Working for Small Change: Investigating the Livelihoods of Ride-hailing Drivers in Cape Town, South Africa.

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Plagiarism Declaration

I know the meaning of plagiarism and declare that all of the work in the dissertation, save for that which is properly acknowledged, is my own.

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Abstract

Since its introduction in 2009, ride-hailing has been at the centre of many critical discussions concerning the disruption of the (public) transportation sector, labour issues and tax matters. Missing voices in this discourse have notably been the employees of ride-hailing companies, specifically in the Global South. Setting out to inquire about the living and working conditions of ride-hailing drivers, this study employed a qualitative research framework and ethnographic methods in a case study of Uber drivers in Cape Town, South Africa. Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were used as leading method to find out more about the drivers' hopes, troubles, aspirations and coping mechanisms. Particularly in the Global South, the growing informalisation and commodification of labour pose a threat to workers. Drivers in need of income are subject to unstable short-term employment that is low pay, does not offer social security, exhibits highly uneven employment relationships, includes large financial risks and predominantly serves customer and corporate interests. Yet, countering fatalistic narratives that frame drivers as helpless and exposed, this thesis offers accounts of creative rule-bending, mitigation strategies and community organisation used to mitigate precarity. I argue that ride-hailing work is located at least partially in a grey zone as the everyday struggle for opportunity forces workers to search for alternative spaces on the fringes between the formal and informal and the legal and illegal. In a comparable manner, ride-hailing companies use legal grey zones and loopholes to advance their business and become the benefactors of the precarious hustle of thousands of mostly migrant drivers in South Africa. This study adds in-depth and original ethnographic research and critical theorisation to the literature on ride-hailing and the living and working conditions of marginalised workers. It illustrates the urgent need to further inquire about the proliferating commodification and informalisation that ride-hailing and the gig economy entails in the Global South.

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Contents

1 Introduction

> Abukar: "In two years to come I'm not an Uber driver anymore. Two years to come I'm not expecting to be on this platform because I now need to shift and look for better life or better lifestyle. Not this one. In two years' time, if we had to meet, I'm sure we will meet in a different industry, not in this Uber business."

All over the African continent ride-hailing companies are facing backlash over their aggressive business practices, precarious working conditions and the misclassification of their drivers. In Cape Town, Taxify and Uber drivers protested in 2018 against exploitation by their employers and for the regulation of the ride-hailing sector (Sicetsha, 2018). In Johannesburg, Bolt and Uber drivers complained about their safety and high commission fees (Kahla, 2020). In Abuja, a national union of Bolt and Uber drivers staged a warning strike to protest the conditions of their so-called partnership (Omilana, 2020a). In Lagos, Bolt and Uber drivers embarked on a week-long strike to protest new regulations affecting their work (Omilana, 2020b). In Nairobi, Uber drivers took to the streets to protest low wages and poor working conditions (Achieng & Muigai, 2019). In Kampala, an association of Uber drivers complained to a speaker of the parliament that Uber declined to pick up talks with their association, because they only deal with individual drivers ("Uber drivers petition …", 2019). In Casablanca, taxi drivers marched in the city to protest Uber's business practice as unfair competition ("Casablanca Taxi Drivers …", 2018). And in Cairo, a group of taxi drivers (unsuccessfully) filed a lawsuit, alleging that Careem and Uber were illegally using private cars as taxis ("Egyptian court allows …", 2018). It seems while Uber manages to satisfy its customers with affordable prices, fast and safe service delivery and secure payments, their drivers' demands for change are neglected.

Since Uber has started operating in Cape Town in 2013 it has rapidly become a widely used transportation alternative for the city's aspiring middle class and more affluent population.[1] To deliver their service, Uber and other ride-hailing companies employ a pool of thousands of mostly migrant workers who make their way into the wealthy Cape Town City Bowl and its surroundings on a daily basis. Mainly coming from less prosperous and largely under-serviced neighbourhoods in the Cape Flats these men and women do the heavy lifting for international

[1] The history of public transportation and taxis in South Africa is long, complicated and discussed in length in the available literature (e.g. Khosa, 1992; Czeglédy, 2004; Pirie, 2013; Walters, 2014). It would have given a great background for contextualisation but was left out to comply with the limited word count of this minor thesis. Likewise, the riders (customers) had to be left out of the discussion to focus solely on the workers.

corporations that tend to ignore calls for more social security, higher wages and better working conditions. As unemployment remains one of the key challenges in (southern) African cities, where the majority of urbanites are caught in informal and precarious employment, ride-hailing companies have no difficulty in recruiting enough drivers. Caught in long-term financing agreements for their cars and spending the majority of their income on operating expenses, these drivers barely earn enough to cover costs. Their aspiration of escaping work in the informal sector therefore is further deferred. And still, messenger- and social media groups are rife with requests from potential drivers vying to work for ride-hailing companies. The complexities of this apparent contradiction are what inspired this research.

Through a qualitative and in-depth account of Uber drivers in Cape Town, this thesis inquiries about how drivers deal with the challenges that ride-hailing work entails and what strategies they employ to mitigate risks, uncertainties and threats. The drivers have been chosen as a central part of this study because their livelihoods in academic terms are understudied, as the literature review (Chapter 2) suggests. Yet, they are the stakeholders of the ride-hailing industry on whose back the entire system is run.

The thesis begins by framing ride-hailing through the lens of institutional disruption, arguing that the ideational foundation of the sharing economy is fraught with contradictions and that the jobs it creates are unstable, precarious and low-wage (Chapter 2). Following the journeys of Abukar and Takawira, Chapter 4 offers in-depth ethnographic accounts of the precarious everyday life and work of ride-hailing drivers in the Global South. Chapter 5 explores the efforts, strategies and mitigation tactics used by drivers to make ride-hailing work for them. Chapter 6 then further contextualises drivers' strategies, precarious work and gig economy companies in the Global South, using among others the concepts of "hustle" (Thieme, 2018) and "grey spaces" (Yiftachel, 2009a) to demonstrate that Uber deploys a similar set of strategies to advance its business interests. This theorisation of the institutional disruption induced by gig economies companies in context of pressing socio-economic complexities of the Global South – uneven spatial development, growing inequality, intra-African migration and staggering unemployment – aims to add to the growing archive of Southern urban experience and knowledge.

To address Uber's business practices and working conditions this thesis departs with the following consideration: The gig economy offers convenient opportunities for precarious employment in entry-level jobs, while relying on legal grey zones, low wages, labour market competition and algorithmic management to enforce their business and pricing strategy. The

research question of this thesis then puts the employees into the centre of the discourse: What are the hopes, troubles, aspirations and coping mechanisms of Uber drivers and how is their livelihood influenced by this complex and digitally augmented employment relationship?

2
Literature review

From cab service to ride-hailing

Uber is one of the most-known ride-hailing companies worldwide. Founded in 2009 in the U.S. as a black car service, the company first offered limousine services under the name UberCab. In 2012, Uber expanded its business model and joined Lyft and other successful ride-hailing companies by introducing the new and cheaper UberX service. Around that time, the concept of the sharing economy took off, representing itself as an alternative to mainstream consumerism and promising that by sharing assets with trusted people, life will improve for the better. Even though the core business of Uber, Airbnb, Lyft and their likes have long ceased to work on the idea of sharing, these companies came to define the sharing economy (Slee, 2015). As of 2020, Uber offers its service in more than 600 cities worldwide, reports 78 million monthly users (Statista, 2020) and is backed by USD 25.2 billion in investments (Crunchbase, 2020) from Goldman Sachs, Google Ventures, Morgan Stanley, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, SoftBank Capital and many others.

Uber's main service to its customers in South Africa is offering on-demand transportation services in a variety of options: UberX as basic service, Uber Black for luxury vehicles and UberXL for up to 6 passengers or extra luggage. To deliver this service, Uber manages a large number of drivers who work their own schedules, supply their own cars, working tools (i.e., smartphones, chargers, cleaning supplies), insurances and social security. The company operates according to the principles of the gig economy offering work that is temporary or task-based rather than employer-dependent and long-term (Stewart & Stanford, 2017).

Because companies such as Uber, Airbnb and Lyft, that are frequently included in the realm of the sharing economy, rely on practices that technically resemble a regular exchange of services much more than an actual act of sharing (Glöss, Mcgregor & Brown, 2016) the term sharing economy is considered a misnomer (Slee, 2015; Hira & Reilly, 2017). The more precise terms for the business model of these companies are "on-demand service economy" (Scholz, 2016) or "access economy" (Acquier, Daudigeos & Pinkse, 2017) as ownership is not shared but granted for a fee. And while particularly those ravingly successful companies of the supposed sharing economy have not much in common with sharing, the principle itself should not be discarded as an alternative as Lizzie Richardson (2015) posits. The sharing economy, if applied right, is able to promote sustainable practices such as "collaboration through work", can offer

"new spatialities of community" and reframes the "consumer as accessor, not owner" (Richardson, 2015:122). The for-profit companies of the sharing economy might be poor examples, but the general idea of technologically-enabled on-demand access is thought to be capable to build social movements based on cooperation and the sharing of goods and services (Schor, 2016). This is where Trebor Scholz and Nathan Schneider place their idea of "platform cooperatives" as a solution to the shortcomings of the sharing economy (Scholz & Schneider, 2016).

However, it is assumed that capitalist behemoths such as Uber are more established and popular among consumers than platform cooperatives and more socially-oriented sharing economy movements. Political theorist Nick Srnicek (2017) argues that most sharing economy companies are not the cultural or political actors of change they claim to be, but are merely steered by market needs and consumer wishes. And indeed, many companies drawing on sharing economy principles fail to reflect their stated agendas (Schneider, 2018). Even worse, because of their aggressive drive for expansion and their unmatched will to create legislation suiting their business model, many of these companies are seen as a new mutation of capitalism, a more virulent form of neoliberalism (Morozov, 2013).

Fighting for expansion

In the last years, Uber has been at the centre of many critical discussions (Schor, 2016; Pollio, 2019; Vallas & Schor, 2020) concerning labour issues (Glöss, Mcgregor & Brown, 2016), workforce management (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016), precarious work (Malin & Chandler, 2017), employment discrimination (Rosenblat et al., 2017) and informalization (Carmody & Fortuin, 2019). It is presumed by some authors that Uber does not take its innovative power from sharing economy ideologies or technological advantage alone, but instead relies heavily on institutional disruption (Laurell & Sandström, 2016). Not having to abide, trying to circumvent or lobbying for rules and regulations that otherwise apply to the rest of the industry are suspected to be its main muscle (Laurell & Sandström, 2016). Uber skilfully circumvents traditional business practices and harnesses legal loopholes to lower overhead costs (Carmody & Fortuin, 2019). Given the marginal profits of the personal transportation sector, Uber is trying to do its best to fend off responsibilities towards its drivers such as social security, health benefits, insurance or equipment maintenance, as this would raise labour costs and threaten their profitability (Shapiro, 2018; Uber Technologies, 2019).

Drawing on Southern urban theories (Schindler, 2017; Bhan, 2019) to account for the legacy of colonial past, historic exploitation and the present-day struggles of the majority of urban dwellers in the Global South, this thesis suggests that Uber uses a set of evasive, informal and transgressive practices to advance its strategy of "aggressive growth and intense competition" (Uber Technologies, 2019:30). I argue that the company knowingly and without much interference by regulating authorities (e.g. cites, local and national government) places its business in "grey spaces" (Yiftachel, 2009a) suspending it in-between the legality, the formal, workers' rights, social security and the illegality, the informal, tax evasion and misclassification of workers. I suggest that this helps to create designated semi-formal spaces of employment or "zones of exception" (Ong, 2008; Roy, 2011:234) that enable Uber to remotely extract value from drivers who live largely indebted and have to cope with low-wages and work without adequate social and financial stability.

The promises of the sharing economy

The ideological background of the sharing economy is built upon a variety of assumptions that function as promises to its users. Namely, more sustainable consumption patterns, better production practices, consumer emancipation, social change, empowerment, solidarity, optimized usage of personal assets, better access (Acquier, Daudigeos & Pinkse, 2017), improved ownership structures (Schneider, 2018), reduced transaction costs and easier financing (Hira, 2017). Accordingly, on their website Uber flamboyantly claims "You move the world" (Uber, 2019), a seemingly broad hint at the magnificent social impact their work has in the global context. If not taken sarcastically, "to move" stands not only for the act of transporting passengers, but for the progress and positive change that Uber's service with the help of the above-mentioned principles embodies. Drawing on Ash Amin's and Nigel Thrift's (2007) framing of the urban economy as being shot through with "cultural inputs", Uber's relationship to the sharing economy can best be seen as a market performance to engage cultural mobilisation through "novel forms of participation" (Richardson, 2015) and not as a cooperation guided by sustainable or emancipatory principles. Uber's broad marketing slogan inspires to plant the ideas of sustainable change and progress in both drivers and riders. And while this performance is able to disrupt orthodox markets by offering new perspectives to the habitual consumerist culture and day-to-day transactions through the use of technology, it reaffirms capitalist "business as usual" (Richardson, 2015) drawing parallels to a "fast capitalism" that seeks to commodify urban culture, values and goods (Amin & Thrift, 2007).

Another conceptual layer to the promises that services such as Uber hold is offered by investigating the phenomenological particularities they engage. Parallels can be drawn from Uber's technologically-augmented transportation service to the deeply political phantasy of development and promise of improvement that material infrastructures enable particularly in cities of the Global South (Larkin, 2013). This "enchantment" of infrastructure, the belief that services by the likes of Uber will offer improvement, is believed to reinforce the call for modern services (Harvey & Knox, 2012) that allow momentary imaginations of an alternative urban life that conceal the "fragmentedness", "contradictions" and "ruptures" of the contemporary city (de Boeck, 2012:323). In their study about large scale road infrastructures in Peru, Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox (2012:521) base the effective power of this enchantment on "three specific promises: speed, political integration and economic connectivity". Especially to the "bottom billion" (Hira, 2017) promises of modernity, improvement, sharing and reduced transactions costs offer a vision of much-needed and drastic improvement.

Yet, sharing economy power houses such as Uber are mainly invested in the commodification of goods and labour and their services target only a financially-sound urban minority due to its many boundaries created by restricted spatial, financial and technological access (Hira, 2017). Moreover, the often-promised flexibility of the unstable contract-based jobs created by the sharing economy has mostly negative implications for workers. Drivers have to rely on themselves for insurance and social security, have no employment protection, are rarely unionised (de Peuter, 2011; Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming) and financial illiteracy is exploited to overstate promises of financial income and economic opportunities (James & Rajak, 2014).

