

## Sharing economy workers: selling, not sharing

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**The sharing or “gig” economy claims to bring the romance of entrepreneurialism to the masses. Through peer-to-peer technology, workers can monetise their homes, resources, time and skills to make additional money. What is marketed as an empowering business opportunity is laden with difficulties and contradictions. Sudden changes to platform design, service offerings and algorithms leave workers feeling vulnerable, not independent. Instead of embracing sharing economy rhetoric, most workers describe themselves as simply seeking money. This article sheds light on the diversity of the gig economy and questions sharing economy company claims that they are contributing to the growth of entrepreneurship.**

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The sharing or “gig” economy claims to bring the romance of entrepreneurialism to the masses. Airbnb, Uber and other gig economy companies argue that they are creating micro-entrepreneurs and expanding microenterprise, companies with 10 or fewer employees. Through Airbnb, fledgling hoteliers can bring in additional funds while Taskrabbits can harness their extra time and skills to start their own personal assistant services. Even Uber gets in on the small business action with billboards advertising the opportunity to be your own boss, with the entrepreneurial improvement of a still-stable paycheck thanks to their income guarantee.

At the same time, the sharing economy promises to transcend capitalism in favour of community. Supporters argue the sharing economy will reverse economic inequality, stop ecological destruction, counter

materialistic tendencies, enhance worker rights and empower the poor (Mathews, 2014). In an oft-quoted example, the average power drill is used for just 12 minutes per year (Kaye, 2012). Though the sharing economy, people can share drills with neighbours, an experience that frees space in their garage, leads them to develop friendships and even allows them to save on lifetime drill expenditures. As Rachel Botsman, author of *The Rise of Collaborative Consumption* (2010), explains: “We now live in a global village where we can mimic the ties that used to happen face to face... [And] to engage in a humanness that got lost along the way” (Kessler, 2015).

This special issue of *CJRES* is concerned with a critical analysis of the sharing economy. It questions the impact of the sharing economy on employment and the nature of work and how sharing may differ across platforms and

services. As noted by Nadeem (2015), “the sharing economy is a floating signifier for a diverse range of activities. Some are genuinely collaborative and communal, while others are hotly competitive and profit-driven.” Amid all of the media and marketing buzz about the sharing economy as providing opportunities for entrepreneurship (Andrus, 2014; Friedman, 2013; McKinney, 2013), there is little discussion of the experience of workers in the sharing economy. Are these workers fledgling entrepreneurs who are entering small business ownership in droves? Is this an effort to create an alternative and more financially equal economy? Is this an actual opt-out, where college-educated workers, frustrated with the lack of work-life balance in mainstream companies, are cobbling together piecework in exchange for added flexibility, or the newest iteration of “moonlighting”?

This article, based on 78 ethnographic interviews, explores the lived experience of workers in the sharing economy. I argue that instead of viewing themselves as part of a nascent social movement (Molz 2013; Schor, 2014), workers often reject the sharing economy rhetoric and critique these services as part of the loaning or selling economy. Rejecting the sharing ethos does not mean workers embrace the entrepreneurial ethos of “be your own boss” either. Instead, this app-driven work is simply viewed as a tool to make money, much like a part-time job. Rather than a novel on-ramp to small business ownership, the few workers who identify as entrepreneurs often have significant skills or capital that would also enable them to succeed outside the sharing economy.

The organisation of this article is as follows. In the next section, I develop my theoretical arguments, framing the article within the literature on entrepreneurship and precarity. I then provide a brief overview on the sharing economy before discussing my research methodology. Following a discussion of the findings, I briefly consider the implications of these

results for understanding the lives of workers in the sharing economy.

### **Entrepreneurship and precarity**

In the USA and Great Britain, the determination of whether a worker is an employee or independent worker is a direct outcome of numerous court cases regarding workplace liability for injuries and damages (Linder, 1989). One common tradition held that if a worker held a skill that the employer did not possess and could not incorporate into his business, the worker was an independent contractor. For instance, a blacksmith might hire a clerk as an independent contractor to balance his books, but any fellow blacksmith or coppersmith would be classified as an employee. A second precedent focused on the narrow notion of physical control—if the employer controlled the worker’s action, clothing, daily activities etc., then the worker was an employee. This definition is the one that has remained since the early 1900s, and was used in clarifying the coverage of New Deal-era statutes designed to protect workers (Jost, 2011). Employees qualified for protections that were not available to independent contractors.

In recent years, the number of workers classified as independent contractors has grown steadily, as businesses have deliberately restructured the work relationship away from the employment model to escape social responsibilities (Jost, 2011). Independent contractors in the USA do not receive unemployment benefits, workers’ compensation, vacation, retirement, overtime, disability accommodation, family leave protections, protection from discrimination or the right to form unions. In 2011, the American Bar Association noted that a federal study estimated 3.4 million employees were classified as independent contractors when they should be reported as employees; a 2009 study by the Treasury Inspector General

estimated that misclassification costs the United States \$54 billion in underpayment of employment taxes.

