

Gender, Class, and the Gig Economy: The Case of Platform-Based Food Delivery

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Abstract

Drawing on original survey and interview data on platform-based food delivery workers, we deploy an intersectional lens to analyze the ways in which the white working-class women who predominate in this sector of the gig economy interpret their work experience. With a focus on the gender–class nexus, we explore the reasons why these workers, especially mothers and other caregivers, self-select into this sector. These include: scheduling flexibility, which facilitates balancing paid work and family care; the opportunity to use previously unpaid food shopping skills to generate income, a neoliberal form of “wages for housework”; and the emotional rewards of serving elderly and disabled customers who cannot easily shop for themselves. Although these workers embrace the traditional gender division of labor and normative femininity, at the same time they express strong class resentment of both the companies they work for and the class and gender entitlements of their most privileged customers.

Keywords

sociology, gender, labor, gig economy, platform work, low-wage work, normative femininity

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Introduction

This article deploys an intersectional lens to analyze the work experience and consciousness of predominantly white working-class female “gig” workers in the food delivery sector. Although intersectionality is an increasingly ubiquitous framework for critical sociological studies of class, race and gender inequalities and identities, studies of the gender-class nexus—our focus here—remain relatively rare. Crenshaw’s influential elaboration of intersectionality theory (1991) generated an outpouring of imaginative new scholarship, but most of it focused on racial and ethnic divisions among women, while class issues received far less attention. “Within contemporary feminist theory and empirical work, there has been a trend toward dichotomizing white middle-class women and working-class women of color,” Julie Bettie observed in 2003, adding, “*class* as a topic seems tainted, perhaps perceived as outdated and unfashionable” (Bettie, 2003: 37–38). More recently, the rise of right-wing populism has stimulated a new wave of scholarly interest in the white working class (e.g. Cramer, 2016; Gest, 2016; Hochschild, 2016), but intersectional perspectives are absent from most of that literature, which focuses primarily on white working-class men, largely ignoring their female counterparts. The same is true of recent studies of precarious labor (Kalleberg, 2011; Standing, 2011) and the “gig economy.”

Our analysis of platform-based food delivery workers, drawing on original survey and interview data, centers on white working-class women who self-select into this female-dominated sector of the gig economy. We collected our data in 2018–2019, well before the COVID-19 pandemic created an explosion in demand for food delivery and the accompanying growth in public recognition of the workers involved, but those developments add to the significance of our findings.

Like most occupations, platform-based food delivery is a gendered field of employment. It is predominantly female in composition, especially in the grocery segment, where women are the vast majority of “shoppers” and “pickers,” many of whom also deliver orders to customers. Moreover, this type of employment commodifies the tacit shopping and food preparation skills that many women routinely develop in their households, usually without monetary compensation. And crucially, this occupation attracts women in part because of their disproportionate responsibility for and commitment to family caregiving, in the context of the frayed U.S. social safety net and the nation’s underdeveloped work–family policy.

The women food delivery workers we spoke with—the vast majority of them white and working class—actively embraced these aspects of the occupation. Most were attracted to this work because it offered them greater autonomy than they had in other jobs, enabling them to control their work schedules so as not to interfere with their caregiving commitments. Many also appreciated the ways in which food delivery jobs enabled them to make use of their previously unremunerated shopping and food preparation skills. Finally, they found this occupation emotionally rewarding and meaningful insofar as it involved helping elderly, sick, or disabled customers who are unable to shop for food themselves. Indeed, this type of work arrangement provides a neoliberal solution to work–family conflict, enabling women to perform paid work while still prioritizing family and caregiving. It also offers a form of “wages for housework” insofar as it monetizes skills developed in unpaid social reproductive labor, confirming Weeks’s (2011: 137) suggestion that wages for housework can involve “an expansion of the wage relation rather than a transformation of its terms.”

While our respondents greatly valued the scheduling autonomy of platform-based food delivery work and its compatibility with caregiving, many expressed deep resentment about the daily indignities they suffered at the hands of their most privileged customers, the low pay they received, and the degrading treatment meted out by the companies they work for. In contrast to their critical awareness of class domination, however, concern about gender inequality was conspicuous mostly

by its absence among our respondents. On the contrary, these working-class women explicitly embraced normative femininity and the traditional gender division of labor.

In the analysis that follows, we apply an intersectional lens to explore the complex dynamics of class and gender in women's interpretations of their work in platform-based food delivery. We follow feminist theorist Temma Kaplan (1982) in arguing that, among our respondents, class consciousness is embedded in what Kaplan called "female consciousness," which she identified (in a different historical context) as specific to working-class women:

Those with female consciousness accept the gender system of their society; indeed, such consciousness emerges from the division of labor by sex. . . . [They] perform work associated with the obligation to preserve life; such jobs range from shopping for necessities. . . . to guarding their neighbors, children and mates against danger. . . whether or not they also work for wages outside their households. (Kaplan, 1982: 545–546).

