discussions that might normally be discouraged" (p. 68). Uberpeople.net is a publicly available forum-based website that has thousands of members, thousands of threads, and even offers the ability for drivers to create password-protected forums.

Simply put, Uberpeople.net is the most viable space for rideshare drivers to engage in sensemaking processes. Uberpeople.net is a space for rideshare workers to make sense of their occupational identity, discover ways to increase their take-home pay, understand confusing features on the platform, and find out how to interact with customers while maintaining autonomy over their vehicle. For instance, in an analysis of forums on the website, Chan and Humphreys (2018) found that drivers used a variety of sensemaking strategies to cope with negative customer ratings. While some drivers were sensitive to low ratings and followed corporate guidance to improve, others felt that negative reviews were a result of systemic issues outside of their control (i.e., ambiguity in review survey, prejudice of customers that was not based on performance, etc.). Chan and Humphreys explained that Uberpeople.net offered discursive space for drivers to share their intentions and motivations for driving (such as driving full time, part time, or ad hoc for fun/entertainment) which had a fundamental impact on how to navigate a core component of the job (such as dealing with customers).

Counterinsitutional websites can help rideshare drivers overcome the discursive barriers of isolation and create a space for collective sensemaking. However, the unofficial nature of counterinsitutional websites may encourage types of communication that may be unprofessional. Even early counterinsitutional websites such as RadioShackSucks.com were rife with sarcasm, inside jokes, and discussions that were more entertaining than informative. The common use of humor in counterinsitutional websites has implications for how sensemaking can occur, as the next section explains.

3. Humor and sensemaking

Organizational communication researchers have examined how humor can facilitate sensemaking. Tracy et al. (2006) explored humor as a sensemaking tool that helped emergency service workers select, maintain, reproduce, and solidify their preferred work identity. Tracy et al. (2006) argued that humor was an especially valuable sensemaking tool when employees face identity-threatening work. In addition to the identity sensemaking, humor allowed these workers to avoid boredom, distance themselves from difficult situations, and create mnemonic phrases to help remember protocol/procedures. In a study on new members into an organization, Heiss and Carmack (2012) found that humor was frequently used to manage stress and uncertainty while making sense of job expectations. Clearly, humor can aid sensemaking when employees navigate ambiguous situations.

We know from past research on humor in online environments that humor can be pro-social and uniting as well as anti-social or vindictive (Kirkwood et al., 2019; Meyer, 2000). The way that humor functions is even more complex when humor is achieved through trolling behaviors in an online environment. In the next (and final) major section, I explain how trolling is a unique form of humorous communication, how trolling can be used to form different social groups, and how trolling can leverage humor for control in online environments. After explaining trolling and humor, I then introduce the research questions guiding this study.

C. ***Trolling, Humor, and Control***

Early work on trolling articulated the term as purposefully deceptive communication that seeks to disrupt discussion between others or cause conflict for amusement (Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017; Herring et al., 2002) For example, Herring et al. (2002) conducted one of the first investigations of trolling behavior by analyzing a troll who attempted to disrupt discussions on a feminist forum. The researchers operationalized trolls as individuals who initially seem sincerely interested in an online community or discussion topic, but then waste time by provoking futile arguments. Herring et al. (2002) considered trolls to be so disruptive, they gave prescriptions detailing how online communities could identify trolls in online forums. Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) added nuance to trolling by defining it as, "Deliberate, deceptive and mischievous attempts that are engineered to elicit a reaction from the target(s), are performed for the benefit of the troll(s) and their followers and may have negative consequences for people and firms involved" (p. 1337). One important aspect of this updated definition is that it highlights how trolls may be drawn to the attention they receive from the specific target of trolling behaviors or from other users in an online environment. Focusing on the troll's desire for attention or reaction from members of an online community showcases how these behaviors may be playful or meant for entertainment, and not solely or necessarily for harming others.

More recent scholarship in this area has adopted a more nuanced understanding of trolling phenomena, moving beyond narrow definitions of trolling as an attack and recognizing that trolling is nuanced, contextual, and social (Coles & West, 2016; Cruz et al., 2018; Dynel, 2016; Hardaker, 2010). Sanfilippo et al. (2018) explored college students' perceptions of trolling and used these perceptions to create a typology of trolling which made distinctions between serious, humorous, pro-social, and anti-social trolling. They explained that serious trolls often have a sincere ideological motivation for trolling others, while humorous trolls engage in trolling behavior for entertainment and enjoyment. Cruz et al. (2018) also explained that trolls can have serious goals or humorous motivations, and these nuanced motivations indicate that trolling should be researched in context. These researchers described trolling as a process consisting of three parts: learning about an online community, assimilating as a member of a community, and transgressing against the community. Although transgressing may have negative connotations, the researchers explored the ways in which trolls transgressed in order to make other community members laugh, challenge assumptions in the group, or create change. Cruz et al. stretched conceptualizations of trolling to something that can be pro-social or anti-social depending on the context.

Given the nuance and complexity in trolling research, I offer a working operationalization of trolling for this study. For the purposes of this project, online trolling behaviors are defined as a contextual phenomenon in which a user or group of users engage in communication towards a specific target to accomplish a variety of anti- or pro-social goals including humor, attention seeking, disruption, entertainment, or collective action. It is important to note that within a trolling context humor is in the eye of the beholder, meaning trolls may or may not enact a type of humor that entertains others. For instance, a troll may find it humorous to insult someone in an online environment in ways that other users do not find enjoyable or entertaining (or vice versa). In the following sections, I explain how trolling can operate on a collective level, the functions of trolling behaviors, and the targets of trolling behavior.

1. Individual or Collective Trolling

Trolling can be an individual act or collective action (Kirkwood et al., 2019). Individual trolling means one lone actor (or troll) directs a communication act against a target or targets by themselves. For instance, if a user trolls the original poster of a thread on Uberpeople.net and other users do not join in, it would be considered an individual trolling act. Collective trolling means that multiple users troll the same target or targets, although the intentions and type of trolling may vary across those users.

In an analysis of the Twitter campaign, #JusticeforBradsWife, Kirkwood et al. (2019) examined the ways that multiple stakeholders with contradictory goals used collective trolling as a form of counterinstitutional resistance against a nation-wide restaurant chain. Examples of these contradictory goals included subverting the company's social media ads, openly criticizing the chain for mistreating employees, making fun of employees and patrons of the restaurant chain, and using the hashtag for self-promotion. Collective trolling differs from individual trolling because it a) offers pro-social motivations for participating (i.e., offers people the chance to be "in" on the joke), b) can create subgroups of users (based on differences in motivation or messaging), and c) is more salient because of the large amount of participants associated with these behaviors. Although this study was the first to conceptualize trolling behaviors beyond the individual level, Kirkwood et al. (2019) urged researchers to continue research in this area to create clearer distinctions between the collective trolling behaviors that showcase humorous and prosocial behaviors with phenomena such as hate speech and cyberbullying, which are vindictive in nature.

2. Trolling Targets

Unlike other forms of humorous communication, for an online communication act to be considered trolling there needs to be a clear target. Targets can include members who are a part of a forum or online community, individuals who are not a part of the forum or online community, organizations, policies, or practices. For example, in their analysis of a trolling campaign that targeted a nation-wide restaurant chain, Kirkwood et al. (2019) found that users trolled each other, individuals who were not explicitly related to the organization (such as former President Donald Trump), the restaurant locations and corporate facility, and the practices of the restaurant chain. Although the goals and intentions of trolls may not always be clearly articulated, the *targets* of trolling behaviors are clear.

Users of the counterinsitutional website, Uberpeople.net, often engage in trolling behaviors or are targets of these behaviors. This means that the website not only offers a rare glimpse into how rideshare drivers interact with one another, it also offers insight as to how trolling impacts these interactions, most especially when it comes to sensemaking and professional identity. Using this logic, the first research question is proposed:

> RQ_1: How do trolling behaviors help rideshare drivers make sense of their professional identity?

3. Trolling Functions

Communication scholars recognize that humor is complex and serves a multitude of functions both individually and relationally (DiCioccio, 2012; Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000; Tracy et al., 2006). Trolling behaviors are partly (but not exclusively) a form of humorous communication, whether or not they exemplify a type of humor that groups or individual users enjoy or find entertaining. As a type of humorous act, I argue that trolling behaviors likely share the same social functions of humor (Meyer, 2000). According to Meyer (2000), humor serves four key social functions including identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. Understanding humor as an identification tool explains that humor can be used to express agreed upon meanings in a group that are revealed through inside jokes (Meyer, 2000). Clarification is when people use humorous anecdotes to capture attention and stimulate memory within a group of people (Meyer, 2000). While identification and clarification are the social functions that unite individuals, the enforcement and differentiation functions can be divisive in nature. Enforcement is often characterized by humorous criticism of people who break social norms, often expressed in teasing within a group. Lastly, differentiation is a humorous way to distinguish individuals from a group and create exclusive in-group identities or characterizations of out-group identities.

Past research on trolling has shown how these behaviors can impact the social identities of users in online environments. Synott et al. (2017) conducted a case-study analysis of the trolling behaviors and strategies of two groups on Twitter that emerged in response to the abduction of a three-year-old child named Madeline McCann, whose own family was under suspect for her disappearance. Synnott et al. divided users into two groups including a) the anti-McCanns that accused family members of the disappearance and b) the pro-McCanns who believed that the family was innocent. According to Synnott et al., users leveraged trolling behaviors to associate with their desired in-group and disassociate from the subsequent out-group. Although the conversations in Uberpeople.net are different than the context Synnott et al. (2017) analyzed, similarities include that rideshare conversations have high levels of personal investment for users and the personalized stakes in this discourse can be incredibly divisive. Given that rideshare drivers have a high stake in making sense of their professional identity and those opinions are likely to be challenged between users, we can reasonably expect trolling behaviors to unify and differentiate rideshare drivers by shaping in and out-groups on the platform.

4. Humor and Control

When considering the functions of trolling behaviors described above, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge how these functions can serve as a control mechanism between in- and out-groups on Uberpeople.net. Notably, the functions of clarification and enforcement are a humorous strategy to bring attention to issues in an environment and influence the behaviors of others. For example, in their study of the psychosocial factors associated with malicious online trolling behaviors, Howard et al. (2019) found that a greater likelihood to make downward social comparisons in social interactions was a significant predictor of malicious trolling behaviors. These downward social comparisons can have individualized outcomes such as improving a troll's self-esteem or helping them establish a type of superiority or dominance in the online environment. On a group level, when trolls make downward social comparisons, it can also give other members something to aspire to, which in turn can serve as a way to control other users. For instance, a troll could ridicule another user through downward social comparison which could influence or change the way the target behaves on the platform.

These control attempts can be aggressive or playful in nature. DiCioccio (2012) argued that humor can be classified as a form of aggressive communication. Humor can be used by an individual to express underlying hostility, verbal aggressiveness (identified by teasing, bullying, or excessive sarcasm), or character attacks on another (DiCioccio, 2012). Research centered on the negative aspects of humor was furthered by Wigley (2012), who explained how humor can be used as verbal trigger events (VTEs). Wigley (2012) described VTEs as acts of aggression that are provoked by a verbal statement including humorous statements. From this perspective, anti-social (or maladaptive) forms of humor can intentionally spark VTEs while pro-social humor can still spark aggression unintentionally (Wigley, 2012). Establishing humor as a catalyst to feelings of aggressiveness and victimization is especially important to understanding how trolling behaviors function within the specific context of an online environment.

According to Lynch (2002), regardless of which type of humor a researcher is describing or which medium the humor operates in, humor is often paradoxical in nature. Lynch (2002) explained that the paradoxical nature of humor means that individuals can use humorous communication to accomplish varying degrees of conflicting goals such as resistance and control in organizations, as well as support and socialization. This suggests that even playful types of humor, such as making a joke about a coworker's mistake, is a way of ensuring that the coworker will not make the same mistake again. Trolling can operate in a similar way, where control attempts fall under a continuum of playful to aggressive attacks that serve to change attitudes or behavior. Using this logic, the second and third research questions are proposed.

> RQ$_{2:}$ How does trolling paradoxically unify while differentiating in the rideshare context?
>
> RQ$_3$: How do trolling behaviors serve as a control mechanism among rideshare drivers?

These research questions are even more pressing when considering recent legal challenges in California that called the rideshare professional identity into question. In the following section, I explicate the important context to situate this study, explain the method used to answer the research question, and describe how data were analyzed.

III. Methods

A. *Study Setting: The Rideshare Industry*

There are myriad factors that separate the rideshare industry from traditional organizations. I have explicated some of the important distinctions of gig work and the share economy in prior chapters (based on Sundararajan, 2016), but now I shift focus to the aspects of rideshare work that are most relevant to the research questions proposed for this project. These aspects include a) the uncertainty rideshare drivers face navigating the “big brother” platform, b) information asymmetries built into the platform, c) the systemic and deliberate isolation of rideshare workers, d) the counterinsitutional website that drivers use to overcome their isolation, and e) how Proposition 22 impacts occupational identity in the rideshare industry.

1. Uncertainty: Black-Box Big Brother

Rideshare workers are the most pervasive type of algorithmically managed employees. Lee et al. (2015) explained that in the rideshare industry, “algorithmic management allows a few human managers in each city to oversee hundreds and thousands of drivers on a global scale” (p. 1). Algorithmic managers collect information on workers, influence work practices, facilitate interactions between different stakeholder groups, and create the infrastructure needed to facilitate the rapid growth of the share economy (Kellogg et al., 2020; Rosenblat, 2019; Sundararajan, 2016). Algorithmic managers are created by designers who understand, program, manipulate, and revise these systems at the corporate level, oftentimes removed from the drivers who use the platform. In contrast to designers who have intimate knowledge of the platform, rideshare workers often have difficulty understanding how their algorithmic managers operate, guessing what their algorithmic managers expect, and predicting how these algorithmic managers will act in the future.

These uncertainties are deliberately manufactured by rideshare companies to afford more flexibility and easier control over users of the platform (both drivers and passengers) (Rosenblat, 2019). Chan and Humphreys (2018) described Uber algorithms as a type of “black-box” for drivers because the company will not disclose how much information is being collected on drivers, how the algorithmic managers prioritize information, or how the algorithmic manager assigns rides to drivers.