Although researchers have addressed how classification as an independent contractor, as opposed to employee, can affect workers (Greenhouse, 2008; Hill, 2015), the concept of risk is more commonly used when discussing entrepreneurs. Since the late 1700s, entrepreneurs have been linked with risk-taking, based on Ricard Cantillon's (1755) observations that the entrepreneur "buys at certain prices and sells at uncertain prices," thereby bearing the risk of the transaction. Howard Stevenson (1985) describes entrepreneurship as "the pursuit of opportunity beyond resources controlled." Although an entrepreneur is often thought of as creating something new, the Oxford Dictionary emphasises control and risk in its definition of an entrepreneur as someone who "undertakes or controls a business or enterprise and bears the risk of profit or loss." The concept of risk is particularly salient for entrepreneurs in the USA, where the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that roughly a third of new businesses will fail in the first two years and more than half will not last 5 years.

Yet Jacob Hacker (2006) has noted that the issue of risk in the workplace is no longer assumed entirely by entrepreneurs or capitalists. Workers have seen their health insurance coverage transformed into high-deductible plans, and company pensions converted from defined benefit to defined contribution plans (401(k)s), pushing the financial risk of health problems and bad investments onto the workers. The rise of outsourcing and focus on short-term profits further means that workers are constantly competing for jobs in a "spot market" that resembles a trading floor. Thanks to stagnating wages, families are more likely to rely on two incomes and the loss of either can be devastating.

This casualisation of the workplace and increasing transfer of risk to workers was one

defining characteristic of the secondary labour market, but has increasingly become much more pervasive and generalised, increasingly affecting managerial and professional workers (Kalleberg, 2008). Standing (2011) warns that this instability has led to the Precariat, a growing number of people, "living and working precariously, usually in a series of short-term jobs, without recourse to stable occupational identities or careers, stable social protection or protective regulations." This precariousness often leads to a sense of anxiety, anomie, alienation and anger.

However, work by Allison Pugh (2015) suggests that this instability is experienced differently depending on the social class and desirability of the worker. In *The Tumbleweed Society*, she argues that for upper class people with in-demand job skills, "insecurity looks more like 'flexibility.'" These workers can pursue jobs that are meaningful and that provide the best fit between job and self. For lower class workers, reduced security in the workplace has also led to an inability to commit in personal relationships. Upper class workers avoid the same fate in part by creating a moral wall between work and family.

Research by Fitzmaurice et al. (2016) suggests that individuals involved in free sharing economy sites such as timebanks, food swaps and learning spaces in Boston fully embrace the sharing ideology and sharing economy flexibility. These participants view themselves as "architects of a new kind-of economy" where the focus is on critiquing neoliberal perspectives, sharing and becoming "a force for social good."

In this article, I argue that while participants in free sharing economy sites may view themselves as "sharing" and architects for change (Fitzmaurice et al., 2016; Molz, 2013), the workers I interviewed in the for-profit realms of the sharing economy share no such perspective and often actively reject the idea of a sharing economy. However, their rejection of sharing does not mean that they accept the entrepreneurial ethos crafted by these companies; many simply consider themselves to be just "workers."

## Defining the sharing economy

The sharing, gig or on-demand economy are catch-all terms for technology-based “peer-to-peer” firms that connect people for the purposes of distributing, sharing and reusing goods and services” (Mathews, 2014). The concept encompasses everything from multi-billion dollar companies, such as Airbnb, to free durable good sharing sites such as Neighborgoods. Definitions of the field vary and often seem arbitrary: Airbnb is seen as the epitome of the sharing economy, but traditional bed and breakfasts are not. Juliet Schor, a preeminent researcher in the field, notes that definitions of the sharing economy tend to be “pragmatic, rather than analytical: self-definition by the platforms and the press defines who is in and who is out” (Schor, 2014, 2).

The sharing economy, also described interchangeably as connected consumption or collaborative consumption, is often described as dating back to the 1995 invention of ebay by Pierre Omidyar (Alden, 2014). Later contributory organisations included Craigslist.com and the free hospitality exchange website couchsurfing.org. The increased focus on the sharing economy is thought to be fuelled by the convergence of smartphones; cashless payment systems and rise of customer review sites. In addition, the recession and post-recession fallout also led to the rampant underemployment of college graduates and the need to monetise possessions and make do with less.

Many sharing economy services have suggested that they offer workers a way to fight stagnating wages and workplace instability. A recent survey administered by Hall and Krueger (2015) notes that more than 90% of Uber drivers say they drive with Uber to “earn more income to better support myself and my family,” though only 71% of respondents agree that working for Uber actually makes them better off financially (Hall and Krueger, 2015). In New York City, Airbnb recently launched a “public relations push highlighting its positive

economic impact on the city’s predominantly-black neighborhoods, from Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, to West Harlem” (Whitford, 2016). Airbnb has also publicised internal research (based on guest stays from 2012 to 2013), to argue that that the typical host earns \$7530 per year and that the funds are used to help people stay in their homes.<sup>1</sup>

The central role of entrepreneurship in economic growth and development is well researched in economic literature. Work by Knight (1921) and Schumpeter (1942) describes the transformative role that entrepreneurs can play by increasing competition and helping to shape markets. Recently, Acs and Audretsch (1988) and Kortum and Lerner (2000) have examined the important role that entrepreneurs play in driving innovation and technological improvements. But not all entrepreneurship is created equal. As Schoar (2010) notes, “much less effort has been devoted to studying the actual entrepreneurs who are the agents of this change and the heterogeneity among these individuals” (p. 57). Schoar argues that there is a difference between subsistence entrepreneurship, which provides a subsistence income, and transformational entrepreneurs, “who aim to create large, vibrant businesses that... provide jobs and income for others” (p. 58).