For Kaplan, and for us, class consciousness can coexist with, and more importantly, can be expressed through female consciousness. Moreover, this type of working-class subjectivity may become more widespread as the COVID-19 pandemic expands demand for platform-based delivery and magnifies gender and class inequalities alike.

Platform-Based Work and the Gig Economy

"Electronically-mediated work," also known as platform-based work or the "gig economy," has expanded rapidly in recent years (Farrell et al., 2018; Vallas and Schor, 2020), although it is far more visible in public debate than its size would seem to warrant. Indeed, the most authoritative estimates suggest that it accounted for only about 1% of the U.S. workforce as recently as 2017 (Katz and Krueger, 2019: 415). Platform-based work spans multiple occupations, from drivers for Uber and Lyft, to workers who do errands or household tasks via Handy or TaskRabbit, to food delivery workers who find jobs on Instacart, Postmates, GrubHub, and similar platforms—our focus here.

Scholarship on platform-based work has focused primarily on its innovative use of algorithmic technology and its reliance on independent contractors who are legally excluded from protection under labor and employment laws that cover "employees" (Griesbach et al., 2019; Ravenelle, 2019; Rosenblat, 2018; Scheiber, 2019). The relationship of race, class, and gender to platform-based work has attracted far less attention. However, some researchers have documented race discrimination on platforms featuring photographs of gig workers, like Handy or TaskRabbit (Ravenelle, 2019: 35–36); moreover, audit studies suggest that workers with stereotypical African American names are less likely to be selected by customers even in the absence of photographs (Edelman et al., 2017). The authors of a recent literature review on this topic report that "every study we have seen that tests for racial discrimination finds evidence of bias" (Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017: 9).

In regard to the class dimension of platform-based work, findings are less consistent. Some commentators have noted that because such work requires basic technological skills and access to smartphones, the most disadvantaged populations are often excluded outright (Kessler, 2018: 115–117). For similar reasons, the limited survey data available suggest that platform workers are disproportionately college-educated (Intuit, 2017). Schor and Attwood-Charles (2017) go so far as to argue that relatively privileged middle-class gig workers may be displacing more disadvantaged workers in jobs like house cleaning. In contrast, other researchers highlight the precarity and low

pay associated with gig work (Ravenelle, 2019, Rosenblatt, 2018, Scholz, 2017), a perspective consistent with our findings here.

Research on gender and the gig economy is particularly sparse. Even basic data on the gender composition of the sector's workforce are elusive. A widely-cited study by Katz and Krueger found that in 2015, women were slightly more likely than men to be employed in "alternative work arrangements" (AWA) as temporary agency workers, on-call workers, contract workers, or freelancers, and that from 2005 to 2015, AWA grew far more rapidly among women than among men (Katz and Krueger, 2019: 396). But their sample was too small to specify the gender composition of "electronically-mediated" work, which accounted for only about 3% of AWA in 2015. Some smaller surveys of platform workers find more men than women in this sector, while others report the opposite (Gig Economy Data Hub; Hunt and Samman, 2019: 12).

At first glance, the gig economy may appear as a gender-neutral sector of the labor market, governed by algorithms that—even if problematic in other respects—are uncontaminated by the (conscious or unconscious) gender bias and discriminatory behavior that characterize many human employers and managers. Thus, Jill Rubery (2019: 102) argues that this new technology presents "an opportunity to rethink the organization of work and employment and to realign our institutions and structures to fit a more gender-equal society." But our research, like the few previous studies of the topic, suggests that this opportunity has yet to be taken up.

One consistent finding is that women are more likely than men to work part-time on platforms (Gig Economy Data Hub); another is that men's earnings, on average, are higher than women's in platform-based work, with differentials comparable to that in the labor market as a whole (see Cook et al., 2018). Gender-based job segregation is also pervasive, although slightly less so than in standard employment. On the whole, despite the putatively gender-neutral algorithms that structure platform work, as a recent literature review concluded, "While the gig economy exhibits some new features, on the whole it represents the continuation (and in some cases deepening) of long-standing structural, and gendered, inequalities" (Hunt and Samman, 2019: 1). Our research on platform-based food delivery offers further evidence for this assessment, exposing the gendered character of employment in this sector of the gig economy as well as the gendered subjectivities of the women who perform this work within the time constraints of their gendered family responsibilities.