The lack of transparency of algorithms creates a variety of issues for drivers. Through an analysis of the counterinsitutional website, Uberpeople.net, Chan and Humphreys (2018) found that drivers experienced frustration with the information that was provided to them (such as navigation routes or locations to pick up passengers). The first challenge was not only that Uber regarded their navigation data as an objective tool for drivers, but that drivers also needed information about their location that the app could not provide. An example of the limitation of navigational knowledge is that Uber drivers needed to know how safe areas were before venturing to unfamiliar places. Another example is that drivers may have contextual knowledge that allows for more efficient routes than the navigation in the app can provide (such as knowledge of traffic, construction, etc.).

Another issue that drivers experienced was how to make sense of their performance and how customer ratings are used to suspend or terminate employees (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Chan and Humphreys (2018) found that drivers were concerned with customer ratings because they saw the ratings as overly harsh or biased. Drivers often reported that passengers often filed ridiculous or illegitimate complaints. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) argued that “Consumer-sourced ratings like those used by Uber are highly likely to be influenced by bias on the basis of factors like race or ethnicity” (p. 263). Race is just one factor that can influence reviews and in turn impact a rideshare driver’s ability to work. From the driver’s perspective, the focal point of the frustration is not just that customers are biased or lie, but that there is no way to remove the information once it is reported. Aggregated information is increasingly reported an analyzed but rideshare companies such as Uber and Lyft lack the fundamental oversight needed to correct or amend the data provided about drivers.

2. Information Asymmetries

Another stumbling block included information asymmetries in the platform. Sundararajan (2016) broadly defined information asymmetries as situations, “in which one party knows more than the other” (p. 139) According to Sundararajan, information asymmetries can lead to negative outcomes in the share economy. One key negative outcome is that an employee could make an adverse selection when information is omitted, incorrect, or incomplete. For instance, if drivers are not given the destinations of their passengers before they accept the ride, it may result in unprofitable rides which would be an adverse selection for the driver.

A/B testing is just one example of information asymmetries in the rideshare context (Rosenblat, 2019). In A/B testing, software designers create different versions of platforms to understand how differences in features impact user behavior. A/B trials can range from minor differences (such as the style of the interface) to entirely different ecosystems for users. Examples of these trials might include paying one group more than another, offering different types of bonuses for giving a certain number of rides, or different visual displays that may or may not shape work behaviors (Rosenblat, 2019). Often, users do not know they are a part of A/B trials as their knowledge might impact research that developers are conducting. Faraj et al. (2018) explained that complex learning algorithms can shape and alter work and organizational realities by both providing and limiting the information that users can access. The negative outcomes of information asymmetries are exacerbated in the rideshare industry because technology itself is the only link that employees have for understanding the organizational realities in which they work.

3. An Isolated Workforce

The confusion that rideshare drivers face from algorithmic management and information asymmetries is exacerbated when considering that these workers are also isolated from one another. Rosenblat (2019) explained that Uber frames drivers as technology consumers rather than employees. By discursively framing rideshare workers as consumers of technology, Uber can reap the benefits of labor from a cadre of independent contractors without being liable for labor law violations (such as when workers drive more hours than legally allotted), having to take responsibility for driver mishaps, or provide benefits to rideshare workers. When rideshare workers are framed as consumers of proprietary technologies, they become isolated from one another. Scholars such as Gottfried (1994) have explored unique challenges that temporary clerical workers experience when they work in an organization in which they do not belong. For instance, since temporary clerical workers are placed in other organizations to work alongside clients, they are unable to compare their productivity with their clerical colleagues (Gottfried, 1994). According to Gottfried, the individualized nature of temporary clerical work makes these employees more susceptible to technical control and they often work harder than their clients expected. Similarly, the isolation that rideshare workers experience creates fewer opportunities for social comparison and knowledge sharing and makes them more reliant on technical (specifically algorithmic) control.

4. Counterinstitutional Websites

One key implication of the isolation rideshare drivers experienced as reported in the above research was that they lacked official discursive spaces needed to make sense of their work. In lieu of interactions in the workplace, rideshare drivers leveraged unofficial channels to communicate with one another. One of the most prevalent unofficial channels that rideshare drivers use is the counterinsitutional website called Uberpeople.net. Gossett and Kilker (2006) explained that "Counter-institutional websites can provide an important mechanism for overcoming discursive barriers within the organization and enable members to take part in discussions that might normally be discouraged" (p. 68). Counterinstitutional websites allow for ongoing interactions where individuals can engage in the intersubjective process of negotiating meaning (Lewis, 2014). Another feature of counterinsitutional websites is that they are not officially sanctioned by the organization, which means that members negotiate meaning with plausible information (which can be more easily refuted or challenged) rather than accurate or complete knowledge (Weick, 1995). To reiterate, Uberpeople.net is a publicly available forum-based website that has thousands of members, thousands of threads, and even offers the ability for drivers to create password-protected forums.

Uberpeople.net is a viable space for rideshare drivers to engage in sensemaking processes. Uberpeople.net was a space for rideshare workers to make sense of their professional identity, identify ways to increase their take-home pay, understand confusing features on the platform, and find out the best ways to navigate their work. In short, Uberpeople.net helped rideshare drivers overcome the discursive barriers of isolation and create a space for collective sensemaking.

B. *Study Setting: Proposition 22 and Identity Crisis*

Uberpeople.net is also a space where users would troll one another, argue, and debate about issues related to rideshare work. Out of all the discussions held on Uberpeople.net, arguments about Proposition 22 were particularly contentious because this issue directly challenged how rideshare drivers made sense of their professional identity. Proposition 22 was a historic ballot measure that asked voters to decide whether Uber and Lyft drivers could be considered independent contractors who consume technology or a legitimate workforce made of employees (Sumagaysay, 2020). A “yes” vote on Proposition 22 meant that rideshare workers would keep their independent contractor status whereas a “no” vote would mean that rideshare drivers would need to be hired as employees. Rideshare drivers who resided in California regularly argued in both playful and sinister ways about the high stakes of this election and how it would affect the future of the rideshare industry.

Stakes were particularly high because of the ways that Proposition 22 would impact the pay of workers. Sumagaysay (2020) reported that, although progressive labor groups such as “Gig Workers Rising” opposed the measure, it did result in three tangible pay changes for drivers. The passing of Proposition 22 would guarantee that drivers make at least 120% of minimum wage while giving rides, receive 30 cents per mile given on rides, are offered occupational accident insurance, and in some cases may be eligible for some health-care subsidies (Sumagaysay, 2020). In addition to supporting the new pay standards that were offered under Proposition 22, rideshare drivers who supported the measure often cited the flexibility and autonomy that they could continue to enjoy if they kept their independent contractor status. It should come to no surprise that the drivers who were most vocal about their support of Proposition 22 on Uberpeople.net tended to be either a) drivers who thought that independent contractor status was key to their success, b) drivers who self-identified as incredibly successful at rideshare work, or c) drivers who did not support all facets of the measure but thought it would provide the safest or most lucrative situation for rideshare workers.

Even as Proposition 22 was being proposed on the California ballot, an alternative structure was being proposed for the rideshare industry through court rulings. Lake (2021) reported that Assembly Bill 5 (AB5) was a piece of legislation signed into law as a result to the Dynamex case in which the Supreme Court of California devised a three-prong test to determine whether gig workers could be classified as independent contractors or employees. The three-pronged criteria for independent contractor status included that a) workers are free to perform services without control or direction of the company, b) the worker must perform tasks that are outside the usual course of the company's business activities, and c) the worker is regularly engaged in an independently established trade, occupation, or business of the same nature of their work (Lake, 2021). Judge Ethan Schulman used these criteria to rule that rideshare drivers were employees because their work was central, not tangential to the rideshare industry. Ultimately, AB5 promised that rideshare drivers be given the same benefits as staffers at Uber and Lyft, including workers compensation, unemployment, paid sick and family leave, and health insurance (this was full healthcare coverage in comparison to the subsidies proposed in Proposition 22).

Rideshare drivers who supported AB5 in lieu of Proposition 22 supported becoming employees, even though it meant that work practices would need to shift. For instance, AB5 meant that workers would need to stay "regularly engaged" to meet the threshold of being a full-time employee. The main implication of these changes would be that if rideshare would continue in California, workers would need to have scheduled shifts and be more closely regulated by their employers. Rideshare workers who supported AB5 were willing to give up their flexibility for these benefits, even though there was a risk they may a) not be converted to employee status by Uber and Lyft, or b) not be given enough work to meet full-time status.

Ultimately, Proposition 22 passed on 12/11/22 before AB5 could be implemented and it became legal for Uber and Lyft to continue using an independent contractor workforce. This measure alleviated Uber and Lyft from labor law violations and ensured they cannot be held accountable when issues such as violence or sexual assault occur during rides (Sumagaysay, 2020). The passing of Proposition 22 also ensured that Uber and Lyft could continue to use opaque algorithmic managers to run the platform, that rideshare drivers would continue to be isolated and unable to organize through official channels, and that drivers would continue to engage in disparate or idiosyncratic work practices. Regardless of future legal outcomes of Proposition 22, this unique historical event resulted in an online environment on Uberpeople.net that was rife with conflict, quarreling, misinformation, and manipulation that impacted how rideshare drivers made sense of their professional identity and what they could expect their work to look like in the future.

C. *Study Setting: Uberpeople.net Platform*

Next, I explain how profiles functioned on the website as well as the differences between forums, threads, and replies on this platform. Profile features and terms such as "forum", "thread", and "replies" vary widely in description and function across different websites, so it is important to use operationalizations specific to the context of this study.

1. Profiles and Avatars

Profiles that users made on Uberpeople.net were different than those on social media platforms because of the level of online anonymity in the platform. Online anonymity is the degree in which identifying information (including real names, images of the user) cannot be associated with a specific person (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Although there have been many different typologies of online anonymity (Lea et al., 2001; Rice et al., 1999; Scott, 1999) visual anonymity was the most prevalent type observed on Uberpeople.net. Visual anonymity means that a user does not post an image of themselves on an online platform (Lea et al., 2001). In Uberpeople.net most users did not post actual photos of themselves or use their real names; rather they left the image field blank, opted to use an avatar, and created a profile handle name not associated with their legal name. Avatars varied greatly from images of sports teams, images of celebrities, pictures of animals, or images related to the geographic location in which they posted (such as beach pictures for California forums). It is important to note that nothing in the platform discouraged users from using their photos or real names in profiles, but the social norms that developed kept most users from doing so. We know from previous research on anonymity in online communities that the type of and appropriateness of anonymity is contextual and can be shaped by group norms: Uberpeople.net was no exception (Rains & Scott, 2007). This norm perhaps developed as a way for users to feel protected in a space where they could criticize or ridicule rideshare companies, although most users opted for visual anonymity regardless of whether they praised or disparaged rideshare companies.

2. Forums, Threads, and Replies

The entire Uberpeople.net platform is a collection of forums organized by geographic regions. These geographic regions include different countries, general areas within a country (such as Southwestern cities in the United States), and specific cities. For the purposes of this project, I only collected and analyzed data from the Californian forums, because of the focus on Prop 22 discourse.

Threads are collections of posts that are started in a specific geographic forum. These conversations can be tagged with a wide variety of topics such as “Pay” or “Politics” but do not necessarily need to be tagged to be visible. Threads are started by a user that writes a post to which other users may want to respond. Replies are the responses to a post that users write. The original posts and collection of replies are archived and searchable as cohesive threads. These threads are archived and searchable by date, keywords, content in the original post, content in user replies, and titles of the thread.

3. Accessibility

Many of the threads are available to the public but some are exclusively for members of the site. Although the website states that the threads are catered towards actual Uber and Lyft drivers, anyone can sign up on the website for free and access publicly available threads. For this study, I only collected data from publicly accessible threads so neither a user login nor password was needed to access the content. Using publicly available data also meant that this project was not classified as human-subjects research, the research met university standards in research ethics, and institutional review board (IRB) approval was not needed. Given that the data collected and analyzed was public in nature these threads might have attracted users who were motivated by performativity or entertainment when compared to private forums. In sum, I cannot speculate as to how private forums differed in terms of users, interactions, or content and these findings cannot be generalized to all types of discourse on the Uberpeople.net platform.

D. *Content Analysis*

To answer RQ_1, RQ_2, and RQ_3 I used a directed content analysis approach specifically focused on discourse about Proposition 22 on Uberpeople.net. A directed content analysis approach is appropriate when, "existing theory or prior research exists about a phenomenon that is incomplete or would benefit from further description" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). In this chapter I explain a) technological features in Uberpeople.net, b) the data collection process, c) how pre-existing theory was leveraged to code and analyze the data, and d) how thematic categories were identified.

1. Unit of Analysis

According to Krippendorf (2019), proper unitization is essential for a robust content analysis. In this project, coding units and thematic distinctions will be used to organize, compare, and contrast as well as identify findings to answer the research questions. Coding units are defined as, "units that are distinguished for separate transcription, recording, or coding" (Krippendorf, 2019, p. 104). More specifically, there are three types of coding units in this project: original user posts in a thread, user replies in a thread, and interactions between users. When users reply directly to another user's original post or subsequent comments, the forum highlighted the specific post to which they are commenting or responding. These reply interactions are operationalized as double interactants (Weick, 1979). Weick explained double interactants when he stated:

> The unit of analysis in organizing is contingent response patterns, patterns in which an action by actor A evokes a specific response in actor B (so far this is an interact), which is then responded to by actor A (this complete sequence is a double interact). (p. 89)

For instance, if Uberpeople.net user A would start a thread with a post, then user B could choose to respond to either the entire post or part of the post. When user B commented on user A's post, it would repost and highlight the specific text in which user B was responding. This feature a) allowed for user A to know exactly which part of their post B replied to/commented on, b) allowed user A to respond to B's comment, and c) allowed every other user on the thread to see specific responses between these two actors and chime in. Using individual posts, replies to posts, and interactions between users was more appropriate for this study in contrast to unitizing entire threads because each thread had at least 100 replies from multiple users. Coding individual replies and interactions between replies was important because a) trolling behaviors may be unique or idiosyncratic to the author, b) professional identity is something negotiated between individual users, and c) replies helped spotlight which users agreed with or affiliated with each other (which was vital for understanding how in and out groups operated on the platform).

E. ***Sampling and Data Collection***

Given that Uberpeople.net has hundreds of thousands of different threads across international forums, stratified sampling of the public forums was important in order to find the data most relevant for this study. Krippendorf (2019) explained that stratified sampling, "recognizes distinct subpopulations (strata) within a population" (p. 119). In this project the overall population is rideshare drivers who use Uberpeople.net, but the subpopulation is rideshare drivers who are a part of public forums specifically for Californian cities including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Orange County, and the Inland Empire.