Unfortunately, there is very little information on whether the gig economy is subsistence entrepreneurship or an on-ramp to mainstream small business ownership. The guiding questions of my research are: what is life in the sharing economy like for workers? To what extent do the workers consider themselves to be entrepreneurs, workers or sharers who are creating a new type of economy? What types of skills and capital do workers bring to the gig economy?

The following sections outline my methodology, including how the sharing economy services under study were chosen. I will then discuss how these companies market

themselves differently to consumers and prospective workers as either a source of sharing and connection or a source of income.

### **Research methodology**

I draw my data from 78 in-depth qualitative interviews with 23 Airbnb hosts, 22 Taskrabbit workers, 19 Kitchensurfing chefs and 14 Uber drivers/messengers. These four services were chosen because they illustrate the type of businesses that are found within the sharing or gig economy: incredibly successful, well-funded companies worth billions (Uber and Airbnb), an established but somewhat struggling start-up (TaskRabbit) and a relatively new but short-lived upstart (Kitchensurfing).<sup>2</sup> In addition, these companies were also chosen for their ability to highlight the different components of the sharing economy. For instance, all four services offer consumers access to underused physical assets (“idle capacity”), but Taskrabbit and Kitchensurfing offer consumer-to-consumer or “on demand” services, while Airbnb is about granting consumers temporary or shared access to a home. Uber focuses on the more efficient use of assets by making money from a personal vehicle and offering shared rides through UberPool (Frenken et al., 2015). Finally, these four firms also illustrate the range of skills and capital barriers that divide services in the sharing economy. Taskrabbit, a personal assistant service, has few barriers to involvement: workers complete an online application and attend an orientation; there is no capital investment needed. Other services, such as Kitchensurfing (now closed), required a specialised skill set, and that prospective chefs audition by cooking a restaurant-worthy meal for staffers; as a result, the Kitchensurfing Today service had a high skill barrier but a low capital-investment barrier. Airbnb and Uber require high levels of capital investment: Airbnb depends upon access to a space that is desirable enough that other people will pay to rent it; Uber necessitates access to a relatively new car that meets

Uber requirements (high-capital investment) with licensing requirements in New York that cost thousands of dollars,<sup>3</sup> while Airbnb’s only “skill” requirement is that users also have a profile on LinkedIn or Facebook (low-skill requirements).

Participant recruitment into this study differed based on platform.<sup>4</sup> Airbnb hosts were recruited through Airbnb’s Contact Host feature. In my introductory email, I provided information about my research project and asked if the host would be interested in participating in a short demographic survey and an interview at a time and a place that was convenient for them. I noted that participation was completely voluntary and that answers would be anonymous. Recognising that Airbnb’s algorithm and the availability of properties often provided different search results from week to week, I searched for hosts and sent batches of interview requests four times between 25 March and 20 July 2015. Participation emails were sent to 150 hosts, resulting in interviews with 20 hosts.<sup>5</sup>

For Taskrabbit, Kitchensurfing Tonight and Uber, workers were hired through the services between March and November 2015 and then told about the project in a face-to-face conversation after a rapport had been developed. Email and phone numbers were solicited and interviews were scheduled at a later time. Three Taskrabbit participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which served to further expand my sample size by giving me access to several Taskrabbits with very high hourly rates. Three Airbnb hosts and one Taskrabbit worker were recruited through contacts at local colleges, providing a much higher concentration of students than otherwise found in the sample. The reliance on the algorithms provided by all four services, partnered with a several-month recruitment period, contributed to sample randomness.

I personally administered the demographic survey and interviewed each respondent, using Weiss’ (1994)<sup>6</sup> interview matrix to allow for a participant-directed interview. All interviews

were conducted in person, with the majority conducted in public locations such as cafes and parks. Interviews averaged more than 2 h in length. During each interview, I asked open-ended questions: how hosts got involved with the sharing economy; their best and worst experiences; how they decide which guests or gigs to accept; handling day-to-day logistics; managing their profile and listing; the experience of getting reviews; and if they considered themselves to be an entrepreneur? The demographic survey addressed such open and close-ended questions as race, income, age, occupation, education level, marital status, political affiliation, sharing economy income and expenses, and three words describing what attracted the host to the sharing economy.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded into thematic fields. Information from the surveys was entered into a spreadsheet and analyzed by calculating means. Thematic qualitative data, such as the decision-making processes around developing an Airbnb profile and listing and accepting guest requests, were sorted into broad topical categories, coded inductively, and analyzed by examining patterns among the codes. To preserve confidentiality, all respondents were assigned pseudonyms and potentially identifying details in the narratives were altered or omitted.