Methods, Data, and Selected Survey Findings

We conducted an online survey of 955 platform-based food delivery workers, and in-depth interviews with a subset of 55. In this section, we discuss our methods and data, and report selected findings from the survey. This provides background for the analysis in later sections of class and gender intersectionality in the experiences of food delivery gig workers, which relies primarily on interview data.

Representative samples are difficult to construct for low-wage workers, and the gig economy presents even more formidable challenges. Adopting the approach pioneered by Schneider and Harknett (2019), we recruited survey respondents through Facebook advertisements targeting individuals who reported working for food delivery platforms. In addition, we reached out to moderators of 47 Facebook groups of platform-based food delivery workers, six of whom agreed to post our survey. Among 1781 workers who started the survey, 955 completed it. Among the latter, 559 respondents expressed interest in a follow-up phone interview (in exchange for a US\$40 gift card), and we selected 55 of them for in-depth interviews, aiming to include workers from a range of companies and demographic groups.

Women were 74% of our survey respondents (and 80% of interviewees). Although comprehensive data on the demographics of the U.S. platform-based food delivery workforce are not available, by all accounts a large majority are female. (New York City, where food delivery rarely involves private cars and where this service has a much longer history than in the rest of the United States, is a notable exception.) In contrast, men predominate among platform-based drivers for Uber, Lyft, and their competitors. A National Public Radio reporter (Selyukh, 2019) obtained data directly from the nation's largest food-delivery platforms: Instacart told her that "more than 50%" of its "shoppers" are female; Doordash stated that women are over half of its "dashers," and more than 60% of those in urban areas; and Postmates indicated that 48% of its delivery workers are women.

In our survey, most female respondents (52%) were mothers supporting or helping to support children under 18. By contrast, only about half as many (26%) male respondents were supporting young children. Our male respondents were also slightly younger and more likely to be students: the average age of the men was 38, compared to 41 for the women; 17% of the men and 11% of the women were students.

Although our interview sample is neither large nor representative, it is striking that several of the 11 male interviewees were gender non-normative or nontraditional in other respects. Two were stay-at-home fathers; two others identified as gay. One young man was living with his parents; two others were college students, scheduling delivery gigs around their classes. Three male interviewees (including one of the gay men) had chronic health problems that made it difficult for them to hold down standard jobs. Four of our 44 female interviewees also suffered from health problems, and another four were students. But in contrast to the men, none of the 44 women we interviewed appeared to deviate from conventional gender norms.

A large majority of our survey respondents were white (78% of the women and 71% of the men). Although over a third were college-educated (37% of the men and 34% of the women), most were far from affluent. Two-thirds of the women and three-quarters of the men reported pre-tax household incomes below US\$60,000; and many were among the working poor: for 47% of the men and 29% of the women, household incomes were below US\$30,000. Yet another testament to their economic vulnerability is that almost half (47% of the women and 49% of the men) either had no health insurance or relied on Medicaid or Medicare. In addition, many had substantial personal debt, averaging US\$33,623 for the women and US\$27,944 for the men (excluding home mortgage debt).

In short, most of our respondents were white working-class women. Their earnings from platform-based food delivery work were limited and typically lower than those of the men in our sample: female respondents reported average earnings of US\$12.92 per hour (after deducting work-related expenses) from their food delivery work, while the men averaged US\$14.38. This gender pay gap is smaller than that in the U.S. workforce as a whole, but similar to within-occupation gender disparities in many standard jobs (Hegewisch and Williams-Baron, 2018). Both men and women respondents worked an average of 29 hours per week, reflecting the fact that many were also caring for young children or were students, which meant these hourly earnings came nowhere close to a living wage.

Class Resentment, Female Consciousness, and Self-Selection into Gig Work

Platform-based food delivery is but one of many low-wage, precarious occupations in which women are overrepresented. Conditions in such jobs are often degraded further by the nation's underdeveloped work-family policy and social safety net. Limited provision for paid sick leave,

paid family leave, and affordable childcare presents a formidable barrier to labor force advancement for mothers, especially working-class mothers, who are the least likely to have employer-provided paid leave (Williams, 2012). These difficulties are compounded in female-dominated retail, hospitality, and service jobs where employers tailor work schedules to patterns of consumer traffic, making workers' hours notoriously unstable and unpredictable, and playing havoc with childcare arrangements (Lambert, 2008). In many such jobs, moreover, hourly employees are not permitted to leave work even briefly to attend to the needs of family members; indeed, mothers are often "one sick child away from being fired" (Williams, 2012: 42). And while they are at work, arbitrary treatment from supervisors is the norm.

We conducted our research at a time when U.S. unemployment was at a near-record low, so that most respondents had ready access to other low-wage jobs. These workers actively self-selected into platform-based food delivery, despite the low pay and status and the indignities they suffered at the hands of employers as well as from privileged, entitled customers.