Aggressive growth and intense competition

A pattern of exploitation arises, with many large corporations extracting huge profits from what is called the sharing economy (Schor, 2016). Even worse, the resource intensive pattern of "hyper consumption" (Martin, 2016) which the sharing economy was thought to tackle has been reframed as an economic opportunity for those seeking to bolster or build their income. One of its promises – sharing as a path to sustainability – thus seems highly unlikely to come true (Martin, 2016). Sharing economy companies leverage a pattern of consumption which is loosely based on shared goods against "private, state and public consumption" while relying on low-wage labour and self-employed workers (Glöss, Mcgregor & Brown, 2016:1632). Only the

smallest part of the revenue is given to the workers (Scholz & Schneider, 2016) who struggle to create stable and sustainable livelihoods[2] (Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming).[3]

Uber's "forward-leaning approach", its "focus on aggressive growth and intense competition" and "failure to prioritize compliance" have had far-reaching consequences (Uber Technologies, 2019:30). Outstanding examples are the grave impact Uber had on the already struggling metered taxi industry (Competition Commission South Africa, 2020), the "violent conflicts" (Giddy, 2019) that ensued between ride-hailing drivers and metered taxi drivers and the company's ongoing legal struggles about workers' rights, gender discrimination and data abuse (Rushe, 2019). Aiming to increase market share by reducing the cost per mile and intending to replace public transportation in the long run, Uber effectively gravitates towards monopolisation of the market (Srnicek, 2017) and makes no bones about these plans (Uber Technologies, 2019). The quest to reduce costs and the drive for centralized ownership combined with "the absence of government regulation" and the inability of workers to resist becomes the source for systematic exploitation (Scholz & Schneider, 2016:21).

Algorithmic management means control

A frequently used term to describe the management practices of gig economy companies is "algorithmic management" (Lee et al., 2015; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Luke Munn, 2017; Shapiro, 2018). Designed to counter the much-promised flexibility of their workers, this management technique is used as soft form of control and surveillance (Shapiro, 2018). In the case of ride-hailing companies this means the position of the dispatcher is taken over by an algorithm. The algorithm matches passengers with drivers, determines routes, calculates pickup times and travel duration, sets the fare and communicates with both the passenger and the driver. Uber is able to use its ownership of the platform to exercise power by controlling the algorithms that define trip distribution, pricing and routes in their own interest and without the knowledge of their drivers. These "information asymmetries" limit the possible choices drivers are able to make and exercise managerial power and control over them (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Chan & Humphreys, 2018). It is argued that this system of management produces strict

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[2] In this thesis the term "livelihood" is understood as the way someone earns the money needed to pay for food, shelter, clothing and other necessities.

[3] In order not to carry forward the discrepancies in terminology that the sharing economy entails, the term gig economy will be used to address platform-mediated task-based work whenever appropriate. For a similar reason, the term ride-hailing has been chosen over the term ride-sharing.

dependencies and leaves such negligible room for autonomy that workers should in fact not be categorized as self-employed (Shapiro, 2018).

One of the sub-systems through which this soft control is exerted are the rating mechanisms that are hardcoded into Uber's apps. These driver ratings that clients can submit to Uber after each ride function as a data-driven and crowd-sourced management tool for the company's workforce (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Shapiro, 2018). The harsh reality is that drivers are deactivated and barred from accepting trips through the app once their rating falls under the threshold of 4.6 out of 5 possible points during their last 100 rides. The foundation for these grave consequences is laid by user reviews which are prone to bias and leave the door open for discrimination (Rosenblat et al., 2017; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Many drivers support this view, arguing that the ratings are often not "reflective of their driving performance and services" (Lee et al., 2015:1608). On the passenger side, a study from the U.S. has indicated strong evidence for systematic discrimination based on names and profile images of passengers, leading to longer waiting times for African American passengers (Ge et al., 2020).

Spatial implications

This study presumes that the practices of gig economy companies and particularly Uber have various spatial implications. Classic business sectors such as hotels and taxis are negatively impacted by international venture-backed companies such as Airbnb and Uber and often challenged by their low-entry pricing strategies (Hira & Reilly, 2017). In addition, Uber is not investing in production or physical infrastructure, but in technological or virtual infrastructure located outside of South Africa. This proves to be a problematic pattern of investment in many Southern cities (Schindler, 2017) that are dealing with an already small tax base (Simone & Pieterse, 2017), inadequate investments in public infrastructure (Pieterse, 2011) and the long-term consequences of colonialism and historically-rooted exploitation by the Global North (Simone & Pieterse, 2017). On a more positive note, it is argued that Uber has allowed a new segment of users to enter the market in South Africa which previously did not have access to personal transportation services (Giddy, 2019). This again had a positive impact on urban mobility, allowing its users to travel more safely through cities (Henama & Sifolo, 2017; Giddy, 2019). Ride-hailing services are moreover perceived as an add-on to public transport or as a last-mile service, connecting many people to otherwise porous public transport systems (Carmody & Fortuin, 2019). As no extensive body of literature specialising on the spatial effects of Uber has been discovered yet this is identified as a fertile area for future research.

Marginalised and migrant life

Theorising the gig economy from the Global South, an essential perspective from which to analyse ride-hailing is the life of marginalised and migrant urban populations. While much of Cape Town's wealth and public infrastructure is concentrated in a small area around Table Mountain, the majority of its inhabitants live in what is called the Cape Flats, an endless suburban sprawl "dominated by informal housing or shanty towns" (Carmody & Fortuin, 2019:198), that makes up most of the urban landscape of the city. Taking into account the staggering unemployment rate of close to 30% in the last quarter of 2019 (Statistics South Africa, 2019), before the Covid-19 pandemic had even started, finding employment is an arduous task particularly for African migrants. No exact estimate of the percentage of migrants in ride-hailing jobs has been found, but studies confirm the field observation that the majority of drivers are intra-African migrants (Geitung, 2017; Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming).[4] To navigate cities that often do not have much perspective or support structure to offer for them (Simone, 2004), migrants have to carefully manage moments and spaces of chance and opportunity and the risks associated with them (Williams, 2017). Pushed by intense demands for housing and shelter, urban dwellers have to rely on "grey spaces" (Yiftachel, 2009a) that embody temporary gaps and emerging spaces in the urban in order to find jobs, access goods and create sustainable livelihoods. By offering entry-level jobs in a relatively unregulated environment, ride-hailing is assumed to support this "pragmatic search for alternative structures of opportunity" (Thieme, 2018:537) for migrants in an otherwise unsupportive urban environment. I presume that the manner in which migrants respond to and work with the risks and opportunities offered by ride-hailing are essential methods to mitigate precarity.

Literature on Southern urban theory (Yiftachel, 2009a; Roy, 2011; Caldeira, 2017; Bhan, 2019) suggests that urban inhabitants rely on different sets of strategies to manage the risk associated with working and dwelling in cities of the Global South. Self-initiated upgrading, or more precisely the act of "repairing" (Bhan, 2019), offers a useful lens to reframe allegedly illegal or informal behaviour as valuable creative problem-solving strategies. Demonstrated by Gautam Bhan in the context of housing, this framing can be applied to the general process of forming livelihoods and more specifically to building careers and finding income in Southern cities. As these "building" strategies aimed at improvement can at times oppose government policies, official logics and formal practices, framing them as "transversal logics" (Caldeira, 2017) can

[4] Contrary to this, Carmody and Fortuin state that most of the drivers recruited for their study were South African nationals. It is not known how this apparent over-representation in the sample can be explained.

offer an adjuvant trajectory. Speaking against fatalistic narratives of a class of dispossessed urban labourers doomed to work in spaces of illegality, alternative readings of "informalities" (Roy, 2011) are deployed in this thesis to demonstrate that subaltern concepts of "grey spaces" (Yiftachel, 2009a), "transversal logics" (Caldeira, 2017) and informality are not only adhering to poor urbanites but also international corporations such as Uber.[5]

Urban inhabitants and specifically marginalised groups have long formed their own systems of social infrastructure in cities to access economic opportunities (Simone, 2004) such as neighbourhood groups, trading hubs, business networks, lending schemes, security forces but also black market operations. In addition to the often-neglected material infrastructure of the city, these social infrastructures are generated through the everyday actions of urban dwellers and can account for significant portions of cities of the Global South (Boeck, 2004). These structures and practices, that AbdouMaliq Simone (Simone, 2004) describes as "people as infrastructure", function with little to no intervention of the state and are often overlooked and not well integrated into the public discourse or policies.

The relentless drive of urban migrants to instrumentalise opportunities to earn an income is part of the "developmental entrepreneurialism of Cape Town" (Pollio, 2019:761). This is assumed to benefit Uber in their endeavour to place their ride-hailing business in the city by supplying them with a seemingly endless pool of inexpensive labourers. The gig economy can offer individuals who experience distrust, lack of connection and have little to no job history as they have previously been excluded, a chance at finding jobs and earning an income (Dillahunt & Malone, 2015). At the same time it is claimed that the sharing economy introduces a "splintering precarity" further widening the gap between the more advantaged sharing economy employees and those denied entry (Malin & Chandler, 2017).

Migrant life in South Africa includes multiple informal debt and lending schemes (Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming). Regular pay renders workers responsible to increased financial obligations towards relatives, families and distant family, making it is increasingly difficult for them to accumulate sufficient savings to ensure stable livelihoods (James & Rajak, 2014). Also worth noting is the pattern of car ownership in South Africa that negatively affects the possibility of building financial stability, for only an estimated 10% of all Cape Town Uber drivers own their own car (Greef, 2018). Though capital accumulation or economic

[5] Subaltern is here used to describe those who do not belong to the elite class and are barred socially and geographically from (political) participation in society (Roy, 2011 drawing on Gayatri Spivak).

emancipation is not the only benchmark for employment, evidence suggests that most temporary workers are not interested in a small pay raise but instead want a fulfilling task and sense connected to their job (Rossiter & Neilson, 2005).

And while there are some positive and desirable effects connected to the sharing economy, there is strong evidence that the jobs it creates are a precarious trap, without perspective, offer only low-wages (Scholz, 2016; Hira & Reilly, 2017) and predominantly serve customer and corporate interests. Ride-hailing is without perspective because it has no career outlook in terms of promotion or increased salaries. It also differs from other precarious low-wage jobs in the scale of automation (jobs are distributed automatically via an App) and the international extent at which it happens (an American company employs drivers in South Africa through a Dutch subsidy). Altogether, it seems at least contested that the gig economy is the innovation that will bring the promised sustainable change to challenge capitalist consumption and ownership patterns (Pollio, 2019; Vallas & Schor, 2020). On the contrary, Uber's ruthless hustle for more market share is supported by the daily struggle of thousands of low-wage labourers desperate to improve their living conditions. Meanwhile, the City of Cape Town has turned a blind eye to the effects that ride-hailing has had on the living and working conditions of the indebted, indentured and exhausted workers that offer a piece of critical transportation infrastructure to tourists, commuters, residents and many other urbanites. The following chapters will further explore the precarious reality of ride-hailing in the Global South through sharing first-hand experiences of their drivers.

3
Methodology and research design

Set out to inquire about the living and working conditions of ride-hailing drivers, this study employs a qualitative research framework and ethnographic methods in a case study of Uber drivers in Cape Town, South Africa. In contrast to quantitative positivist epistemologies that aim for generalisability and reliability (Golafshani, 2003), this study seeks to produce an in-depth and site-specific account of ordinary and everyday lived experience (Lincoln, 2010; Sallaz, 2018) with specific focus on the experience of employment in the gig economy. The research design has its foundation in the conception of the post-modern paradigm, according to which knowledge is situated, and truth claims are provisional (Lincoln, 2010). It further follows the post-structuralist paradigm in accepting that research is continuous and fluctuating and must be contextualised (Tracy, 2010). Accordingly, this thesis mobilises an interpretivist and post-positivist epistemology by applying a reflexive dialogue-based methodology to allow enough room for participants' experiences and inputs (Denzin, 2010).

This study had to diverge from the ethnographic standard of participant observation as my continuous presence in the field was not possible. This was due to workplace policy of Uber that did not allow anyone but the driver and his client in the car. I had to resort to a less-immersed ethnographic methodology (Denzin, 2010) that consisted of interviews, the analysis of documents and audio-visual materials (Gobo, 2008) while trying to stay in contact with drivers through phone calls and instant messaging.

It is worth noting that the fast-paced nature of the gig economy and further software itself can influence the research outcome (Pollio, 2019). This can affirm one critical conception of ethnography, that its findings are "valid, though incomplete" and sometimes "impotent" (Sallaz, 2018:10–12). By the time this research is concluded, or even while it is conducted, the Uber App might be redeveloped, company policy could change, and terms of service could be rewritten, rendering part of this research irrelevant or incorrect. However, the highly unequal employment relationship and the precarious working conditions are unlikely to be influenced by the aforementioned changes.

Data collection methods

Against this background, qualitative semi-structured and in-depth interviews were chosen as a leading method for this research. Considering the research question for this thesis – aiming to find out more about the hopes, troubles, aspirations and coping mechanisms of the employees

of the gig economy – this method offers enough depth, breadth, flexibility and credibility for this venture (Tracy, 2010; Doorn, 2017).

A total of ten interviews with five participants were conducted ranging from 28 to 84 minutes and adding up to a total of nine hours. Whenever it was possible, follow-up interviews were scheduled. However, two participants were interviewed only once, and no follow-up interview could be scheduled. Another two participants were interviewed twice, and the fifth participant was interviewed four times.[6]

As an ongoing process throughout this thesis research I have used cross-checking and immersion to gather information and validate data about the research area. Additionally, I have gathered insider knowledge about the ride-hailing industry using weekly observations in social media groups (Facebook). Furthermore, I have screened educational and entertainment content on video platforms and blogs related to ride-hailing and have closely followed local and international news and policy related to ride-hailing. To document and reflect on the process of the thesis and its methodology, I have kept a field diary with daily and weekly entries.

Validity and reliability

The sample size is fairly small, particularly when compared to studies using quantitative methods, but reliability and validity are ensured through "trustworthiness, rigour and quality" (Golafshani, 2003:604). The depth and breadth of the interviews in synergy with the first-hand experience of participants collected through the semi-structured interview framework allows for sincere, credible and significant answers and hence data (Morris, 2015). To eliminate bias, data triangulation (Golafshani, 2003) was utilised by comparing the research findings with the exploratory observations I had documented before the project started, contextualising the data with other recent studies on ride-hailing (in Cape Town) and discussing findings with a senior researcher and expert on ride-hailing from the University of Edinburgh.

