

Heros or Schmucks?: Implications of the Hero Narrative for Gig Workers During the CoVid-19 Pandemic

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Overnight the pandemic has turned luxury services into essential services. Nowhere is this more evident than in food delivery where grocery shoppers have been dubbed ‘heros’ by the media and customers alike. Yet these workers encounter persistent precarious work conditions as they labor under invasive technology, fickle customers, and ever-changing platform rules. Drawing on a qualitative field study, including interviews, digital artifacts, forum posts, and newspaper articles, of grocery shoppers during the pandemic, we explore how individuals construct narratives of their work and the outcomes of said narratives. We begin by describing the construction of the hero narrative through media, customer interactions, and the platform and how workers either accept, reject, or contextualize the hero narrative. Our preliminary analysis suggests these responses to the hero narrative result in different strategies for engaging with the work and outcomes. This study has implications for literature in narrative construction, meaning-making, gig work, and precarious labor.

Keywords: algorithm, gig economy, narrative, essential workers, platform-based work, precarious work, coronavirus pandemic

Task Rabbit. Doordash. Instacart. The gig economy, a labor market that relies on algorithms to facilitate short-term contracts, has transformed how work is executed and experienced. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic overnight these services, which were typically viewed as a luxury, became essential for many consumers whom could no longer shop for basic necessities. Reflecting this change of events, public narratives of gig workers shifted, noting their essential and hero-like aspects of their work, with media, platform companies, signs in front yards thanking gig workers for their service - a phrase typically saved for veterans. Nowhere is this hero narrative more salient than in the case of grocery store shoppers, platforms such as Instacart, Shipit, and Dumpling received more than a 450% surge in-demand (Holt, 2020) and more than doubled their workforce during the pandemic (Sonnemaker, 2020). By customers outsourcing shopping, they are limiting their exposure - reducing their risk reduction and, indirectly, the population's - while increasing workers'. These risks are coupled with the increased competition for work assignments, as more individuals are attracted to the rising demand, alongside the already precarious work conditions (lack of sick pay and workers' compensation, variable compensation determined by an algorithm). This raises the question: "How are the narratives of gig workers as heroes interpreted and interrogated by the workers themselves against the backdrop of a precarious local, regional, and national work conditions (e.g., national health crisis, increased personal risk, uncertain pay, and algorithmic management)? And what are the outcome of workers' interpretations of the hero narrative?". In an on-going qualitative study of grocery store shoppers we hope to address these questions. This study contributes to organizational literatures in narrative construction, meaning-making, gig work, and precarious labor.

Prior Work

The world of work is rapidly changing as the modern places strives to become "lean, fast, and flexible" (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018). Nowhere are these changes more evident in the gig economy,

the fastest growing segment of the US workforce where algorithms have replaced managers, work is spliced into bite-sized tasks, employment relationships have become increasingly short-term at times lasting only minutes. As institutional moorings fade, self-narratives play an even more critical role in helping individuals create a sense of coherence as they navigate working lives between and outside organizations. Workers holding multiple jobs and moving in-between organizations struggle to find a sense of authenticity between their contextualized work roles and their broader work-self identity (Caza, Moss & Vough, 2019). Similarly, workers operating outside the bounds of organizations, coped with the chronic precariousness of operating outside the bounds of organizations workers cultivated holding environments that essential to render identities viable and selves vital (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019). Each of these strategies are somewhat fragile as they require significant cognitive and emotional effort as individuals must do this identity work without the support of organizational routines or sometimes even regular interaction with co-workers. Further, workers not engaged in employment within organizations have fared worse physically, psychologically, and economically in U.S. natural disasters.

Methods

Given the emerging nature of on-demand work during pandemic and my interest in theory development, we designed a multiple-source qualitative study. The project will consist of three data collection periods spanning 12 months. The first collection period is underway and will be completed by July 2020 with repeat data collection from the same individuals in November 2020 and Summer 2021. To date, we have completed thirty semi-structured interviews in 21 North American cities. Respondents have been and will continue to be recruited over various social media channels (Facebook shopper groups, Instacart subreddits, and advertisement posting platforms, as well as by referral from other respondents) and by hanging-out in supermarkets. Additionally, we are collecting data from print/news media, web

forums (e.g., Reddit groups), and digital artifacts about workers experiences (e.g., screenshots of user-interface, email exchanges with customers and the platform). Data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

Findings

Our preliminary findings suggest three sources of the hero narrative (media, platform and customers) and workers responses (accept, reject, or contextualize) and actions in relation to this narrative.