For women and men alike, an enormously appealing feature of platform-based work is the absence of human on-the-job supervision (Vallas and Schor, 2020), as many of our interviewees noted. "It's not like a regular job, where you're in an office or at McDonalds, where you know that you've got a boss in the office right next door," explained a single mother who juggled two other jobs along with food delivery. "This job isn't like that. You do have to follow the rules, so in that way there is a boss. But there is not the physical presence of someone breathing down your neck." Similarly, an older woman "shopper" told us, "I don't have to answer to a higher power. I like the fact that nobody is watching me work. I don't feel like there's always somebody looking over my shoulder."

And yet, as many interviewees lamented, food delivery is poorly paid, stigmatized, low-status work. "I have friends who tell me to get a real job," one woman confessed, adding that many of her coworkers "are ashamed. . . . We're at the bottom of the totem pole, in terms of employment." Another declared, "I don't want this to be my job, my career. It's just embarrassing." The stigma was reinforced regularly by the undignified treatment meted out by the most privileged food delivery customers, which embittered many of our interviewees. "I didn't know I'd be treated like garbage," one woman exclaimed. Another told us, "You're there to provide a service, yes. But you don't want to be treated as 'the help.'"

Although only a minority of our respondents were actively engaged in workplace protests against Instacart and other food delivery platform companies—protests that surfaced long before those tied to the 2020 pandemic (Levinson, 2020)—many expressed anger about the ways in which they were treated by these employers (Griesbach et al., 2019). They were particularly incensed about the arbitrary changes—"pivots" in gig economy lingo—that the companies periodically made in job payment rates and in the ways customer tips were handled. "I can make good money one week, and then the next week make a third of that, and there's no rhyme or reason," one woman explained. "Every app is constantly changing and updating," a worker who worked on multiple platforms told us, "I've got to keep up with all the changes and that gets exhausting." These pivots also were tied to declining earnings. "They just keep cutting here, and cutting there, until pretty soon there's not going to be anything left but tips," another woman complained.

These grievances generated fierce expressions of hostility toward the platform companies. "I hate this company," one woman exclaimed. "They're the enemy! It's us against them, and it's war." Another remarked, "A lot of us really like doing the job, like the flexibility, and like the customers," but then added, "I don't know anybody who likes the company!" Still another woman said one of the platforms was like "the Antichrist."

In short, our interviewees were well aware of their class position. They regularly complained about the low pay and status of their work, their poor treatment by the companies they worked for,

as well as the stark inequalities between their own economic situation and that of their more affluent customers.

In striking contrast, however, concern about gender inequality in the home or workplace was conspicuous by its absence among these female food delivery workers. In that respect, they exemplified “female consciousness,” much like the white working-class women Joan Williams (2017) describes: “Their focus was not on gender equality,” she declares. “Most working-class white women don’t aspire to ‘men’s work.’ Instead, they invest more of their identity in family in a very gendered way” (74–75). Indeed, unlike male workers, who are often lured into the gig economy by the promise of “being my own boss” (Ravenelle, 2019; Rosenblatt, 2018), for these white working-class women the main attraction of platform-based food delivery was the ways in which it allowed their female consciousness to flourish.

Women workers were drawn to this type of work precisely because it enabled them to prioritize their commitment to their children, families, and communities, which most alternative forms of employment available to them did not permit. Not only could they control their work schedules to avoid conflict with the needs of their children and other caregiving commitments, but they could also generate income from the food provisioning skills they had developed at home, working as unpaid wives and mothers. And in some of their delivery jobs—those serving elderly, sick, or disabled customers—they were able to assist needy members of their communities, in ways that many found emotionally satisfying. In the rest of this section, we explore each of these aspects of the work in more detail.

“I Take Care of Everyone in My Life”: Scheduling Flexibility and Food Delivery

Platform-based workers have considerable control over scheduling, something that most of our interviewees had lacked in their previous jobs. A woman who had worked as a stocker at Whole Foods but then quit to become a gig worker recalled, “I saw a lot of Instacart shoppers in the store and I just got to thinking, ‘Why am I working on someone else’s schedule?’” Another woman told us:

People get addicted to creating their own schedule, not having a boss, having freedom. They never want to get a normal 9 to 5 job again. So they put up with all the horrible things that happen to them. You can just treat them like slaves!

This comment exposes the Faustian bargain of platform-based work: putting up with poor treatment from both customers and the platform companies themselves in exchange for increased control over one’s time.