1. Boundary Conditions

In addition to sampling from Californian forums, the following boundary conditions were used to narrow the scope of this study and find the data most appropriate for answering the research questions. The first boundary condition that was used in this study was that only threads that explicitly mentioned “Prop 22” or “Proposition 22” were collected for analysis. This boundary condition was appropriate because Prop 22 specifically addressed issues of professional identity for rideshare drivers in California, and the keywords were the clearest search terms that can be used to find threads that are relevant for the research questions. This boundary condition also provides rationale for why only data from Californian forums was used in this project. Simply put, any threads that had the key terms “Prop 22” or “Proposition 22” were collected and analyzed as long as the threads met the other boundary condition detailed below.

The second boundary condition was that only threads from 4/1/2020 to 01/02/2021 were collected for analysis. This was an appropriate timeline because it captured several months leading up to the election (which took place on 11/3/20) when Prop 22 was on the ballot. This timeframe also captured approximately two months after Prop 22 had passed. This timeframe was important because it shows sensemaking leading up to the high-stakes election that defined the professional identity of rideshare drivers, as well as the weeks leading up to when Prop 22 would be implemented after the certification of California’s election results on 12/11/20.

The final boundary condition was that only threads with a minimum of 100 replies were collected for data analysis. Having a high number of replies in the threads was important because collective forms of sensemaking and collective forms of trolling are communication phenomena that are negotiated in interactions between users. I conceptualize threads with at least 100 replies as having a high level of engagement which helped me find threads that were nuanced and rich enough to answer the research questions. Posts with high levels of engagement also meant that the number of unique users was likely to be higher. Preliminary exploratory searches showed that threads with lower levels of replies tended to be irrelevant for the purposes of this study. For instance, many of the threads that had low levels of engagement mentioned Prop 22 as a way to recruit rideshare drivers for other jobs in various industries, and typically involved only a few users.

2. Data Collection

Using the boundary conditions described above, the data included 18 threads from Californian forums, 198 webpages of data from all the threads, and posts or replies from 197 unique users. The high level of unique users was valuable in this project because it meant that the data analyzed captured perspectives from many different types of users and did not represent a type of echo-chamber setting for a minority of users.

After pulling data according to the boundary conditions set up for this study, each thread was deemed appropriate to be analyzed for the project. No data cleaning was needed because each thread contained material relevant to the research questions. The threads that met the boundary conditions were collected by two undergraduate research assistants. These research assistants took comprehensive screenshots that captured all the text in the threads, images (such as memes) in the threads, and profile information of users in each thread. The research assistants converted the files into PDFs and uploaded these documents into Atlas.Ti. Atlas.Ti was an appropriate qualitative software for this project because it offered cloud coding features so that I could work on coding the data with research assistants remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

F. *Coding Process*

In the first step of the structured coding process, I developed a codebook based on prior theory on sensemaking, functions of humor, and trolling behaviors. The codebook is separated into two sections, with the first grouping of codes designed to identify instances of sensemaking about the professional identity of rideshare drivers including retrospection, meaning negotiation, reinterpretations, labeling and presumptions (See Appendix A for codebook with operationalizations of these constructs and examples). The second grouping of codes was designed to identify the functions of trolling behaviors including identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. This codebook was used to train two undergraduate research assistants who assisted with data collection and coded threads.

1. Intercoder Reliability

Although intercoder reliability is not always a requirement for robust qualitative research, in this project it was important to establish intercoder reliability during the codebook training process (Tracy, 2020), given the use of structured coding. During the training, the research assistants and I coded the same set of threads using the codebook that was established at the beginning of the study. We coded independently and then met to discuss similarities and differences between the codes we assigned to the initial thread. Coding agreements and disagreements were translated into nominal data (using 0 and 1 for each category) which was used to calculate Krippendorf's alpha (Krippendorf, 2019). Krippendorf's alpha is useful for determining intercoder reliability because it indicates when agreement between coders is better than chance. The first round of coding yielded $\alpha = .64$, which was not high enough to indicate a high level of intercoder reliability. According to Krippendorf (2019), researchers can generally be confident that they have high levels of intercoder reliability when calculated α =.8 or above.

After the lower level of Krippendorf's alpha was calculated, I conducted more training with the research assistants for two additional weeks. This training included discussing each of the codes and the disagreements again in-depth, reading literature that was used to make the codebook, and coding pages of threads together. This process did not lead to revisions of any of the coding operationalizations detailed in the original codebook. When I felt the research assistants had a better grasp on the coding process, we each coded another set of threads independently. Overall, 30% of the data was coded for this reassessment, and the number of agreements and disagreements was translated into nominal data (again using 0 and 1 for agreements and disagreements) and Krippendorf's alpha yielded a result of $\alpha = .82$ after the second round of coding. The significant increase in intercoder reliability and the volume of data used in these initial tests gave me confidence to assign threads for the research assistants to code independently.

2. Verification

In addition to ensuring high intercoder reliability, I also leveraged microscopic analysis as a verification tool for this study. Strauss and Corbin (1998) explained, "Microscopic analysis obliges the researcher to examine the specifics of data" (p. 65). Using microscopic analysis in this study meant that I read each post in all the threads line by line, even if the research assistant had originally coded the thread. I did this to a) gain tacit knowledge of the platform, b) identify themes, and c) do quality control of undergraduate researcher coding.

3. Thematic Categories

During the data analysis stage, the research assistants and I assigned hundreds of codes from the structured code book as well as emergent codes based on the context of user conversations (often referred to as in vivo codes; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Research assistants were instructed that they could create emergent codes as long as the codes a) reflected important context in the data and b) were relevant to the codes outlined in the codebook they were trained on. For instance, while the term "hustlers" was not in the original codebook, it became a code because users mentioned this term when discussing their professional identity. It is important to note that emergent codes were also paired (or co-occurred) with codes outlined in the codebook: for example, in the "hustlers" example, these comments were also coded with sensemaking codes such as "meaning negotiation" and "labeling." This process helped the research team stay theoretically grounded (which is essential for directed content analysis) while also tagging important types of contextual knowledge needed to understand the phenomena of interest. Emergent codes did not need to be separate coding categories themselves, but were operationally subcategories of prior, structured categories from the original codebook.

Emergent codes were discussed in team meetings to make sure the codes were appropriate for the project and relevant to the concepts in the codebook. In the event of minor disagreements or discrepancies, I would make changes to codes as needed during microscopic analysis in which I went through each line of the data after it was initially coded by the research assistants.

After all the data was coded and codes were verified during the microscopic analysis stage, I went through 4 rounds of axial coding. During this axial coding, I compared and contrasted codes in order to sort groupings by a) the coding categories outlined in the codebook and b) the emergent codes which were subcategories of the prior coding categories. Then groupings were organized by larger thematic categories and the research question in which the findings were most relevant. Most of the groupings were included in this process with one key exception. This exception was the emergent codes surrounding political beliefs and identity. Although the research assistants and I thought political types of trolling (such as pro-Trump users applying conservative logic to justify their endorsement of Proposition 22) would be interesting to observe, but later found that these codes often were often non sequitur and inconsistent, which meant that they did not contribute to the sensemaking of professional identity, robust unifications or divisions, or control mechanisms.

After axial coding was completed, there was a total of 4 major thematic categories and 9 subthemes needed to answer the research questions. The first major thematic category was labeled "the good ole' days," and involved drivers engaging in retrospection about how their pay has decreased overtime, reinterpretations of users who promoted their success, and labeling to discredit the users who were thought to have been lying about their pay. The second major thematic category was labeled "rideshare and real jobs" and involved user discussions about which drivers could be considered professionals, whether driving for Uber can be considered a real job, whether the purpose of rideshare work is to supplement income, and whether the flexibility in rideshare work makes the job worth doing (See Appendix B for descriptions of subthemes). The third major thematic category was labeled “hustling for prestige” which involved users of Uberpeople.net leveraging trolling behaviors such as sarcasm, humor, and insults to manufacture prestige grading (or rank order) that were used to unify and differentiate drivers (See Appendix C for descriptions of subthemes). The last major thematic category was labeled “ants, spies, and attempts to control” which showcased the ways trolling behaviors were a) used to challenge the legitimacy of users and b) advocate for the demise of rideshare companies (See Appendix E for descriptions of subthemes). In the following chapter, the findings of this project including the themes, subthemes, and context needed to answer RQ_1, RQ_2, and RQ_3 are discussed.

IV. Findings

In the first section of this chapter, I use the findings to answer the first research question. RQ_1 asked how trolling behaviors help rideshare drivers make sense of their professional identity. Rideshare drivers made sense of their identity by discussing decline in pay over recent years and by policing users who brag about their success. Rideshare drivers also trolled one another to differentiate a) who are the most professional drivers, b) who can make rideshare a real job, and c) who can only drive as a side gig. Ultimately, while drivers disagreed as to what rideshare platforms could provide drivers (full time income versus extra side money), the trolling behaviors were used to create key distinctions that separated different factions of users on Uberpeople.net.

Although the trolls on Uberpeople.net may have been motivated by multifaceted or contradictory goals, the outcomes of these behaviors were incredibly divisive. RQ_2 asked how trolling paradoxically could unify while differentiating in the rideshare context. Rideshare drivers leveraged trolling to a) manufacture prestige grading to rank the best users, b) differentiate which drivers had the best work practices, c) and use social comparison to mock out-group members. While trolling enabled users to categorize rideshare drivers in divisive ways, there was one type of trolling that generally fostered general identification and unification. When users made fun of the devaluation of their labor, the negative changes to the rideshare industry, and the ways that they will be worse off no matter what happens with Proposition 22, there was a high level of agreement from other users. Part of this identification could be attributed to the entertainment value and emotional catharsis that followed the use of driver-deprecating humor.

In the final section of this chapter, I use the findings to answer the second research question. RQ_3 asked how trolling behaviors serve as a control mechanism among rideshare drivers. One way that users would attempt to control one another was by using a metaphor about ants. This metaphor was originally used to demean users who continued to drive for Uber and Lyft and influence users to quit driving. Later, the term was reclaimed by self-identified "ants" and used ironically. Another way that users would attempt to control other users is by accusing them of corporate espionage. This tactic was often used whenever someone posted something favorable about Proposition 22. The last way that users on Uberpeople.net attempted to control one another is by co-opting the negative position of Proposition 22 to promote the idea that failure of the bill would bring about the end of rideshare companies.

A. *The Good Ole' Days*

The first way that rideshare drivers made sense of their professional identity was by engaging in retrospection about how their pay has decreased overtime, reinterpreting users who promoted their success, and labeling to discredit the users who were thought to have been lying about their pay. Users also reflected on how earning potential had plummeted due to a) the rate changes that Uber has made within the platform and b) decreased demand for rideshare services during the COVID-19 pandemic. One user, "Lucky7," described the changes in their take-home pay while driving when they stated:

> I drove Uber since after I retired in 2013. Uber start cut rate at winter 2015 from $1.85 per mile and $0.45 per minutes to $1.45 per mile and $0.30 per minutes and cut again in winter 2016 and again in 2017. Driver received less paid every year. You will be lucky if you still make $15 per hour at daytime you and $22 per hour driving at nights until March this year. [Lucky7; Judge Orders…]

After explaining the decreases in pay that rideshare workers have endured since 2013, Lucky7 described how this justified their support for AB5 instead of Prop 22. From Lucky7's perspective, this decline in pay was evidence that rideshare companies are creating obstacles to driver success and that AB5 was the punishment that Uber deserved after treating its workforce so poorly.

Other users shared Lucky7's skepticism that Prop 22 would increase the quality of life for drivers. User "Mike78" explained that Uber and Lyft were both untrustworthy because, "they always change a rate, remember when $1.35/mile (even more) on UberX was around, lots of people took new cars (financing or leasing), and after a while Uber dropped rate to $1.10 - $0.80 and changed ping system" [Mike78; UP Prop 22 Poll]. Mike78's retrospection on changes in mileage policy showcased another peril of rideshare workers who invested in new vehicles to earn more money. These drivers absorbed financial risks (including buying, leasing, and renting new vehicles) to earn higher rates on UberX rides, only to find that rates were cut without any forewarning to drivers. When users engaged in sensemaking about negative changes to the rideshare industry, it was clear that some users a) used the past to undermine trust in rideshare companies and b) rideshare work was becoming less viable for drivers.

Many users on Uberpeople.net were incredibly precise in discussions about pay; these posts tended to get high levels of engagement. When users thought someone was being deceptive by bragging about their pay, they were ready to call them out publicly. After a user shared a post about their average pay while driving for Uber, another user, "Nutsi Pelosi," responded, "Drivers used to gross 1,500 a week. Not now. You DID NOT MAKE THAT. Your net income is far less. Full-time drivers average 1,500 miles a week. The cost per mile is .75c Nationally." [Nutsi Pelosi; ABC protects IC's from ULDD]. Another user, "Rex Havoc," chimed in:

> You were being disingenuous. You could have just said you might make $1,500 to $2,000 working 60 to 80 plus hours a week, which is much more realistic. But you chose to say $3,000 a week instead. Someone will come on this forum, read your post and think they can make $3K a week Ubering. And we all know that

> isn't going to happen going forward in this current business environment. [Rex Havoc; AB5 Employees vs. Prop 22]

Both Rex Havoc and Nutsi Pelosi engaged in labeling a user as disingenuous or a liar when they bragged about their pay. Rex Havoc's attack on the user who bragged about pay was particularly interesting because they were worried about how misinformation about pay could negatively impact new or prospective drivers. Rex Havoc went on to explain that it is difficult for new or prospective rideshare workers to get realistic expectations about pay through recruitment advertisements and wanted to leverage Uberpeople.net to help communicate more accurate pay information. In traditional organizations there are generally official channels that can help employees make sense of their income and create expectations of future earning potential, but in the rideshare industry, users are largely left to make sense of their pay and form expectations about future earnings through unofficial channels. Compensation is clearly a fundamental aspect of professional identities and the banter on Uberpeople.net exemplified the crowd sourced nature of pay discussions as well as the policing that occurs when users disagree with income information.

B. ***Rideshare and "Real Jobs"***

In addition to frank and heated conversations about pay, users regularly engaged in discussions about which drivers could be considered professionals, whether driving for Uber can be considered a real job, whether the purpose of rideshare work is to supplement income, and whether the flexibility in rideshare work makes the job worth doing (See Appendix B). Throughout these conversations, users trolled one another to foster identification among likeminded drivers, to differentiate themselves from users they disagreed with, and to clarify the legitimacy of work practices.