Sampling method

The participants were selected through a quasi-random convenience sampling method (Given, 2012) by ordering rides through the Uber app. The prefix "quasi" is used here as the selection process matches a driver with a rider seemingly at random, though the exact matching algorithm is unknown. This sampling method is less susceptible to bias than snowball method sampling,

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[6] The last three interviews had to be conducted by phone because of lockdown restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this case the consent form was read to the participants and their answers were recorded.

but might still lead to the over-representation of certain groups (Given, 2012; Anderson, 2014). Additionally, the location the Uber app is used from can influence the socioeconomic background, demographics or other particularities of the drivers (A Fortuin, personal communication, 2020). However, as qualitative research builds sincerity through specificity (Given, 2012), depth and thick description rather than statistical representation (Golafshani, 2003) and strength in numbers, this concern can be partially neglected. It has to be noted that one participant was recruited with the help of a fellow researcher at the University of Cape Town. The average age of the participants was 39 years. All recruited drivers were male drivers who have migrated to South Africa from other African countries. This was to be expected as most Uber drivers in the Cape Town are male (Carmody & Fortuin, 2019) and intra-African migrants. This confirmed the data I had collected over eight months before starting the study.[7]

Before the drivers were asked to participate in the study, I informed them about the intention of the research, the purpose of the study, form of compensation and that their participation would be anonymous. Once they agreed to participate, contact details were exchanged to schedule an interview at a later time. In total, 45% of drivers contacted for this study participated in an interview (See Table 1).

Sampling method	Drivers contacted		
	Agreed to have interview		Not wanting to have interview
	Participated in interview	Not participated in interview	
Convenience	4	5	1
Referral	1	0	0

Table 1: Participant data from the recruitment process. Source: Author's data.

Personal experience has indicated, that Uber drivers might have problems participating in interviews as they work 12-hour shifts, have limited free time and a small margin. Therefore, all drivers were reimbursed with a cash payment equal or similar to their hourly earnings for the corresponding interview time.[8] While the issue of monetary compensation is widely debated

[7] As the aim of this thesis was not to solely focus on the migrant experience in the ride-hailing sector it has to be noted that it was not intended to only recruit participants with migrant background. However, the small sample that was deemed viable for this thesis consists only of participants with migrant backgrounds.

[8] The estimate of ZAR 100 per hour of interview was calculated using data from literature (Greef, 2018; Carmody & Fortuin, 2019) and later (positively) validated against the participants' statements.

in social sciences, my opting for reimbursement was based on the consideration that instead of an incentive, or monetary exchange, this transaction was a necessary compensation for drivers' lost earnings. The ethical consideration of not causing inconvenience to participants was thus chosen to be more pressing than the methodological concern that these payments might influence the relationship between the researcher and the participant, the sample pool or the interview data (Head, 2009; Morris, 2015).

Data processing and analysis

All recorded interviews were transcribed. The transcribed interviews were then processed using the qualitative data analysis (QDA) software NVivo. Because the interview data proved to be extensive and highly detailed, coding was used to sort, summarise and condense information into more manageable portions for further analysis (Saldaña, 2013; Morris, 2015). It has to be noted, that this process is not reducing information, but rather adds value through the act of interpretation (Saldaña, 2013). As many themes for analysis already existed through the literature review, an inductive in-vivo coding method (Saldaña, 2013) rooted in grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) was used to screen the data for previously unnoticed themes. Subsequently, a deductive coding process was used to compile thematic clusters that were then written up into notes. These thematic notes formed the basis for the empirical chapter of this study.

Ethical considerations

It is acknowledged that the recruitment process might influence the research itself (Morris, 2015) particularly as it starts out as a client-customer relationship during a ride-hailing trip. Drivers might have been inclined to give more positive, affirmative or non-critical answers to not affect their rating and face consequences. However, extensive casual conversations with Uber drivers, during rides that were conducted over a timespan of eight months before this study had started, have indicated that drivers often and sincerely voice concerns about their employment and employer.

We are reminded of the charged political nature of ethnographic inquiry (Denzin, 2010; Morris, 2015) particularly in post-colonial countries and the many epistemological and practical concerns that arise practicing ethnography in this context (Bourdieu, 2003). The person and personality of researchers and research participants are not without effect, and attributes such as class, educational background, gender, nationality and race in their wider meaning can influence the relationship between researchers and participants (Bourke et al., 2009). Researchers therefore have to assure not to instrumentalise the relationship with the participants

for their own benefit or gain and have to accept that some areas of interest or themes are inaccessible to them (Bourdieu, 2003).

It is of utmost importance to value and reflect on scientific principles such as sincerity, credibility and academic rigor during research. In addition, research involving "vulnerable populations" such as minorities, economically disadvantaged or educationally disadvantaged is loaded with responsibility, liability and ethical concerns (Morris, 2015). It is therefore paramount to follow broader guidelines of fairness, respect, care and honesty as outlined in the *Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource Poor Settings* (Schroeder, 2019). Adequate reimbursement for the time and effort of the participants of this study is one of those aspects. To be sure, this reimbursement was not intended to buy myself freedom from the question of how to engage with the community of Uber drivers in a more meaningful and sustainable manner (Bhan, 2014).

Ethical clearance and approval for this thesis was granted by the Faculty of Science Research Ethics Committee (FSREC) from the University of Cape Town (Appendix A). The conditions of this approval have been complied with to my best knowledge and belief. As mentioned above, all participants were informed about the background and intent of the study in detail. Before a participant's first interview, consent to participate in the research was obtained and the process of anonymisation was explained in detail. Consent was documented on a multi-step form (Appendix B) which both parties signed and received a copy of.

It has to be noted that, In May 2020, as the analysis for this thesis was nearing its end, I was asked to be part of a small research team inquiring about the direct effects the Covid-19 pandemic had on ride-hailing drivers in Kenya and South Africa. This research assistant position resulted in two publications that I co-authored with other members of the team (Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming; Otieno, Stein & Anwar, 2020). However, this thesis is based solely on my own research effort and any reliance on another persons' ideas, data or conclusions has been duly referenced.

Anonymity and data security

The best possible was done to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees and the protection of their data and privacy. Data that could be used to identify individuals in the thesis (e.g. names, workplaces, addresses) were anonymised to protect drivers from any repercussions and to offer them a secure platform to voice their opinions. All audio recordings have been deleted after they had been processed for analysis. All sensitive data including personal information, contact

details and audio recordings of potential participants and interviewees of this study were stored on password protected and encrypted devices that were not accessible to third parties.

4
Climbing the ladder par force: Instrumentalising precarious employment

The experience of intra-African migrants in South Africa

Using the exemplary journeys of Abukar and Takawira as an introduction by immersion, this chapter discusses the precarious circumstances that exist on the interface of intra-African migration and the gig economy. Both protagonists' stories give testimony to the grave conditions they have fled, the struggle of finding a place to live and the exhausting efforts of securing employment.

"I need to live. I need to survive. I need to enjoy.": Takawira's career

Coincidently, one of Takawira's former employers was supplying the restaurant we first met at for an interview. The restaurant that also served as a bar in the evening hours, was located next to a busy street of an otherwise quiet and upmarket Cape Town neighbourhood. We were sitting on the terrace together drinking coffee and alcohol-free beer when the small delivery truck of his previous employer stopped next to us. Takawira came to Cape Town in 2009 because of the ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe. Ever-increasing inflation rates decimated savings and pensions (Southall, 2017) and it is estimated that up to 50% of residents in Harare and Bulawayo are receiving money from family members living in the diaspora. More than 20% of those are living in South Africa (Bracking & Sachikonye, 2010). With his 46 years Takawira has the most extensive employment history of all drivers in this study. When he first arrived in Cape Town, he was living in a shack in one of Cape Town's townships. Without a steady income this was his only option, but he was at least partially protected against evictions. Takawira was well aware that immigrants are seen as a source of cheap labour not only in Cape Town, but in all of South Africa.

> "You see there is a mentality that foreigners, the ones that do cheap labour, they want to be paid small money. No, that's not true. I don't come from 3000 kilometres to get cheap money. I need to live. I need to survive. I need to enjoy."

When his income gradually grew, he first moved to safer and more convenient township, before finally settling in what he called a "medium suburb". His career path had a similar incremental trajectory. Before starting at Uber, Takawira was employed as an assistant delivery driver for a caterer in Cape Town. Before that, he took up various odd and informal jobs always risking not getting payed after a full day of labour.

> "Of course, I didn't start as a driver. I started hustling. Cutting even fire wood not long ago. Then sometimes not being paid. Sometimes you can go into construction. You dig 50 centimetres down and you don't get paid."

He was a hard-working man that used every chance to climb the career ladder and spoke of it with confidence and dignity. However hard his struggle was, he knew where he was heading. With every salary increase, he was also able to improve his family's living conditions.

> "Climbing the ladder – we are coming from an environment whereby you could sleep in a shack. For the first time I started sleeping in a shack here in South Africa. So, nobody can tell me it's nothing I did. And I moved on because of the earnings that you'll be getting. […] Now I'm staying in a two-bedroom apartment with my kids. There is no disturbance anymore. So, you need life and death in order to progress. And if you check on my profile on Uber – I said a very profound statement: the sky's the limit. So, if it is the limit – you need to progress."

In 2013, he became a driver and over the span of seven years worked for a number of different delivery companies in Cape Town. His last permanent appointment lasted for almost a year, before he decided to join Uber. Though he is satisfied with his increased earnings and flexible working times as a ride-hailing driver, he is thankful to his former employer for what they enabled him to achieve. For Takawira the transition from cutting firewood to driving for Uber was the process of finding a more formal place to work. His wife undertook a similar journey before she landed her job in hospitality.

> "[…] She did some of the small courses. Quite a number to uplift herself until she became a certified South African butler. So, now she is formal at a very good company. Very energetic company, very professional company. And she's working as a corporate butler in that company taking hospitality and catering. We became formal in the sense that we needed to professionalise our life. So, I thought I will start a catering company, but because of finances I couldn't, that's why I turned to Uber."

To bolster his income from ride-hailing, Takawira took a first aid course and applied for accreditation as a tour guide. He hoped that this would enable him to further monetise the car he was renting by offering guided tours for tourists. Instead of only charging people for the duration of the trip, he would then be able to also charge them for his tour guiding services.

Takawira's story is one of hardship and sacrifice. His positive character disguises most of this struggle with stories of success and a vibrant plan for the future. His story also demonstrates

the incremental character that is inherent to his career and his quest for a safe and dignified livelihood. Together with his wife, he is fighting precarity and trying to build a stable professional career. In contrast, Abukar's story illustrates the fickle reality of many migrants' livelihood and how quickly they are disrupted.

"I needed quick income to cover the everyday costs.": Abukar's journey

Abukar left Somalia in the early 2000s during a time when large number of Somalis fled the country to evade the repercussions of the Somali Civil War that was active since the 1980s (Sadouni, 2009). He managed to leave Somalia for Nairobi, Kenya despite visa problems. The neighbouring Kenya functioned as a refuge for Somali migrants, even though they were facing severe restrictions and there were insufficient opportunities for business and employment (Sadouni, 2009). This is why Abukar later left Kenya and relocated to Maputo, Mozambique. Citing the threat of Malaria as a major concern, Abukar then moved from Mozambique to South Africa. He first settled in Durban for nine months before settling in Cape Town, which he said was a more healthy, safe and sustainable environment. Cape Town would become his home for the next 15 years up to today.

> "For me leaving the country in 2003 was not because of the war, but the impact of the war. There were no medical supplies. There was no education, no healthcare, no water. If I got injured the probability for me to die was high, because of a lack of treatment or medication. There were no jobs! Say, I get injured because of crossfire – which can happen at any intersection of Mogadishu or generally Somalia – to worry about the wound or to worry about the hospital cost – you couldn't imagine."

Before Abukar started at Uber, he had been self-employed. For several years he was managing his own convenience store in the Cape Town CDB close to the bustling Greenmarket Square. However, he was forced to close his business and let his employees go when the building his shop was located in was renovated and upgraded. Abukar was not able to take up the lease again because his business premises had been remodelled into a lobby. Feeling overwhelmed by being put out of business, he took some time off but saw an opportunity to make use of his own car when a friend told him about Uber in 2014. He stated he did not have much choice and did not investigate or research much before joining.

> "I was at home doing nothing. And I needed quick income to cover the everyday costs. So, I did not do much research about it. You know, you do research and all that when you have a choice to do so. But it's like – there's a war and you need to flee."

Abukar was one of the few drivers for whom Uber was not the best-paying job in his career.[9] As a manager of his own convenience store, he was earning more and had much better living conditions. He also complained that Uber required him to be constantly physically present to earn an income. In his old job he was not at risk to lose any income when he was not at his shop or in case he got sick, because his employees would cover for him.

To assist their parents in Somalia, Abukar and his brother regularly send remittances. He stated that it is a duty for him rather than a privilege and put an emphasis on the fact that he is sending the money through legitimate remittance channels. To save enough to support his parents' livelihood, Abukar is very conscious about his spending habits and mentioned this means that the family sometimes skips lunch.

The demanding quest for employment

The stories of Abukar and Takawira document their individual paths to ride-hailing. For Abukar it offered a fresh start after his business forcedly came to an end. For Takawira it promised to be the next step up the ladder. And while ride-hailing was at the time a viable and much needed opportunity for both of them, it came with severe trade-offs that the following section describes.

Working six days a week

In order to pay for their cost of living and other job-related expenses, ride-hailing drivers have to drive long hours for almost every day of the week. None of the drivers in this study worked for less than eight hours and most drivers stated that they work 12 hours a day for six days a week. Driving for long hours requires an enormous amount of alertness and perseverance and thus drivers are regularly physically and mentally exhausted from work. However, on Uber's website where potential candidates can sign up to become drivers the company canvasses the flexibility of the workplace:

> "Only drive when it works for you. There's no office or boss. That means you'll always start and stop on your time—because with the Uber app, you're in charge." (Uber Technologies, 2021a)

The reality looks much different. For most drivers ride-hailing is the only job and they work full-time without a break in order to maximise their income. The only flexibility they can afford is choosing when to take a break. But despite all that, some drivers showed contentment and

[9] And while it is the best paying job for some, it is still not enough to cover the costs.

even satisfaction when speaking about their working times. It was more important for them to decide for themselves when to work, than to have shorter shifts. Many drivers set themselves a daily goal of around ZAR 1000 and only stop working once they have reached it. This can lead drivers to spend more than 12 hours a day on the road and even then, success is not guaranteed, because their income is not calculated by the hour but by the number and length of the trips they are assigned by Uber. And while drivers reported that longer working hours yield higher pay, there are countless days when they did not manage to earn enough despite working for 12 hours.