Scheduling flexibility was especially important to those with family responsibilities. “I have two kids. Right now, they’re my world and they need me,” one woman explained. Another mother elaborated:

If my son wakes up at two o’clock in the morning and has a fever, I don’t have to worry that my boss is going to freak out because now I have to stay home. So it just makes things a lot easier, being able to call the shots and work when I need to work.

In stark contrast to the “just-in-time” scheduling that is increasingly ubiquitous in retail and service jobs (Lambert, 2008), being able to control one’s own time was a major attraction of this work.

While most of our interviewees had worked in low-wage service sector jobs previously, some had held more demanding middle management jobs but then “opted out” when they had children. They too appreciated the scheduling autonomy of gig work, even though their incomes were drastically reduced. A woman who had been a retail manager explained:

I had a son who has special needs, and I still needed a job. But I needed to have my own schedule and be able to manipulate when and how I worked. And I was tired of having to get up at 6 in the morning to be somewhere at 8 and then not usually leaving until after 7. Now, I do deliveries when he’s at school. And then my dad watches him at night so I can work. The only drawback is, if I don’t work, I don’t make money!

Many full-time mothers engaged in multitasking, fitting delivery jobs into their day while prioritizing their parenting duties.

Once I drop off the kids, I’ll go do an order. Or if I’m in the middle of something at home, I’ll finish it and then go do the order. The thing that I like best is that I can still be around my kids and still do my motherly things with my kids and not have to worry about, ‘Well I’m stuck at work. Who’s going to get them for practice?’ Because I have two girls, both of them play sports, and one is in Girl Scouts. Each day of the week they have something going on. . . . I try to do my schedule so I at least have that 15–20 minutes to pick them up real quick from their activity, take them home. Or if I don’t have an order, I’m at home with them. That’s what I like best about the job.

Single mothers in particular waxed enthusiastic about this aspect of gig work. One with the sole responsibility for a 10-year-old daughter told us:

Being able to make my own hours works really, really well. So I’m flexible if she has a school event or if she’s sick or anything. I like that I don’t have a boss breathing down my neck. And I’m the type of parent where if she wants me around in that school, I’m going to be there.

Another single mother explained:

I’m divorced, and unfortunately my ex-husband is not around like he should be, so I decided it would be easier to have a job where I could make my own schedule. Working at a corporate office, which I did for four and a half years before I did this, they give you pretty much one time slot to work. And it became difficult – I was working extra hours just to cover, literally, day care costs. So that’s really why I started, because I was able to work when I wanted to.

Married mothers expressed similar sentiments. “It works great for a stay-at-home parent,” a mother of two school-age children whose husband had a stable job told us.

I just love that I can go on their field trips, that I can go and volunteer at their school. ‘Oh, my mom’s going to be home when I get home,’ versus me getting home at six or seven p.m. and I can’t be there for the homework, or they’re going to be in the after-school program. I’d just rather be with them.

Another woman who became a mother at age 39 “gave up a career making like \$75,000 a year to stay home with my kid.” She explained, “It was a huge responsibility, that job; I was on call 24/7.” She stayed home for 6 months after the birth, and then went back to work, but her son “kept getting ear infections, and kept getting sick. So I quit again and then I just stayed home with my son for the next four years.” She took another job when he started pre-kindergarten, but then quit

that one too. “I couldn’t be a good mom and a good employee. I wanted to go on the field trips, and other stuff, like ‘muffins with mom.’” Later, she worked as a substitute teacher, which she was still doing at the time of our interview. But she strongly prefers food delivery.

It’s a great job for a stay-at-home mom. I like being out and about. I like the freedom of not having somebody on top of me. I like that I don’t have to ask for time off. And I like the money! I like making a different amount of money each week.

Importantly, this woman’s husband had a well-paid job; she used her earnings to pay for special expenses like trips with their son.

Since women are the vast majority of primary parents, mothers were most likely to express these sentiments. But a stay-at-home father who had spent 6 years mostly taking care of his kids shared the same perspective. He told us that his income “is not important as far as the family is concerned,” and stressed the fact that the flexibility of platform-based food delivery work was “second to none.” He first started doing gig work “just to get out of the house.” He explained:

The fact that I can just work when I want and not work for weeks at a time was very valuable, especially with my wife’s job, which is demanding and difficult. To be able to take off two weeks so that she can leave the country for work, worked out very nicely – I could stay home with the children while she was gone. . . . It is probably one of the better jobs that I’ve ever had, due to that flexibility, freedom.

Scheduling autonomy was also a draw for those caring for parents or ill spouses. “I have an elderly parent that I take care of, and I have a husband who has challenges: he’s bipolar,” one woman said.

