



# THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

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## MASTER OF PUBLIC POLICY CAPSTONE PROJECT

Imperfect information and psychological contract breaches: A closer look at Uber  
and DoorDash

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18 August 2022

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of PPOL 623 and completion of the requirements  
for the Master of Public Policy degree

## **Executive Summary**

This paper explores the ways in which the practices of Uber and DoorDash contradict their promises to their workers, thus signifying a psychological contract breach. Through an exploration of grey literature and anecdotes collected via internet chat forums and content websites, the findings in this paper reveal that many Uber and DoorDash workers are experiencing working conditions that contradict their expectations. These psychological contract breaches are caused as a result of imperfect information.

Withholding information regarding job scope, compensation, and how data is used to inform algorithmic management decisions are examples of mechanisms used by Uber and DoorDash which result in psychological contract breaches. As the overarching mechanism through which Uber and DoorDash are breaching psychological contracts is imperfect information, this paper suggests that labour policy can address psychological contract breaches in app-work by regulating information disclosure.

## Introduction

More than 3 million Canadians are gig workers (Statistics Canada 2019) and this number is continuously on the rise (Dryden 2022). Gig work offers income opportunities to workers who may be experiencing challenges in the traditional labour force (Ziehler and McCallum 2020). This alternative labour economy also appears to offer flexibility and job autonomy (Duggen et al. 2019), attracting those who are keen to perform labour on their own terms. Yet despite the perception of autonomy and flexibility, research suggests that gig work platforms function in a way that limits workers' ability to exercise any true autonomy over their labour experience (Duggen et al. 2021; Duggen et al. 2019).

Both academic literature — which includes interviews with gig workers — and grey literature reveal that many gig workers feel their expectations of gig work were not met (Duggen et al. 2021; Duggen et al. 2019). This dissatisfaction suggests that gig workers are experiencing breaches of psychological contract. Robinson (1996) states that psychological contracts “entail beliefs about what employees believe they are entitled to receive, or should receive, because they perceive that their employer conveyed promises to provide those things” (575). When gig work platforms make promises that are then contradicted through the companies' practices (Duggen et al. 2021), this functions as a breach of psychological contract, as it violates a key expectation that was held by a worker. Psychological contract breaches within the gig economy have significant implications for labour policy as the gig economy continues to grow, making up approximately 8 per cent of Canada's labour economy (Statistics Canada 2019).

Uber and DoorDash are two gig work companies that were founded in 2009 and 2013 respectively (Uber n.d.a; Loeb 2019). Both companies are considered app-work platforms by gig work researchers, as they have leveraged technology to facilitate a new form of gig work

wherein customers and suppliers are matched via algorithm (McDonnell et al. 2021). Uber is cited as the most popular ride sharing app globally (Fortune Business Insights 2022) with an annual revenue of \$17.4 billion in 2021 (Iqbal 2022). In addition to leading the rideshare market, UberEats leads the North American food delivery market with \$8.3 billion in revenue in 2021 (Curry 2022a). Second to UberEats is DoorDash with \$4.9 billion in revenue in 2021 (Curry 2022b). Both Uber Technologies Inc (which includes Uber and UberEats) and DoorDash are leaders within the gig economy. Therefore, the actions of these organizations have implications for the gig economy and the labour economy as a whole.

Due to the significance of Uber and DoorDash in the app-work economy and the gig economy as a whole, these two platforms are used to explore some of the labour policy challenges associated with app-work. This paper aims to highlight the labour policy challenges within app-work specifically as it relates to how the experience of app-workers contradicts the promises made to them by app-work platforms. Consequently, this paper seeks to answer the following question: What are the mechanisms through which Uber and DoorDash may be breaching psychological contracts?

This paper begins with a brief explanation of the gig economy and situates app-work as a distinct sub economy within gig work. It then highlights the key themes that inform the relationship between app-workers and app-work platforms. This paper then presents findings from grey literature that highlight the specific ways in which Uber and DoorDash workers experience psychological contract breaches. Finally, this paper outlines ways in which policy professionals might be able to address psychological contract breaches through labour policy.

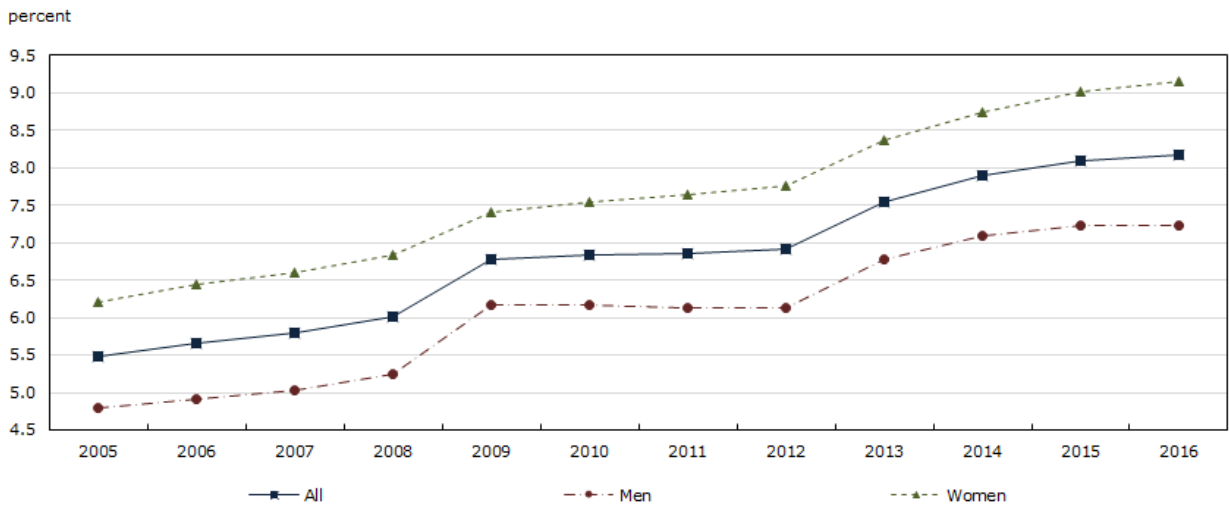
Background

Gig work, also known as freelance work or precarious labour, is by no means new. Flexible working arrangements and project-based jobs — in which the traditional employer-employee relationship is forgone — have existed for centuries (Tran and Sokas 2017). These working relationships are often such that the worker is categorized as an independent contractor rather than an employee (Muller 2019, 174). As gig workers are technically considered business owners within Canadian labour markets, they forgo all labour protections that accompany an employee status (Government of Canada 2021). This working relationship presents labour policy challenges, and the significance of these challenges continues to increase as the gig economy rapidly grows.