South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world. The top 10% earners receive more than two thirds of the total national income (*World Inequality Report 2018*, 2018). The Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit shows that 79% of households earn on average less than the minimum wage per person while 50% earn less than ZAR 1149 per month (Farouk & Leibbrandt, 2018). In light of these numbers the reported weekly income of ride-hailing drivers seems well above the national average. However, the interview data shows that when factoring in the associated costs of the job and the financial risks and responsibilities, drivers are still living precariously and are not able to save money or make large investments. Being able to pay for food is a main reason for drivers to work. For most drivers ride-hailing is the main source of income, though they are not always the sole breadwinner of the household. All drivers in this study had families with children. Some of the driver's wives were working or had small businesses in their home country. But even with a double income, these families struggled to generate enough income to cover their costs of living. Additionally, drivers and their families are supporting relatives and extended family in South Africa and abroad by paying for food supplies, education, accommodation, utilities and other expenses.

Most drivers reported to have a personal daily target of ZAR 1000 while working six days a week. After all job-related costs have been deducted from this weekly income of around ZAR 6000 drivers are left on average with between ZAR 2000 and 3500 per week depending on the season and their working hours (see Table 2 for an exemplary tabulation). But Uber is not a job with a fixed income. Income varies from season to season and day by day. During summer tourists drive the demand with lucrative long trips to tourist destinations around the Cape Peninsula and sometimes beyond. As the interviews were held during the last months of summer (November to March) it is assumed that the income reported by the drivers reflects their earnings during this more profitable time of the year, while income during off-season in winter (April to October) is lower.

Position	Amount in ZAR
Income from rides through the Uber app	10000
Uber's commission (25%)	- 2500
Income after commission	7500
Fuel costs	- 2100
Payment for car	- 2500
Net-Income after fuel costs and payment for car	2900
Rent for apartment	- 1500
Remittance to parents and in-laws	- 750
Amount left for food, transport, clothing, data and other	650

Table 2: Example of weekly income and expenses for the month of January in the case of Takawira. Source: Author's data.

The cost of working for Uber

Driving for Uber is time intensive and exhausting. Drivers not only have to struggle with low earnings but also with financial challenges because of the high operating costs of ride-hailing.

> Abukar: "The vehicle I own and drive is a financed vehicle, I need to pay the maintenance fee which is the servicing and all that. I need to pay the insurance. If I add up all that it's a cost that I see on the table. The only way to cut that cost is for me to drive every day for more than 12 hours in Uber."

Drivers frequently complain about the high commission that ride-hailing companies deduct from their income. As of 2020, Uber takes 20 to 25% of every trip (Competition Commission South Africa, 2020) and also charges clients additional fees for every trip. A large part of what is left from a driver's income after these deductions is spent on job-related expenses. One of the biggest factors is the fee that drivers pay to their partners for renting the car. The same holds true for drivers who finance their own vehicle. On average drivers pay between ZAR 2500 to 3000 per week to rent a car from their partner. Most times these rental fees already include insurance cover and maintenance, but drivers also reported that their partners expected them to pay for minor services or yearly inspections. Another constant expense is fuel. Driving on average 800 to 1500 km a week, around ZAR 250 to 300 are spent on fuel each day. Meaning around 25 to 30% of a driver's income is spent on fuel.

Not only does Uber require drivers to have their own vehicle, but they also have to cover all other work-related costs themselves. Drivers have to pay for their own phones, data, phone

holders, charging cables, cleaning supplies and smaller items such as air fresheners. Although many drivers stated they owned a smartphone before they started the job, the wear and tear through non-stop use, especially on the battery, should be considered. One driver mentioned that he used two phones – one for the Uber app and the other for his personal communications.

Concerning ownership patterns

To offer their ride-hailing service, Uber extracts value from the assets (the cars) of their drivers to generate profit. As car ownership remains low in Africa, drivers spent a large share of their income to rent cars through Uber partners and car rental companies (Graham & Anwar, 2018). Most drivers did not own a vehicle when they first joined the company as drivers and were also not able to afford buying one that met the criteria of Uber. Only Abukar owned a car that allowed him to operate on Uber. Nevertheless, he financed an additional two cars through a bank and rented them out to drivers. To gain access to cars, drivers enter into contractual agreements with partners. This allows them to use their partner's car in exchange for a fixed weekly rate called target. Only one driver financed the car he was using through a bank paying monthly instalments.

Not only do drivers struggle financially to access the vehicles necessary to operate on Uber, but they also have problems accessing the virtual slots needed to operate (see Chapter 5). Even if drivers manage to secure enough funds to afford a vehicle, they still lack a slot to be able to drive. A tiresome undertaking as the distribution mechanism for slots is unknown and the waiting time can sometimes stretch over years.

> Tonderai: "If I get a better job that gives me more money, that is better than Uber, I'll opt to go for that job. Why? I don't have a slot. And if the job pays more then I'll tackle the job, because what we consider at the end of the day is money. That changes my life. Money comes in two ways. There's the money that comes like a loaf of bread. You get a loaf of bread, you can have three, four decisions of the kind of slices that you want to make because you have a loaf of bread. But to pick up bread crumbs and trying to make it a loaf is difficult. You understand what I'm saying?"

Of concern is also that the contractual agreements drivers enter with their partners are often not in writing but only based on mutual trust. This is detrimental to drivers, as the owners maintain full control over the cars and can change the particularities of or cancel the agreements. One driver complained that Uber and their partners earn the most, while the drivers do the heavy lifting. Furthermore, drivers argued that the term "partner" is not correct, because they have

extremely limited bargaining power and little freedom of choice. Drivers also criticised that Uber charges them substantive commission while providing them only with rides and no other services.

"In Uber we don't decide": Information asymmetry and algorithmic management

During their job drivers have virtually no contact to any of the company's employees. To do their job drivers rely heavily on the digital infrastructure that Uber uses to distribute rides via their apps.[10] Uber employs information asymmetries in its apps, leaving drivers in the unknown about how trips are distributed, how routes or fares are calculated and who rated them. These black-boxed algorithms are a part of an algorithmic management practice which enables Uber to automate the planning, distribution and tracking of trips and the evaluation of their drivers. This section spells out the structural problems that arise from work that is managed largely by algorithms and how drivers experience these.

The Uber Driver app notifies the driver of incoming trips. Once a driver accepts a trip the app navigates the driver to the client's pickup address. After the client is picked up, the app determines the route a driver has to take to the destination. The driver or the client can choose to take another route, but the previously calculated fare for the trip might change as the trip distance and duration changes. This can cause grievances on the client side, as the previously advertised fare on the app changes. The driver does not know how trips are distributed and is unable to influence the duration, destination or fare of his trip. One driver shared his discomfort.

> Gift: "Before you start the job, you read the rules. And then after that, you know what to do. After reading everything you're supposed to do your things, but according to their rules. If you just go out of the rules you can get punished."

Drivers reported that Uber at times acts inexplicably and makes business decisions affecting its drivers with no prior notice or warning. When Uber changes contractual particularities or their terms of service they notify their drivers once they open the Uber app. At this point drivers have no option but to agree or they are blocked from using the app. In order to earn their target and to pay for their car they have to opt in. Because new rules are dictated from above with no

[10] There are distinct apps for each stakeholder in the system. Clients can use "Uber Request a trip" or "Uber Lite" (a version of the former that consumes less data), drivers need to use "Uber Driver" and partners can use "Uber Fleet" to manage their vehicles.

option to appeal, drivers argue their decision-making and negotiating power is marginal and they are in fact forced to accept all changes.

> Abukar: "I don't have a boss, but I have someone else. I don't call it boss. In the Uber system there's no boss to tell you your salary will be increased or decreased. […] But there are other people that decide what they want. Clearly Uber says, Uber is partnering with drivers. English is not my mother language. Knowing and understanding is different. If I partner with you, we need to be agreeing on everything we are doing together. But in Uber we don't decide. We are partner by name, but actually we get no say at all. They come up with a policy, they update it, we must agree. If I don't agree, it means I cannot go online to work. So, it's like, I'm forced to sign this without my consent. If I say no, it's like the end of the road for me. Any driver who says he's partnering with Uber is lying. We're not partnering with anybody. We are forced to do this. We are forced to and subjected to their terms and condition not ours. Because nobody consults with us."

Alex, who owned his own car but had to rent a slot from another driver, had to pay for a second car from a partner, when Uber altered its terms of service and renting slots was suddenly not allowed anymore. Alex was no longer able to drive, and his weekly income broke away. His only option was to rent a second car including a slot from another partner. For the following weeks he would pay for the financing of his own car and the rental of a second car including a slot, until he managed to secure his own slot.

The above-mentioned scenarios would offer enough opportunities for Uber to consult with their drivers to design driver- and rider-centric solutions for a more sustainable workplace. But drivers are not integrated into decision-making processes at Uber and further treated with detachment and indifference. Drivers suspect that Uber shows little sympathy towards them because clients are the actual paying customers. What makes the relationship with Uber even more complicated is that drivers have almost no contact with any of the company's representatives or employees. Abukar complained that he feels like talking to a machine whenever he approaches Uber with problems that arise during his work. Instead of talking to a supervisor, drivers have to call a hotline or send a message using the company's app. Only for issues concerning deactivation or disputes with their clients they are called into Uber's office. And even then, the local Uber office does not have decision-making power.

> Abukar: “In Uber we don’t see real people. We always deal with machines and computerised systems. The closest time we see people is in the Uber office, but really their hands are tied. They are not decision makers. They cannot even tell you what’s the problem.”

Having little personnel on the ground lowers overhead costs for Uber significantly. And so, a large part of workforce management is achieved by Uber’s rating system. Through this rating system riders are effectively assessing each driver after the ride is finished. Drivers are very aware and some outright sceptical about the value of this management technique. With that little contact, drivers felt that not Uber, but their partners are their real employers. However, Uber supplies drivers with trips, processes payments and has the power to deactivate drivers or change contractual particularities. Their partners are mere middle men that supply drivers with cars and slots. Drivers also complained about how negligent Uber is in managing and controlling their partners. Even though all cars operating on Uber have to be in working condition and without any cosmetic damage, there are partners renting out damaged cars. When Takawira rented a car, his partner failed to mention that one of the passenger doors was not opening. A clear violation of the company’s terms.

“What about the driver?”: Left at the margins without support

Many ride-hailing drivers are aware of Uber’s company hierarchy. Especially in terms of earnings, drivers know that they are at the lower end of the pay scale and that the owners of their cars, the fleet management companies and Uber itself are the actual profiteers. There are reports of drivers going home with only a ZAR 1000 per week after paying for all their job-related expenses. One driver reported he knew of colleague who only earned ZAR 90 in one particularly unrewarding week. Another driver stressed that this was true to such an extent that drivers had problems to pay for petrol, cleaning supplies and basic necessities, because their earnings were insufficient. Tonderai felt that when it came to earnings, drivers were the last on the list.

> “There are a lot of people who are making money and they are not drivers. At the end of the day the dealers, the service stations, the petrol stations, they are making a lot of money. The networks with their data bundles, they make a lot of money through Uber. And the mechanics make a lot of money through Uber. What about the driver? The partners, they make lot of money though Uber. What about the driver?”

Abukar shared a similar sentiment. He felt the job was not what it promised initially, especially after considering all related costs and responsibilities. He was able to finance his own vehicles and generate an income but compared to his old job it was meagre. He was looking for alternative options.

> "Five years down the line, I'm now regretting that I've spent a lot of energy and time. I could have done many things. If I went to varsity, I would have my degree by now. […] I feel five years of time went away. I don't regret it now. I've been part of the journey. But as we speak, I'm trying ways and means to go out of this. Bettering my life or way of living here."

Takawira criticised Uber's strategy to hire ever more drivers. By doing so, Uber tries to minimise the approach time for each trip which is a key metric for Uber's business model (Uber Technologies, 2019). For drivers this means they have to share an almost steady or, as it was the case during the Covid-19 pandemic, even declining number of trips with an ever-growing number of drivers. A constant struggle as Takawira reports.

> "And will you get 100 of those trips when there are a thousand cars around you? There's a lot of cars on the Uber platform. So, will you make it? That's a challenge."

When asked about their grievances at work, many drivers reported to be dissatisfied with the level of support that Uber offered them. Drivers criticised the general unavailability of support staff, biased corporate policy and slow processing times for driver-related issues. Alex stated that Uber does not support drivers sufficiently against bad ratings and their repercussion. He reached out personally to Uber in that matter but got no satisfying response from the company. He recalled an encounter with a client during which he was asked to transport more than the legally allowed number of passengers in his car. When Alex refused, an argument between him and his customers ensued. Shortly after he received a one-star rating. Though ratings are anonymous Alex alleged it was from that specific customer, because he was the first customer of the day and the rating appeared shortly thereafter. And while he followed corporate policy and traffic laws, he was not able to get the negative rating removed from his account. Alex felt that he was "not protected from doing the right thing" and that Uber has offered him no support in that matter. Abukar is similarly disappointed by this lack of support from Uber. He got deactivated after he refused transportation to a highly intoxicated client. When the client in question was not able to walk his friends placed a ride request for him. After Abukar refused the ride, the incident was reported to Uber.

> "Then next day when I went to work – I'm deactivated. There is someone in the office that called me. They said: 'Are you around? Come to me.' I get to the Uber office and I had to write down what happened. When I spoke to them and explained again it's totally different. They (Uber) said: 'Sorry, they (the client) exaggerated, because they used the race card, you know?' That's what they used when they complained about me."

Uber also deactivates drivers for missing documents such as vehicle licenses. It is mandatory for every vehicle to be licensed but the penalty from Uber's side is seen as unnecessarily harsh by the drivers. While the traffic department only charges late licensing penalties and arrears when a driver is stopped, Uber deactivates a driver's account taking away multiple days of earnings. Abukar and Gift stated this is particularly problematic when the yearly license renewal falls on a Friday. This can mean a whole weekend of earnings is lost.

This chapter demonstrated how drivers are willing to work tirelessly, enter risky financial engagements and endure grossly unequal business relationships and employment terms. And while Abukar's and Takawira's experiences illustrate that this is done in an attempt to incrementally improve their livelihood and to mitigate precarity, it does not form an argument for precarious employment. The next chapter will explore the strategies that drivers employ trying to minimise the risks, uncertainties, imbalances and annoyances of their ride-hailing jobs.