1. Professionalism and Uber Black

When making sense of their professional identity, users of Uberpeople.net regularly discussed how differences in driver status created important distinctions. By status, users referred to differences between regular Uber X drivers and the more “elite” category of Uber Black drivers. Although Uber X and Uber Black drivers performed the same job using the same platform, the a) higher vehicle quality and b) higher status clientele separated the careerists who could self-identify as a professional (Uber Black) and who could work rideshare as a “real job.”

Users recognized that outsiders may have a hard time understanding the differences between Uber Black and Uber X drivers. Even Uber X drivers and Uber Black drivers highly contested whether there is a big difference between the groups. User, “Uber-xxx,” stated, “Just wondering how is uber x not a job but uber black is? I suppose you guys are slightly more professional, but the scope of work and hours are pretty similar” [Uber-xxx; Will Those Say No]. In response to being compared with Uber X drivers, Uber Black drivers regularly distinguished themselves. User, “LyftLady,” stated, “To average joes we the same drivers. To the law n if u ask the Black riders...We totally different breeds.” [LyftLady; Will Those Say No post]. User, “U Phoria,” described some of these distinctions when they stated:

> I’m not Uber Black, but those guys are licensed and commercially insured, I consider that a respectable job. Everyone jumped into driving uber and since so many quit jobs and eventually failed at making a ‘living’ at it we now have the state stepping in to protect stupid. All you drivers that want to have a real job just need to go out and get one and leave rideshare like it is. [U Phoria; Will Those Say No]

U Phoria’s comment spotlights the material means by which Uber Black achieve the level of professionalism needed to legitimize their career. U Phoria also showcased a perspective that other Uber Black users echoed; that rideshare work would be so much better if amateur Uber X drivers would step aside and find other ways to make a living.

Other distinctions between Uber X and Uber Black drivers were rooted in different practices they engaged in during work. K Boy explained:

> The other big factor for me is, driving Black I would wear black jeans and at least a button up shirt and my Nikes. Driving X, I'm wearing a T-shirt and shorts and my Nikes. Driving Black, I would clean my car out every day after each ride if possibly. Driving X, I do car wash once a week on Sunday morning after Saturday night. I felt obligated to keep my car neat and tidy driving a SUV where most riders are ballers and prob expect our cars to be clean af. Driving X these days, I'm not even cleaning the car out every day but I get complimented every day that my car is clean...I feel I have to impress my Black riders for possibly a private ride later or a big tip at all times. I open doors...etc most of the times super cater to their needs. I don't feel this way with my X riders. [K Boy; Will Those Say No]

Although many Uber Black drivers have professional driving experience in which a uniform was likely required, Uber does not have requirements for how Uber Black drivers should dress. This means that changes in dress or cleaning procedures were self-imposed by Uber Black drivers such as K Boy. From K Boy's perspective, the expectations from customers who could afford Uber Black made him feel that he needed to have more professional conduct when compared to Uber X rides.

The material means by which users thought they could actualize their professionalism in the rideshare industry seemed counterintuitive. On one hand, Uber Black drivers may have a stronger dedication to the entrepreneurial side of rideshare work that makes things such as a) the cleanliness of the car and b) type of passengers serviced important for understanding the value of their business. On the other hand, the self-imposed nature of these standards showcased the ways that Uber Black drivers drew upon other transportation services to form expectations of professionalism and assimilated to those standards despite the extra labor and costs.

2. Real Jobs

In addition to arguing about which drivers were considered the most professional, users on Uberpeople.net also discussed whether rideshare work could be a "real job." According to user, "Diceman", rideshare platforms were never meant to provide the same types of benefits that workers receive in "real jobs." Diceman stated, "I am retired. I strongly advise young drivers to get a real job, do the rideshare as a side job only, rideshare has no any real benefits when you retire" [Dice Man; Passed 22]. Although Diceman's comment was disputed amongst other users, other comments emerged that were more sarcastic or offensive in nature.

For instance, in response to comments about the challenges rideshare workers described because of their independent contractor status user, "K Boy," made sarcastic remarks. K Boy trolled other users by saying, "Were you expecting a gold Rolex after 10 years driving Uber? BAHAHAHAHAHAA" [K boy; Combined Changes Coming to Both Apps]. This comment was sarcastic because it equated users' desire for Uber to pay them a living wage and provide health benefits with the types of benefits white-collar workers may receive in their careers. K Boy clarified his position when he stated, "GET A REAL JOB that will treat u with some respect instead of trying to swim in the middle of a sand" [K Boy; Combined Changes Coming to Both Apps]. Another user, "Breezze", argued that rideshare drivers who want benefits should seek out menial types of labor that would provide employee status. Breezze stated, “McDonald’s is hiring…There’s a place for those looking to be an ‘employee’” [Breezze; Predictions for AB5 Vs. Prop 22].These comments exemplify the trolls on Uberpeople.net that disrupted user conversations about improving working conditions by a) arguing that rideshare workers are foolish to think they can achieve their goals, b) that users are entitled to think they should be treated with respect by the corporations that hired them, and c) rideshare workers who cannot live off of driving should pivot to low-status work. These trolling behaviors demeaned and differentiated users who were advocating for better work conditions by questioning whether they should be involved in rideshare work at all.

Despite trolling remarks, users expressed nuanced views on whether rideshare work is a “real job.” User, Linnyvan, responded to trolls by stating, “And yes Uber is a real job. When you have to pay bills and you're working full-time, Uber is a real job and it's a hard one” [LinnyVan; Why I am Voting Yes]. From Linnyvan’s perspective, the luxurious hallmarks of white-collar work (such as high-end watches or prestige) did not make a job “real” but that the difficulty of the work did make a difference. Another user, LA_Uber_Driver, explained how to drivers who are unable to pursue other opportunities rideshare work is a “real job.” LA_Uber_Driver stated, “There is all kind and people with all kind of circumstances that just couldn’t have a regular 9 to 5 job for and that’s it, they completely rely on an opportunity like this” [LA_Uber_Driver; Why I am Voting Yes]. This comment spotlighted a different dimension of “real jobs” where the necessity and availability of work impacts which forms of work can be considered real or respectable.

Ultimately, whether users conceptualized rideshare work as a "real job" had nuanced connections to whether they felt workers should be considered employees or contractors and, in turn, whether they supported Prop 22. User, Basketball 9-5 showcased this nuance when he stated:

> It would be nice for Uber and Lyft to treat us true independent contractors but greed is more important yes they will let us smell the T bone steak with all the fixings but we don't eat...and it's incredibly sad how they threw us to the wolves during this pandemic..no soul or compassion....so all my fellow drivers who don't want to be employees look elsewhere...I think it's time for these companies to pay us what they owe us and thank God we are employees!!!!pay back that 430 million dollars you owe unemployment...and God willing back wages for us....those bones they showing us aren't real nor sincere…they don't care about us at all!!!" [Basketball 9-5; Yes or No on Prop 22]

This comment exemplified users who felt that they should still stay as independent contractors but should still have the legal protections associated with other forms of work. User, "Chocoholic", shared a similar perspective when they stated, "I just want a system that actually works and protects drivers. In my ideal world, we are independent contractors, but able to earn fair and reasonable compensation and have appropriate protections (disability, protection from unfounded complaints and deactivations, etc.)" [Chocoholic; Yes or No on Prop 22]. Although many users expressed multifaceted and nuanced understandings of whether rideshare work should be considered a "real job," others insisted that this type of work should only be used to supplement income.

3. Side Jobs

While some users fought over if and for whom rideshare was a "real job", others insisted that driving was a side gig. User, "NCRBill," explained their perception of rideshare work when they stated, "I drove cause I wanted to, not because I had to. That is the reason many of us drive. I will stop if it means I'm an employee instead of independent contractor" [NCRBill; Judge Orders]. User, "U Phoria," explained, "Uber started as a gig, a way for people to make a little extra money with the car they already own. Don't blame me because you decided to make it a career" [U Phoria; Yes or No on Prop 22]. U Phoria's comment was in response to users who considered Uber to be a full-time job and to advocate for employees' benefits. This comment exemplifies a position that most "side gig" drivers held where they considered users who are fighting for employee status to ultimately be misusing a side income opportunity to make ends meet. User, "George Tea," echoed this sentiment by saying, "Thank goodness I have a regular job and only do this for side money. I think it's pretty sad that people are doing this full-time" [George Tea; Are You Gonna Vote Yes or No on Prop 22]. George Tea's comment framed drivers who relied on Uber to make a living as stupid or pitiful.

Although some users discussed rideshare side job work as a way to supplement income, others discussed how multiple side gigs could be leveraged to make a comfortable living. User, "DrivingManiac," explained that only having one type of independent contractor job was foolish when they stated, "Like I've stated earlier most of these full timers are almost broke. This is all they have. For part timers it's just extra money for us. Guys are always boasting about big payouts. It's actually entertaining" [DrivingManiac; Are You Gonna Vote Yes or No on Prop 22]. DrivingManiac trolled users who mainly give rides on Uber instead of a) driving for multiple platforms and b) doing food delivery through rideshare platforms such as UberEats. Another user, "Judge and Jury", explained that working multiple side jobs was the key to their success. Judge and Jury said, "Freedom of flexibility, if used correctly, pays the bills and increases the savings account. Learn, adapt, experiment and use multiple apps to your advantage" [Judge and Jury; Will Those Who Say No]. From this perspective, if drivers wanted to make ends meet then they needed to work across multiple platforms to monetize as much of their time as possible, which helped users make sense of how they should conceptualize their professional identity. Sensemaking about professional identity in the rideshare industry always teetered on factions that thought rideshare work was a) professional if you assimilated to certain standards, b) was sustainable only if drivers engaged in other types of gig work (such as grocery or food delivery), or c) an unsustainable job that should only be used sparingly. What is particularly interesting about these distinctions is which drivers thought their professional identity was more associated with a gig worker identity, which meant workers should take on the most lucrative tasks (not necessarily giving rides) available versus the drivers who thought driving met the threshold for a "real job."

C. *Hustling for Prestige*

I now turn attention to the ways that trolling served a larger divisive function and was used to create different in and out-groups on Uberpeople.net. Users used trolling behaviors to differentiate in and out group members and clarify which users were most exclusive. It was clear that users of Uberpeople.net were leveraging sarcasm, humor, and insults to manufacture prestige grading (or rank order) between different types of drivers. Drivers who considered themselves to be the most elite often referred to themselves as "hustlers" and regularly showcased their success, work ethic, shrewd behavior, and tacit knowledge of the platforms (See Appendix C). Hustlers also regularly attributed the lack of success that other users described to laziness or stupidity. When discussing why so many users of Uberpeople.net were against Prop 22 user, “El Impulsador,” explained “The lower IQ drivers that don't know how to hustle will vote ‘no’ because they need all the employee protections including minimum wage because they lack hustling skills” [El Impulsador; AB5 Employees vs. Prop 22]. User, “Judge and Jury” echoed “El Implusador’s” sentiments when they said:

> If you can't make enough money as a gig app contractor, move along to a W2 job that meets your standards. Leave us profitable contractors to our own devices. Frankly, getting tired of unprofitable drivers clamoring to even the playing field through legislation to aspire to a part time, minimum wage employee. Is that want you want? Part time, minimum wage employment while driving your vehicle into the junk yard? [Judge and Jury, Why I am Voting Yes 22]

One key insight from Judge and Jury’s comment was that profitable contractors are capable of success and that inequities on the platform were the fault of the driver instead of recognizing systemic issues that could be causing issues. Other ways that hustlers used trolling behaviors to differentiate themselves included showcasing (or “flexing”) their wins on the platform and self-labeling as top-quality drivers (known as the “10%ers).

1. The Art of the Flex

While users could self-identify as “hustlers,” they would need to engage in some “flexing” or bragging in order to convince other users of their greatness and prestige. Characteristics of “flexing” in Uberpeople.net generally included a) bragging about profitable rides or days of driving, b) boasting their shrewdness, and c) promoting their own lifestyle. When bragging about a productive day user, “DeadMiler69,” said:

> I AM quite the multitasker. I accepted my first ride at 5:50am this morning. At 12:45 I was back at my hotel room for the second time. That’s 7 hours of total time being gone. I’m not going to even deduct the 30-minute stop for gas and coffee or the 45-minute poop and lunch break

> or the 45 minutes of "dead miling" I've done to get back to hotel twice. In the TOTAL time (7 hrs) since I accepted my first request until 12:45pm, I've made $280 or $40/hr while getting paid to eat lunch, take a dump, drink coffee and completely obliterate [DeadMiler69; AB5 Employees VS. Prop 22]

DeadMiler69 was bragging about or "flexing" his ability to maximize profit on trips while minimizing the amount of time he spends travelling without driving a passenger. As a self-proclaimed hustler, DeadMiler69 liked to brag about his ability to make money off of rides by his shrewd knowledge of the platform while counterintuitively having no dedication to the rideshare companies in which he worked. In another post, Deadmiler69 explains this distinction when he stated, "Name me one job that has those opportunities WITHOUT having to interview for the job and have absolutely no responsibilities to the company." [Deadmiler69; AB5 Employees VS. Prop 22]. It was clear that Deadmiler69 preferred independent contractor status because he felt his autonomy was the key to his success.

Other hustlers tended to emphasize the opportunities in rideshare work even amidst record low rider demand due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After bragging about making 3K in one week during the pandemic, user "UberDaddy21" was met with criticism from other users because Uberdaddy21 had to work 70 hours to make that amount of money. In response to the criticism or trolling they received, UberDaddy21 stated:

> I have made $3K in a week since Covid started but that did require close to 70 hours. That is not the point. The point is that I have the OPPORTUNITY to do so. If I'm down on my luck and I need $2-3k in a week I can give it my best effort. Nobody can say, 'sorry we can't allow you online right now, you maxed out your 30 hours this week. Hours reset each Monday at 4am. Please try back then.' [UberDaddy21; AB5 Employees VS. Prop 22]

Similar to DeadMiler69, UberDaddy21 felt the need to defend the autonomy of independent contractor status, even when most drivers were unable to work due to the changing demand on the platform. Both UberDaddy21 and Deadmiler69 promoted a dominant ideology amongst the hustlers, that they were so incredibly capable of success as long as Uber and Lyft stayed out of their way. It was the belief in their own success that hustlers used to argue in favor of Prop 22 and argue for protecting independent contractor status.