Study participants were generally diverse, with 56.3% identifying as white (which included a number of white ethnic immigrants from Armenia, Germany, Israel, Ireland and Canada). Approximately 20% identified as Black/African-American and 10% as Hispanic. The remainder identified as multi-racial, declined to answer or gave ethnic or religious affiliation instead. The majority of participants were male (64.3%), reflecting the predominantly male workforce of Uber in New York City; slightly more than a third of participants were female (35.7%). Their ages ranged from 20 to 60, with 63.4% falling between 20 and 35 years old. Their education levels were

especially high: 42% had a Bachelors degree and 19% had a graduate degree. Thirty percent of respondents listed their educational level as some college or below and several of those were currently enrolled in a local college. Slightly less than a quarter (22.3%) of my sample described their household income as more than \$100,000 and 26% listed incomes between \$75,000 and \$99,999. Twenty-eight percent categorised their income as below \$35,000 and 39% gave an income between \$35,000 and \$74,999. However, there was some variation in income by service: Taskrabbits were much more likely to report incomes below \$50,000 (75%) while Airbnb hosts often reported incomes above \$100,000 (50%) and 57% of Uber drivers reported incomes between \$50,000 and \$74,999.<sup>7</sup>

In the remainder of this article, I will discuss the entrepreneurial ethos crafted by sharing economy services and how that ethos compares with the lived experience of workers in the sharing economy. Then I will discuss how workers describe their work and their thoughts on the idea of a sharing economy.

### **Crafting the entrepreneurial ethos**

As noted above, entrepreneurs are individuals who undertake or control a business or enterprise and bear the risk of profit or loss (Cantillion, 1755; Stevenson, 1985). Yet, the sharing economy is often identified as focused on trust, convenience and peer-to-peer collaboration (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). As a result, sharing economy companies maintain a Janus-faced marketing strategy. On one hand, they must market themselves to potential clients as offering unique or convenient experiences working with “individuals, not companies”; at the same time, they craft an entrepreneurial ethos to convince workers to join and to offer their space, resources and free time to the “cause.” This entrepreneurial ethos highlights the autonomy (“be your own boss” and “set your own hours”) and income possibilities

(“determine your own rates”) that is more often associated with entrepreneurs than workers. In order to obscure the contradictions between the sharing rhetoric and entrepreneurial ethos, many sharing economy companies segregate their messaging for workers and clients.

The opening page to the Airbnb website emphasises sharing and community: a large banner announces, “Welcome Home” and the company’s tagline is “Belong Anywhere.” According to the company’s website, Airbnb is “Your home, everywhere.” There is even a video on “how Airbnb hosts create a sense of belonging around the world.”

The section targeted at hosts, “Why Host,” is focused on the financial and personal control aspect of hosting. Although workers can “welcome travelers” and “meet people from all over the world,” it’s also a way to “earn money,” “earn extra money,” “earn more during popular travel seasons” and, for those who remain hesitant, “creating a listing page is free.” The same site page also includes a handy button to “See What You Could Make.”

Likewise, Uber’s main website, [uber.com](http://uber.com), is also marketed to clients with a large banner noting “Your Ride, On Demand: Transportation in Minutes with the Uber App.” The careers section of the website only includes corporate jobs such as Account Executive and Account Manager. Clicking the “Become a Driver button” brings the visitor to a new website: <https://partners.uber.com/drive/>.

Whereas the main Uber site focuses on convenience (one-tap to ride, reliable pick-ups, cashless), the driver-partner site is all about the income possibilities: the “app lets you earn money with the tap of a button,” “get paid automatically” and once a driver is approved, they are “ready to start earning money.” Uber’s advertisements to drivers, found on Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) busses all over New York City, focus on the entrepreneurial ethos by advertising that Uber offers drivers “no shifts, no bosses, no limits” and are

guaranteed to “make \$5000, during your first month.”

The Taskrabbit listing on Peers.com makes the entrepreneurial ethos even more apparent, noting that “as a Tasker, you can use your skills and free time to become a microentrepreneur and build your business.”<sup>8</sup> The Taskrabbit Tasker resource site even includes a link to print-quality logos so that workers can “create your own marketing materials to promote your business on TaskRabbit” and the suggestion that Taskers “build their business” by customising their TaskRabbit URL.<sup>9</sup> In 2015, Taskrabbit increased their service fees from 20 to 30% and offered a reduced 15% fee for any repeat business from the same client. Even as many Taskrabbits watched their income drop, they were told that the change was intended to “incentivise entrepreneurship” so that workers would obtain repeat clients.

In some cases, companies describe their brand of entrepreneurship as better than independent entrepreneurship because they provide marketing and billing. The marketplace model offers an added boost—being your own boss, without having to manage the back office; being an independent worker, with a guaranteed paycheck. A perfect example of this “entrepreneurialism plus” could be found in the Kitchensurfing website. The main Kitchensurfing website was geared to clients. Just as with Uber, information on available Kitchensurfing jobs was limited to opportunities with the back-end, such as product designers and data analysts. But the chef recruitment page, available through a Google search, provides chef testimonials that were quick to promote the idea of Kitchensurfing entrepreneurialism as taking the hassle out of small business ownership (emphasis added):

*Kitchensurfing is the perfect tool for me to mimic a restaurant experience in completely different surroundings without all of the chaos and uncertainty that inevitably comes*

with running a NYC kitchen (Anthony Sasso, Chef de Cuisine at Casa Mono).