Sources of the Hero Narrative

Media. Media coverage on gig workers and the pandemic permeated most if not all major (and local) news outlets, including *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *CNN*, *NPR*, and *The Atlantic*, among others. From the outset of the pandemic, major media outlets noted the increased importance of gig workers, announcing the “rise of a new type of worker- the - essential heroes” (Kelly, 2020) that were “more essential than ever” (Seylkuh & Bond, 2020) having “never been more indispensable, both for their customers and companies” (Schwartz, 2020). Human interest stories also emerged such as the New York Times’ “I Feel Like a Hero: A Day in the Life of a Grocery Delivery Man” (Randle, 2020) and Slate’s “Gig Economy Workers are our Newest First Responders” (Quart, 2020). More critical pieces noted workers’ double bind - increased demand from customers and increased exposure to health risks -- and highlighted worker demands (Gig Workers Collective, 2020), strikes (Mulvaney and Wallender, 2020), and inadequate organizational protection (Pardes, 2020). Whether a specific article was uniformly positive or more nuanced they each reinforced the notion that workers were essential and often heroic. This coverage was not lost on workers - every participant in our study had seen the media coverage of their work. One individual hoped that the media’s coverage would help other customers’ understand the value of her services. “I’ve seen stories of Instacart or Shipt workers

delivering to the elderly and people that can't get out. I think it's great that they're giving that coverage, because there are a lot of people who even though they use the service, they don't appreciate it." (Kaia, Morgantown, West Virginia). In sum, media coverage both gave the general public and workers' access to the hero narrative.

Customers. Shopper's knowledge and interactions with customers reinforced the hero narrative. Even before the pandemic, shoppers framed their work as an opportunity to serve those who found it harder to shop, such as the disabled, and this framing became even more salient during the pandemic. Two shoppers describe similar sentiments

To me, when you ask me if I'm a hero for doing this work, I know that there probably are some [customers] that literally at-risk people and can't leave the house and I am saving them in a certain way by feeding them.

- Brent, Oakland, California

I always liked the aspect of helping people, even before, but it was really augmented when the pandemic hit, and it made me feel really [good] ... I really liked it. And it's just the thank you. It's just saying, "Thank you for doing that for me. You really helped me out." That made me feel good.

- Amy, West Palm Beach, Florida

Appreciation from customers reinforced workers' frame that their work was meaningful and needed. Customers would hang signs in their windows (Figure 1 and Figure 2) or leave notes with large tips on their doors (Figure 3). Customers often disclosed personal information which reinforced the value of shoppers' services.

When I first started shopping for people, I was amazed at how many people called me their hero, called me the best person ever, their savior, just for getting their groceries for them. And when I would drop off the groceries at their front door with my mask on, with my gloves on, they'd say 'You have no idea how much we rely on you, we are immunocompromised so your service is just amazing' and they tipped me a \$20. Often I will deliver groceries to houses and there is a sign that says 'Leave groceries, very high-risk household, no-contact delivery only.'

- Jax, Gilbert, Arizona

In spite of the shift to contactless delivery limiting in-person interactions between customers and shoppers, customers were successful in finding alternative methods to communicate their view of shoppers as essential and heroic.

Instacart. Lastly, the platform company referred to the hero narrative in marketing to potential shoppers and the in-app communication. When applying for the job, individuals are reminded this is an opportunity to ‘be a household hero’ and are shown a picture of one white hand giving a bag of groceries filled to the brim with vegetables and milk to another outstretched white hand. During the work itself drivers received repeated reminders of their new status (Figure 4). Frequent notification encouraged shoppers to work, reminding them of how easy it was to “do good and make money by bringing groceries to people in need’ (Figure 5). The company also encouraged customers to thank shoppers, reminding them that shoppers were heroes (Figure 6). Drivers were aware of the changes in Instacart’s marketing, “ You look at their app on the app store, “be a household hero, shop for families across America.” That’s their whole narrative.... No, they never called us a household hero before that - it was just “be a shopper for others, earn money in your spare time” (Aurora, Columbus, Ohio).

Reactions to the Hero Narrative

While shoppers received similar messages from media, customers and Instacart about being a hero, they interpreted the narrative differently either accepting, rejecting, or situating the narrative.

Accepting the Hero Narrative. When accepting the hero narrative, workers described their work in relation to the customers, whom they saw as physically at-risk and appreciative. They recognized that they were helping those more vulnerable (immunocompromised, those with young children) by bearing

the risk of exposure through completing a “routine” or “easy” task. Two shoppers describe similar sentiments.

Yeah, sometimes. Yeah, I mean it's a good feeling to know that you are doing something that is so easy to do, and so routine to do, and somebody else isn't putting themselves at risk because you're out there.

-*Salina, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

I do. I feel like I'm helping people. I really do. I don't necessarily call myself a hero, but I do feel like I'm helping people that can't go out, because they're compromised or because they have little children.

- *Laurel, Youngstown, Ohio*

Shoppers who accepted the hero narrative depicted scenarios in which they were able to help others and saw that as their primary lens to view their work.