Although hustlers regularly trolled other users on the platform, their comments also became fodder that other drivers used to troll the hustlers. In response to a hustler who would post shirtless pictures to show off their physique while bragging about their success, another user said, “p.s. you are very weird/lonely to feel the need to flex so much and post shirtless pictures. Get a family/life” [Uber-xxx; So I’m Confused…]. Uber-xxx’s comment spotlighted agitation towards hustlers who felt the need to promote or brag about multiple aspects of their lifestyle, including their own levels of physical fitness. Other hustlers became targets for trolls to make fun of their pay. For instance, user, “El Implusador” trolled a hustler after they posted their pay by saying, “If you were paid OT on those hours even at McDonalds you would net more than $1900. Dumba** You are in the BS $100k a year uber "think they're hustlers" group. Lol! GTFO” [El Implusador; AB5 Employees VS. Prop 22]. This comment exemplified the tension hustlers felt between wanting to add more prestige and exclusivity to their ranks while also becoming more vulnerable to myriad attacks on the platform.

2. The 10%ers

Users who identified as hustlers were particularly interested in trolling their counterparts by insulting their intelligence, work ethic, socio-economic status, or general lifestyle. An especially salient example of prestige grading between rideshare drivers was fueled by a group of hustlers who referred to themselves as the "10%ers." Using the "10%er" term showcased how hustlers used the sensemaking device of labeling to further distinguish themselves from other drivers. In a seminal post that coined the term "10%er," K Boy explained the differences between 10%ers and 90%ers when they stated:

> Here is how u find out if u a 90%er or the 10%er:
> 1) If you at LAX...and if you taking any base fare out of LAX at any time, you're a 90%er. 2) If you're at an event and you taking shorties out of there, you're a 90%er. 3) If you only stage for 10 mins but give up and base fare it, you're a 90%er. 4) If you don't order steak sandwich in the pigpen, you're a 90%er. 5) If you don't keep your car fresh at all times, you're a 90%er. 6) If you don't drink Starbucks but McDonald's coffee, you're a 90%er. 7) If you wearing sandals or slippers while driving, you're a 90%er. 8) If you have one of those please tip me messages in your car, you're a 90%er. I can keep going but I don't want to insult most of our drivers. [K Boy; Will Those Say No]

In this post, K Boy described specific practices that separate the top earners and the majority of rideshare drivers, some of these practices include taking short (and therefore less profitable) rides, taking the base fare instead of waiting for increased prices (i.e., waiting for fares to surge before accepting), and asking for tips. The humor of this post lies in the criteria for 10%ers that is related to socioeconomic status or lifestyle in lieu of work practices. For instance, things like coffee preferences, attire, and what type of sandwich someone orders are sarcastically linked with a drivers a) level of professionalism, b) level of success, and c) ability to make a good living through rideshare.

It is important to note that the 10%er criteria was met with opposition from other users, for example “WEY00l” responded, “If you make up a stupid list of 90%er you are a zero%er.” [WEY00L; “Will Those Say No” post]. Responses to trolling content illuminated that the post about 10%ers bothered other users enough to hurl insults at K Boy. Other users sought to undercut the self-prescribed success of hustlers and 10%ers by attributing their success to the algorithmic managers who assigned rides to drivers. User, “El Impulsador” explained, “Your hustling arse has no rights (rider more rights than drivers) and can only make a livable wage if U/L "likes" you that day and doesn't have the algorithms against you.” [El Impulsador; AB5 Employees VS. Prop 22]. El Implusador’s comment spotlighted the tension between users like the hustlers who believed they could be in control of their success through rideshare and other users who were skeptical of their ability to make rideshare a worthwhile endeavor.

3. Drivers Always Lose

In contrast to the ways that trolling divided and differentiated users, trolling that presumed the detriment of rideshare drivers fostered unification from multiple types of users. When users presumed any potential changes that Uber or Lyft wanted to implement, they often used humor to commiserate and cope with their own lack of control. Users tended to troll both the companies and CEOs in charge of rideshare work as a way to make fun of the unequal power differentials they felt on a daily basis. User, “Aerodrifting”, explained their feelings about Uber by stating, “Putting faith on Uber is the dumbest thing a human being can possibly do” [Aerodrifting; Why I am Voting Yes]. In conversations comparing possible outcomes of Prop 22 another user, “1995flyingspur” stated, “You are probably spot on…screwed no matter what” [1995flyingspur; UP Prop. 22 Poll]. Another user echoed the sentiment that Uber and Lyft had it out for rideshare workers when they said, “what's in the best interest of Uber and Lyft has always been at our expense. It's as simple as that.” [UbingInLA; UP Prop 22 Poll].

Users overwhelmingly made fun of the fact that whether Prop 22 passed or not, they would no doubt be victimized by Uber and Lyft. As a joke, users made up the following phrase “@@@@ed” to be used in lieu of the term “fucked” because profanity could be removed by moderators. User, “JG10” exemplified the use of this phrase when they stated, “The filthy rich aren’t done @@@@ing us in the ass how delightful” [JG10; UP Prop 22 Poll]in response to updates about Prop 22. Another user, “K Boy”, posted a popular meme of a man getting a prostate check at the doctor’s office that labeled the doctors as Uber and Lyft and the patient as rideshare drivers (Appendix D). This meme brought some comic relief to the plight of rideshare drivers and reaffirmed that, no matter what the outcome was on Prop 22, at least they could relate to the powerlessness they all felt. Other users consistently alluded to this meme when making sense of Prop 22 and the changes they anticipated if it passed. User, “Slim Shady”, “Come January Uber and Lyft will make you guys so flexible that you won't be able to close your legs for a very long time” [Slim Shady; Combined Changes Coming to Both Apps]. It was through these types of jokes and trolling attacks against Uber and Lyft that users were able to foster a sense of comradery and cope with the lack of control they had over the industry.

D. ***Ants, Spies, and Attempts to Control***

Here I explicate how trolling was used as a control mechanism on Uberpeople.net. This final grouping of themes showcased the ways trolling behaviors were a) used to challenge the legitimacy of users and b) advocate for the demise of rideshare companies (See Appendix E). Trolls that exemplified these themes had contradictory goals, different subgroup affiliations within the forum, and leveraged humor in diverse and multifaceted ways.

1. Ants are Marching

One way that trolling was leveraged for control on Uberpeople.net was through the insult of rideshare workers being compared to ants. The comparison between rideshare workers and ants was made because drivers were seen as largely submissive to Uber and Lyft without having their best interests in mind. When talking about the mass amount of rideshare drivers on the road User, “Uberer2016”, stated:

> The mindless ants who drive 14 hours a day even at 2 in the afternoon when no one is riding are the ones who complain why they can't even make minimum wage and would vote NO on this. Rideshare is actually VERY profitable for those who drive selectively. If you drive during weekend nights, there's no possible way you could make less than $20 net per hour. A single big ride from a concert or sporting event could net you $50+ per hour. Sadly, because of these so-called ants who mindlessly work 14 hours a day and making less than minimum wage, all this might be taken away from the selective drivers [uberer2016; WHY I AM VOTING YES ON PROP 22]

From Uberer2016’s perspective, drivers who would mindlessly log in and accept rides were the reason why rideshare work was not lucrative and that drivers needed to be shrewd if they wanted to make a living off the app. Another user, “Nurburgringsf”, also used the term “ants” to describe rideshare drivers when they said, “The many ants who do this on the side for extra income and the essential workers who rely on rideshare to get to work and home" [nurburgringsf; Are you gonna vote yes or no on Prop 22]. It is important to note that the term "ants" most often had negative connotations and was often pitched to discourage other users from driving. For instance, user, "GiantsFan89", stated, "Watcha gonna do if they don't come for you? If prop. 22 fails, are you a good ant, taking any and all offers? Do you think you will be one of the few offered part time, minimum wage employee status?" [GiantsFan89; Why I am Voting Yes 22]. In this way, the term "ant" was used to taunt drivers who continued to work for Uber and Lyft, regardless of the negative changes that rideshare drivers endured.

Although the term "ants" was originally meant as an insult, other users both found the term "ants" to describe rideshare workers as ridiculous and sarcastically played along. User, "K Boy", made fun of the term's usage when they stated, "UBER is an EVIL company. Their executives are Reptiles, not human. Evil company ran by reptiles. Their drivers are ants, not humans. Sounds like an episode of ninja turtles" [Kboy; Will Those Say No]. K Boy often quarreled with users who would use the term "ants" to demean drivers who continued to work for Uber and Lyft and this sarcastic comment was a way to spotlight the sheer ridiculousness they perceived in the comments. Another user, "Make Ubering Great Again", also sarcastically used the term "ant" when stating, "Idk about y'all but I be online for sometimes 16-18 hrs a day to make ends meet. how the f @@@ am I gonna do that if prop 22 doesn't pass I don't want no minimum wage. Can I just keep anting in peace?" [Make Ubering Great Again; Yes on Prop 22= Pro Trump]. The ironic use of the term "ants" showcased the double-edged nature of humor and how sarcastic comments, or remarks can be turned against the trolls who used them.

3. Fakes and Spies are Everywhere

Trolls on Uberpeople.net also attempted to control the dialogue on forums by regularly delegitimizing users that disagreed with by accusing them of using fake accounts or working as a spy for Uber. User, Deadmiler69, stated, "I don't buy into the conspiracy of UP people creating alternate profiles, but the new member George sure acts a lot like a certain misunderstood skallywag that used to roam this forum" [DeadMiler; Are you gonna vote yes or no on Prop 22] to describe similarities he found between a new user and one that was previously banned from the forum. Another user, "Slim Shady", accused a user of creating fake profiles when multiple users disagreed with Slim Shady. Slim Shady stated, "How many more sock puppet accounts are you gonna open to pretend like you have support Steve" [Slim Shady; Combined Changes Coming to Both Apps]. Although diction or style in writing was used to identify fake profiles, other users accused profiles of being faked without clear reasoning or justification. This suggests that accusing profiles as fake was used as a technique to discredit a user's viewpoint rather than to actually catch someone using multiple profiles.

In addition to users being accused as fake, some users were accused of secretly being corporate spies working on behalf of Uber or Lyft. When accusing a user of being a spy, Carlsbad Mitch stated:

> You're too scripted to come across like a driver with spontaneous thoughts which I've already given you with my posts. You have nearly 10,000 messages in just over a year on this site. That's insane amount for a real driver without a paid agenda. That's a full-time job in itself so I'm 99% sure you're working for Uber as part of their army of influencers that's been well publicized. If I'm wrong, why would you spend all your time

> daily creating threads and trolling every post against 22? I'm not fooled and tricked like other low IQ drivers. [Carlsbad Mitch; UP Prop 22 Poll]

Carlsbad Mitch had a hard time understanding how user, "SHalester", could so frequently and unilaterally disagree and challenge him and thought the spy theory was the most viable option. Similar to the sarcastic responses to trolls who used the term "ants," SHalester used sarcasm to respond to Carlsbad Mitch's accusations. SHalester began signing all of their comments with a fake corporate signature, "SHalester Uber SR SR VP Driver Relations (hah hah)1455 Market St #400, San Francisco, CA 94103 (no traffic that is 1.5 hours for me, really)" [SHalester; UP Prop 22 Poll] to undermine Carlsbad Mitch's attacks. Ultimately, when a user accused someone of being a spy it was used to discredit favorable assessments of Proposition 22 and positive outlooks on the future of rideshare work which suggests that certain types of opinions were policed on the platform.

3. Let it Burn

The final way that users leveraged trolling attacks to control discourse on Uberpeople.net included users co-opting the negative position on Proposition 22 for their own causes. These users often felt powerless or complacent against Prop 22,: other users used hyperbole to attack Uber and Lyft and root for the failure of these companies. When discussing why they want Prop 22 to fail, user, "Carlsbad Mitch", stated, "Of course, I want to see the slave ships sink to the bottom of the ocean! No!!" [Carlsbad Mitch; UP Prop 22 Poll]. By comparing rideshare work to slave ships, Carlsbad Mitch used hyperbole to characterize the challenges that rideshare workers face along with framing Uber and Lyft as evil slave owners. When discussing why they were against prop 22 another user, "The Devil", commented, "I just want to watch it burn" [The Devil; UP Prop 22 Poll].

AuxCordTherapy echoed these desires when he stated, “The destruction of Uber/Lyft is not something I could pass on. A dream come true for many drivers who would love nothing more than the demise of the two most evil companies in existence. So it’s a no” [AuxCordTherapy; UP Prop 22 Poll]. Users who promoted the failure of Proposition 22 as a way to get revenge on rideshare companies felt justified because they believed that these companies would continue to devalue rideshare labor if left unchecked. Although I cannot judge to the extent in which these tactics changed voting intentions of drivers, it is clear that promoting the demise of Uber and Lyft represented an attempt to a) reinterpret what a no vote on Proposition 22 could accomplish and b) stoke anger against rideshare companies.

E. *Summary*

In this chapter, I have explained the findings that answer the research questions in this project. I have leveraged discourse on Uberpeople.net regarding Proposition 22 to explore how trolling behaviors facilitate a) identity sensemaking, b) the formation of in- and out-groups, c) unifying and divisive functions of trolling, and d) control between users. In the following chapter, I discuss a) the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, b) how these findings converge or diverge from past research, and c) showcase the importance of this study.

V. Discussion

In this chapter I will first explain how trolling behaviors were normalized on Uberpeople.net, then I will discuss why trolling is meaningful for the sensemaking, identity work, intergroup dynamics, and attempts at control as observed on the website. Although this was a case study situated in the rideshare context, the findings of this project may be transferrable to other contexts or future research on trolling phenomena.

A. *Trolling in the Rideshare Industry*

In earlier chapters, I explained that the operationalization of online trolling behaviors as a contextual phenomenon in which a user or group of users engage in communication towards a specific target to accomplish a variety of anti- or pro-social goals, including attention seeking, disruption, entertainment, or collective action. The operationalization I offered was broader than past definitions that conceptualized trolling as purely disruptive, deceptive, or mischievous and mainly associated with negative outcomes (Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017; Herring et al., 2002). After examining the findings from this case study, the operationalization I presented is a) reflective of how trolling functioned in the rideshare context and b) can illuminate aspects of trolling that are overlooked or ignored.