*Kitchensurfing is a gift from the food gods. It takes all the boring aspects but necessary evils of the food world, such as PR, advertising and collection of money out of your hands. It lets you do what you do best: COOK!* (Chef Warren Schierenbeck).

In case the chef testimonials were not clear enough, the copy below the revolving quotes further reiterated that Kitchensurfing will allow you to “grow your business” with a “100% free web presence.” After its pivot from a chef marketplace to a nightly *prix fixe* on-demand chef service, the company continued to focus on the possibilities for future entrepreneurship. Their ads for part-time employee chefs noted that the job provided the opportunity to develop “private chef skills” and that it was an “alternative to the traditional restaurant career.”

### **The reality of the “sharing” economy**

Although workers are told that they are independent, they are often held to a series of behaviour and responsiveness requirements that are set by the companies. For instance, Uber drivers are expected maintain at least a 4.6 rating (out of 5 stars) and to accept at least 80% of ride requests; failure to do so can result in deactivation (Hullinger, 2015). Airbnb hosts must respond within 24 h or their account will also be temporarily deactivated. For those sites where the client gets to pick from various service providers—such as Airbnb and Taskrabbit—complex algorithms determine who is shown, when they are shown and what is shown. And companies can and do make changes at will, often leaving workers scrambling to keep up. These sudden changes to platform design, service offerings and algorithms leave workers feeling less like independent small business owners and more like the beleaguered employees of a capricious boss.

For instance, Taskrabbit recently underwent a “pivot” that ended task bidding on work and instead required Taskrabbits to list their availability in 4-h blocks. Instead of picking and choosing the tasks that they wanted to complete, Taskers were assigned tasks that they had to accept or reject within 30 min. Failure to accept above a certain percentage of tasks, or to respond within 30 min, could result in deactivation. Too many such mishaps could result in the tasker being “removed from the community,” Taskrabbit-speak for being fired. As a result of these changes, the workers’ sense of freedom and being one’s own boss quickly dissipated. “Anyone left working for TR is an indentured servant,” wrote one commentator on a popular Taskrabbit Facebook group... You are not growing your own business, you are growing TR as a business” (Garling, 2014). A second change in the summer of 2015 involved Taskrabbit increasing their cut from approximately 20–30%, with an additional 5% Trust & Safety fee on the back-end, to be paid by the client.

My interviews with Taskrabbit workers occurred in the midst of this second change. The lack of worker input contributed to the feeling that they were not entrepreneurs who controlled their workplace, but rather struggling workers simply trying to make a go of it in a constantly changing environment. Sarah, 29, a Taskrabbit who joined the service before the pivot, has a side service as a personal assistant. She only considers her personal assistant work, outside Taskrabbit, to be entrepreneurship. As she puts it, “I just think Taskrabbit is more like working for them.”

Her perspective is not unique. Jamal, 25, a college graduate from a highly prestigious university, also thinks of himself as a Taskrabbit employee.

I think of this as being a way to use somebody’s product that they made from their entrepreneurial skills, and making money for them. But I don’t see myself as an entrepreneur. I see myself part of a system to help



somebody else make money.... Even though legally as a Taskrabbit, I'm an independent contractor, I see myself as a Taskrabbit employee.

Although the companies, media and members of academia describe this as the "sharing economy," in-depth interviews with workers for these four services tell of a different reality. When asked about being involved with the sharing economy, workers often expressed confusion:

I'm not sure if the sharing economy is the best name for it. I'm not sure what exactly they're getting at with the idea of sharing economy but when I think of sharing economy I think of a culture where there's bartering. I mean, with a lot of the sharing economy things that are going on, people are paying for a product, that's basically what they're doing (Robert, 28, Taskrabbit).

It sounds like a phrase like "strategise," like one of these sort of like corporate terms that don't really mean anything (Ryan, 38, Taskrabbit).

The focus on money as opposed to free sharing wasn't limited to Taskrabbit workers, but found across platforms:

The sharing economy, I think, by large is a misnomer. It would be sharing if you were Couchsurfing but you're giving me money and I probably won't let you stay with me if you weren't giving me money, so we're not sharing. You're paying me and I'm giving you something, a product, a service. That's just good marketing but it's not very honest (Andrew, 28, Airbnb host).

Technically, I really don't know what the sharing economy means; but to me it means the chance for somebody like me or somebody who has another talent to be able to work on their own without corporate world.

So I guess sharing economy would be the opposite of corporate world to me. I think it gives you the freedom to be creative and to express your own talents and be compensated for it (Damla, 38, Kitchensurfing chef).

Rather than the feel-good, community and trust-focused message offered by sharing economy supporters (Botesman and Rogers, 2010; Matthews, 2014), many workers described themselves as money-focused or even the work as a "hustle."

I think of myself as a hustler.... Basically right now I'm just money-motivated. Basically I have the attitude where I am basically doing things that I don't think I can do to get by. So there's times when I would look at a job—and someone might say, "You're sure you can handle it?"—And I'm like, "I don't know what I'm doing" (Shaun, 38, Taskrabbit).

I got into it because it was so profitable. I wasn't thinking in terms of "I want to be involved in the sharing economy." I didn't think of it as the sharing economy. Now, I only think of it as a sharing economy, sort of like in a general and philosophical sense. To me, it's still sort of like a hustle (Josh, 32, Airbnb host).