The last fifteen years have seen a steep rise in gig work (Statistics Canada 2019); this rise is largely attributed to the creation of new app-work platforms such as Uber and DoorDash.

Figure 1.1 shows the growth of the gig economy in Canada.

Chart 2  
Trends in the share of gig workers among all workers, by sex, 2005 to 2016



Source: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations based on data from the Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamics Database.

Figure 1.1  
Source: Statistics Canada 2019

McDonnell et al. (2021) note the importance of distinguishing app-work from other types of gig work, as it allows for a “greater appreciation of the idiosyncrasies between different forms of gig work” (3997). This appreciation can then make way for discussions around the unique labour policy implications of each sub economy within the larger gig economy. McDonnell et al. (2021) break down the gig economy into four main types: capital platform work, cloud work, crowdwork, and app-work. Both Uber and DoorDash are considered app-work platforms according to McDonnell et al. (2021). Therefore, app-work is the key focus of this paper.<sup>1</sup>

According to McDonnell et al. (2021), app-work exists as its own type of gig work for two primary reasons. Firstly, app-workers do not set their own pricing. While a gig work platform such as AirBnB — which would be categorized as a capital platform work facilitator, according to McDonnell et al. (2021) — offers pricing suggestions to suppliers, it is ultimately up to the ‘worker’ to set their own price. For app-workers, however, pricing is algorithmically generated (McDonnell et al. 2021, 4001). Secondly, unlike gig economy ecosystems that allow customers to choose their own supplier based on services offered at a given price, with app-work, it is an algorithm that quickly and somewhat surreptitiously matches customers with suppliers. App-work facilitators such as Uber and DoorDash directly match consumers with suppliers, assigning labour to workers via algorithm. This is in contrast to cloud work facilitators (such as Upwork and Freelancer) and capital platform work facilitators (such as AirBnB and Etsy) that merely suggest certain suppliers to consumers based on the consumer’s preferences and the supplier’s previous performance (McDonnell et al. 2021, 4001). Consequently, the key

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the focus of this analysis, the other types of gig work outlined by McDonnell et al. will not be explored in this paper but will be mentioned in order to better contextualize how app-work is distinct from other types of gig work and breeds unique labour policy challenges.

difference between app-work and other forms of gig work is the role of algorithms in managing a worker's entire experience.

Algorithmic management is a hallmark of app-work. Duggan et al (2019) define algorithmic management as “a system of control where self-learning algorithms are given the responsibility for making and executing decisions affecting labour, thereby limiting human involvement and oversight of the labour process” (10). Unlike traditional human resource management, it is the algorithm that decides when a worker gets a job, what information a worker will receive, and when a worker will be suspended from the platform. Therefore, as the algorithm constantly learns how to achieve a more efficient outcome, subtle changes are perpetually being made to a worker's conditions unbeknownst to them (Muller 2019).

Algorithmic management has significant implications for labour policy, as it has the potential to exceed traditional modes of organizational control. Kellogg et al. (2020) submit that through algorithmic management, organizations are able to manipulate worker behaviour, track and evaluate performance, and punish actions that deviate from the algorithm's desired outcome. Based on these capabilities, the authors state that management by algorithm is more “comprehensive” and less transparent than traditional management practices (396).

App-work presents unique labour policy implications, as it is distinct from other forms of gig work due to its reliance on algorithms to manage a worker's experience. Therefore, as this paper aims to understand the mechanisms through which Uber and DoorDash — two app-work platforms — are breaching psychological labour contracts, it is critical to first understand the unique labour policy challenges presented by the app-work economy as a whole. Beyond an understanding of app-work and algorithmic management, there are additional contextual

components that should be appreciated when exploring the relationship between app-work platforms and their workers. These contextual themes emerged through a literature review and will be explored in the next section of this analysis.

### **Context**

Literature on app-work reveals some key themes that are highly relevant to the issue of psychological contract breaches. The themes explored in this section of the analysis aim to provide a contextual framework for the purpose of better understanding the factors at play in the relationship between app-workers and app-work platforms. These themes fall under two main categories: power imbalance and platform roles. In exploring the power imbalance between app-workers and app-work platforms, policy professionals may gain a better understanding of the vulnerability of app-workers. Similarly, understanding the role that Uber and DoorDash play in the labour economy is essential in understanding the various ways in which Uber and DoorDash are breaching psychological contracts.

#### ***Power imbalance***

Power imbalances are present throughout various operational areas of app-work platforms. This power imbalance further exacerbates the labour policy challenges associated with app-work, as it leaves workers exceptionally vulnerable (Muller 2019, 178). Relevant literature reveals three key sources of power. The first source of power lies within imperfect information, the second source of power is perpetuated through a lack of accountability, and finally, the third source of power comes from the existing societal inequalities that are perpetuated through precarious labour relationships.

#### ***Power through imperfect information***



Imperfect information refers to a scenario where either a buyer or seller lacks the necessary information to make an informed decision regarding a product's price or quantity. The presence of imperfect information can lead to a market failure, as it may eventually discourage either buyers or sellers from participating in the market (Brown, Forman, and Scheiding 2019). In the case of Uber and DoorDash, the customer looking to request a ride or order food is the 'buyer.' As for the 'seller,' one might argue that the seller is the app-work platform; these platforms, after all, set the price of the service and accept payments from buyers (McDonnell et al. 2021, 4001). In reality, the app-workers themselves operate as the supplier, as they are classified as independent contractors and not employees (Crawley 2021). As independent contractors, app-workers are considered business owners, supplying their services to customers via app-work platforms like Uber and DoorDash. As independent contractors, and therefore suppliers, app-workers require certain information in order to participate in the market in a way that would sustain an efficient market outcome (Brown, Forman, and Scheiding 2019). Both Uber and DoorDash, however, have a history of withholding pertinent information from workers. This includes information about how much money workers will make from a job (Lemar 2021), what resources will be required to complete a job (Dough 2022a), and how key decisions regarding their status as a worker are being made (Duggan et al. 2021).