B. *The Nature(s) of Trolling*

First, the trolling that occurred on Uberpeople.net was both pro-social and anti-social in nature. Although there were examples of trolling aimed to maliciously attack a user's behavior or reputation, even these vindictive attempts could impact intergroup dynamics in pro-social ways. The clearest example of these nuances was how downward social comparisons were leveraged to attack rideshare drivers (in an anti-social way) to establish a strong in-group identity (which is pro-social in nature). Social comparisons involve individuals interpreting information about others in relation to themselves (Wood, 1996). According to Wood (1996), social comparison can help an individual evaluate themselves by accurately viewing their abilities, discovering areas of self-improvement, and enhancing the way they feel about themselves. When individuals engage in upward social comparison, they are comparing themselves with someone who is better off in some way (such as being more skilled or having more resources). In contrast, downward social comparisons include individuals comparing themselves with someone who is worse off in some way (such as being less skilled or having fewer resources). In this case study, downward social comparisons were used most often by either a) users who believed they were more professional or hardworking than their counterparts (including the self-defined "hustlers") or b) smarter because they decided to quit rideshare work (including the ex-drivers who were against Proposition 22).

Downward social comparisons help expand our understanding of trolling because it showcases trolls who were heavily embedded in the online community, were influential, and who advocated on behalf of their in-group. For instance, the self-proclaimed hustlers made jokes about how much better they were than the average rideshare driver, sparked discourse about how Proposition 22 would impact driver success, and regularly urged users to vote "yes" on Proposition 22 so they can keep their independent contractor status. Another important dimension of these downward social comparisons is that this form of trolling occurred by members who were highly involved in Uberpeople.net, sparked highly interactive discussions (as seen by the high number of replies), and often started the threads in which others commented. This is important because much of the trolling literature conceptualized trolls as outsiders who must learn and assimilate to transgress or disrupt discourse (Cruz et al., 2018; Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017; Herring et al., 2002), but in this case trolls seemed integral, influential, and embedded in Uberpeople.net from the beginning which suggests that trolling can be established as a normative behavior in online environments. Based on these findings, it is time for researchers interested in trolling phenomena should recognize the pervasiveness of these behaviors as a social norm in online environments such as Uberpeople.net. Now is the time for researchers to move beyond conceptualizations of trolling that emphasizes trolls only as individuals, which makes being a "troll" a static state or inherent characteristic and start exploring how trolling is a collective and communicative act that impacts online discourse.

Some recent research has looked at trolling as a type of behavior that is modeled for other users (Cheng et al., 2017). In their experimental research on trolling in online environments, Cheng et al. found that trolling is not an activity performed by anti-social people but is a behavior that anyone can be capable of under the right conditions. According to Cheng et al., when an individual is in a negative mood or when they observe others perpetuating trolling behavior, they are primed to engage in trolling themselves. This is an interesting line of research because it brings into question the ways in which users are primed to engage in trolling based on environmental cues rather than having a specific motive or agenda (Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017; Herring et al., 2002). In this case study, I question whether any one user can be singled out as a "troll" on Uberpeople.net because trolling behaviors were pervasive, used by a variety of stakeholders, and completely normative in the environment. I argue that the normalization of trolling behaviors may have contributed to the division and polarization (such a hustlers versus average rideshare drivers or Uber Black versus Uber X drivers) observed in the findings and encouraged users to pick a side rather than engage in authentic discussion to find common ground. In Uberpeople.net, trolling not only sparked polarization in terms of identity, but was also tied to how users planned to vote on Proposition 22 with groups such as the hustlers or "10%ers" pushing for the passing of the measure while average rideshare drivers or ex-drivers did not want the measure to pass. Clearly, more research is needed to understand how trolling can be a group-level trait or an environmental cue that signals the purpose of an online environment (such as a forum) but it is my hope that these findings help spark future research in this area.

C. *Trolling and Professional Identity*

The first research question (RQ_1) asked how trolling behaviors help rideshare drivers make sense of their professional identity. Users leveraged trolling behaviors to a) describe tensions of entrepreneurial identity in rideshare work, b) showcase how materiality impacts perceptions of "real jobs", and c) establish who could make rideshare a "real job."

1. Entrepreneurial Identity

Trolling behaviors on Uberpeople.net showcased the tensions that rideshare drivers experience when making sense of their professional identity. Fairhurst and Putnam (2014) defined tensions as, "the push-pull dilemmas among choices that grow out of discontinuities as a result of competing directions" (p. 279). Putnam et al. (2016) expanded on this definition and highlighted the emotional consequences for organizational actors that experience tensions including stress, anxiety, discomfort, and feelings of constraint. When these negative feeling states are exacerbated, organizational actors may experience negative outcomes such as frustration, uncertainty, or paralysis (Lewis, 2000;

Putnam et al., 2016). Simply put, tensions can negatively impact experiences for employees and keep them from pursuing individual or organizational goals.

The tensions that rideshare drivers experienced impacted how they made sense of their professional identity and the presumptions they made about how Proposition 22 would impact their work. The most prevalent tension regarding professional identity was when users debated whether they should be classified as independent contractors. Simply put, many users on Uberpeople.net explained that they would be okay with being classified as independent contractors if they were afforded the same freedom that they believed independent contractors had in other industries.

The tensions surrounding independent contractor status arose out of the conflict drivers experienced in their role by being denied the benefits and security of employee status while also being denied the freedoms of being an independent contractor. These tensions were further exacerbated when users discussed the relationship between independent contractor status and the entrepreneurial identity that rideshare companies often marketed to recruit drivers. Rosenblat (2019) explained that rideshare companies often recruited drivers by promising them the ability to be an entrepreneur, be their own boss, and run their business out of their personal vehicle. According to Baum and Locke (2004), one of the hallmarks of entrepreneurial identity is the self-efficacy to control their work process and meet their personal financial goals, but Uberpeople.net users expressed how little control they have over the rides they are assigned and their overall compensation.

In addition to tensions impacting sensemaking about professional identity, tensions also impacted how users trolled each other. For instance, users often painted a bleak picture of their earnings during the COVID-19 pandemic, which had decreased because of a) lowered passenger demand and b) changes that Uber and Lyft made to earning rates for drivers over time. Many users talked about how a few years ago rideshare was a viable source of income and it made more sense for drivers to take on financial risks (such as renting, leasing, or buying a nicer or bigger vehicle) to increase their earning potential. Conversations about income potential were so heated because users had different perspectives on what type of pay was possible and this led users to callout information on pay that they felt was incorrect or inflated. These callouts showcased the humorous function of enforcement when individuals use humor to highlight issues with another person's viewpoints or actions. In this case study, trolling was used to highlight unacceptable or inaccurate information about pay to mitigate the impact of that misinformation for other users. An example included when one user trolled another because of misinformation about earning potential, then explained how they did not want that information to influence new rideshare drivers.

Finally, this study helps advance knowledge on how tensions impact sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995). According to Weick (1995), organizational members often aim to produce habits, norms, and routines to help foster stability and certainty, but disconnections in practice and theory may make organizations ambiguous in nature. Weick (1995) explained that these disconnections make organizational members reliant on subjective forms of sensemaking that may be idiosyncratic in nature. In this case study, users exemplified a form of collective sensemaking that created, rather than resolved tensions. For instance, when faced with the main tension between employee classification or independent contractor status, trolling behaviors fostered more tensions and deeper divisions regarding professional identity. The findings of this project suggest that subjective sensemaking can be an effective way to navigate tensions at the individual level, but can interfere with sensemaking at the collective level. Organizational researchers interested in the relationship between tensions and sensemaking should continue exploring this phenomenon at the collective level.

2. Rideshare, "Real Jobs", and Materiality

Another way that trolling impacted identity sensemaking was evident in whom users believed could make rideshare a "real job." This study supports previous research that indicates that conceptualizations of a "real job" are not based solely on the characteristics of the work itself (Clair, 1996; Lucas, 2011; O'Connor & Raile, 2015). Additionally, this case study also echoes previous research that showed an individual's socioeconomic status (SES) impacts what types of jobs are considered legitimate or a career (Clair, 1996; Lucas, 2011; O'Connor & Raile, 2015). For instance, users who described their background as higher in SES (such as retirees who drove for rideshare as a hobby; Rosenblat, 2019) would argue that rideshare is a fun way to explore a city and make some side money, but that it could never be a feasible "real job." In contrast, other users from self-described lower SES relied on rideshare to make ends meet and considered rideshare a "real job" because it was difficult and demanding labor.

However, the more interesting findings involved users who believed that the quality of a driver's vehicle indicated whether rideshare was a "real job."

Users who argued that vehicle quality was an important factor when considering if rideshare is a "real job" used sarcastic trolling behaviors to argue that Uber Black drivers were the only real professionals in the industry. The criterion to be an Uber Black driver varies by region, but generally if a worker wants to be Uber Black driver, they need a luxury vehicle (Rosenblat, 2019). Uber Black drivers argued that they were also more professional because they wore more professional clothes, kept their vehicle cleaner, and served a higher status clientele. These reasons are particularly interesting because they were generated from within and entirely self-imposed (Uber has no dress code for any class of driver) which showcased how materiality was fundamental to their arguments about professionalism.

By materiality I am referring to a set of properties that define objects as real, objective, and factual (Yaneva, 2009). In the rideshare context, materiality refers to the physical properties of work that shape social interactions, such as the quality of the driver's vehicle (based on size, make, model, or other features), the physical experience of being in the vehicle (such as smell, cleanliness, etc.), and the appearance of the driver themselves (such as what they wear, how they speak, or how they present themselves). I argue that the users who justify their level of professionalism through material factors are more motivated by entrepreneurship than their counterparts.

We know from past research on entrepreneurs that their self-efficacy is usually shaped by the material means they have to achieve their goals and their ability to shape the environment in which they operate (often called "placemaking"; Gill & Larson, 2014). For instance, in their study on high-tech entrepreneurs in Utah, Gill and Larson (2014) found that participants wanted to intentionally reshape their environment by adopting regional aspects they believed made Silicon Valley successful while maintaining local regional traits they believed were valuable (such as running a business in Utah with strong connections to the Mormon church). Although the placemaking Gill and Larson described is at the regional level, the main similarity is that Uber Black drivers leverage materiality to shape the environment in their vehicle which they believed separated who could make rideshare work a "real job." More research is needed to understand the role that materiality plays in the rideshare professional identity, but this case study offers some insights into a potential area of future research including how materiality, placemaking, and entrepreneurial identity function in the gig economy.

D. ***Trolling and Intergroup Dynamics***

The second research question (RQ_2) asked how trolling paradoxically unifies while differentiating in the rideshare context. Trolling behaviors on Uberpeople.net were used to create and sustain in- and out-group identities that were divisive and competitive in nature. The competitiveness showcased in the data generally interfered with attempts for group validation, affirmation, or social support.

1. Prestige Grading

The first way that trolling behaviors were used to differentiate in- and out-groups was prestige grading. Dreyfuss (1968) explained that prestige grading was a tool of bureaucratic control in traditional organizations. According to Dreyfuss, this form of control functioned by giving different levels of responsibility to employees to establish a social hierarchy in which some positions were more prestigious than others. The reason why this was a control mechanism is because the level or authority and responsibility was implemented to sustain a hierarchy rather than being based on expertise or skills of employees. An example of this is when an organization implements different levels of management in order to encourage employees to keep climbing up the corporate hierarchy.

On the surface it can be difficult to decipher how prestige grading occurred on Uberpeople.net, but there are clear examples of prestige being created and reified through trolling behaviors. The best example of prestige grading in the rideshare industry occurred when a group of users labeled themselves the top “10%ers” and used sarcasm to explain how they are more hard working, more capable of making an income, have better taste, and enjoy finer things in life (such as splurging on Starbucks drinks when other drivers get cheap coffee at McDonalds) when compared to most rideshare drivers. The reason why this behavior can be considered prestige grading is because it is artificial in nature, facilitated in- and out-groups based on prestige or status, and became reified in Uberpeople.net over time. Simply put, while rideshare drivers essentially have the same responsibilities wherever they drive and what type of vehicle they used, trolling was used to make some groups feel more elite and capable than others.

A cornerstone of humor communication research has been built on a theory that individuals use humor to feel more superior than others (Gruner, 1978; Lynch, 2002; Morreall, 1983; Rapp, 1951). In the superiority theory of humor, jokes, sarcasm, and wit are seen as tools to help individuals position themselves above others and create distance from those they see as inferior. According to LaFave (1972), one of the implications of this approach to humor is that individuals target individuals who are a part of an out-group and lower in status so they can boost their own feelings about themselves or their in-group. Humor researchers explained that superiority humor can solidify in-group identities and can increase group cohesion, while creating a bigger chasm between themselves and perceived out-groups (Meyer, 1997; Pogrebin & Poole, 1988). For example, in their study on humor used by correctional officers, Tracy et al. (2006) found instances where prison guards sang while delivering food to prisoners so they could ignore the flood of requests they get from prisoners in these interactions. Tracy et al. (2006) explained that this form of humor was a tactic to establish superiority over prisoners and send the message that their "requests are trivial and that officers do not and should not be required to attend to them" (p. 297).

Unlike the contexts in which superiority theory is typically applied such as between two groups from different classes or levels of status according to society, the hustlers and "10%ers" used humor to artificially create different status levels before superiority could be asserted. Although aspects of this prestige grading seem trivial and laughable to an outsider (such as what coffee someone buys), to users, these jokes solidified divides between who could make a living on rideshare work versus users who were struggling to make rideshare work profitable. The divides had real impacts on whether users would express support for Proposition 22 as the "10%ers" wanted to preserve their independent contractor status and further alienated users from each other. This case study illuminated how trolling can be an effective way to cultivate and sustain in-group identities between users who have similar levels of social status and perform very similar jobs.

2. Group Validation

We know from many different types of research across many disciplines that absences can be meaningful in social science research. In this study, messages of encouragement, social support, and validation were notably absent. This absence is even more remarkable when considering the immense stress users were experiencing from loss of business during the COVID-19 pandemic and the identity threats posed by Proposition 22. According to Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), forms of stigmatized labor and “dirty work” are more bearable for employees when they can engage in social support and group-level validation. On Uberpeople.net, group-validation seemed to occur most often between users who considered themselves as part of an elite rideshare driver group, while most users of the forum were slighted and experienced little relief from the stigma and challenges in rideshare work. Simply put, in a society where taxicab drivers often feel invisible (Henslin, 1974) and slighted, the experience of rideshare drivers is even more isolating and challenging due to divisive trolling behaviors on Uberpeople.net, and to lack of in-person interaction among the drivers, unlike taxicab drivers. The lack of validation may have also contributed to the divisive nature of trolling on Uberpeople.net where users were more often polarized rather than finding common ground with one another.