I just finished the [poetry] tour and I came back to New York, and then maybe two or three months later, out of the blue, I suddenly thought "Wait, I can Airbnb my apartment in New York" and because I needed—I was trying to generate more income to be honest. So I went to the website, and I saw this thing about community and the helping everyone and I was like, "Yeah, sure, whatever. I just want to pay rent" (Matt, 36, Airbnb host).

In contrast to the entrepreneurial ethos, workers generally do not view their app-driven work as entrepreneurship, but as simply as a tool to make money. When asked if they viewed themselves as entrepreneurs, many participants

workers laughed and responded with an overwhelming “no”:

No. No. (laughs)... I feel like an entrepreneur would be if I invented this idea, but it's really just like I am doing this because somebody else created the infrastructure that makes it possible to do this (Ramona, 28, Airbnb host).

I don't really. (laughs) 'Cause I don't feel like I'm doing anything. I'm not really going out and trying to promote myself as a Taskrabbit. I'm just, you know, putting in the hours that I'm free (Christina, 30, Taskrabbit).

No, not at all. I would need to come up with something original or at least like, if I was doing this on my own and getting my own customers, maybe (Francesco, 29, Kitchensurfing chef).

Perhaps because Airbnb is less time consuming than Taskrabbit—most hosts mentioned spending less than a handful of weekly hours on their hosting efforts—many more Airbnb hosts had side businesses than Taskrabbit workers. However, even though they often considered their side work to be entrepreneurial, they often did not consider their Airbnb work to qualify as entrepreneurialism or small business management. This is perhaps best illustrated by James, who works for a social media start-up, and rents his apartment on Airbnb. He does not view his Airbnb work as entrepreneurialism, but he describes himself as an “ebay junkie” who is constantly seeking the adage of “buy low, sell high.” His description of his ebay efforts clearly demonstrates that he has an entrepreneurial mindset, it is just not applied to Airbnb (emphasis added):

*I'm investing in a lot of comic books right now. Trying to buy them low, for comic books that have been picked up by TV networks, and/or they are making major motion pictures on. So, I'm trying to buy them early*

before they actually go up. When [the movie] goes live, then *things skyrocket* for two or three weeks. You *unload all your inventory* and it works pretty well. Watches, electronics, clothes, old shoes, shorts and anything I have in my house. *I setup an assembly line*. I take photos—old shirts, shoes, pants. It's amazing what people will buy.

### **Entrepreneurialism as an exit from the sharing economy**

There were two major exceptions to the non-entrepreneur mindset among participants: successful Airbnb hosts with multiple listings they have turned into de facto hotels, and Kitchensurfing chefs who had food-related side businesses such as serving as a freelance personal chef. For the chefs in particular, the service platforms were often used as an introduction to prospective clients. Workers then market themselves to clients directly by demonstrating their skills and distributing personal contact information, cutting out the platform as “middleman.”

For instance, Ashaki, 35, plans to open an ethnic restaurant in the near future. Working for Kitchensurfing as a chef-for-hire allowed her to test recipes for her upcoming restaurant and gave her an opportunity to meet and market to prospective diners.

Do you think of yourself as an entrepreneur? I think so, yeah. My whole thing is, “I want to build a brand.” That's why I call myself an entrepreneur because I want to build something that will last longer. ... I want to be at the beginning of it as well, so I can leverage it as it grows.

Likewise, for Laura, 29, a self-described cheesemonger, working as a Kitchensurfing Tonight chef was part of her plan to grow her cheese-tasting party company. She explains, “I figured it would be a good way to network with my potential clientele, or at least my target market

and get comfortable speaking about my services.” For these chefs, their Kitchensurfing work was not entrepreneurialism, but was part of their marketing strategy for an entrepreneurial side business.

Successful Airbnb hosts who had multiple units or who felt that they treated their listings as a company—often by hiring others, incorporating as a business or otherwise professionalising their work—also described themselves as entrepreneurs. Of the 23 hosts interviewed, two used Airbnb to maintain second apartments where they didn’t live, and three others maintained multiple apartments. One individual, Yosef, 27, who was publicly active in the Airbnb campaign, attended a highly prestigious and expensive hotel and hospitality college in New York. With plans to one day become a professional hotelier, he was not letting his age or lack of degree deter him in the meantime. With assistance from his family, he rented two three-bedroom apartments on the Upper West Side of Manhattan that he listed for 30-night stints as quasi-hostels, with up to two people per bedroom. He also manages 10 listings owned by associates and rents the spare bedroom of his two-bedroom rent-stabilised West Village apartment.

When asked if he views himself as an entrepreneur, Yosef is quick to detail his exploits, including time spent selling spare video games as a child. He describes Airbnb as his biggest entrepreneurial effort in part because of the financial risks involved, but also admits that the platform made it easy:

I don’t feel I did much because the platform was already there. But taking on a lease... paying a deposit, monthly rent, furnishing an apartment,—so putting down almost eight or 10 grand—assuming the risk of a yearly lease...

In addition to running his Airbnb listings, Yosef incorporated his venture, registering it as a limited liability company in 2014 and launching a

company website. He even organises events for his guests, such as a party on the rooftop of his home in the West Village.