I take care of everybody in my life! And I don’t have to check with a boss and say, ‘Hey, I had a really bad night,’ or ‘dad has a heart appointment tomorrow.’ I’ve had to do a lot of that [in other jobs]. Heart doctor, lung doctor, this doctor, that doctor. I can be there and not have to worry about whether I still have a job, not worry if I’m going to get written up tomorrow, or am I going to be scheduled for every weekend for the next month.

Similarly, a member of the “sandwich generation” who was simultaneously caring for her mother and a school-aged child, explained:

I manage my own schedule. I get to travel with my family or take vacations, or when my kid is sick, I stay home. I don’t have to put in a sick day. I have an 80-year-old mother, so I’m helping her. I have a kid. My husband has a business. I try to either take my kid to school or pick him up once a day, between me and my husband. So it gives me flexibility. Life happens.

“What Girl Doesn’t Like to Shop?”: Gendered Skills and Food Delivery

Many interviewees cited another positive feature of food delivery gig work, namely that they truly enjoyed grocery shopping. Many were delighted to discover that their well-honed but previously unremunerated skills in food provisioning (Devault, 1991) could be used to generate income. “I am one of the crazy people. I love grocery shopping!” one woman exclaimed. “I love to go to the grocery store. I’m just going shopping and spending someone else’s money. How awesome is that!?” Others echoed this view. “The one thing that I love about Instacart is, I love to shop!” one woman declared. “I’m a shopaholic. I love to shop – and it’s somebody else’s money.” Another interviewee elaborated on the advantages of shopping for others:

I used to spend a lot of money because I'd work at my office job and I'd get off at five o'clock and I'd blow \$100. I'd buy food we didn't need, thinking, 'I don't know when I'm going to go to the store again, so I'd better stock up.' This job satisfies the need to spend money to the point where I find that I never go to the store anymore for myself. If I need something, I grab it on my last shop of the day. I'm not going out and blowing \$100 after work. And I don't feel like I'm constantly missing the sales. I know what the sales are, I'm in the store every flipping day! So I know that sugar is going on sale this weekend, which makes it extremely cost effective. So I feel like I'm a better shopper! My ideal job is to get paid to shop for other people and spend thousands of dollars in a day. Just thousands of dollars! And see every new product that is out there. And leave a grocery store with more money than I walked in it with, when you calculate my pay.

For these women grocery shopping was a craft, and also a source of pleasure. One criticized a male Instacart shopper who in her estimation lacked the requisite expertise:

I came across a shopper the other day who is new to my zone. And I was watching him pick avocados. He wasn't picking avocados. He just walked up to it, picked it up, and threw it in his cart. And 90 percent of those avocados that were in the section where he picked were soft and not good. I said to him, 'You should pick the ones from the top. They're better.' He says, 'I don't care. They're not for me.' I said, 'Well, don't you work for Instacart?' He said, 'Yeah, exactly. They're not for me.' I said, 'Well, you're servicing a customer. You would think that you want to bring them a good product.' He's like, 'This is a part-time gig, lady. I don't really care.'

In contrast, many women took pride in doing the shopping properly. One told us, "If [customers order] a lot of vegetables and fruits and stuff, I don't try to go fast. I try to make sure everything's fresh and that the expiration dates are good." She went on to explain her overall efficiency strategy.

I've got a routine now, where I start in produce and then go over to the bakery and then go to the meat, and then from there just go down the aisles and go to dairy. That way you're making a loop around the store and hopefully not backtracking.

Another woman explained:

It's like solving a puzzle, because you have to find the items in the shortest amount of time. And you don't want to zigzag back and forth in the store, because you're just going to be wasting time and energy. So finding the best route and memorizing the stores and getting everything down to where it's just memory – it's pretty cool!

Women cited other food shopping skills as well, like making intelligent choices of substitutes for items customers had ordered that weren't available in the store. "The difference between an okay shopper and a great shopper, it's all in the substitutes," one declared. "What's the most appropriate substitute for this? What would the customer do, you're constantly thinking, what would a customer be purchasing if the customer was at the store?"

Culinary skills were yet another aspect of the shoppers' craft. One woman told us:

I'm a person who cooks, so I like being in grocery stores, because I can be like, 'Oh, I wonder what I could make with this?' And peering into other people's grocery lists and figuring out what they're cooking. So there was a little piece of creative freedom that came with the job that I didn't expect. And I

like being able to help people in an intelligent way. Being able to educate people – not like it’s my job, but I did explain to one woman that, ‘Oh yeah, you can make pizza sauce with crushed tomatoes and oregano.’ So I wound up picking that up for her instead of the really gross store-brand pizza sauce that I didn’t really like the look of.

Another woman also spoke about picking up cooking tips while working as a shopper: “I’ll start on an order, and I can tell they’re putting together chili. And they’ll have that one ingredient and I’ll be, ‘Holy crap, that is the most awesome recipe!’ and I’m taking a picture of their cart.”