Rideshare drivers often cite app-work platform's opacity as a key challenge when it comes to thriving in the environment. In a study that included interviews with rideshare drivers, Duggan et al. (2021) summarize the driver's responses, stating that the ability for platforms — through algorithmic management — to intentionally withhold information from drivers is "very constraining" (19). This lack of transparency creates an apprehensive working culture where drivers feel perpetually "on edge," fearful of being deactivated from the platform at any time

(21). Ultimately, rideshare drivers stated that it is unclear what punishments are enforced via algorithmic management in response to cancelling rides, arriving late, etc. However, drivers expressed that there are certainly disadvantages when the desired level of performance is not maintained (Duggan et al 2021, 22). While drivers are aware that there are disadvantages to sub par performance, the exact disadvantages and the exact thresholds that trigger said disadvantages are unknown.

App-work platforms hold complete ownership of information and all data exchanged within the platform. These organizations also have total control over how and when information is distributed. This leaves app-workers unable to exercise any true control over their work environment, as they are not given the information that would allow them to do so (McDonnell 2021).

Imperfect information puts app-workers at a disadvantage, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation; this perpetuates the power imbalance between app-work platforms and app-workers. The role that algorithmic management plays in this relationship further complicates this power dynamic, as a primary function of algorithmic management is that the algorithm is always adapting. As algorithms continue to learn, rules that govern an app-worker's entire experience are always evolving. These rules exist in an algorithmic 'black box,' making it difficult for workers to understand let alone challenge them (Muller 2019, 180). Another factor that makes it difficult for app-workers to challenge this power imbalance is an overall lack of systemic accountability for app-work platforms.

*Power through lack of accountability*

In addition to imperfect information, a power imbalance between gig work platforms and their workers is perpetuated by a lack of accountability. Gig work platforms go relatively unchallenged as many labour laws do not apply to them. Additionally, gig work platforms hold no explicit responsibility to disclose information based on Canada's information disclosure laws.

The mechanisms that typically keep employers accountable, such as labour laws, cannot be utilized due to gig workers being independent contractors as opposed to employees. While the fight for gig workers to be classified as employees has been won in some jurisdictions (Balintec 2022), most rideshare and food delivery drivers in Canada are still classified as independent contractors, and thus, remain unprotected under provincial employment acts (Employment Standards Act, 2000). In some countries and U.S. states, Uber drivers have been deemed misclassified and Uber has been forced to classify drivers as employees (Toh, 2021). This, however, is not the case in most Canadian provinces.

In Canada, app-work platforms continue to exert control over workers' behaviour, yet these workers are offered no financial security or legal protections (Duggan et al. 2019). This creates a power imbalance as it renders app-workers exceptionally vulnerable. If workers were classified as employees, they would have guaranteed minimum earnings as well as clear legal recourse when they feel they are being mistreated. Without the employee classification, however, app-workers are left with limited labour protections.

In addition to a lack of labour protections for app-workers, Canadian laws also lack sufficient provisions regarding information disclosure. There are two principles within the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (2000) that are especially relevant to the issue of data disclosure on app-work platforms. The principles are Openness and

Individual Access. Section 5, subsection 4.8.1 outlines the principle of openness, stating “Organizations shall be open about their policies and practices with respect to the management of personal information. Individuals shall be able to acquire information about an organization’s policies and practices without unreasonable effort. This information shall be made available in a form that is generally understandable.” The Act then highlights what information needs to be made available in subsection 4.8.2. This information includes:

- (a) the name or title, and the address, of the person who is accountable for the organization’s policies and practices and to whom complaints or inquiries can be forwarded;
- (b) the means of gaining access to personal information held by the organization;
- (c) a description of the type of personal information held by the organization, including a general account of its use;
- (d) a copy of any brochures or other information that explain the organization’s policies, standards, or codes; and
- (e) what personal information is made available to related organizations (e.g., subsidiaries).

Additionally, subsection 4.9 of The Act states, “Upon request, an individual shall be informed of the existence, use, and disclosure of his or her personal information and shall be given access to that information.” While The Act addresses issues of data disclosure within the principles of openness and individual access, there is nothing in The Act that speaks to a larger duty of algorithmic transparency or the duty to disclose non personal information if it has a direct effect on a customer, contractor, or employee. This creates a grey area as gig work platforms are not being fully transparent about job details, but these organizations could argue that fully disclosing key job information does not fall under ‘policies, standards, or codes.’

With drivers being classified as independent contractors and with a lack of explicit legal provisions regarding information disclosure in Canada, there is a lack of accountability for app-

work platforms. This allows these platforms to continuously utilize algorithmic management to control worker behaviour. In doing this, workers not only have very little information about what is happening, but they have limited options for legal recourse should they want to challenge the corporations' practices. Canada lacks the legal framework to protect app-workers and this reality is made worse by the fact that these workers tend to be already systemically under protected due to socioeconomic circumstances.

### *Power through societal inequalities*

One of the greatest sources of power that app-work platforms have over workers comes from current societal inequalities. That is, it is the imbalance between multi-billion-dollar corporations and low-income, marginalized workers. Research has shown that racialized Canadians and new immigrants are overrepresented within the most precarious and lowest paying jobs. Many of these people are attracted to gig work for the flexibility and control it appears to offer (Ziehler and McCallum 2020). In prior years, Uber seemingly took advantage of this vulnerability, promising rideshare drivers an annual income of up to \$100,000 and targeting low income drivers with predatory car lease deals (Smiley 2020). Smiley reports in the Guardian:

When these apps realized that they needed larger fleets to compete, they started recruiting low-income, often immigrant drivers with false promises of the American dream. For example, even if you didn't have a car or credit score, Uber would set you up with a car lease – all you had to do was commit to making 150-200 rides a week for the company. Can't do it? No worries, Uber knows there are plenty of others for them to target – but you still have to pay that car lease Uber signed you up for (Smiley 2020, 8).

Uber's car lease program illustrates that the app-work platform expects to attract workers who are economically vulnerable. This relationship between economically vulnerable app-workers and multi-billion-dollar corporations who hold complete informational and financial power is significantly and functionally imbalanced.

This is not to say that gig work platforms have created this societal inequality. Racialized Canadians and new immigrants have historically been overrepresented in low paying and precarious work (Block and Galabuzi 2011). This is due to greater barriers in Canada's labour force which include explicit discrimination, implicit bias, and systemic obstacles which make various groups socially and economically vulnerable. Due to these barriers, vulnerable Canadians often find themselves in more temporary and precarious roles, which includes app-work (Lam and Phung 2021). These roles are often taken out of necessity, which suggests an existing lack of personal control over work outcomes (Ziegler et al. 2020, 18). Consequently, while app-work platforms are certainly not responsible for making people vulnerable in the first place, the corporations benefit from this vulnerability and perpetuate it through their continued exercise of power over these groups.