5
Making it work: Strategizing precarious employment

Being subjected to the tenacious pressure of securing a livelihood in an over-saturated employment market while having to balance social and financial obligations to their families abroad leads drivers to work constantly. And while many drivers are aware of the precarious employment conditions, the huge financial risks and the uneven employment relationship, they struggle to find less precarious or more lucrative jobs. This chapter explores how drivers employ strategies and mitigation measures to navigate the risks and grievances associated with ride-hailing.

Mitigating risk and uncertainty for razor-thin margins

Ride-hailing drivers encounter many uncertainties at their daily job. They do not know when their next trip will be scheduled, who their next clients is, what the next destination is or how much they are going to earn. Their next trip can take them around the corner of the block or dozens of kilometres away to tourist hotspots such as Hermanus. Thus, they cannot plan their end of the work day. They have to wait, gamble, hope, be patient and sometimes rely solely on luck to earn their income.

> Tonderai: “It all depends because I set my goal like – I need to make ZAR 1000 per day. If I just make ZAR 1000 early, then I stop working. If I don't make ZAR 1000 early, then I keep working until I have that ZAR 1000. It's difficult to say I work these hours because it all depends with the trips that I get.”

Another uncertainty are the ratings drivers receive. After each trip, their clients are requested through the app to rate the trip. Ratings consist of a star rating on a scale from one to five and an optional badge. Badges are pre-defined small emblems that appear on a driver’s profile in the app e.g. “excellent service”, “great chat”, “clean and tidy”, “made my day” or “great route choice”. Although many drivers perceive their driving style and service level to be consistent there are days when they receive multiple bad ratings. When Gift started driving for Uber, he encountered problems with his ratings because he did not adjust to the local traffic regulations quickly enough. One reason was that he was not used to left-hand traffic. His customers, irritated by his driving style, vented their frustration by giving him bad ratings. But the cause for negative ratings is not always that apparent. All interviewed drivers complained to some degree about unfriendly, rude and outright xenophobic behaviour of their clients. Although

these encounters are only a small part of the whole, the negative experiences they cause are persistent. Many drivers expressed that they wished their clients would be more understanding of their situation and realize the consequences bad ratings have for them. Apart from frustrations and personal speculations of what might have influenced customers to leave a bad rating there are real world consequences for drivers. To drive for Uber, drivers have to maintain an overall positive rating over a certain threshold.[11] Once their rating drops below, drivers are instantly deactivated and refused access to the app. Additionally, drivers can get deactivated for not accepting enough trips or cancelling a disproportionate number of trips. While some drivers were able to resolve these deactivation issues by appearing at the Uber office in person and offering a statement, others were deactivated for multiple days, leaving them without income. With reason drivers suspected that ratings are used as a management method to influence drivers' behaviour by making them accountable to arbitrary judgement from their clients.

Another unpredictable risk that drivers are exposed to is falling victim to violent attacks. Ride-hailing drivers are very security-conscious and try their best not to put themselves at risk during their work. They are concerned about falling victim to armed robberies, hijackings (South African term for carjacking), shootings, stabbings or killings. All drivers interviewed expressed at least some concerns of being exposed to threats of violence during their daily job and particularly at night.

> Alex: "I don't work at night. I told myself never to work at night. During the day, I don't feel threatened at all. […] You see a lot of these things that happen with Uber drivers, where they get robbed and they get shot, get stabbed, that happens mostly at night. So, I told myself, I'm never going to work at night, because I'm with a family also. My wife would never allow me to go."

Tonderai himself has recently been chased by hijackers in an attempt to rob him. He also stated that not long ago his brother has been taken hostage when robbers stole his car. Moreover, a friend of Abukar's was taken hostage for a night while the perpetrators used his car to rob other ride-hailing drivers.

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[11] As of 2020, the threshold for deactivation is a rating of 4.6 or lower. Uber states that this threshold varies from country to country and is calculated using the last 500 trips of a driver.

"Sorry ma'am": Locating geographies of endangerment

But some drivers refuse to only work during the day as the nights are seen as most profitable. As a strategy to minimise risk and being able to work at night, drivers try to stay away from neighbourhoods where they deem the risk for violent attacks the highest. Borrowing from the police vocabulary, these allegedly crime-ridden areas are called "hotspots" by drivers and are often located in the historically under-serviced neighbourhoods of Cape Town. However, drivers are only able to influence the location they pick clients up, by physically staying away from certain areas. They have no influence over where they have to drop their clients off as the destination of a trip is only shown once they have picked up a client. Nevertheless, drivers have developed strategies to avoid drop-offs in alleged hotspots.

> Abukar: "It now depends on where I'm picking up. I do an assessment on the physicality of the person. You know you can see who's got a criminal look or not. If you are a nanny – an example – that works in Sea Point and you're going to Langa, and your boss requested for you, I will drive you. I will drive you to Langa because – nanny – I cannot penalise her, because she lives in Langa. Remember, she doesn't represent the crime in Langa. She's an honest person working for a family in Sea Point. She needs to get home. I don't worry about that nanny. I will drive her from Sea Point all the way to Langa where she lives. But remember, if she lives – where there is no road for me to drive – I will easily tell her: 'Sorry ma'am, however, I will take you to the police station. So, you organise your other getaway to your area from the police station.' I will say that. If you go into where it's not safe, where it's not good to change my tire in a certain area, then I'm not passing the police station. […]"
>
> Malte: "Are people understanding of that or are a lot of people…?"
>
> Abukar: "Yes, people understand. See, on the Hout Bay side is a township called Imizamo Yethu. We always tell them daylight is OK, but after sunset automatically no Uber driver goes past the police station. Everybody understands, anyone who works in or lives in Imizamo Yethu takes Uber, no matter if in Hout Bay or outside Hout Bay. They know drivers go to the police station."

One driver also mentioned that ride-hailing drivers are put under pressure by local minibus taxi associations that threaten to illegally impound their cars if they transgress into their self-proclaimed operating areas. While this did not happen to the driver himself, similar reports surfaced during research on ride-hailing drivers in Johannesburg. Here, one driver reported he

was threatened by minibus taxi drivers when he tried to pick up a client from the Johannesburg central station (Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming).

Stretching the rules: Using "grey spaces" to earn

To be successful in their job, evade fines, bolster their income or satisfy clients, ride-hailing drivers further employ a variety of strategies. Some of these strategies are nifty hacks, others operate in "grey spaces" (Yiftachel, 2009a) or are outright prohibited by ride-hailing companies.

Takawira reported that many ride-hailing drivers are working without the mandatory ride-hailing license. He was lucky enough to be issued an operating license, but many of his colleagues were not. Not having an operating license means drivers are legally prohibited from operating and have to avoid getting stopped by traffic police e.g. during traffic stops. Gift has made this experience already. He was driving without an operating license, was stopped by the traffic police and had his car impounded. The fines for this transgression start at ZAR 10000 and then increase gradually. For drivers this is a critical situation because while their car is in the impound lot, they are not able to earn an income as it can take several days until the paperwork is sorted. And while Uber is covering the costs of the impoundment, the driver has to pay the fine in advance until the case is settled. Many drivers have to leverage their social network trying to borrow money informally through friends or relatives. To avoid having their cars impounded, drivers use messaging groups to relay the locations of traffic stops. During the time of this research most traffic stops were reported to be happening at tourist- and ride-hailing hotspots such as the V&A Waterfront and the Cape Town International Airport.

Alex has already applied for an operating license but is driving without it in the meantime as he needs the weekly income. He chose to do so, as it can take over two years until an operating license is assigned. This means drivers are making a risk assessment: Are the chances of being caught worth the weekly earnings? Unlike Gift, Alex was lucky. He never got caught, but there have been close encounters and he has been stopped by the police several times. For this case Alex carries a charter permit. It does not legally allow him to work for Uber in Cape Town, but it has it has bought him some argumentative leeway during his encounters with the police.

> "It's a gamble. It's very, very hard. I mean, every time you have to be on the lookout for the cops and all that."

Alex also uses the charter permit when clients want to travel further distances, but do not want to use the Uber app. In this case both him and his client can profit: Alex does not have to pay the commission to Uber and can offer his client a discounted fare for the trip.

To register a car on the Uber platform or to drive for a partner, a slot is required. But Uber has made the number of slots finite and is only handing out new slots gradually. Drivers were not able to tell us how the distribution system for slots works but stated that the longer you are on Uber the higher your chances are to receive a slot. While slots were not a problem for drivers who rent vehicles from partners, as most partners already own a slot for their car, it was hard for drivers who planned to utilise their own car to acquire a slot. Even though it was prohibited by Uber, Alex managed to rent a slot for a weekly fee from another driver. If Uber noticed that he rented a slot, they could deactivate the slot and block him from using their app. From the perspective of the people trading with slots this behaviour can also be seen as "grey space" strategy to gain a passive income by renting out sought after virtual assets. Tonderai offered his opinion on the matter:

> "That slot, you can't rent it to someone. If you rent, it's illegal. Uber doesn't want you to rent or sell it to someone, it's illegal. Because you got it for free from Uber. There are some people […] who are naughty – I have heard other people saying a slot is ZAR 20,000 – right now. 'If you want to buy a slot come to me, I upload your details, I give you my password and everything. Then you have a slot. You will be using that slot under my name, then I'm done with you. Whatever you want, you come back to me then I will sort it out for you.' But you can't transfer it. Once you transfer it into another name Uber closes out."

Stronger together: Community financing and collaboration

As another strategy to save costs, some drivers share vehicles with others. Abukar explained that when his younger brother wanted to join Uber but did not have a car, he chose to share his car with him. They agreed that Abukar would drive during the day and his brother during the night. This offered them a way to earn additional income without having to rent or finance an additional car. Both of them had their own account on the Uber app and while Abukar was driving the car as the owner, his brother was working for him as a driver-partner. These deals are more the exception than the rule, but Abukar was hinting at the fact that it is almost impossible to earn enough money alone to finance a vehicle.

Many drivers have difficulties to apply for car loans at banks and are not satisfied with the rental agreements that most Uber partners or fleet management services offer. Cars in the UberX category were available to rent for ZAR 2500 a week on average in early 2020. UberXL cars are available at a slightly higher rate of around ZAR 3000 per week as they offer increased earnings per trip. Drivers were well-aware that these deals are not in their favour and stated that repeatedly. Takawira said that this was the reason why some drivers started to organise saving schemes. These saving schemes are often set up similarly to a stokvel and work on a rotational basis. Each member has to pay a defined amount of money every week or fortnight while agreeing to the saving scheme's binding rules and regulations. The saved funds are used to buy cars for each of its contributing members on a rotational basis. The saving scheme concludes once every member has a car.

But not all mitigation strategies revolve around finances or risk. Some deal with the daily psychological stress that ride-hailing drivers are exposed to. Alex, frustrated with the behaviour of some clients, stated that he sometimes counter rates clients when he expects a bad rating from them. While this tactic has no real-world consequences for the clients, as low ratings do not imply consequences or get them blocked from the app, it offers Alex a chance to vent.

> "Usually it's the customers that you know they're gonna rate you one-star because of something that happened while you're in the car, you know. You counter rate them as well because you know, they are gonna rate you one-star."

Unlike many other workers, who have lunch rooms, shop floors, factories and other corporate spaces, ride-hailing drivers have no space to congregate and organise themselves. This is assumed to be one reason why Uber drivers depend heavily on virtual spaces to communicate with their peers. Drivers rely on social media networks (e.g. Facebook) or instant messaging groups (e.g. WhatsApp) to access information relating to their work. Often grouped by nationality, these forums are used to gather valuable information about problems or delays that might affect a driver's earnings such as traffic jams, accidents, hijackings, road blocks or police checks. On the other hand, drivers tell each other about potential earning opportunities such as large events or crowds of people. Likewise, prospective drivers use these platforms to look for cars because partners offer cars and slots there. Drivers also reported that stokvel saving schemes are organised in these groups. Furthermore, drivers use these platforms to deal vent their frustrations about their job, entertain each other with multimedia content or casual conversations. For most drivers, these virtual networks offer a valuable and necessary forum to meet and communicate with their colleagues. As there are not many large organisations or

labour unions for ride-hailing drivers yet,[12] these platforms provide drivers with a semi-public space to vent frustrations, talk about labour issues, build support structures and organise themselves. In one group drivers even held a fundraiser and arranged a funeral march for a ride-hailing driver that had passed away recently.

Impacts of Covid-19

The ethnographic research for this thesis took place during the end of January and the beginning of April 2020 and thus overlapped with the global Covid-19 pandemic and the countermeasures against it. On the 27th of March 2020, the South African presidency announced a nation-wide lockdown and much of the country's economy came to a sudden standstill as a consequence of airport and border closings, the shutdown of all non-essential businesses and institutions and an extended curfew. As a result, Uber drivers were facing a sharp decline in rides. They were depending on tourists, commuters, business people and students, all of whom were now staying at home. Furthermore, during lockdown level 5, drivers were only allowed to operate during certain hours of the day. This meant that without advance warning their income drastically decreased from one day to the other. While drivers were aiming to earn an average ZAR 1000 per day before the lockdown, they were now struggling to earn more than ZAR 80 per day. Drivers reported they were waiting for multiple hours without getting any rides. The informality of their employment situation further meant they had no unemployment insurance or access to aid and were facing the economic shock of this pandemic alone.

> Tonderai: "It's a very stressful moment because of this virus. It's disturbing us and we don't have any source of income. Uber is the only way. Now I don't have any business that I do. I'm just chilling at home and it's hectic. It's very sad. They opened the hours, we should work from 5 am to 9 am, then stop, then work from 4 pm to 8 pm, then stop. But I can open up my application to go online from five o'clock in the morning. Then I spend the whole three hours, maybe four hours and I don't get a trip. I just get a cash trip, maybe ZAR 18, or ZAR 20. Sometimes I might get maybe ZAR 80. But that will be all for the day because I'm not having other customers."

[12] Notable examples for larger unions are found in the U.S. and Canada. In the U.S., with the help of the Service Employees International Union, a group of ride-hailing drivers has (unsuccessfully) appealed Proposition 22, a law that allows gig companies to classify their workers as independent contractors (Hussain, 2021). While in Canada, Uber Drivers United has been rallying for better working conditions and unionisation since 2019 (Mojtehedzadeh, 2020).