Rejection of Hero Narrative. When rejecting the hero narrative, workers described their worker in relation to the platform company, Instacart, and the customers, whom they saw as unappreciative and entitled. They alluded to a sense of dissonance that often took the form of statements such as “if we were heroes, [certain outcome] would not be the case.” This internalization of poor treatment or working conditions seemed incongruent to identifying as a hero. Two shoppers describe similar sentiments.

They call us household heroes, and that kind of garbage. They would pay more than \$7 for shopping if they really put any value on what I do...I think it's Instacart's just lack of any kind of feeling for it's workers, just the difficulty everyone had in getting those PPE kits, the lack of pay raise of any kind, no sanitation kits, no communication at all. I think it's more the way Instacart treats its shoppers that makes me dissatisfied than the type of customers.

- *Aurora, Columbus, Ohio*

We put ourselves out there without ... The world wasn't expecting a pandemic, and then the Instacart shoppers, the ones that stuck with it, we just did it, and we did a lot of crazy things, and standing in lines and dealing with customers that didn't understand there was no roll of toilet paper. They just kept saying, "Get me another brand" to the point where we would send them empty shelves. People would get upset. They would pull their tips because we couldn't get them Lysol, even though there wasn't any.

- *Amy, West Palm Beach, Florida*

Shoppers who rejected the hero narrative depicted scenarios in which the platform's actions spoke louder than the words of the platforms of the media. Nor did they describe their work as 'easy' in that they had to satisfy demanding customers who did not understand the challenges imposed by the pandemic. Overall, shoppers identified a blatant disconnect between their treatment and others' verbalized perspectives of their work, which often fell short in comparison.

Contextualizing the Hero Narrative. Another group of workers took a situational approach to the narrative, describing that their actions were, at times, essential and even heroic though they themselves were not heroes. For these individuals, embracing the hero narrative required grappling with the implications of their work serving at-risk groups along with everyday mundaneness of shopping

No. No, I do not [feel like a hero]. But at the same time, like we were just talking about, I do realize the impact, the change in how I feel about work is like, no, I know I'm being of service. If other people want to call it a hero, that's fine. Okay. The biggest shift to that, when things first switched over, here was a gig that I was not particularly proud of and the decision got made in my life. It's like, "Oh, fuck. I have to do this now. Okay, great. I appreciate it. I know how to do it," but not particularly glamorous. And then, the next week, now I'm a household hero? Okay, that was weird...Now, with all this stuff going on, I really appreciate and understand the demand, too, but the mere fact that I'm there doing any of it, I'm already being of service. So don't guilt trip me into extra and don't think I'm going to come over and do your dishes at the same time as delivering your groceries. It's just not going to happen.

- *Joshua, Oakland, California*

Interactions with customers who were clearly utilizing shopper services out of convenience rather than necessity, also undermine the hero narrative.

Oh, God, I don't know, that's so like dependent on the situation. Like don't think it like sort of it goes like order by order? Because like sometimes they're filling someone's order and it's like clearly just someone wanted like ice cream or like a ... You know, they wanted a treat or like clearly ... or you can't tell, but like it wasn't a necessity, right? So I would ... It probably depends on the order and like that person's motivation for placing it, you know. But like I guess I didn't have that conception of myself at all and it's like really, it would be really sort of odd to think about that, considering, you know ... Well, you know better than me, that it is like a gig economy job and they're like notorious for like not being the best quality jobs, so I don't know.

- *Maya, State College, Pennsylvania*

Shoppers also framed their desires to earn money as selfish and another barrier to seeing themselves as heroes.

But to me, I feel like I'm trying to get by so I feel like I'm also doing this for myself.... "you don't even have to pay me. I don't need the money, Instacart. You don't even have to pay me. I'll just go do this for you." There are people who are doing that for people. There are people who are shopping for family or friends and they're not getting paid for it. They're just doing it to help them because they're at risk and they can't leave their house.

- Brent, Oakland County, CA

The hero narrative invoked conflict for shoppers attempting to make sense of how the reality of their work, by juxtaposing the the context of the pandemic, views about customers, and their espoused motivations for doing the work.