3. Misery Loves Company

Although trolling on Uberpeople.net was most often a tool of division, there was a rare instance of trolling that unified drivers. Meyer (2000) explained that when humor serves an identification function it unites individuals by letting them share in an inside joke, or a joke that is idiosyncratic to a specific community. The best example of this form of humor was when users joked about how regardless of whether Proposition 22 passed, that drivers would be worse off. These jokes typically involved describing how drivers are “getting @@@@ed over” by rideshare companies because these companies are only interested in protecting their own wealth regardless of working conditions. This humor seemed to function as a form of emotional catharsis for drivers who felt powerless and unable to orchestrate change.

Past organizational research has showcased instances where employees use humor as a form of relief when they are faced with feelings of powerlessness in demanding jobs (Lynch 2002; Smith & Kleinman, 1989; Tracy et al., 2006; Tracy & Tracy, 1998). For example, in their study on humor, sensemaking, and identity management, Tracy et al. (2006) found that humor was a strategy employees used to highlight how their work was incongruous, chaotic, or threatening. Tracy et al. described an instance where prison guards used a loudspeaker to make jokes about serving a delicious Christmas dinner to prisoners. According to Tracy et al., this form of humor allowed prison guards to cope with the negative aspects of their work that were out of their control (such as working on holidays). Another example was that firefighters would joke about body parts being splattered on pavement to cope with the lack of control they had over their work when dealing with bizarre and horrific situations.

In many ways, the findings presented in this study transfer what we know about humor and relief in traditional organizations to an online trolling context.

On one hand, users who joked about the eventual demise of rideshare drivers were able to experience a sense of relief over aspects of their work they could not control. On the other hand, these trolling behaviors also helped reassure drivers that if they were having a hard time succeeding on the platform, it was not their fault, rather it was the outcome of working for a company that is not concerned with the wellbeing of workers. Clearly, this type of trolling was able to foster solace and unification in an online environment rife with conflict and division.

These findings also exemplify the paradoxical nature of humor (Lynch, 2002) and its ability to unify while differentiating. It was especially interesting that in the subtheme "drivers always lose" that even self-proclaimed hustlers would join in on the joke. For instance, while the user, K Boy, was a hustler and heavily advocated for Prop 22 he also posted one of the most popular memes on the platform (See Appendix D) which described how rideshare companies take advantage of drivers. Regardless of divisions over which drivers were most professional, better skilled, or elite all users shared a pessimistic view of rideshare companies which was fueled by the undeniable devaluing of their labor over time (such as the declining pay potential from when drivers started, in which even "hustlers" were subjected).

E. *Trolling and Control Mechanisms*

The third research question (RQ_3) asked how trolling behaviors serve as control mechanisms among rideshare drivers. Clearly, trolling behaviors functioned as a control mechanism on Uberpeople.net because users a) leveraged downward social comparisons to influence other drivers, b) exercised extreme cynicism, doubt, or sarcasm against users they disagreed with, and c) used presumptions to advocate against rideshare companies.

1. Downward Social Comparisons

Earlier in this chapter I explained how downward social comparisons were a common type of trolling behavior exhibited by users on Uberpeople.net, but these behaviors also functioned as a form of influence or control in the threads. In traditional organizations, Brown et al. (2007) found that downward social comparisons were positively related to job satisfaction and affective commitment. According to Brown et al. (2007), downward social comparisons were also negatively related to job searching behaviors, which indicated that as employees who engage in downward social comparisons with colleagues are likely to enjoy their work and desire to stay at their organization. The findings by Brown and associates (2007) are particularly interesting considering this case study because the two groups that engaged in downward social comparisons either a) seemed satisfied with rideshare work or b) had a high affective investment in the rideshare industry.

Users who self-identified as hustlers, "10%ers", and Uber Black drivers were the first group of users that tended to make downward social comparisons. These users identified as successful rideshare workers and often advocated on behalf of Proposition 22 so they could keep the independent contractor status they believed fueled their success. Ultimately, these downward social comparisons seemed to increase cohesion among this elite group of drivers, to promote a "yes" vote on Proposition 22, to make other rideshare drivers feel inferior, and to convince rideshare workers who met challenges in the industry to quit. Oftentimes hustlers, Uber Black drivers, and the "10%ers" would discuss how much better their jobs would be if casual rideshare drivers stop accepting rides and leave more business for these self-proclaimed professionals. We know from past organizational research that competitive work contexts tend to create differentiation rather than assimilation in a workforce (Stapel & Koomen, 2005), and it is likely that competitiveness contributed to intimidating strategies including a) securing independent contractor status and b) getting “amateur” rideshare drivers off the road.

Another prominent group of users that regularly made downward social comparisons were ex-drivers on Uberpeople.net. Although these users had low levels of job satisfaction that led to their exit from the gig economy, they were very emotionally invested in the future of the rideshare industry. For instance, many ex-drivers made fun of rideshare drivers (including the hustlers) by calling them “ants,” which insinuated that these drivers are hardworking, but also incredibly foolish. These ex-drivers tended to explain that rideshare drivers will never be successful because the rideshare companies purposely set them up for failure and argued that all drivers should quit. While both groups leveraged downward social comparisons to convince users to quit rideshare, they clearly had different motivations driving their efforts.

If there were any positive types of upward social comparisons being made on Uberpeople.net, it was not present in the publicly available data used in this study. Future research in this area should continue to explore the impact that downward social comparisons have on isolated employees in the gig economy. Although the lack of human contact and isolation that rideshare drivers experience can be conceptualized as negative because it increases reliance on technical control (Gottfried, 1994), the isolation may present benefits in a competitive industry. One tangible benefit of isolation that rideshare drivers experience is that it shields them from intimidating messages from other drivers through official channels, which in some contexts may outweigh the negative impacts of isolation (such as a lack of knowledge sharing).

2. Doubts and Delusions

Another way that trolling functioned as a form of control on Uberpeople.net was when users weaponized extreme cynicism, doubt, or sarcasm against those with whom they disagreed. One example of this behavior included when a user was accused of being a secret corporate spy. These spies were accused of sharing “corporate propaganda” to benefit Uber and Lyft if they posted anything that advocated for the passing of Proposition 22. Another example was when users were accused of using fake accounts to make it seem like their viewpoints were more popular (i.e., having “fake” users agree with or promote a thread). Although there was no clear evidence of corporate espionage or of fake accounts being used, these attacks continued to be used when there were significant disagreements between users.

These trolling attacks showcase the need for more research to help understand how and why enforcement and differentiation humor functions differently than other forms of peer disciplining. On the surface, enforcement and differentiation can appear similar to other forms of peer discipline such as concertive control (Barker, 1991; 1999). Barker (1991; 1999) posited that self-managed teams discipline one another if a member deviates from normative behavior in the group. Certainly, enforcement and differentiation allow for members to be disciplined for breaking group norms in an online environment, but it is different than concertive control because there is a lack of identification and lack of group cohesion. Another big difference is that concertive control is normally used to help get team members back in line with group norms, but the enforcement and differentiation on Uberpeople.net tended to privilege alienation over reformation. Future research on online trolling should continue exploring distinctions between trolling behaviors and disciplining behaviors, with an emphasis on how group orientation (such as feelings of entitativity or group cohesion) may impact these processes.

3. Destructive Presumptions

The final way that trolling was leveraged as a control mechanism is when users urged voters to vote against Proposition 22. These users presumed that if Proposition 22 did not pass, then rideshare companies would have to scale back or dissolve. Users who advocated against Proposition 22 tended to either want rideshare companies to be destroyed, wanted to see these companies be punished, or wanted to see rideshare companies be forced to change how they classify rideshare drivers. For instance, users would joke about how satisfying it would feel to see their companies be destroyed and “burn” if Proposition 22 did not pass.

First, these comments are clearly a form of discursive resistance against rideshare companies by current or ex-drivers. Organizational scholars have long subscribed to the notion that discourse (at multiple levels within organizations) constitutes the realities that organizational actors experience (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014). Consistent with that perspective, Mumby (2005) explained that resistance can be constituted by discursive actions. Mumby argued that employees can use discourse to create space for resistance through humor, disidentification with the organization, cynicism, or gossip. For instance, in a case study on clients of the Women's Social Service Organization (WSSO), Trethewey (1997) found that clients engaged in discursive acts of resistance. Some of the examples that Trethewey found were that clients made fun of ineffective counseling sessions, were absent from mandatory meetings, and offered constructive criticism of WSSO programs (Trethewey, 1997).

Lynch (2009) also found that humorous strategies can also be conceptualized as acts of resistance. Lynch (2009) identified humor as an act of resistance because "workers can safely use resistance humor to express grievance, resist, and challenge unfair and/or burdensome managerial restraints" (p. 459). Lynch also explained that like other forms of resistance, humorous resistance strategies can also have a dialectical relationship with organizational control. In their case study on restaurant workers, Lynch found that workers use multiple humorous strategies such as assigning nicknames to managers and using jokes to distract from instances of micromanagement. Humor is also extremely popular in the rideshare passenger discourse. For example, Pratt et al. (2019) analyzed 2000 tweets from Uberpool or Lyft Line passengers and found that the most common type of discourse was humorous in nature. Pratt et al. explained that, "passing on humorous observations and stories about UberPool and Lyft Line experiences with other passengers appears to be a substantial subgenre of the public discourse about sharing rides" (p. 459).

Past research on collective trolling has also shown that trolling can be an act of discursive resistance (Kirkwood et al., 2019). In their case study on a collective trolling campaign against the Cracker Barrel restaurant chain, Kirkwood et al. found that users engaged in discursive resistance through a variety of methods including dominating the comments sections of social media advertisements to promote their own messaging. The acts of discursive resistance in this Uberpeople.net case study differ from the types of resistance that Kirkwood et al. (2019) observed because these messages were aimed at an insular audience in a rideshare driver specific forum. This means that the discursive resistance was not visible to the true targets (i.e., the rideshare companies themselves, especially on a corporate level) of this hatred and animosity. Another big difference is that these messages aimed at controlling Uberpeople.net user behavior by urging them to vote against Proposition 22 rather than being aimed at rideshare companies themselves.

In this chapter I have explicated how the findings of this case study can stretch our theoretical and empirical understanding of trolling phenomena, the rideshare occupational identity, intergroup dynamics in the rideshare industry, and attempts at control between rideshare drivers. Next, I will explain the limitations of the current case study, offer directions for future research, and offer concluding thoughts for this project.

VI. Conclusion and Implications

The most profound and interesting aspect of this study is how relentlessly users of Uberpeople.net generated divisions although they were very similar to one another. This is especially important because Proposition 22 was put on the ballot during the COVID-19 pandemic which meant that not only did the passing of Proposition 22 result in less protections for drivers; this also occurred during a time when rider demand was at its lowest point and when drivers were more vulnerable than ever. For instance, many states had to scramble during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to provide additional unemployment benefits to gig workers although the independent contractor status of drivers meant that they would not have been entitled to any unemployment benefits before the pandemic (Ivanova, 2020). All drivers were subject to the compounding insecurities proposed by being an independent contractor in the service industry during a global pandemic regardless of the car they drove, whether they were classified as Uber Black, or their motivations for driving. And yet, there was little attempt at collective action towards safer working conditions (such as having personal protective equipment), better pay, and health or unemployment benefits. Simply put, regardless of similarity among rideshare drivers and a pressing need to unify for industry-wide changes, Uberpeople.net users were more focused on agitating one another through trolling behaviors, prestige grading, and downward social comparisons. If the rideshare industry is analogous to the sinking of the Titanic, then the drivers featured in this study are passengers who fought over who should get a space in lifeboats rather than trying to save each other.

In this chapter, I conclude the case study by explaining the limitations of the study, offering directions for future research, and showcasing practical and theoretical implications.

A. *Limitations*

First, it is important to recognize the limitations of this case study. Although sampling public forum discussions on Uberpeople.net about Proposition 22 for several months was a good boundary condition for the qualitative content analysis, there may have important conversations about professional identity in the rideshare industry that were on private forums and not accessible for this study. Uberpeople.net is an international platform with hundreds of thousands of threads that can be analyzed to give a generalizable picture of how rideshare drivers make sense of their identity worldwide. Researchers who are passionate about this topic and have the resources to analyze significantly more data points than I did should consider how fruitful this counterinstitutional website can be. For instance, while the users in this case study experienced tensions with their legal classification as independent contractors, rideshare drivers in Europe have many protections and benefits that Americans would associate with employee status. Exploring different regions may bring a more holistic view of how the rideshare drivers make sense of their professional identity and understand what is most important for facilitating success in this industry.

Another limitation in this case study was that I was not able to contact or interview the users of the Uberpeople.net forums I analyzed. According to Lynch (2002), when researchers study humorous communication, it is important to consider the motivations of the humorist. One reason why it is important to examine motivations is to understand the authentic meanings behind inauthentic forms of humorous communication (such as hyperbole, sarcasm, aggression, etc.). In this case study, I used the context of threads to indicate the seriousness and authenticity of user comments, but misinterpretations may have been possible. It is important to note that virtually ethnographic trolling research has similar limitations as anonymity keeps researchers from interviewing trolls outside the online environment in which they operate (Herring et al., 2002).

B. *Future Directions*

Although this case study had limitations that may impact the transferability of these findings, it can still be generative for future research on trolling, professional identities, and experiences in the rideshare industry.

1. Normative Trolling Behaviors

In this study I observed examples of trolling coming from embedded and influential members of Uberpeople.net, which suggests that these users helped make trolling a norm in this forum. If trolling becomes a normative behavior in online environments (which I believe it has), then researchers need to stop searching for individual trolls who may be shaping online discourse and instead look to the group-level to understand which forms of trolling are normalized, considered acceptable, and even appreciated or cherished in an online environment. For instance, in their case study on a collective trolling campaign against the Cracker Barrel restaurant franchise, Kirkwood et al. (2019) found that trolling was appreciated and promoted by other users for the sake of entertainment value. In Uberpeople.net, trolling undoubtedly resulted in high levels of interactivity on the site and it is possible that these behaviors are what drew some users to the website. Had moderators intervened and stopped instances of trolling, the forums may not have been as rich in discussion or have as much engagement. Researchers should continue to be open to how trolling is becoming something that users expect, enjoy, and actively pursue in online communication and further differentiate these types of behaviors from general antisocial norms that are prevalent in some online platforms.