Imperfect information animates an already significant power imbalance between app-work platforms and their workers, leaving app-workers with limited control over their working situation. A lack of accountability makes it difficult for workers to challenge exploitation or mistreatment, as the legal framework for doing so does not exist in Canada. Finally, existing socioeconomic inequalities further contribute to the imbalance of power, as app-workers tend to be already marginalized people. All of these power sources ensure that app-workers remain quite vulnerable.

Muller (2019) highlights the need for close scrutiny of the power imbalance created by app-work platforms, as how they operate is often in direct contrast with how they represent themselves to users (169). App-work platforms often present themselves as marketplaces or matching service while simultaneously collecting copious amounts of data to be used for

corporate benefit. This presents a tension between the perceived role of app-work platforms and the true role.

### ***The role of gig work platforms***

Understanding how the true role of gig work platforms often deviates from the perceived role of these platforms is instrumental in understanding the dynamics at play within psychological contract breaches. Gig work apps often present themselves as merely an online marketplace enabling independent contractors and customers to transact (Uber n.d.b, 1). In reality, these technologies design their own sub economies and control activities to support organizational profitability (Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2019). Uber, for example, may be seen as an organization that facilitates transactions between drivers and customers looking for a ride. This perception has been created by Uber intentionally as Uber itself describes its technology as one that “matches consumers looking for rides and independent providers of ride services” (Uber n.d.b, 1).

The perception that app-work platforms are simply a marketplace for matching producers with consumers allows these platforms to exercise a critical degree of power over workers. This power is exerted through a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’ effect, wherein gig work platforms present their role as one thing but operate under an entirely different ethos (Muller 2019, 184). The tension between how app-work platforms present themselves and how they truly operate is what McDonnell et al. (2021) refer to as “competing institutional logics” (4005). The authors explore two institutional logics — the market logic and the corporation logic — in order to conceptualize how the perceived role of gig work platforms interacts with the true role of these apps.

The perceived role of gig work platforms can be understood through the lens of the market logic. The market logic suggests that gig work platforms are an online marketplace, merely enabling the transaction between independent contractors and customers (Duggan, et al. 2020). Based on this institutional logic, the platforms would offer complete autonomy to independent contractors, allowing them and the customers to freely operate within the economic laws of supply and demand (McDonnell et al. 2021, 4005).

The true role of app-work platforms can be understood through the lens of the corporation logic. The corporation logic suggests that an app-work platform, like any other corporation, is designed to facilitate its own success (McDonnell et al. 2021). While the corporation logic is not fundamentally contradictory to the market logic, for organizations such as Uber and DoorDash to reach the level of success they have, they must control the activities that take place within their markets. This includes controlling worker behaviour in order to ensure the app-work platform maintains a certain degree of financial success (Duggan, et al. 2020). The intentional control of information and behaviour for the benefit of the platform is precisely what creates competition between the market logic and the corporation logic (McDonnell et al. 2021, 4005).

When Uber describes its technology as one that “matches consumers looking for rides and independent providers of ride services” (Uber n.d.b, 1), it gives the impression that the corporation operates under a market logic. However, the strategies of algorithmic management that are central to Uber’s operations suggest that this platform fully operates under a corporation logic while submitting a perception to the contrary. Not only does Uber appear to be functioning under a market logic, but by design, the organization fully controls its own sub economy, manipulating behaviours and interactions to serve the corporate bottom line (Wood and



Lehdonvirta, 2019). Understanding the role of gig work platforms — and how the perceived deviates from the actual — is important for understanding the key factors at play in the relationship between app-work platforms and their workers.

The notion of competing institutional logics can be used to better understand the role of gig work platforms, as Muller (2019) states,

Machine learning algorithms with theoretically perfect information on the market and instructions to maximize profits will get better and better at matching buyers and sellers of services, and everybody wins. The reality is not so simple. A closer look at the incentives and constraints on platform firms illuminates a set of situations where their interests diverge from, and may directly oppose, those of their users. (Muller 2019, 167).

The above statement illustrates how despite the suggestion that app-work platforms create a marketplace in which producers, consumers, and the platform itself are all ‘winners,’ in reality, app-work platforms have created and exercise full control over sub economies that are designed to benefit the platforms, more often than not at a direct cost to workers (Muller 2019, 184). App-workers have joined app-work platforms expecting one experience based on the perceived role of the platform, yet in reality have a completely different experience (Duggan et al. 2019). Consequently, the discrepancy between the perceived role of app-work platforms and the true role directly contributes to psychological contract breaches. The findings outline the specific mechanisms through which Uber and DoorDash deliver a labour experience contrary to app-workers’ expectations.

## **Methodology**

In order to better understand the specific ways in which Uber and DoorDash are breaching psychological contracts, grey literature and internet chat forums were explored. Data collected for this analysis include information from Uber and DoorDash websites, accounts from

Uber and DoorDash workers from content websites (such as Ridesharing Driver), and accounts from Uber and DoorDash workers from chat forums (such as Reddit and Quora). This data was then used to build a case study of Uber and DoorDash.

While anecdotal evidence may lack the scientific rigour found in empirical data, it can be a useful source of information for developing knowledge around complex social dynamics (Ginty 2013). Thus, while the methodology used in this paper does not yield conclusive findings based on empirical evidence, it does provide a useful lens through which to view the complex relationship between app-workers and app-work platforms. The results of this research can therefore be used as a starting point for further, more robust analysis.

## **Findings**

Through an exploration of grey literature and chat forums, key findings emerged that highlight some of the areas that DoorDash and Uber drivers experience working conditions contrary to their expectations. This tension signifies a psychological contract breach (Robinson 1996, 575). Both Uber and DoorDash quite explicitly promise flexibility and schedule autonomy. The following phrase can be found on Uber's website: "Your schedule is up to you. With Uber, you can get paid to drive when you want and manage your own hours. Whether you choose to drive throughout the week or just when you need extra money, Uber is a great way to be your own boss" (Uber n.d.c). This message demonstrates two key promises Uber makes to potential workers: autonomy through schedule flexibility and control through ownership of work. The phrase 'your schedule is up to you' suggests that drivers will get to choose exactly when they work, and the phrase 'be your own boss' suggests a degree of ownership over the entire experience. Similarly, the following sentence can be found on the DoorDash website: "Unlike full-time jobs or seasonal gigs, when and where you work is totally up to you" (DoorDash n.d.a,

2). This message communicates that workers will benefit from a form of labour independence by working with DoorDash. Both Uber and DoorDash communicate to potential workers that they will experience labour autonomy and flexibility should they choose to become an app-worker. Accounts from Uber and DoorDash workers, however, reveal that these promises of schedule flexibility and job autonomy are broken through a variety of algorithmic management practices deployed by both Uber and DoorDash.