Discussion and Conclusion

Who benefits from the hero narrative and to what degree? In popular culture, heroes are depicted as those that leverage a position of power to aid those less fortunate. And it is without question that Instacart has financially benefited from the pandemic in addition to customers that utilized the service as a means to preserve their household safety. Yet it remains unclear if workers benefit - while being heralded as a hero is meaningful public recognition, this narrative could further exacerbate existing inequalities if they substitute for actual labor reform. Our research suggests that workers do not simply ingest the narrative, but instead interrogate and contextualize and interrogate it, framing their work activities. Our preliminary findings suggest different outcomes for each groups in terms of their engagement with the customers and the app/technology. Additionally there are demographic differences between each group we are planning to further explore.. As we continue to develop this research we hope to make contributions to literature in narrative construction, meaning-making, the gig economy, and precarious labor.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Support for frontline workers during the pandemic. Source: [Twitter](#)



Figure 2. Support for frontline workers during the pandemic. Source: [The Sacramento Bee](#)

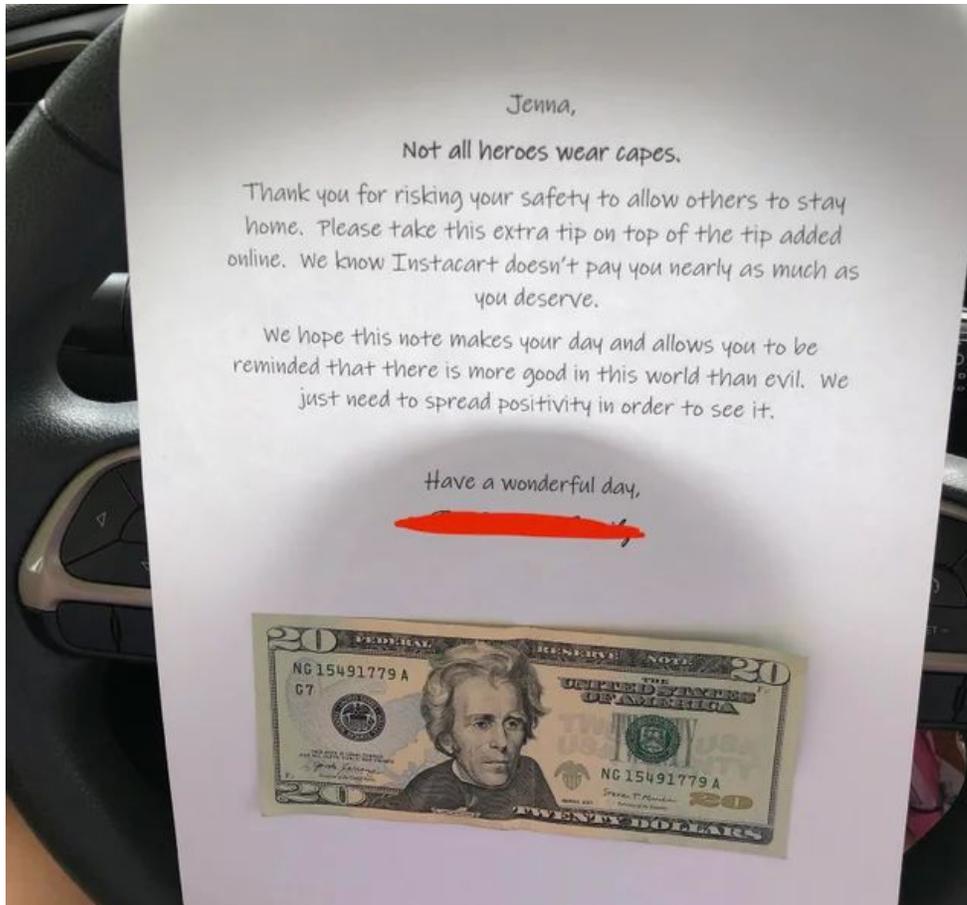


Figure 3. Message and extra cash tip for shopper post delivery. Source: [reddit](#)



Figure 4. Instacart advertisement shopper app download. Source: Apple Application Store

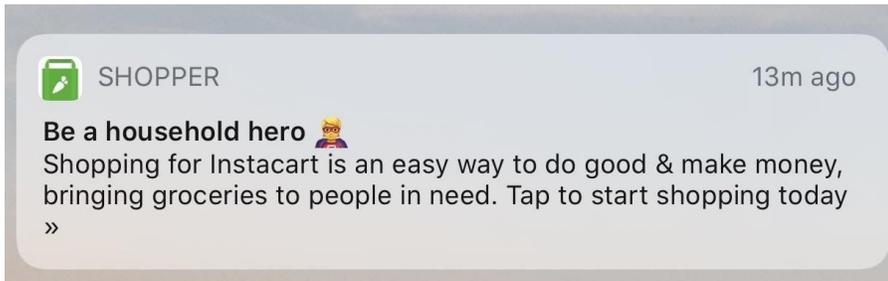


Figure 5. Notification from Instacart to shopper. Source: Authors'

← Tweet



During this busy time, Instacart shoppers are going above & beyond to deliver the essentials. Did your shopper go the extra mile? Share your thanks using [#householdheroes](#).



9:36 AM · Mar 27, 2020 · [Twitter Web App](#)

Figure 6. Tweet by Instacart asking consumers to utilize [#householdheroes](#). Source: [Twitter](#)