The general attitude of most drivers in this study was a combination of confidence, resilience and bright outlook on the future but it changed drastically as the pandemic progressed. The sudden loss of income, uncertainty, lack of social security and missing financial support by the state meant that drivers were facing poverty on many levels. With no savings, no unemployment insurance and no social security, drivers struggled to pay for their cars and groceries, were skipping meals, could not pay rent and were facing illegal evictions, despite an effective moratorium on evictions during the national lockdown. One driver reported that he was unable to buy clothes for his new-born during lockdown (Otieno, Stein & Anwar, 2020). And even when the South African government announced social relief programs, offering financial support and food parcels, many drivers were not able to access them. Drivers who had a migrant status were not eligible to apply for the ZAR 350 South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) grant or were afraid to que for community-organised emergency relief because they feared xenophobic ressentiment. But even South African drivers had problems accessing the relief programs because they could not prove their loss of income sufficiently (Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming).

Opposing fatalistic narratives that frame subaltern urban dwellers as helpless and exposed, this chapter offered accounts of creative rule-bending, mitigation strategies and community organisation to counter precarity. However, the effects of these measures are constricted and should not be overestimated (see also Roy, 2011) as the balance of power is disparate. The next chapter first contextualises and then traces the limits and possible trajectories of drivers' agency using the concepts of "hustle" (Thieme, 2018) and "grey spaces" (Yiftachel, 2009a).

6
Delivering world-class service on an empty stomach: Theorising the ambiguous relationship of drivers and ride-hailing

The precarious state of ride-hailing

The fieldwork for this thesis discussed in the previous chapters confirms that working conditions for drivers at Uber are unsafe, unstable, exhaustive and highly exploitative. Ride-hailing jobs are fickle and precarious in nature, because they are low pay, do not offer social security and exhibit highly uneven employment relationships (Carmody & Fortuin, 2019; Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming). Drivers struggle to fight economic marginalisation and are burdened with the operative and financial risk and indebtedness just to have a shot at earning an income (Simone & Pieterse, 2017). Their income after the deduction of commission, fees, operating cost, insurances, repairs and data is barely enough to pay for housing, schools fees, food and support for relatives in need. Drivers' livelihoods are under the constant threat of being disrupted by minor events. When one driver was not able to work because his car had to stay at the garage for multiple days for a gearbox replacement, he was not able to pay the rent for his family's apartment and had to fear eviction.

Tied to financial responsibilities

The majority of drivers, particularly those who are migrants, lack full access to the city's amenities and are mostly unrecognised by the local administration. They live at the margins of the city in often overcrowded and under-serviced settlements with incomplete infrastructure and little to no public services. From here drivers start their daily journeys and venture into the more profitable parts of town in search for trips: The CBD, the airport, the Atlantic seaboard and the affluent suburbs close to the City Bowl. Sophie Oldfield and Claire Benit-Gbaffou (2014) demonstrate that living without acknowledgement or support from local administrations and being "condemned" to informal practices is the reality for the majority of urban inhabitants in the Global South (Oldfield & Bénit-Gbaffou, 2014). Only a small minority of drivers operates formally with an operating permit, while the South African Competition Commission estimates that as much as 87% of ride-hailing drivers in Cape Town are driving without it (Competition Commission South Africa, 2020). A vicious cycle, because the informal practices of this majority seem diametrically opposed to the small minority of "ratepayers and property owners" that engages formally with the city (Oldfield & Bénit-Gbaffou, 2014:282). In other words, the majority of drivers are barred from engaging with the city and claiming their rights,

because they fear fines or prosecution. Furthermore, there is evidence that drivers are afraid to organise or unionise because ride-hailing companies are known to block and remove drivers who engage in these actions from their platforms (Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming).

Due to the low car ownership and the high levels of inequality in South Africa, many prospective drivers neither have a vehicle nor the necessary financial means to acquire one. This means drivers have to spend a substantial amount of their income to finance or rent the cars needed to work. In an attempt to cut costs and to avoid responsibility, Uber has partnered with car rental services, fleet management agencies and private individuals to supply drivers with cars (Uber Technologies, 2020, 2021b). In Johannesburg, Uber also partners with recruitment agencies that offer drivers to vehicle owners for between ZAR 750 to ZAR 1482 (Uber Technologies, 2020).

Interviewed drivers were highly conscious of their unstable socio-economic situation and showed a strong awareness of their lack of bargaining power. They tolerated their position in the company hierarchy but were actively voicing concerns about the fact that they are earning the least. And while drivers technically decide how much they want to work, most work up to 12 hours a day for six to seven days a week, are exhausted, drained and their health at-risk. Having to deal with this precarious situation of being forced to work a job that earns an income but does not provide enough to support a livelihood is a pattern that is particularly, but not exclusively, evident for African youth (Honwana, 2014).

But for most drivers starting at Uber was a conscious decision to advance their career and increase their income. Attracted by the opportunity to be self-employed, many left their old jobs behind and took huge financial responsibilities to finance cars or pay for deposits. Coming to South Africa from regions of war and economic decline, many of them are supporting their partners and children abroad while others were sent by their parents to earn money to support an extended family at home. While most drivers proudly acknowledge this familial duty, they are haunted by the financial responsibilities of providing for family and relatives abroad, while they themselves struggle to secure a livelihood.

Struggling to create sustainable livelihoods

Particularly the financial opportunities that ride-hailing work offers to drivers allegedly outweigh the precarious prospects addressed above. In Facebook groups for ridehailing drivers there is a seemingly endless supply of drivers asking for slots, cars and partners attempting to get a job (Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming). It is argued here that the appeal of ride-hailing

jobs is influenced by the historically-rooted bleak economic situation of many drivers, extreme competition on the job market and contemporary images of modern urban imaginaries.

The colonial legacy of Africa in general, and apartheid in South Africa in particular, has negatively influenced the chances of previously disadvantaged communities to access housing, develop careers and build economically stable livelihoods (Simone, 2012; Simone & Pieterse, 2017; Williams, 2017). This, and the consequences of racist apartheid policies, has generated modi operandi especially in the younger generations of city dwellers that are aligned towards chance (Nuttall & Mbembe, 2007). In their analysis of the urban core of Johannesburg, Achille Mbembe and Sara Nutall (2007) explain in rich detail how the post-apartheid generation of particularly young urban dwellers are not only forced to work low income jobs (see also Honwana, 2014) but are also driven towards risk in trying to improve their situation even if chances are only marginal.

This study confirms that migrant drivers took immense risks fleeing armed conflicts, poverty or economic decline to improve living conditions for themselves and their extended family. Their will to endure multi-year migratory journeys, refugee camps and inconceivable uncertainty hints at the unstable conditions in their home countries and how bleak their perspective was there (Simone, 2004). Many drivers in this study have succeeded at temporarily gaining a foothold in the urban and managed to "climb the ladder", to borrow Takawira's phrase. To achieve this, they had to risk giving up jobs, moving neighbourhoods and even leaving countries to pursue this uncertain and "incremental" (Bhan, 2019) improvement. Gautam Bhan demonstrates that the incremental building process is a coping mechanism used by urban dwellers to deal with precarity in the context of housing (Bhan, 2019). While improving their lives incrementally, drivers have shown to be incredibly creative, adaptive and managed to stay in an otherwise unaffordable urban environment without much support of government institutions.

Habitus of hustle

In his study on migrants navigating the inner city of Cape Town, James Williams (2017) describes their adaptive behaviour as an attitude of "hustle" and draws a deeply emphatic image of migrant city dwellers while not portraying them as impoverished and desperate, but rather as resilient, relentless and resourceful. Through careful consideration of all possible options and the utilisation of every chance, drivers manage the many "grey spaces" (Yiftachel, 2009a) of their job and develop "makeshift tactics" (Simone, 2004; Vasudevan, 2015). This

amalgamation of "struggle and hope" is also what Tatiana Thieme (2018) describes as "hustle". It is a constant assessment of the risk associated with the use of "grey space" and the probability of major trouble with law enforcement (Thieme, 2018). Certainly, this use of "grey spaces" and "makeshift tactics" can contest official policy and questions established ideas of formality, legality and regulation. In the context of peripheral urbanisation Theresa Caldeira (2017) explains this strategy as "transversal logics". However, in the case of ride-hailing this process has a very limited effect, because as shown, these spaces, particularly when driven by rent-seeking capitalist ventures, are tightly controlled by corporations and often "highly unequal and heterogeneous" (Caldeira, 2017:4) leaving drivers with limited strategic agency.

Because ride-hailing is more easily accessible than other jobs where work experience and formal education is preferred by employers, it offers entry-level employment for low-skilled job seekers. Located at the borders of the formal economy with inadequate regulation and limited intervention by government institutions, ride-hailing constitutes a very "pragmatic search for alternative structures of opportunity" (Thieme, 2018:537) offering easy access and an economic opportunity. In her study, Thieme (2018:534) demonstrates that most work in the Global South is located outside the regulated formal economy and also does not follow "capitalist industrial modes of production". This description holds true for ride-hailing drivers as they work in a contested and highly commodified environment that is placed on the fringes of the formal service economy. However, drivers do not operate outside of capitalist logics in general, but at its very core. Industrial is here only the global scale at which ride-hailing companies operate and the ubiquitous surveillance and control measures that are in place to manage employees.

The temporality of ride-hailing

While ride-hailing is not the business of choice for most drivers, they are set to make the most of it. In terms of income, putting aside the precarious nature of ride-hailing work, it is a step forward for some and a step backward for others. As jobs are unsteady and hard to access, improved working conditions and an increasing salary are not always given when changing jobs. Bhan (2019) explains how this incremental process of piece by piece improvement is one of the main methods of building for subaltern urban dwellers in the Global South. This principle, I argue, does not only hold true for building homes, but also for building careers and livelihoods. Unable to rework the economic structures or the structural inequalities of their work environment, drivers are trying to make Uber work for them piece by piece. And while drivers are engaged in "upgrading" their career path and economic situation incrementally, they

are obstructed by their employer and missing institutional support, unable to "repair" it permanently (Bhan, 2019). Migrant workers in the ride-hailing industry employ a manifold set of strategies to mitigate inadequate working conditions (Vallas & Schor, 2020), are extremely resilient and "play a crucial role in the global gig economy" (Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming:10), but are at the same time trapped by financial responsibilities to work informally and precariously for international corporations backed by billions in venture capital. Aware of the underlying conditions, drivers cope with unstable earnings, unequal employer relationships and missing chances of advancement by treating ride-hailing as just another temporary opportunity. In fact, many drivers stated that Uber was a temporary solution for them, until they found a better source of income (see Pollio, 2019).

Intending to increase their chances, drivers are constantly considering manifold opportunities to advance themselves (Simone, 2004). They leverage their personal networks in an attempt to access jobs and try to diversify their income to improve their unpredictable and unstable economic situation (Thieme, 2018) by setting up side-businesses e.g. mushroom growing, tour guiding or charter services. And they are willing to quit hard-fought jobs and are taking large financial risks for a chance at earning better.

Decreased earnings, increased informalisation

But since the inception of its service, Uber has become less profit-yielding for drivers and their income has since steadily declined (Greef, 2018). This is owed to changes in pricing (Competition Commission South Africa, 2020) as a result of the competition between ride-hailing companies and the increasing number of drivers signing up for Uber. Countering increasing number of passenger rides with an increasing number of drivers is a strategy applied by Uber to increase its market share, as the company documents in Figure 1. The strategy posits that as the number of drivers grows, the network coverage increases and the waiting time for riders decreases resulting in an increased demand. More demand with a stable number of drivers means increased waiting times but also higher earnings for drivers. To minimise the waiting time, maximise network coverage and effectively grow their market share, Uber then tries to increase the number of drivers, effectively decreasing earnings for drivers. And indeed, many drivers have already experienced that Uber has reduced their fares while their customer base grew. This rapid networked growth can create extremely homogenised markets (Srnicek, 2017).

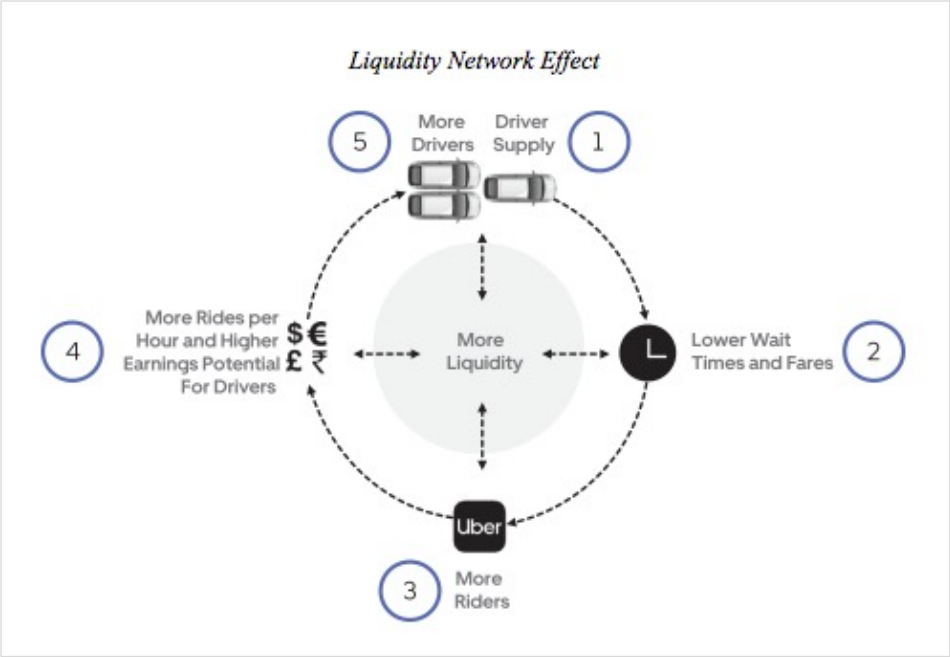

Figure 1: The Liquidity Network Effect. Source: Uber's Form S-1 Registration Statement, 2019

Furthermore, decreasing prices and the increasing informalisation and commodification of work amplified by the ride-hailing industry means drivers are faced with low wages, irregular working times and unstable jobs. Oftentimes drivers have no binding contracts and their working conditions or rental agreements are only agreed upon by handshake. And while the majority of drivers are working full-time for several years, all of them are employed as independent contractors leaving them without social security. All these are indicators for the informalisation of work (Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming).

Utilising "grey spaces" to counter uncertainty

To deal with the uncertainties, inequalities, grievances and dangers that their workplace confronts them with, drivers employ a manifold set of tactics and coping strategies because, as Abukar exclaimed fittingly: "In Uber we don't decide! We are partner by name, but actually we get no say at all."