The following findings outline three examples of mechanisms used by Uber and/or DoorDash which breach psychological contracts. All three mechanisms appear to leverage imperfect information to limit the control that app-workers have over their experience. This limited control through imperfect information contradicts the notion of labour autonomy promised to app-workers. Due to constantly changing policies and an overall lack of transparency from Uber and DoorDash, it is challenging to state with certainty which of the policies uncovered in the findings are currently active within Canada. The findings, however, are not meant to serve as an audit of the current policies through which Uber and DoorDash are breaching psychological contracts today. The findings simply provide examples, whether past or present, of the mechanisms that Uber and DoorDash have used — and in some cases, continue to use — which break the promise of flexibility and autonomy that draw people to app-work (DTGardi 2021). The first mechanism, which both Uber and DoorDash have employed, is the withholding of final destination information.

### ***Destination information***

As of early 2022, Uber drivers were unable to see a passenger's final destination until they had accepted the ride and picked up the passenger (Dough 2022a). The same rule applied for UberEats and DoorDash deliveries; that is, drivers could see where orders needed to be

picked up from, but could not see the location of the final delivery until after the order had been picked up (Webber 2021; Josuke 2020). This lack of transparency creates significant challenges for Uber and DoorDash workers. One of the challenges that this lack of transparency creates is that drivers are unable to decide for themselves whether a job will be profitable for them after taking into account where exactly they will have to go, how long it will take them to get there, and how much it will cost them in gas (DaWhiteDwight 2021).

As of November 2021, Uber was showing drivers the estimated mileage and duration of a ride request. Figure 2.1 shows what an UberEats driver saw prior to accepting an order. The bottom of the screen shows a small watch symbol with an estimation of how long it will take the driver to reach their final location (in this case, 37 minutes) as well as an estimation of how many miles away the delivery destination is (11.8 miles). The estimated mileage and duration information, while intended to provide more information to drivers, often further misled drivers. This information proved to be misleading, as drivers on Reddit confirmed that the app is regularly inaccurate about the mileage as well as the time it will take to complete an order (Redbenzo 2021). This justifies the need for drivers to have complete information regarding drop-off and delivery destinations in order to be able to exercise autonomy over the jobs they take.

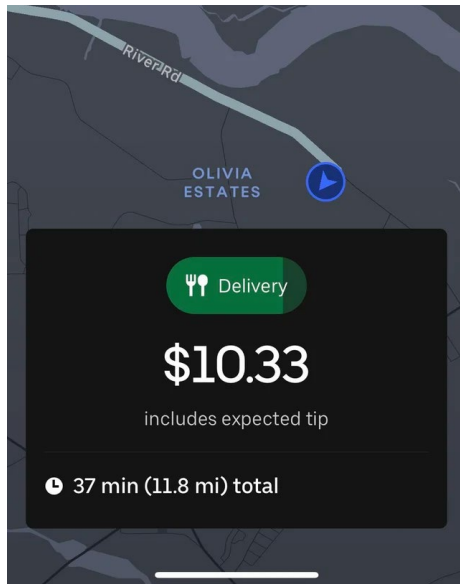


Figure 2.1  
Source: UniqueAssUsername 2021a

Uber executives may cite the corporate community guidelines as a justification for the lack of transparency around final destination information. According to Uber’s community guidelines, it is “unacceptable to discriminate on the basis of a rider’s destination” (Uber n.d.d, 1). Uber calls this particular type of bias ‘destination discrimination.’ Destination discrimination refers to a type of discrimination that occurs based on a passenger’s pickup or drop-off location. If, for example, a driver refuses to accept a ride request because a passenger’s final destination is in a low-income neighbourhood that is perceived as dangerous, this can result in low-income customers waiting longer for rides or not getting rides at all (Ince 2019).

Briefly in 2019, Uber drivers in the state of California were given passenger destination information before accepting a ride (Zipper 2019). As this was a brief policy change, there were no conclusive results concerning whether or not this increased the prevalence of destination discrimination. Normally destination information is hidden from drivers and they must choose to accept the ride request in order to see the final destination address. If after accepting the ride

request, the driver chooses to cancel the job, they can, but this harms their overall standing with Uber (Cheddar Den 2022).

Withholding passenger destination information ensures customers get service regardless of where they live. However, this policy limits the control that app-workers have, making it difficult for them to exercise ownership over their work as they do not know the full scope of the job before they accept it. One Uber driver particularly felt that the responsibility to ensure all customers get a ride should not fall on the Uber drivers. Reddit User UndulateEpidemic (2020) documents having to cancel two rides in a row which were requested by the same customer. After accepting the ride the first time, this Uber driver saw the location was in an area that they did not feel comfortable driving in, a location with “roads full of potholes and drunk drivers” (UndulateEpidemic 2020). The driver then cancelled the ride only to get a request from the same group further down the road, which the driver cancelled again. The driver was then reported to Uber for destination discrimination. After being contacted by Uber directly regarding the destination discrimination claim, the Uber driver stated on Reddit “Fuck Uber for telling us we have the right to decline or cancel but then scolding us when we actually do” (UndulateEpidemic 2020).

While the act of not disclosing destination information may appear like a noble attempt to eliminate discrimination, through past policies, Uber has shown that if discrimination is the true reason behind a lack of destination disclosure, then the corporation is willing to trade discrimination for financial gain. This is demonstrated by Uber’s past actions of using information as a tool to encourage desired behaviour. Prior to 2021, Uber drivers in the U.S. did not even receive information around estimated mileage and duration (Weber 2021). If drivers

upheld a certain pattern of behaviour, however, they would then receive access to this information. The following is a Quora response from an Uber driver:

Understanding that this is something drivers really want, Uber instigated a rewards program where if your user feedback rating was high enough, and your cancellation rate was low enough, and your overall performance was often enough, that they would tell you the anticipated length of your next ride. It doesn't tell you exactly where you'll be going, but it's going to tell you how long it's going to take to get there (Weber 2021).

Similar to this strategy, UberEats once announced to its drivers that they would receive upfront information about where their deliveries were going if they maintained certain performance standards. A writer for Ridesharing Driver shared an excerpt from an email they received from Uber: "In an email to drivers, Uber stated, 'Accept 5 out of every 10 trips to continue getting upfront information'" (Dough 2022a, 4). The author went on to confirm, "If your most acceptances drop below 5/10, you will no longer see the restaurant name or the customer destination. In some cities, the acceptance minimum is 3/10" (5). Figure 2.2 below shows a copy of the email from UberEats, shared by a driver on Reddit. Similarly, Figure 2.3 shows what the same driver saw when their acceptance rating fell below 5/10.