2. Uberized Professional Identities

Another key area of future research is in the professional identities of rideshare drivers or gig economy workers more broadly. In this case study, I found instances where materiality shaped a) perspectives on whether rideshare work can be considered a “real job”, b) whether drivers were proud to work in the rideshare industry, and c) intergroup dynamics between rideshare drivers. We know that the share economy is built on having workers use their personal property (i.e., personal vehicles for Uber, personal homes for Airbnb; Sundararajan, 2016) and these forms of work are argued to exacerbate wealth inequities between gig economy workers (Fleming, 2017). Simply put, the wealth an individual has in the form of a nicer car or nicer home increases their earning potential on share economy platforms. This is an interesting shift as much of the service industry has traditionally placed the onus on organizations to have the material means to add prestige to the experience of customers and employees. For instance, if a waiter works at a nice restaurant, it is up to management to come up with the funding to make the environment seem comfortable and luxurious. In contrast, the rideshare industry puts the onus of responsibility on the worker to have the material means to create a luxurious experience needed for Uber Black; this in turn impacts how employees see themselves in relation to their counterparts. Future research should keep exploring the socio-material nature of identification and affiliation (such as intergroup dynamics) in the share economy.

3. Rideshare Information Asymmetries

The last future direction I offer is related to the information asymmetries in rideshare work and how these disconnections create varied experiences for rideshare drivers. In the aftermath of the passing of Proposition 22, Hiltzik (2021) reported that rideshare drivers noticed substantial changes to the platform. Leading up to Proposition 22, Uber often allowed users to see the drop-off locations of potential passengers which gave drivers more control over their earnings and the routes they would have to drive (Hiltzik, 2021). However, after the passing of Proposition 22, drivers reported having extremely limited information about a passenger's drop-off location and could not tell whether the rides they accepted would be profitable. Hiltzik's investigation suggests that Uber may have given drivers access to more features to help give drivers more information and flexibility in order to gain their support before voting for Proposition 22. I find this prospect deeply disturbing because it showcases the unprecedented control that rideshare companies exercise over drivers to pursue their own agenda. Researchers who are interested in gig economy work should continue to unpack how information asymmetry, misinformation, or disconnections shape the experience of employees and its implications for the autonomy of workers in the future.

C. *Implications*

It is my hope that this case study helps advance knowledge in the field of organizational communication. Rideshare workers represent one of the first and most pervasive settings in which employees are managed by algorithms and have no official channels to interact with each other. Given that interactions between rideshare workers are most commonly happening in unofficial channels such as Uberpeople.net, and as shown here involve considerable trolling, it is clear that theories on trolling need to be expanded and trolling behaviors need to be situated as an organizing process. In this study, I have demonstrated how trolling impacts phenomena that have largely been theorized and observed in traditional organizations such as occupational identity, intergroup dynamics, and control between workers. As more forms of work become “Uberized,” or decentralized and constrained to online environments (Fleming, 2017), researchers should continue exploring unofficial channels and the normative behaviors in these channels (such as trolling) to understand what workers are thinking, feeling, and how they make sense of their work.

On a practical level, this study can showcase the experience of rideshare workers for policymakers who typically lack information about how the gig economy impacts their constituents (Hall & Krueger, 2018). Hiltzik (2021) reported that Uber and Lyft are planning to replicate their success with Proposition 22 in other states, which means that the classification of gig economy workers will certainly be up for debate across the rest of the United States. Research on professional identity in the rideshare industry and how identity classifications impact the wellbeing and livelihood of gig economy workers is especially relevant given these future legislative trends.

D. *Conclusion*

In conclusion, trolling behaviors were pervasive on Uberpeople.net and impacted how rideshare drivers made sense of their professional identity, what topics facilitated divisions and fueled intergroup dynamics, and how they exercised control over one another. Trolling was used to express different perspectives on rideshare occupational identity, unite and divide, create in and out groups, make downward social comparisons, and ridicule dissenters. It is my hope that this study will inspire organizational research on the complex and nuanced factors that shape rideshare identities and experiences.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Codes used to identify sensemaking strategies.

Sensemaking and Professional Identity			
Sensemaking Type	Description	Identity Implication	Example
Retrospection	When a user reflects on a past experience they had with Prop 22 (such as campaigning for a specific outcome, having conversations with customers about the measure, etc.…).	Users who supported Prop 22 are conceptualized as wanting a professional identity due to a variety of reasons (status, benefits, etc…).	User 1 writes "I thought Prop 22 was my one shot at a 'real job' with actual retirement benefits- I am so upset we lost"
Meaning Negotiation	When users have different meanings associated with Prop 22 and discuss it.	Users that are divided in their support of Prop 22 will have different orientations to professional identities of rideshare drivers.	User 1 discusses how passing Prop 22 will help them keep flexibility in their work. User 2 responds by explaining how Prop 22 will decrease the bargaining power of rideshare drivers.
Reinterpretations	When users reinterpret their understanding of Prop 22 based on interactions with other users.	Users may change their stance on Prop 22 after the passing of the measure. This in turn can impact their understandings of professional identities.	User 1 was in support of Prop 22 discusses the negative impacts on his take-home pay after the bill passed. User 2 explains how User 1 should have been against Prop 22. This interaction reshapes the meanings User 1 associates with the measure.
Labeling	How users label aspects of Prop 22 will impact the meanings they make about the measure.	How users label aspects of Prop 22 will reveal the meanings they make concerning their professional identities.	User 2 often labels Prop 22 as something rideshare workers don't deserve; this reveals that they are against the measure and support a professional identity in which drivers are considered employees.
Presumptions	The presumptions that users have of Prop 22	The presumptions that users have of Prop 22	User 1 is politically conservative and is

	will impact the meanings they make about the measure.	will reveal the meanings they make concerning their professional identities.	typically against regulations for business, they have positive presumptions of Prop 22 and the concept of rideshare drivers being independent contractors.
Independent Contractor (IC)	Perceptions and conceptualizations of what it means to be an independent contractor.	The ways that users understand independent contractor status will impact how they make sense of their professional identity.	User 1 is happy Prop 22 passed because it gives them the flexibility they feel is typical of IC work; User 2 criticizes User 1 for thinking they are an IC because they cannot control their rates.

Table 2. Codes used to identify the functions of trolling behaviors.

Functions of Trolling			
Function	Description	Social Implication	Example
Identification	Trolling behaviors that identify similarities in thinking or practice between users.	Prosocial [likely unifies users and encourages more thread replies].	User 2 trolls User 1 for being an “idiot” for supporting Prop 22 and explains pay statistics to support their point. User 3 discovers similarities with U2 and also trolls User 1 with aggressive or demeaning humor.
Clarification	Trolling behaviors that draw attention to an individual, group, or issue (past or present).	Prosocial [likely unifies users and encourages more thread replies].	User 1 complains about not having health insurance, User 2 trolls User 1 by saying if they helped campaign against Prop 22 then they might not have challenges getting the benefits they want.
Enforcement	Use of trolling behaviors to criticize users for deviating from social norms, being wrong, or expressing unpopular opinions.	Neutral [may encourage or discourage replies].	User 1 expresses an unpopular opinion about Prop 22, User 2 trolls User 1 for their opinion.
Differentiation	Use of trolling behaviors to distinguish users as part of an out-group.	Antisocial [may be likely to encourage or discourage replies].	User 1 talks about how they are unhappy that Prop 22 passed. User 2 points out that User 1 drives part time and makes fun of them for not being dedicated. This type of trolling behavior insinuates that User 1 does not

			belong in the forum.

Appendix B

Table 3. Summary and description of main themes in response to RQ_1.

Trolling and Professional Identity		
Theme	**Description**	**Trolling Example**
Good Ole' Days	Rideshare drivers engaged in retrospection about how their pay has decreased overtime and discredited users who bragged about their pay.	"Drivers used to gross 1,500 a week. Not now. You DID NOT MAKE THAT. Your net income is far less. Full-time drivers average 1,500 miles a week. The cost per mile is .75c Nationally" [Nutsi Pelosi; ABC protects IC's from ULDD]
Professionalism and Uber Black	Rideshare drivers disputed whether Uber Black drivers were more professional than their counterparts.	"To average joes we [*referring to Uber Black drivers*] the same drivers. To the law n if u ask the Black riders...We totally different breeds" [LyftLady; Will Those Say No post].
Real Jobs	Rideshare drivers argued about whether driving can be a "real job" and who can rely on rideshare for income.	"Were you expecting a gold Rolex after 10 years driving Uber? BAHAHAHAHAHA" [K boy; Combined Changes Coming to Both Apps]
Side Jobs	Rideshare drivers debated whether driving is meant to be a way to supplement income rather than be a main job.	"Uber started as a gig, a way for people to make a little extra money with the car they already own. Don't blame me because you decided to make it a career" [U Phoria; Yes or No on Prop 22]

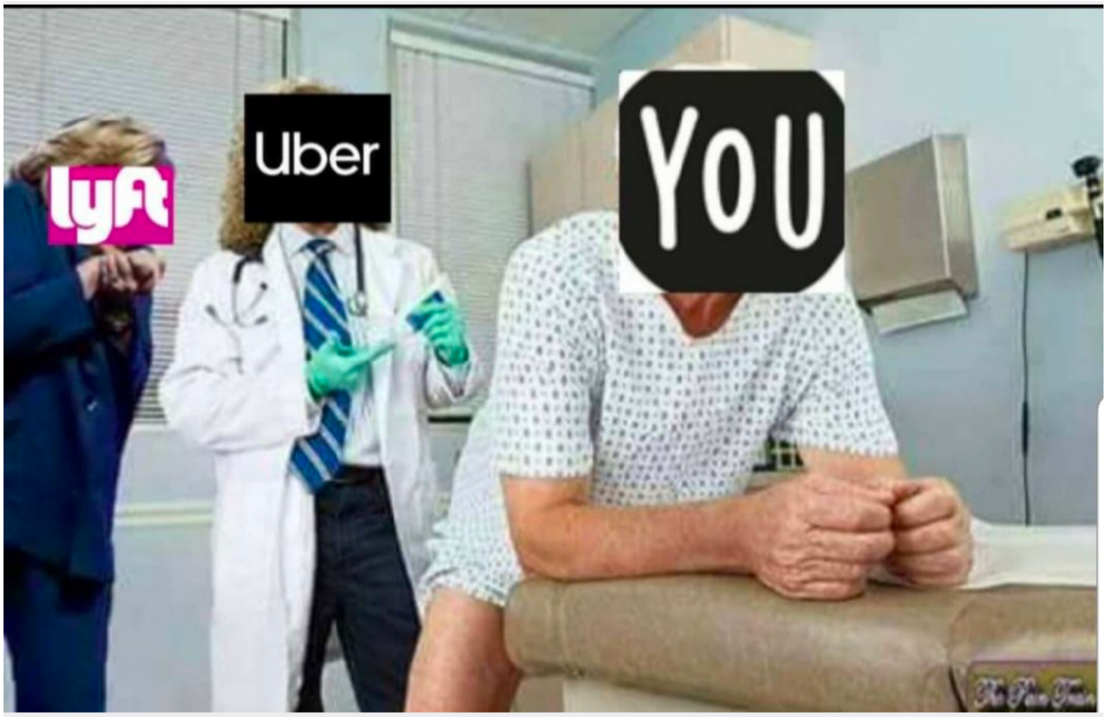
Appendix C

Table 4. Summary and description of main themes in response to RQ_2.

Trolling and Intergroup Dynamics		
Theme	**Description**	**Trolling Example**
Hustlers *(Differentiation)*	Users who self-identified as hustlers regularly bragged about their pay and promoted their lifestyle. This form of trolling created the in-group of "hustlers" and the out-group of average rideshare drivers.	"If you can't make enough money as a gig app contractor, move along to a W2 job that meets your standards. Leave us profitable contractors to our own devices" [Judge and Jury, Why I am Voting Yes 22]
10%ers *(Differentiation)*	Self-proclaimed "elite" hustlers trolled their counterparts by insulting their intelligence, work ethic, socio-economic status, or general lifestyle. This form of trolling created the in-group of "10%ers" and the out-group of "90%ers."	"If you don't drink Starbucks but McDonald's coffee, you're a 90%er. If you're wearing sandals or slippers while driving, you're a 90%er. If you have one of those please tip me messages in your car, you're a 90%er. I can keep going but I don't want to insult most of our drivers" [K Boy; Will Those Say No]
Drivers Always Lose *(Unification)*	Users trolled rideshare companies to make fun of the unequal power differentials they felt on a daily basis. This form of trolling created an in-group for all drivers who felt that they were "screwed" regardless of the outcome of Proposition 22.	"Comes January Uber and Lyft will make you guys so flexible that you won't be able to close your legs for a very long time" [Slim Shady; Combined Changes Coming to Both Apps].

Appendix D

Image 1. Meme created to explain the lack of powerlessness rideshare drivers feel, regardless of the outcome of Proposition 22 in California.



Appendix E

Table 5. Summary and description of main themes in response to RQ_3.

Trolling and Control Attempts		
Theme	**Description**	**Trolling Example**
Ants	Ex-Drivers used the term “ants” to argue that rideshare drivers are hardworking but foolish. This was a way to encourage drivers to quit.	“Watcha gonna do if they don't come for you? If prop. 22 fails, are you a good ant, taking any and all offers? Do you think you will be one of the few offered part time, minimum wage employee status?” [GiantsFan89; Why I am Voting Yes 22]
Spies	Users accused each other of being corporate spies if they argued on behalf of Proposition 22. This was a way to delegitimize users during disagreements.	“You’re too scripted to come across like a driver with spontaneous thoughts which I’ve already given you with my posts. You have nearly 10,000 messages in just over a year on this site. That’s insane amount for a real driver without a paid agenda” [Carlsbad Mitch; UP Prop 22 Poll]
Fake Accounts	Users accused each other of using fake accounts to support viewpoints during debates. This was a way to delegitimize users during disagreements.	“How many more sock puppet accounts are you gonna open to pretend like you have support Steve” [Slim Shady; Combined Changes Coming to Both Apps].
Let it Burn	Users argued that rideshare companies will dissolve, be forced to reform, or experience a form of punishment if Proposition 22 did not pass. This was a way to advocate against Prop 22 and influence (or control) how users voted in the election.	“Of course, I want to see the slave ships sink to the bottom of the ocean! No!! [*referring to how to vote on Proposition 22*]” [Carlsbad Mitch; UP Prop 22 Poll]