Drivers have extremely limited bargaining power and lack freedom of choice as their means of labour, e.g. cars, slots and the digital platform they are operating on, are controlled by Uber and the vehicle owners. Bound by monthly payments and the need to earn an income, written agreements are often frowned upon, drivers have no protection against wrongful dismissal and their so-called partners are able to change contract particularities at their own will. And so, Abukar's expression of indignation above reverberates further than the workplace. It signposts the drivers' perceived position in the corporate hierarchy but also stands for the stoic will to

temporarily make the job, make Uber work for them and to find a foothold in the urban. The manifold strategies and coping mechanisms that drivers develop to deal with the shortcomings, grievances and the hostility that ride-hailing entails then attests to this structural power imbalance expressed in Abukar's statement above.

Coping with the unknown

Drivers have endured extended periods of time waiting for chances, jobs, promotions and salaries. Many of them spent months or years on their journey to South Africa dealing with multiple unknown variables and uncertainties. They waited to transition through different forms of housing, for slots to operate on their own, to get unblocked on the platform, to pick up their studies again or for the right moment to try another career opportunity. To deal with time spent in waiting positions drivers then employ coping mechanisms and strategies. Sophie Oldfield and Saskia Greyling (2015) describe at length how, in the context of housing access in South Africa, these repetitive acts of waiting stimulate people to find opaque, informal and often times ephemeral solutions to bridge the uncertain.

While drivers are waiting for Uber to assign them their own slots, some illegally rent slots from other drivers or drive on someone else's profile. Large numbers of ride-hailing drivers are taking the daily risk of large fines and impoundment for driving without an operating permit. For many drivers ride-hailing is a temporary solution, but they try relentlessly to utilise Uber to earn an income until they have found another better paying job. In that sense, drivers are searching for ephemeral gaps in the urban, moving carefully in a space on the margin of legality. Oren Yiftachel (2009a) demonstrates that this blurring of lines, between the lightness of the legal and the darkness of the illegal, creates what he calls "grey spaces". These semi-formal, semi-legal spaces that drivers work in are not managed by the authorities through regulation but rather by a narrative of "delegitimating and criminalisation" (Yiftachel, 2009b). The city of Cape Town has chosen not to penalise ride-hailing companies for exceeding the number of legally allowed cars on the road, but instead targets drivers with large fines and the impoundment of their cars. This delegitimisation aimed at the drivers opens up the "grey space" leaving them "concurrently tolerated and condemned, perpetually waiting 'to be corrected'" (Yiftachel, 2009b:90). The result is a "creeping urban apartheid" (Yiftachel, 2009b:88) created between the tolerated corporations that are able to legitimise their "grey spaces" and a class of workers who, unable to do so, are confined to informality and illegality. And while many urban dwellers are far from being "passive victims" of the sprawling informality that "grey spaces"

embody, they are also nowhere near claiming rights of more formal citizens[13] (Yiftachel, 2009b).

In an effort to compensate for their lack of rights and to find stability and security, drivers are open to cooperation across all boundaries, but group together mostly according to nationality. These groups are often organised in semi-public social media or messenger groups e.g. Facebook and WhatsApp, are purpose-driven and mostly short-term networks, because drivers are not bound to their job, the city or the country (Simone, 2004). For many drivers, these groups offer a support structure that protects them from external threats such as accidents, violence and risk but also offers financing options e.g. stokvel schemes. At the same time competition or obstruction by other drivers and public or official intervention is kept at bay by the reputation of group solidarity and identity. It is a pattern of solidarity (Sadouni, 2009) which forms an important layer of security (Simone, 2004) to compensate not only for the risk and threat of violence but also for the lack of social security and insufficient inclusion by the state.

To be successful at their job, to manage risk and to avert violence, drivers manage a set of "complex geographies" (Simone, 2004). Drivers have mapped and demarcated their operating area, the City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality, into different informally assigned zones. There is no official register of these zones and some are semi-permanent, e.g. the more profitable areas around the Atlantic Seaboard, while others are transitory e.g. hotspots that are defined as such because of frequent robberies or police controls. Driver's use of these zones can be seen as a spatial mitigation strategy to lower perceived risks.

Unable to access support

Certainly, the above-mentioned strategies demonstrate that drivers are far from being helpless, immobile or hopeless. But it is also without doubt that their work environment is hard to navigate, full of personal and financial risks and their livelihoods are highly precarious and unstable. Even drivers that earn as much as ZAR 10000 per week are often left with less than 30% of that after Uber's commission and their operating costs are deducted. It is vital here not to overestimate or romanticise the effects of the impressive resilience, agency and inventiveness of drivers in light of their continuing marginalisation and the fact that the state is actively avoiding the responsibility for social security and welfare (Ballard, 2015). Edgar Pieterse and

[13] "More formal citizens" can, for example, claim rights, have registered addresses, residence permits, land titles or access to city or state services. The behaviour or status of such citizens is "approved" or deemed "legal" by authorities or the government (Yiftachel, 2009). Informality, on the other hand, is defined by a lack of such approval (See also Oldfield & Bénit-Gbaffou, 2014).

AbdouMaliq Simone (2017) also put the finger on the wound and highlight the perpetual ramifications that colonialism has for cities and their inhabitants in the Global South. Particularly historically disadvantaged cities and communities carry the burden of development by themselves without being able to tap into the same rich resources as their former colonisers (Simone & Pieterse, 2017) while investment in public infrastructure in Africa even declined from the 1980s to the 2000s (Pieterse, 2011).

To Migrants who are subjected to a life of constant hustle and in search of a temporary yet stable home, many cities of the South do not offer much sense of belonging (Simone, 2004) or support. During the Covid-19 pandemic it was made visible that particularly migrant ride-hailing drivers were not considered formal citizens and were denied state welfare. Many of them were unable to access any form of unemployment benefits, food parcels or cash transfers. Though, Gautam Bhan (2017) has demonstrated that the integration of unorganised sector workers into an urban welfare state is possible. But the "unsaid belief" that migrants can only claim rights in their home countries has to be contested to reimagine "who belongs in cities" while ever more people are moving to them (Bhan, 2017:468). I suggest that the "makeshift" and "ephemeral" (Simone, 2004:426) strategies used by migrants in an effort of making do in the urban can be worked into more sustainable and permanent practices of creating livelihoods by offering particularly subaltern and migrant urban dwellers access to social security, less vulnerable employment and a safer more permanent urban environment.

Promised improvement for ungovernable and neglected spaces

While drivers struggle to make a living, the City of Cape Town has left ride-hailing companies with ample room for manoeuvre, doing little to regulate it. Admittedly, the city has restricted the number of ride-hailing vehicles each company is allowed to operate but has effectively failed to enforce this limit as a large majority of drivers are seen driving without licenses. Uber is not afraid of city officials impounding cars over missing operating licenses. Evidence suggests that Uber has spent millions of Rand from 2015 to 2018 to reimburse drivers for release fees of around ZAR 10000 (Competition Commission South Africa, 2020).

Asher Ghertner (2011) has demonstrated how state actors can seemingly oversee large economic operations setting up informal or outright illegal structures. His case study documents how a mall is illegally built in a protected green space in Delhi's Southern Ridge in a desperate attempt to grow the image of a world-class city. City governments with stressed budgets and insufficient infrastructure seem susceptible for seemingly free city upgrades from private corporations (Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Simone & Pieterse, 2017). The notion of "world-class

aesthetics" that these upgrades offer is much anticipated by city governments, because it promises a solution for "otherwise ungovernable terrain" (Ghertner, 2011:282). Instead of taxing, regulating and directing ride-hailing companies, cities of the Global South appreciate their disruptive potential because it promises to drive out other less aesthetically pleasing, makeshift or emergent services (Simone & Pieterse, 2017). In his case about the Malebo pool region in Kinshasa, Filip de Boeck describes the "half-hearted" attempts of the local government to regulate newly emerging farming activities on previously non-existing land and its failure to "direct, control and, above all, tax" (de Boeck, 2012:315). The inability of governments to support, secure and sustainably grow newly emerging urban spaces, services and infrastructures can offer chances to urban dwellers, but also create a competitive edge to rent-seeking corporations, as it is shown in this study.

Reframing infrastructure

Using unmarked cars, drivers are almost invisible and untraceable to the city because the government tends to acknowledge infrastructure only once it has reached a certain scale (Bhan, 2012). Partially visible structures, activities in "grey space" and non-traceable transactions are neither analysed, counted nor supported by state actors (Simone, 2004). Bhan (2017) reminds us of the impact that single civil agents have in large scale infrastructure operation. Following his argument, ride-hailing drivers can be seen as a piece of social infrastructure that produces a valuable and much needed networked transportation service. By framing this fragmented network of people as "people as infrastructure" (Simone, 2004) it is possible to highlight the structural importance that a single driver has at the macro level of the network. Each driver delivers transportation services to commuters, students, business people, tourists and mobility-impaired customers one use case at a time. A single driver is neglectable for the city, but a network of thousands of drivers delivering essential services certainly does not go without notice. Making visible this network of drivers as a vital infrastructure can initiate the process of formalising "grey spaces" that have long been a working solution for many subaltern urban dwellers. This process could frame unsteady employment, informal practices and "grey spaces" not only as a problem, but rather as a very pragmatic solution by subaltern urban dwellers to carve out livelihoods in an otherwise hostile environment.

Driven by promises of world-class city aesthetics

Apart from offering an income and a chance of being self-employed, I argue that ride-hailing has incorporated contemporary ideals of urban spaces and work places to appeal to its drivers and clients alike. Ride-hailing offers a quick and seamless transportation solution, safe payment

methods, flexible working hours, access to otherwise unaffordable cars and a workplace in the city's most affluent neighbourhoods. It challenges the existent (public) transport systems, some of which are deemed fragmented, informal, slow or less reliable not only in cities of the Global South, but globally. By offering internet-enabled access to its service that is promoted as safer, more affordable and faster than its classic competitors in Cape Town (e.g. minibus and taxis), ride-hailing attends to the solutionist mantra of being able to improve life and solve all its problems through technology (Halpern et al., 2013; Morozov, 2013). This image of technologically-enforced service improvement is a deeply political urban development phantasy rooted in "feelings of promise" that can be enabled by infrastructure particularly in post-colonial countries (Larkin, 2013:333). The alleged opportunities that the improved service offers have their own phenomenological peculiarities that transport a sense of modernity (Larkin, 2013) and an "enchantment" that prevails over doubts, risks, disappointment and failure (Harvey & Knox, 2012). In their study about large scale road infrastructures in Peru, Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox (2012:521) base the effective power of this enchantment on "three specific promises: speed, political integration and economic connectivity". Firstly, Uber utilises the need to move quickly and seamlessly through the city as one of its main selling points. Before, customers had to wait at street corners for minibus taxis or had to flag down taxis manually. Now rides are scheduled and tracked via a mobile app. Uber expects their drivers to arrive at the destination in under five minutes. Secondly, drivers are promised political integration being able to work in the economically prosperous and well-serviced areas of Cape Town. Lastly, economic connectivity is experienced by the drivers as it is promised to them to tap into the rich resources of the central districts of Cape Town and the tourism business. But all this comes as a trade-off for immense personal and financial risk, indebtedness and lack of social securities. And while ride-hailing drivers are delivering a service many of them cannot afford themselves, the dissonance between the drivers' experience of infrastructure in the less serviced, historically and structurally neglected parts of Cape Town and the promised future largely amplifies its inherent promise (Harvey & Knox, 2012). But for those living at the margins, the promises and opportunities of those new structures also lead to newly erected barriers (Graham, 2010). Some locations are not receiving service because they are deemed a hotspot, many cannot afford the fare as local minibus taxis are more affordable and prospective drivers are unable to access vehicles by themselves.

Effectively then, ride-hailing offers a much-contested heterotopia (de Boeck, 2012), unwillingly shining a light on working conditions, spatial justice, precarity and issues of urban

transportation while uncovering spaces of exploitation, greed and unregulated capitalism. But for a moment this space allows drivers and passengers to push aside the "fragmentedness", "contradictions" and "ruptures" of the city (de Boeck, 2012:323) to disappear into an ideal space of urban life, a well-paying job, working urban transportation, steady employment and self-employment.

Uber's large-scale hustle for competitive advantage

Since the introduction of ride-hailing in South Africa, the use of metered taxis and their revenue has declined and several companies were forced to close down. Metered taxi providers could not compete with Uber's subsidised fares and were facing an unfair regulatory disadvantage (Competition Commission South Africa, 2020). Declining income, job losses and the advancing commodification of work have added to the "constantly shifting dilemmas" (Simone, 2012:359) that metered taxi operators have to face. Still, promises of improvement and ideals of modern life are weaponised in the fuzzy and depleting marketing language that Uber uses to promote its business to the drivers: "You move the world", "Opportunity is everywhere", "Make money on your own terms" (Uber, 2019). Furthermore, the company has boasted to be a "significant net contributor to hundreds of local economies – creating new economic opportunities for thousands of people" (O'Keefe & Jones, 2015). This thesis has not only confirmed that most drivers stay below the tax threshold of ZAR 79000 with their annual income (South African Revenue Service, 2019) and thus pay no income tax in South Africa, but also that the livelihoods created by Uber are fickle and precarious.

Additionally, it is presumed that by using a network of Dutch subsidiaries Uber funnels all of its income generated from trips in South Africa out of the country in an effort to avoid taxes. South African taxi associations have long complained that ride-hailing providers do not pay adequate taxes and thus gain an unfair advantage over their competitors. Moreover, the Competition Commission of South Africa has questioned if ride-hailing companies are correctly accounting for corporate tax and value-added tax. The commission noted that the corporate tax paid was "disproportionately low compared to the revenue generated in South Africa" (Competition Commission South Africa, 2020:62). I thus suggest that not only drivers, but also the ride-hailing companies that they work for use "grey spaces", informality and the notion of hustle to advance their business and market position.

Corporate informality and "grey spaces"

Indeed, from 2015 until recently Uber managed to reduce its taxable income generated outside the U.S. through the use of Dutch subsidiaries to as little as 1%, using a tax strategy called the "Double Dutch" (O'Keefe & Jones, 2015). When changing European regulation concerning multinational corporations put an end to Uber's "grey space" tax strategy, the company managed to create a USD 6.1 billion tax deduction in the Netherlands amounting to almost a tenth of its total valuation. This will help Uber to reduce its corporate taxes for years to come (Browning & Newcomer, 2019).