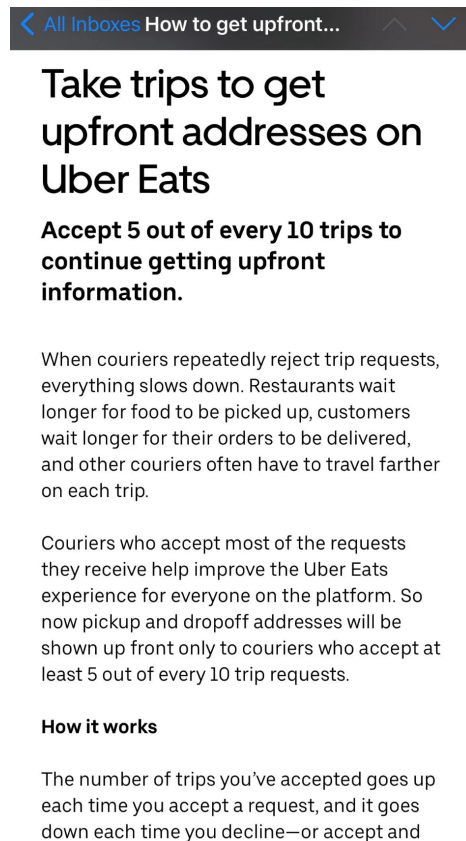


Figure 2.2  
Source: UniqueAssUsername 2021b

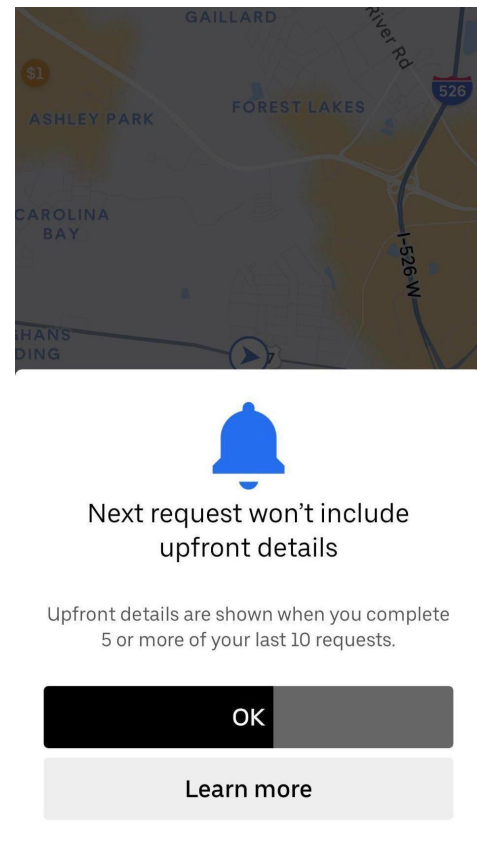


Figure 2.3  
Source: UniqueAssUsername 2021c

By February 2022, UberEats communicated via email that it had retracted this policy.

Figure 2.4 shows an email from UberEats which states, “We have paused the feature that shows or hides upfront pickup and drop-off addresses based on the number trips you accept out of your last 10 requests.”



## Update on upfront addresses and accepting trips Inbox ☆

 **Uber** 3:01 PM  
to me ▾

**Uber**

We have paused the feature that shows or hides upfront pickup and dropoff addresses based on the number of trips you accept out of your last 10 requests.

We appreciate all the feedback that has been provided and we will continue to evaluate how the feature impacts the experience of couriers and customers.

Figure 2.4

Source: Dough 2022a

The notion of app-work platforms leveraging information in order to achieve certain outcomes has also been explored through academic research. Summarizing interviews with rideshare drivers, Duggan et al (2021) state “Respondents noted that they must maintain consistently high acceptance levels to know how far a ride is going to be (RS20). This lack of transparency and limited availability of basic task information was problematic for workers who might not want to drive an hour out of town, but don’t have the information” (10). These examples of how Uber has used passenger destination information as a tool to encourage desired behaviour demonstrate how Uber leverages imperfect information to exercise control over workers despite autonomy being a key expectation of workers. Another mechanism used to

limiting worker autonomy and exercise control through imperfect information is DoorDash's hidden tips.

### *Hidden tips*

DoorDash drivers are compensated with a base pay that ranges from \$2-\$10+ per delivery “depending on the estimated duration, distance, and desirability of the order” (DoorDash n.d.d, 2). On top of that base pay, drivers are paid 100% of the tip a customer leaves. However, drivers are not always informed of how much this tip will be. Even if a customer tips before an order is accepted, DoorDash will at times only show a portion of the tip to the driver. The driver will then see the total compensation amount after the delivery is made. Figure 3.1 shows what a DoorDash driver saw prior to accepting an order. Under the compensation amount (\$2.75), there is a message that says “total may be higher.” This message suggests to DoorDash drivers that there may be more money in it for them, yet there is no way of knowing how much additional compensation they can expect (if any at all) unless the driver completes the order.

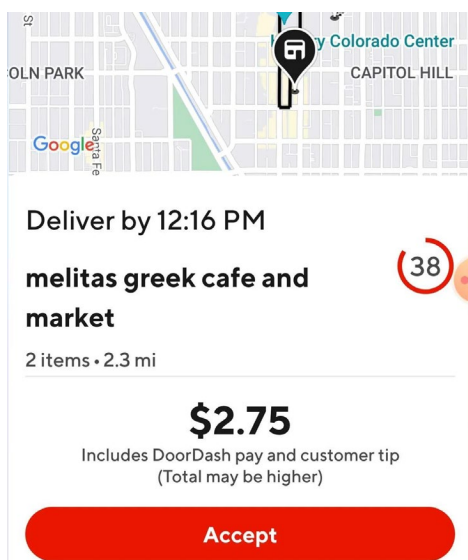


Figure 3.1  
Source: EntreCourier 2021

While the hidden tip algorithm seems to be consistently changing and differs from location to location (DD-OD 2022), DoorDash workers have theories based on their personal experiences with the company. One driver believes the algorithm is quite systematic, and states,

Doordash hides tips over around \$4 on the order offer screen. In theory it's to prevent us from cherrypicking, declining until a good tip shows up, and thus helps get more of the smaller orders delivered when we gamble that it might be worth it. But all it does is make us decline even more since we can't see the big tip to know it's worth taking. So say a customer tipped \$10. The order offer would still only show us \$6.50 (2.50 base pay plus 4 tip). Any amount below that, there is guaranteed no hidden tip. That exact amount, means there's a chance there could be more tip hidden but there's no way to tell for sure till you complete it (Bok249 2022).