Other interviewees enjoyed learning about products they weren’t already familiar with on the job. “What girl doesn’t like to shop?” one asked rhetorically, adding:

It afforded me the opportunity to be able to just go and look at stuff maybe that I might want, or see things that I might not necessarily be exposed to in my own personal life because maybe I didn’t shop at that store. There were a lot of stores that had organic items and things like that. I liked the exposure, being exposed to new things.

Another echoed that sentiment: “I like being introduced to new products as I’m shopping for customers. Things that I had never noticed before. So I try out different products.”

Thus women’s traditional responsibility for food provisioning and preparation (Devault, 1991) was both reinforced and validated, even as it was commodified within the platform economy. For one woman, the finite nature of shopping for someone else offered another kind of satisfaction. “I do like grocery shopping,” she said.

There is a list when I get an order, and then it’s complete, it’s finished. The job of a mom with three kids, nothing’s ever done, it always comes back to me, so this gives me a nice sense of completion.

One of our male interviewees, a 19-year-old student, also mentioned that he enjoyed shopping, but he did not mention the skills involved as a source of satisfaction, simply commenting that he liked being paid to do it: “It’s fun, to be honest, when you’re shopping for someone. I mean, I get paid to go to a grocery store!” Pride in the shopping craft, however, at least in our sample, was a specifically female phenomenon.

“It’s Definitely More Than the Money”: Food Delivery as Care Work

Another attraction of food delivery work for many women is the emotional gratification involved in helping customers who have difficulty shopping for themselves, due to age, illness, disability, or other factors. The weakness of the social safety net makes food delivery work attractive to women with caregiving commitments on the labor supply side; on the service demand side, that same weakness means that people with disabilities must turn to the market to get their basic needs met—which in turn gives food delivery work a much-valued caregiving dimension. One interviewee recalled:

My very first customer, I pull up into her driveway, go up to her front door. She opens the door and she’s got a cast on her leg from her ankle all the way up to her thigh and a newborn in her arms. So that’s when I knew that the service was more than just a luxury service. Some people really need it. I deliver to old folks’ homes, I deliver to people in trailer parks in wheelchairs, and I also deliver to mansions!

Others recounted similar experiences:

A lot of people are very appreciative. ‘Oh, I couldn’t get out because I’ve been so sick.’ Or, ‘I’m recovering from surgery. This service is wonderful!’ A lot of older people that can’t get out on their own anymore, they say it’s changed their lives. They spend so much less money because they don’t have to order takeout for every meal. Their time spent with their loved ones can be times just spent together, rather than, ‘Okay, my son has two hours that they can come over, they have to take me to the store because it’s the only way I can get there.’

I enjoy delivering to senior citizens, because they like that little two-or-three-minute interaction. They’re the most friendly; they’re the most grateful. Seeing them happy makes me happy. There’s one couple I met, they were almost 90 years old. And they had been married 69 years. Just being able to ask them, ‘Oh, you’ve been married 69 years?’ That’s a blessing! You get a little bit of their life story in two, three minutes. And they were still able-bodied, but they couldn’t get out.

The good experiences would be for the elderly. Like the ones that literally can’t come out of the house. It warms my heart to know that they didn’t have to go out in traffic and cold weather to have to get their groceries. That they’re probably frail. This is a plus for me, dealing with customers that really are benefitting from the service or the ones that can’t get out. I’ve delivered to a man that just had a heart surgery. He wasn’t really elderly, but he couldn’t lift anything over like five pounds- so that’s basically everything in the grocery store. Or where it’s a new mom and she’s at home with her newborn. Those deliveries are why I keep doing it, besides the money. Because people do really benefit from the service.

Some women framed the care work aspect of food delivery in quasi-professional terms. “There is a social work element in this job,” one explained.

I have [as customers] a lot of older people that live by themselves. Like I have an older lady. She tips really well. Every time I go over there, I literally spend like 45 minutes being with her. I know everything about her, her family, and she knows about me. And then I have a guy in an assisted living facility. He never tips, but I don’t care. For me it’s definitely more than the money.

For her, the meaning of providing care to someone in need trumped any sense of entitlement in regard to tips.

Another woman told us:

I like the community service aspect of it. There’s a lot of people that are shut-ins or disabled. And I could be their only human interaction in a month. I really do like that part of my job. I have one customer, she shared with me that she doesn’t drive because of her seizure disorder. She just is such a positive part of my day, and hopefully I of hers. It just makes me very happy to deliver to her. I really, really enjoy getting out and helping people.