I own a hotel. I’m a hotelier. I just have a room here and apartment there, but I currently have 25 guests in this city staying in my places. They all have my phone number. Anything happens, I’m in charge of them. That’s the exact same thing as in a hotel... Until I have that chain of hotels, I just have a chain of different apartments all over this island.

Likewise, Josh, 32, had a self-described Airbnb “syndicate” involving eight separate apartment listings when I interviewed him in May of 2015. The eight listings were split between three profiles in order to avoid drawing attention from the authorities or from Airbnb. Originally a small-time user who rented out his apartment when faced with an overlap between leases, he is now firmly established in Airbnb and hopes to one day write a book advising others on how to be successful hosts. He explains, “This has become a business. I have lots of places, I have cleaning people I have to pay. I have—you know—responsibilities. If I stopped paying attention to it, it would collapse, right?” For Josh, his entrepreneurialism was so successful that he hired his fiancée’s undocumented immigrant mother to manage the listings, turning it into a family business and pure investment. In his words: “We want to do as little manual labor as possible and turn it into passive income.”

Josh was not the only host who talked about outsourcing. When self-described entrepreneurs in the sharing economy workers become successful, they begin to resemble mainstream firms. Ryan, 27, maintains multiple Airbnb listings with a business partner, and as his company has grown, he has started hiring assistants to manage the day-to-day business. Unlike most workers in the sharing economy, he gives

his employees full benefits, including health insurance.

However, rather than embrace these individuals as role models for the rest of the Airbnb community—after all, these are the workers who have taken Airbnb’s entrepreneurial messaging to heart—these are the New York City hosts that Airbnb tries to ignore or disclaim. Although New York is one of the largest Airbnb markets, with more than 25,000 active hosts (Airbnb in the City, 2014), since 2010 it has been illegal in New York State to rent out entire apartments in multi-unit dwellings for less than 30 days. A scathing report in October 2014 from the New York Attorney General found that 72% of Airbnb listings for entire units from January 2010 through June 2014 ran afoul of this and other codes (Airbnb in the City, 2014). Although Airbnb has taken the stance that it is helping hosts to keep their homes in the face of escalating rents, the report found that large-scale operators dominated the service: only 6% of the hosts made 37% of the revenue earned in New York (\$168 million), and these corporate users offered anywhere from three to 272 listings (Streitfeld, 2014). Even though Airbnb’s host marketing emphasises users’ ability to make money, Airbnb does not hold these users up as role models but has described them as “bad actors” and stressed the need for “sensible rules that stop bad actors and protect regular people who simply want to share the home in which they live” (Streitfeld, 2014).

Perhaps one of the biggest signs that the gig economy is not as it appears is the stigmatised nature of the work. Goffman (1963) defined stigma as a “process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity.” Although stigma is more commonly thought of as affiliated with overt or external deformations such as scars, disabilities or medical conditions such as leprosy, stigma can also arise from deviations in personal traits such as unemployment, welfare dependency or teenage parenthood. Stigmatised individuals often feel different and devalued by others, and Heatherton et al.

(2000) note that many experience psychological distress.

Richard, a white male middle-aged Taskrabbit, opened an interview by telling me that his girlfriend of 2 years had broken up with him due to embarrassment over his Taskrabbit work. Rebecca, 34, a Taskrabbit with an advanced degree and a side job as an adjunct instructor at a local college, admitted that she often lied to her mother and friends about her work—telling them that she was temping in an office, not tasking in people’s homes. The embarrassment was not limited to Taskrabbit workers either.

Even though I assured participants that their identities would be hidden, one Uber driver emailed after an interview to reiterate the importance of not mentioning him by name. He explained, “Uber for me is a feeling like ‘when you get really drunk and regret whatever you did last night.’ That’s exactly it. I really don’t want to be associated as an Uber driver at any point of my life. I really don’t want it to come up when people search my name on Google.”

Another driver, who had previously worked as a professional gambler, said that his embarrassed wife told him not to tell people that he drove for Uber.

Although research suggests that stigma is sometimes associated with entrepreneurship, the stigma usually arises when the entrepreneur’s venture fails (Landier, 2005; Shepherd and Haynie, 2011; Simmons et al., 2014). Stigma associated with one’s work is much more common among sex workers (Agustin, 2013; Vanwesenbeeck, 2001) and those working in minimum wage fast food jobs (Newman, 2000) or in blue-collar fields (Cobb and Sennett, 1993). The embarrassment associated with working in the sharing economy suggests that this may be an occupation of last resort for some workers.

## Summary and conclusions

Sharing is usually free—a view shared by many workers interviewed for this research. However,

most of the free websites that originally comprised the sharing economy are now defunct: Snapgoods, Neighborrow, Crowd Rent and Share Some Sugar (Kessler, 2015). The somewhat better known NeighborGoods lingers, but only as the pet project of an investor; with 42,000 signed up, only 10,000 users are active (Kessler, 2015). In some cases, free sharing economy sites such as Couchsurfing.com have been superseded by for-profit ventures such as Airbnb. For others, the mission has changed: Lyft debuted as “your friend with a car,” complete with fist bump, but it now competes with Uber based on price. Instead of building the connections promised by the sharing economy, workers are even more divided—Couchsurfing has been supplanted by Airbnb, where workers are so divided that they make money from each other by selling “sharing.” Yet the sharing economy moniker lingers, even as the companies involved become multi-billion dollar monoliths and the only component being “shared” is risk (Kalamar, 2013).