Another DoorDash Driver believes the hidden tips are slightly more random, stating that approximately 16% of all orders they accepted had hidden tips (EntreCourier 2021). While tipping in a more traditional industry, such as restaurants, typically takes place after a service has been completed, DoorDash and UberEats collect tips before orders are delivered. Therefore, even though the total compensation amount has already been calculated, a lack of tip transparency means that a worker will not know what that amount is until the service has been completed. Policies like this keep workers in the dark about how much money they will make despite the amount already being calculated. Many app-workers believe these policies are put in place to discourage drivers from holding out for high tip orders and to manipulate drivers into taking low paying jobs, as the driver does not know if there will be a big payout in the end (IIRizzII 2022; Superbotto 2022). This sentiment is demonstrated by a DoorDash driver who states on Reddit,

I think they try and ride the line between incentivizing you to take the order, and making it harder to reject bad orders because you don't have all the information up front. Essentially, they need to trick us into taking shit orders on the hope that there might be a tip... We are not truly independent unless we know the full scope and pay of our work.” (FiniteFinesse 2022)

The occasional withholding of tip information is an example of how algorithmic management practices limit app-workers' ability to operate as independent contractors. A lack of tip transparency makes it impossible for workers to make an informed decision about accepting a job as compensation details are being hidden.

DoorDash's history of hiding tips in an effort to control worker behaviour (FiniteFinesse 2022; IIRizzII 2022; Superbotto 2022) is another example of imperfect information — a tool through which Uber and DoorDash limit the control that app-workers have over their labour experience, thus breaching psychological contracts. This theme of using imperfect information to breach psychological contracts is also found in how both Uber and DoorDash track acceptance ratings and monitor worker status.

### *Acceptance ratings and worker status*

An acceptance rating is defined by DoorDash as “the percentage of deliveries that you have accepted out of the last 100 delivery possibilities that you have received” (DoorDash n.d.b, Acceptance Rate). Following this description, DoorDash states “to increase your acceptance rate, always accept delivery opportunities assigned to you” (DoorDash n.d.b, Acceptance Rate). DoorDash encourages workers to accept all jobs assigned to them, even though many jobs may not be profitable for the worker based on how far they have to drive, where they live, and the fuel efficiency of their car.

While both companies track acceptance ratings, neither Uber nor DoorDash explicitly state on their website the various ways acceptance ratings are used to assign jobs. DoorDash states that workers will “never be deactivated for a low acceptance rate” (DoorDash n.d.b, Acceptance Rate). However, previous Uber policies have included marking a driver as

‘unavailable’ if they decline three rides in a row (Steinberger 2018) and deactivating drivers for 10 minutes if they refuse too many requests (Prassl 2018). Despite the impression Uber and DoorDash give that a low acceptance rating does not negatively impact a worker’s status, Uber and DoorDash workers have experiences that suggest it does. One DoorDash driver states, “They punish drivers with low acceptance rate. I only get orders that was [sic] declined (just by looking at it, its [sic] 100% obvious) by other drivers. Im [sic] basically a garbage collector” (Goyongj 2021). Similarly, an Uber Driver shared, “I had dropped my acceptance rate below 50% and got instant message that if I will have rating lower then [sic] average they will block my account” (RokeeCode 2022). Regardless of how Uber and DoorDash use acceptance ratings to dictate what jobs a worker will get and when, the various theories from workers suggest yet another example of imperfect information. That is, Uber and DoorDash are collecting data and workers are not entirely sure how that data is being used.

One area where acceptance ratings are explicitly monitored is for DoorDash’s Top Dasher program. In order to earn ‘Top Dasher’ status as a DoorDash driver, workers must maintain a high level of activity as well as a high acceptance rating. For workers to qualify for the Top Dasher program, they must meet and maintain the following criteria:

- Customer rating of at least 4.7<sup>2</sup>
- Acceptance rate of at least 70%
- Completion rate of at least 95%<sup>3</sup>
- 100 completed deliveries during the last month
- At least 200 lifetime deliveries completed (DoorDash n.d.c)

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<sup>2</sup>“Customer rating is a score from 1-5, calculated from the 100 most recent ratings submitted by customers on their delivery (not food) experience” (DoorDash n.d.b, Customer Rating).

<sup>3</sup> “completion rate is the percent of deliveries complete out of the 100 most recent delivery opportunities you accept” (DoorDash n.d.b, Completion Rate). If a worker accepts an order and then cancels it, this will negatively affect their completion rate (DoorDash n.d.).

Once the above criteria have been met, DoorDash drivers receive the ‘perk’ of being able to work anywhere, at any time — a function that one might expect to be available to all DoorDash workers given the DoorDash marketing phrase “when and where you work is totally up to you” (DoorDash n.d.a, 2). Top Dashers have access to a “Dash Now” function, which allows them to start working at any time and in any location (DoorDash n.d.c). Workers who do not qualify for the Top Dasher Program are required to schedule their work times in advance and are limited to certain locations unless demand is high (Dough 2022b). The notion that DoorDash workers have full schedule flexibility and can work whenever it is convenient for them is not a given reality, rather it is a working condition that needs to be earned by maintaining high acceptance ratings. Maintaining high acceptance ratings means accepting jobs regardless of if they are profitable or not. Consequently, in order for workers to truly benefit from the function of working whenever they want, they must maintain a certain level of performance that may not always be in their best interest. By assessing worker status through functions like acceptance ratings, DoorDash ensures that workers accept a lot of jobs regardless of whether they are profitable or not. This challenges the expectation of autonomy which leads workers to believe that if a job is not profitable for them, they can simply decline to accept it. In reality, workers must earn their ‘autonomy’ by taking jobs that may not be in their best interest in order to have more access to jobs that may in fact be profitable.

Through imperfect information, Uber and DoorDash exercise control over their workers, directly contradicting the promise of labour autonomy that draws app-workers into the gig economy. Withholding destination information, tip information and information regarding how acceptance ratings affect workers are all examples of imperfect information and function as mechanisms through which Uber and DoorDash breach psychological contracts. This

psychological contract breach through imperfect information is implemented via algorithmic management, which functions as a more intensive tool for controlling worker behaviour than traditional management practices (Kellogg et al. 2020).