Same as its drivers, Uber has identified "alternative structures of opportunity" outside of the regulated environment to "hustle" for its interests, advance its position and effectively lower its cost of business (Thieme, 2018:537). Like many other multinational corporations, Uber shifted their income through this "grey space" of legal tax loopholes to low tax countries. Similar to Claire Benit-Gbaffou and Sophie Oldfield (2014) who have demonstrated that "grey spaces" are not only used by subaltern urban dwellers to build homes but often also by the "political society" trying to evict the former, this study has shown that "grey spaces" are not only used by drivers, but also by their employers. It can be argued that "grey spaces" exist in the formal business sector as much as in "the deprived urban fringe" (Yiftachel, 2009b:92; Roy, 2011).

Uber and other ride-hailing companies go out of their way to avoid formal responsibility towards social security, taxation and regulation by misclassifying drivers as independent contractors (Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming). The Covid-19 pandemic has unmistakably shown that without unemployment insurance or social security drivers are at the risk of sliding into poverty within weeks. The burden of aid is left to the cash-strapped cities and municipalities of the Global South which are dealing with an already small tax base (Simone & Pieterse, 2017). To be able to keep employing drivers in California as independent contractors, Uber and other U.S. gig economy companies have successfully spent north of USD 200 million lobbying for their own proposition (Conger, 2020). Together, and with the help of large legal teams, these companies are actively constructing their own legislation by virtually drafting labour law that allows them to define drivers as self-employed. By circumventing calls for labour rights and social security with aggressively lobbied legislation, ride-hailing companies are creating their own "zones of exception" (Ong, 2008; Roy, 2011:234). These technically legal, yet capital-intensive "elite informalities" demonstrate that the "idiom" of Southern urbanisation – informality – is not only leveraged by the poor, but also by international

corporations (Roy, 2011) utilising spaces of unclear or missing regulation and circumventing existing legislation.

It is uncanny how similar the strategies are that subaltern urban dwellers and international corporations employ in their uneven race for a piece of the urban (Simone, 2004). While the subaltern instrumentalise scarce opportunities to create dignified livelihoods in harsh urban environments, gig economy companies commodify work, use legal loopholes, create their own legislation and only pay workers sub-standard wages in a race for enough market share to be profitable. All backed by billions of dollars in investment capital.

Ride-hailing companies are the benefactors of the precarious hustle of thousands of drivers in South Africa. As this and other cited studies have shown, these companies reject all responsibilities for their workers, ignore all pleas for change and have full control over contractual particularities. And while the mitigation strategies spelled out in the previous chapters demonstrate considerable creativity, resilience and agency, they fail to initiate a process of structural improvement for all drivers. The concluding chapter below will address this fact and speculate about the practical implications and the need for future research.

7
Conclusion

The advent of ride-hailing has without a doubt caused major disruptions to the South African transport sector and companies such as Uber and Bolt have faced strong headwind from workers and their direct competitor the taxi industry. But in the light of staggering unemployment numbers, ride-hailing is still seen as a viable opportunity for income particularly by unemployed migrants. As the research for this study was partially conducted during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa it illustrates both the precarious normality of drivers before the crisis and a brief peek into the even harsher reality at the onset of the pandemic. It therefore adds rich detail to the literature on how drivers and ride-hailing companies act during times of global crisis. The significance of this study is rooted in its focus on the experiences of otherwise understudied individuals in the Global South, the emphasis on an also understudied company, the growing public interest in ride-hailing and the increasing number of drivers that are employed by the gig economy.

Summary of findings and limitations

The fieldwork for this thesis inquired about the hopes, troubles, aspirations and coping mechanisms of the employees of the gig economy. The hypothesis of this thesis that working conditions for drivers at Uber are unsafe, unstable, exhausting and highly exploitative has been confirmed. This thesis therefore largely supports findings of previous studies on the topic (Carmody & Fortuin, 2019; Pollio, 2019; Otieno, Stein & Anwar, 2020) in that ride-hailing jobs are fickle and precarious in nature, because they are low pay, do not offer social security and exhibit highly uneven employment relationships. It has also been found that ride-hailing is not only used as an entry-level job, but also acts as a perceived stepping stone, career improvement or, as in Abukar's case, an emergency solution to mitigate financial hardship.

The ride-hailing business in Cape Town is to a great extent supported by migrant workers who endure low-wage work under appalling conditions desperate to improve their financial status and living conditions. This thesis argues that the City of Cape Town has mostly ignored drivers' requests and demands for investigation and regulation in favour of the seemingly free and desperately needed transport infrastructure that Uber delivers. Even the 2020 report on ride-hailing by the Competition Commission (Competition Commission South Africa, 2020) has had little to no effect on how ride-hailing companies conduct their business. And while the report can be seen as a supporting gesture by the state it has yet to show real world

implementations to its findings. The empirical research (Chapters 4 and 5) for this thesis has further demonstrated that drivers are left alone in their struggle for better pay, unemployment insurance and the right to be heard.

Drawing on contemporary literature on the gig economy and institutional disruption (Slee, 2015; Scholz & Schneider, 2016; Graham & Anwar, 2018) this thesis also showed strong evidence that the jobs created by this new type of on-demand work turned out to be precarious low-wage traps without perspective or social-security that predominantly serve customer and corporate interests. Burdened by the financial engagements they entered to finance cars, drivers work tirelessly to make ends meet. This confirms James and Rajak's (2014) findings that financial illiteracy is exploited to overstate promises of financial income and economic opportunities.

During the early stages of the fieldwork most drivers sounded confident to make Uber work as a much-needed opportunity despite all hardship, exploitation and unfairness. But as many drivers were pushed into poverty due to the pandemic-related loss of income, uncertainty, lack of social security and missing aid by the government they became disillusioned, frustrated and were looking to find other sources of income. Many of them were struck with disbelief when in December 2020, while many of them were still struggling to deal with the effects of the pandemic, Uber changed their fare structure, effectively reducing the per mile [sic] charge 40% from ZAR 8 to ZAR 4.80.

This study further documented the strategies that drivers employed in their effort to gain competitive edge, mitigate job related risks and counter precarity. These strategies pointed towards the fact that much of ride-hailing work is located in the informal domain, as the everyday "hustle" (Thieme, 2018) for opportunity forces workers to make use of "grey spaces" (Yiftachel, 2009a) on the fringes between the formal and the informal and the legal and the illegal. Unable to claim their full rights and afraid to unionise because they fear fines, prosecution or contract termination, many drivers feel left out, confirming Oldfield and Bénit-Gbaffou's (2014) findings as they are living without acknowledgement or support from local administrations and are confined to informal practices.

The majority of drivers in this study immigrated from Southern African countries and have taken immense risks fleeing armed conflicts, poverty or economic decline giving testimony to the colonial legacy (Simone, 2012; Simone & Pieterse, 2017) that still affects many Southern urban dwellers. I argue that the very "pragmatic search for alternative structures of opportunity"

(Thieme, 2018:537), or "hustle", of subaltern migrants is utilised by rent-seeking ride-hailing companies that claim to have no legal responsibilities towards their workers. Trapped by financial responsibilities and struggling to create stable livelihoods, drivers are suspended in the informality of a corporate zone of exception created by Uber. And while some drivers have managed to incrementally build their careers and improve their lives, many wanted to quit ride-hailing but were depending on the income.

At the same time, Uber uses legal "grey spaces" to advance its business. Drivers are mislabelled as employees to evade responsibilities and subsidiaries are used to minimise tax duties in South Africa. I argue that similar to their drivers, Uber strategises "hustle", "grey spaces" and informality to gain competitive edge. The only difference being that Uber's "struggle" is brokered by lawyers and tolerated by the city government. The result is a "creeping urban apartheid" (Yiftachel, 2009b:88) created between the tolerated corporations that are able to legitimise their "grey spaces" and a class of workers who, unable to do so, are confined to informality and illegality. Uber's leverage is the much-needed urban transportation upgrade that harnesses its alleged disruptive power from an indebted workforce that lacks the most fundamental employment rights.

Practical applications

Literature on the gig economy and particularly ride-hailing companies in the context of the Global South is still in short supply. This study adds in-depth ethnographic research and theorisation to the literature on ride-hailing through region-specific and original research. It further adds a critical perspective on the living and working conditions of the marginalised in the Global South.

Furthermore, this study has shown the harsh reality of ride-hailing and that drivers' demands are ignored by their employers. There has been virtually no help for drivers that have been affected by the pandemic. I suggest that challenging Uber's practice to define drivers as independent contractors is the right path towards ensuring the much-needed stability, social security and unemployment insurance that many drivers argue for. Another complexity that stands in the way of realising basic labour rights is that ride-hailing drivers are largely unorganised and have no official representative bodies or unions (Otieno, Stein & Anwar, 2020). Organised labour representation could have a significant effect towards realising worker demands and labour rights.

It has also been demonstrated that while drivers deliver a critical part of Cape Town transportation infrastructure their demands are largely ignored by the city government and little is done to regulate ride-hailing companies. And while the privatisation of transportation infrastructure by international corporations must be addressed critically, I suggest that, making visible the enormous network of drivers as a vital infrastructure could temporarily benefit the formalisation of "grey spaces" that condemn many urban dwellers to informality. The thousands of drivers working day in and day out to sustain a critical piece of urban infrastructure should no longer be ignored.

I further argue that the ongoing exploitation of workers in the name of the gig economy has to be addressed by national or international regulating authorities. Particularly in the Global South the growing informalisation and commodification of labour poses a threat to workers that are caught in unstable short-term employment. Furthermore, the tax "hustle" of international corporations should be investigated to address corporate "zones of exception" (Ong, 2008; Roy, 2011:234) that exploit vulnerable workers and to seize the opportunity for much-needed tax income.

Recommendations for further research

As one limitation of this study has been the small sample size, future research could address this shortcoming by scaling up this study in order to account for more significance and variety in terms of drivers' biographies and experiences. The migrant experience has played a prominent role in this thesis and investigating the intricate relationship that intra-African migrants have to ride-hailing offers a productive undertaking. This study could not identify considerable political will to change legislation and policy concerning the gig economy or particularly ride-hailing in South Africa. Further research should actively address this gap and guide policy makers to make more informed decisions (Tracy, 2010; Pieterse, 2015). Another rich area of research is located around the missing organisation and representation of ride-hailing drivers (Vallas & Schor, 2020). All drivers used at least some form of social media or messenger to communicate with other drivers on a daily basis while the few organisations claiming to represent ride-hailing drivers were met with doubts and distrust by drivers. Future research could address the fears of drivers towards the organisations and the struggles of the organisers to establish such organisations. Lastly, the large-scale effects that the drivers' concerted efforts have had on city's transport network are still uncharted. Specifically following Gautam Bhan's (2012) interpretation of AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) concept "people as infrastructure" is seen as disruptive theoretical trajectory towards the acknowledgement and the

formalisation of an urban workforce that has worked tirelessly to create an unmatched transportation network.

In May 2020, as the analysis for this thesis was nearing its end, I was fortunate enough to be part of a small research team inquiring about the direct effects the Covid-19 pandemic had on ride-hailing drivers in Kenya and South Africa. This research project (Otieno, Stein & Anwar, 2020; Anwar, Otieno & Stein, Forthcoming) documented that without any social security, unemployment insurance or savings, many drivers were facing poverty on many levels. As so often, the research itself was unable to address the immediate effects and offered no practical, financial or emotional assistance to the affected drivers. However, the devastating consequences that thousands of ride-hailing drivers were facing country-wide without virtually any help by their employers, illustrated the urgent need to further inquire about the proliferating commodification and informalisation that ride-hailing and the gig economy entail in the Global South.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Ethical Clearance Form

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
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Faculty of Science
University of Cape Town
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6 December 2019

Malte Stein
Department of Environmental and Geographical Science

Working for R26: Investigating the Livelihoods of Uber Drivers in Cape Town, South Africa.

Dear Malte Stein

I am pleased to inform you that the Faculty of Science Research Ethics Committee has approved the above-named application for research ethics clearance, subject to the conditions listed below.

- Implement the measures described in your application to ensure that the process of your research is ethically sound; and
- Uphold ethical principles throughout all stages of the research, responding appropriately to unanticipated issues: please contact me if you need advice on ethical issues that arise.

Your approval code is: **FSREC 116 - 2019**

I wish you success in your research.

Yours sincerely

Signature Removed

Dr Shari Daya
Chair: Faculty of Science Research Ethics Committee

Cc: **Dr Anna Selmeczi (Supervisor)**

Appendix B – Consent Form

African Centre for Cities (ACC) – Environmental & Geographical Sciences (EGS)

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
PRIVATE BAG X3
RONDEBOSCH 7701
SOUTH AFRICA

RESEARCHER/S: Malte Stein
TELEPHONE:
E-MAIL: stnmal004@myuct.ac.za

Informed Voluntary Consent to Participate in Research Study

Working for R26: Investigating the Livelihoods of Uber Drivers in Cape Town, South Africa.

Invitation to participate, and benefits: You are invited to participate in a research study conducted with Uber drivers in Cape Town. The study aim is to investigate the livelihoods and working conditions of said drivers. I believe that your experience would be a valuable source of information, and hope that by participating you may gain useful knowledge too.

Procedures: During this study, you will be asked to answer a variety of questions concerning your job, professional experience, personal situation, personal views and knowledge about the Uber App.

Recording: We may take photographs and/or record audio as part of the study. These will be used to accompany this study and its publication. If you object to this, please indicate below.

Risks: The harmful risks to you, related to your participation in this study, may be that your employment relationship with Uber might be affected. This particularly holds true if you choose to participate in this study under your real name.

Feedback: You will receive feedback about the results of this research in the form of a personal copy of a short publication in which the main research findings will be summarized. A digital version of the full thesis will be made accessible to you, should you be interested.

Disclaimer/Withdrawal: Your participation is completely voluntary; you may refuse to participate, and you may withdraw at any time without having to state a reason and without any prejudice or penalty against you. Should you choose to withdraw, the researcher commits not to use any of the information you have provided without your signed consent. Note that the researcher may also remove you from the study at any time.

Confidentiality: All information collected in this study will be kept private in that you will not be identified by name or by affiliation to an institution. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained as pseudonyms will be used. Should you wish to be mentioned by your real name please indicate.

What signing this form means: By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in this research study. The aim, procedures to be used, as well as the potential risks and benefits of your participation have been explained verbally to you in detail, using this form. Refusal to participate in or withdrawal from this study at any time will have no effect on you in any way. You are free to contact me, to ask questions or request further information, at any time during this research.

I agree to participate in this research	☐ Yes	☐ No	_____ (Initials)
I agree to be photographed	☐ Yes	☐ No	_____ (Initials)
I agree to be audio-recorded	☐ Yes	☐ No	_____ (Initials)
I agree to have my name/photographs/ audio recordings properly anonymized	☐ Yes	☐ No	_____ (Initials)

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature of Researcher	Date