As illustrated by Taskrabbit’s 2014 service pivot and 2015 rate change, Kitchensurfing’s service changes and eventual closure, and Uber’s rate changes, workers for these services encounter a good deal of risk from the services. Although many American workers run the risk of getting laid off, sharing economy workers are usually independent contractors who do not qualify for unemployment insurance and run the risk of on-the-job injury (not covered by workers compensation) and of work slow periods. In order to convince workers to join and take on considerable risks, these companies craft an entrepreneurial ethos, telling workers that they can set their hours and determine their paycheck. In some cases, sharing economy services market this as entrepreneurialism plus, work that offers the freedom to set one’s own hours and determine one’s own paycheck, while outsourcing marketing and billing.

However, even as companies tell workers that they are independent contractors and entrepreneurs, their actions often speak louder than

their words. Service pivots and rate changes, especially in the case of Taskrabbit, often leave workers feeling less like independent workers and more as though they are employees or members of the precariat (Standing, 2011). Vosko (2006) notes that “precarious employment is a defining feature of the... labour market, yet it is poorly understood.” Unlike the artists researched by Bain and McLean, workers in the sharing economy have not reorganised their working lives to demonstrate a “more collective orientation” (Bain and McLean 2013, 107), nor do workers view themselves as “architects of a new kind of economy,” like participants in free sharing economy sites (Fitzmaurice et al., 2016). Although workers exhibit some of the anxiety, anomie, alienation and anger that Standing (2011) described as a component of the precariat, the workers interviewed in this research experience a sense of stigma in regards to their sharing economy work, further suggesting that this is not “entrepreneurism plus.”

Perhaps because risk in the workplace is no longer assumed solely by entrepreneurs (Hacker, 2006, Pugh, 2015), workers for these services do not generally view sharing economy work as entrepreneurial unless they have taken on considerable financial risks (such as renting multiple apartments) and hiring other workers. In some cases, such as with Kitchensurfing chefs, sharing economy work was viewed as part of a marketing effort for a separate company outside of the so-called sharing economy.

Rather than serve as a novel on-ramp to entrepreneurialism, workers who succeed in the sharing economy—such as multi-unit Airbnb hosts and Kitchensurfing chefs with side businesses—often have have significant skills or capital that would also enable them to succeed outside the sharing economy. In addition, successful workers often strive to leave the sharing economy behind by creating firms that offer the benefits and protections of employment, not independent contracting.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <http://blog.airbnb.com/economic-impact-airbnb/>.

<sup>2</sup> As a further illustration of the aptness of these four services, both Taskrabbit and Kitchensurfing underwent major pivots or service changes during the course of this study. Taskrabbit abolished their bidding service and increased their fees from approximately 20–35% of a worker's advertised rate. Kitchensurfing ended its "rent a chef" service, launched Kitchensurfing Tonight, reclassified workers into employees (from independent contractors) and then shut down the service, all within a year.

<sup>3</sup> New York City app-based drivers face particularly high capital barriers. Drivers are required to follow many of the same license, registration and insurance requirements as yellow cabs but unlike with cabs, all costs are assumed by the individual drivers. Estimates vary widely and depend on the type and age of the car insured, the driver's record and experience. However, new drivers must often pay anywhere from \$3000 to more than \$6000 in insurance and licensing fees, not counting a car payment, before ever driving a mile in New York. In addition, drivers must pass licensing and medical exams, take drug tests and complete courses in defensive driving and wheelchair accessibility.

<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the requirements of human subjects research in the USA, my research methodology, including participant recruitment efforts, were reviewed and approved by the CUNY Graduate Center Institutional Review Board (IRB) before any research was conducted.

<sup>5</sup> My 13% response rate includes automatic declines that occurred when a host does not respond to a message within a certain period of time. Several hosts agreed to an interview but then became non-responsive when I attempted to follow up.

<sup>6</sup> I had a surprisingly easy time developing rapport with my respondents. My demographics were a close match with many of the respondents and I believe my use of Weiss's interview matrix also made it easier to develop rapport. Unlike a more rigid interview protocol, the matrix allowed for jumping around among topics, and participants were advised that they should feel free to bring up additional topics or go off on tangents. Although this led to interview transcripts that were not neatly organised, I believe it also allowed for more openness. Several respondents joked that the interview felt like a therapy session.

<sup>7</sup> This higher income for Airbnb hosts, compared to Taskrabbits, is likely due to the hosts' ability to charge a premium for space, as opposed to for labour, and the fact that hosts needed to be able to afford a desirable enough home—or spare space—in order to host on Airbnb. Individuals who are too poor to rent apartments in desirable areas are less likely to be hosting on Airbnb in New York City.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.peers.org/income/taskrabbit/#income\\_details](http://www.peers.org/income/taskrabbit/#income_details).

<sup>9</sup> <https://support.taskrabbit.com/hc/en-us/articles/204409620>.

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