Gig work researchers credit the gig economy for pioneering “algorithmic techniques of worker control” (Duggen et al. 2019, 20). Consequently, by regulating algorithmic governance specifically as it pertains to information transparency, policy professionals may be able to address a key root cause of psychological contract breaches (McDonnell 2021, 4004). The following analysis explores how the findings from this paper can inform policy conversations around information transparency within an algorithmically-managed labour relationship. The analysis provides general recommendations for how labour policy can better address the discrepancy between the expectations of app-workers and their lived experience.

### **Policy implications**

Canadian labour policy is designed to ensure workers have enforceable rights when it comes to their labour experience (Government of Canada 2022). These protections, however, are not extended to app-workers due to their independent contractor classification. Despite being classified as independent contractors, app-workers experience a unique set of labour challenges. Factors such as power imbalances, imperfect information, and the role app-work platforms play within the labour economy all contribute to the unique challenges faced by app-workers. These factors inform the relationship between app-workers and app-work platforms, making the labour policy implications of app-work distinct from those of independent contract work as a whole.

This paper used Uber and DoorDash as a case study to better understand some of the labour policy challenges present within app-work, specifically through the lens of psychological

contract breaches. The findings revealed that through imperfect information, Uber and DoorDash breach psychological contracts, delivering an experience contrary to app-workers' expectations of autonomy. Based on the various ways in which Uber and DoorDash workers experience psychological contract breaches via imperfect information, it is suggested that policy professionals consider how labour policy might evolve to include provisions around disclosure, specifically as it pertains to information regarding algorithmic management practices, job scope, and data usage.

#### *Algorithmic management information disclosure*

Algorithmic management makes it difficult for app-workers to stay informed about the organizational processes that govern their labour experience. Therefore, in order to address this, labour policy must provide a framework for management information disclosure in general. Currently, provincial labour laws in Canada do not contain many provisions around disclosing management information. That is, even employees across Canada are not explicitly entitled to information regarding how they are being managed. The only provisions regarding management information disclosure center around employers being required to notify employees of what time they are expected to start and stop working (Alberta n.d.a). While provincial employment standards do not apply to app-workers, the lack of policy provisions around management information disclosure suggest a possible gap in the labour industry as a whole and not just within app-work. Consequently, in order for policy professionals to consider how algorithmic management information disclosure can be regulated within app-work, they must first consider how management information disclosure can be regulated in the labour economy as a whole.



### *Job information disclosure*

In addition to algorithmic management information disclosure, policy professionals should consider how job information disclosure can limit imperfect information. App-workers require full information regarding the details of a potential job in order to exercise the autonomy promised to them. However, hidden tips and passenger destination information limit their awareness of the full scope of a potential job. Based on this challenge, policy practitioners should consider the possibilities and implications of offering app-workers extensive job information prior to them choosing to accept or decline a job. This would eliminate the ability for corporations to use imperfect information to exercise control over app-workers.

Job information disclosure policies for app-workers could potentially mirror provincial occupational health and safety provisions. For example, occupational health and safety provisions in Alberta state that workers have the right to refuse dangerous work, the right to know about workplace hazards, and the right to participate in health and safety discussions (Alberta, n.d.b, Workplace safety). While these laws are specific to workers' safety, they touch on the issue of information; that is, employees have a right to key information that impacts their ability to feel safe on the job. While it can be argued that withholding passenger destination information is a safety issue, the key takeaway is that policy professionals can look to occupational health and safety laws to conceptualize how job information disclosure regulations may be used to enforce an app-worker's 'right to know.'

### *Data use disclosure*

Algorithmic management practices make it difficult for app-workers to know how their data is being used. For example, Uber and DoorDash workers feel unsure about how acceptance ratings and other metrics affect job assignments (Duggan et al. 2021). While there is no legal

precedent for algorithmic transparency legislation in Canada, there are examples of relevant case law in other countries. For example, in 2021, the Dutch Court ruled that Uber and Ola, an Indian multinational ride-sharing company, must disclose all data used to suspend drivers, deduct compensation, or assign jobs (Ekker, n.d.). This is a significant ruling as it sets a precedent for data transparency in European countries. While Canada lacks case law around data and/or algorithmic transparency, case law in other jurisdictions illustrates the type of data disclosure legislation that could address the issue of data transparency within app-work.

Exploring how labour policy can better address information disclosure as it pertains to app-work is an avenue through which policy professionals can address psychological contract breaches caused by imperfect information. The findings from this paper suggest that if current labour policies were to include provisions regarding information disclosure — specifically as it pertains to management practices, job scope, and data use — then app-workers within Canada would be better protected from psychological contract breaches.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

A key limitation of this paper is that due to the anonymity of platforms such as Reddit, the exact jurisdiction of app-workers could not be identified. Therefore, the data revealed in the findings is not geographically specific. As this paper seeks to act as a resource for addressing labour policy challenges in Canada, a more regional specific analysis of these platforms may prove worthwhile. An additional limitation is that the internal policies explored in this paper may not be active policies in Canada today. Due to a lack of transparency from Uber and DoorDash and the evolving nature of algorithms, verifying which algorithmic management practices Uber and DoorDash are currently using proved challenging. Therefore, this analysis was unable to

provide an account of the current policies that Uber and DoorDash are using which breach psychological contracts. Despite the limitations of this analysis, it does make a unique contribution to gig work literature as it sheds light on the distinct labour policy challenges created by algorithmically governed app-work platforms.

App-work platforms such as Uber and DoorDash have breached psychological contracts by providing a labour experience contrary to what their workers expect. The overarching mechanism through which these psychological contracts are broken is through imperfect information. As the revealing or withholding of information within app-work is largely governed by algorithms, app-workers may not know exactly what internal policies are in place until they actually experience them. This creates a lack of control over one's work experience and is fundamentally at odds with the notion of autonomy.

While this paper reviewed Uber and DoorDash — and the ways in which these companies are breaching psychological contracts — it also sheds light on the ways in which imperfect information can affect the labour experience of app-workers, which has implications beyond Uber and DoorDash. This paper also considers the policy implications of algorithmic management — which is a cornerstone of app-work — and identifies key policy gaps. Canada lacks the policy and legal provisions to hold app-work platforms accountable for the experience of app-workers. This leaves app-workers exceptionally vulnerable as they have few options for challenging these working conditions. As app-workers tend to be more socioeconomically vulnerable than those navigating a more traditional labour environment, they may have fewer options outside of app-work. Therefore, ensuring that app-workers are protected through effective policy is a way to ensure vulnerable Canadians are protected within the labour force as a whole.

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