Even those who were quick to express anger about their low pay as gig workers praised this aspect of the work. “I would get to the location and it was an elderly person, or it was a hand-capped person. And it just makes you take stock – here I am complaining about this, but at least I’m able to do it,” one woman commented.

I remember one time I delivered to a lady and she looked perfectly capable and able-bodied, but she had a special needs child that she couldn’t leave to go and do shopping. I really felt like I was making her day just a little bit easier.

Another explained:

A lot of my business comes from older people or handicapped people, which is really cool. A lot of them are really thankful for it. And it gives me a good feeling to be able to help somebody. I couldn't do it without getting paid for it. But at the same time, it's still helpful. It's a good service, even though the company is crap.

Resentment of Class and Gender Entitlement

Women did not extend this desire to be helpful indiscriminately. They expressed fierce resentment of male customers who took advantage of food delivery services but who were perfectly capable of doing the work themselves. "I keep a list in my phone. I call it a DND list – do not deliver," one interviewee confided. "I had a nasty guy hit on me. I had another guy who had seven cases of water, and he was younger than me and quite capable. And he watched me lug them all into his kitchen for him." Interestingly, another woman, while similarly offended by the entitlement of male customers, couched her sentiments in a more traditional gender idiom:

You have the males that sit there and watch a female, like me, deliver it. And they're like, 'Ok, I'll wait here.' And they have stairs and you're carrying up packs of water. That irks me. But maybe it's just the way I was raised, that guys are supposed to help women.

A complex mix of gender normativity and class resentment are at the root of the outrage these women expressed; yet the "nasty guy" comment offers a rare glimpse of feminist consciousness as well.

Male and female workers alike were embittered by privileged customers with a sense of class entitlement. "I had one situation where a customer practically brought me to tears, basically just talked down to me like I was just like nothing," one woman recalled. Another commented:

It's one thing to deliver to an older person that is homebound, just cannot leave their house, can barely move. That's your good deed for the day! It's another thing to deliver to a very affluent neighborhood where the houses cost a million and up – and they don't tip!

Similarly, a stay-at-home dad noted the stinginess of the rich in regard to tips. "Wealthy people are difficult to separate from their money," he said, "regardless of how much you're providing for them." Another worker compared the generosity she observed among less privileged customers to the stinginess of the rich ones:

I've done them where a neighbor anonymously sent orders of food to a family that had no money, and they knew they weren't going to have Thanksgiving. I've also delivered to entitled people who act like I am a servant and don't like me knocking on their door. Those are the people who never tip. Never! If I deliver to a bad neighborhood, say a food desert, I always get a very nice tip. If I deliver to the half-a-million-dollar homes on the acreage and I'm delivering them their Costco, it's always 'Leave it by the side door and don't knock.' And no tip!

Others criticized affluent students who tipped poorly, and who expected to be able to obtain everything online. "Some of the students get on my nerves," a woman who often made deliveries in a college town confided.

There is an entire condo building there – I’ve never gotten a tip from anybody in it. They’re all students. It worries me because, that’s the future. They don’t want to leave their homes. Everything is online. Everything is brought to them.

Another woman agreed: “That’s the world we live in. Everyone wanted it five minutes ago.”

Conclusion

Although the platform-based food delivery workers we interviewed complained about their low pay, the frequent “pivots,” and the resulting unpredictability of earnings, as well as their ill-treatment at the hands of their more privileged customers, they strongly preferred this work to standard jobs. Deeply resentful of class-based inequities, they rarely expressed a parallel critique of gender inequalities—except in regard to male customers who treated them as potential sexual prey. Otherwise, these predominantly white working-class women articulated not a feminist but a class-specific female consciousness, embracing rather than challenging traditional gender arrangements.

Both women and men with demanding caregiving commitments self-selected into this type of work because of its advantages over standard low-wage retail and service jobs with “just-in-time” scheduling. They especially valued the flexibility and scheduling autonomy that allowed them to prioritize family needs over paid work. Women in particular also took pride in their shopping and cooking skills—developed in unpaid food provisioning at home—from which this work enabled them to generate income, in a neoliberal twist on wages for housework. Finally, they found the work particularly meaningful and emotionally rewarding when it involved helping the elderly, disabled, or others in need of assistance.

The multiple satisfactions gleaned from platform-based food delivery by the white working-class women who are a core demographic of the industry are precisely what enables the platform companies to continually ratchet down pay levels and intensify exploitation. Yet such exploitation, and the female consciousness on which it is predicated, as Kaplan (1982) showed in a different context, can also spur worker organizing and collective action. The protests against Instacart that broke out during the 2020 pandemic are only the most recent example (Levinson, 2020). That topic is beyond the scope of this article but warrants attention in future research.

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