Risky Business: Gig Workers and the Navigation of Ideal Worker Expectations During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Lindsey D. Cameron
Assistant Professor of Management
Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania
3620 Locust Walk
2027 Steinberg-Dietrich Hall
Philadelphia, PA 19103

Bobbi Thomason*
Assistant Professor of Applied Behavioral Sciences
Pepperdine Graziadio Business School
24255 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90265

Vanessa M. Conzon*
Assistant Professor of Management
Carroll School of Management, Boston College
Fulton Hall 347
140 Commonwealth Avenue
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

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Managers and customers often expect individuals to be "ideal workers" devoted entirely to work, and this devotion is typically displayed through being available to work at any time, on any day (Reid, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals in lower-paid, customer-facing jobs were expected to not only be available, but also to take on physical risk. However, the ideal worker literature has paid relatively little attention to how risk relates to ideal worker expectations, reflecting in part the extant literature's focus on professionals who face relatively little physical and financial uncertainty. In this paper, we draw upon the experiences of non-professional 'gig' workers (TaskRabbit workers) to examine how they manage customers' ideal worker expectations—including risk—using data from interviews (n=49), online worker community communications, social media, and the company. We show how these workers engage in different tactics to manage risk in response to customers' expectations, including two tactics—covering and withdrawing—that have not been discussed in prior ideal worker literature. In doing so, we expand scholarly understanding by showing how concerns about risk shape workers' responses to ideal worker expectations, particularly in customer-facing service work outside of traditional organizations.

Keywords: ideal worker; service work; on-demand/gig economy; risk; COVID-19 pandemic

Managers and customers often expect workers to be "ideal workers" who are completely devoted to their jobs (Acker, 1990; Blair-Loy, 2003; Ladge & Little, 2019). Devotion is often displayed by being constantly available to work, at any time and on any day, such as by quickly responding to requests outside of typical working hours, and not taking time off for caregiving responsibilities (Correll, Kelly, O'Connor & Williams, 2014; Reid, 2015). Given the demands of personal and family lives, many individuals struggle to meet these ideal worker expectations and consequently experience career penalties, such as lower pay and fewer advancement opportunities (Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2012; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). Scholars have studied how individuals respond to ideal worker expectations through identity management tactics (e.g., Reid, 2015). We define identity management tactics as the behaviors individuals engage in when presenting their identities to others, where said behaviors are shaped by one's underlying preferences (Button, 2001; Lyons et al., 2015; Mohr et al., 2019).

Yet the ideal worker literature has largely overlooked an important and common characteristic of work—risk—highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in part because the literature has largely confined itself to studying professional workers who face little physical risk (i.e., chance of injury or illness) or economic risk (i.e., chance of irregular or no pay) (Turco 2010; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013). However, risk is a common experience for the many Americans who find themselves in "bad jobs" that are financially uncertain, have unpredictable schedules, and are physically dangerous (Kalleberg, 2011). In such jobs, individuals must manage ideal worker expectations not only in terms of their *availability* for work, but also the *risk conditions* they will tolerate. In this paper, we explore how workers who hold "bad jobs" – specifically, frontline service workers – respond to customers' ideal worker expectations regarding taking on risk when they conflict with workers' own risk preferences.

We explore this question in the "extreme case" (Eisenhardt, 1989) of independent contractors doing in-person service work during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. The pandemic has amplified risk, especially for in-person service workers on on-demand platforms such as Uber and Instacart. In New York City, for example, taxi drivers were more than 25 times more likely to contract COVID-19 than the general population (Wolfe, 2021). As contractors, these workers are often ineligible for paid sick leave, employer-sponsored health insurance, and workers' compensation. Thus, during the pandemic, they have had to choose between not working—and potentially not meeting their financial needs—or working and increasing their risk of contracting COVID-19. Drawing on interviews (n=49), online worker community postings, social media, and official company communications of a popular on-demand platform, TaskRabbit, we show how workers engage in identity management tactics to narrow the gap between their risk preferences and customers' ideal worker expectations. In doing so, we expand the concept of the ideal worker by showing how workers' willingness to take on risk—particularly physical and economic risk—is an essential part of what it means to be viewed by customers as a devoted ideal worker in certain jobs, such as service work.

Literature Review

Ideal Worker Expectations and Workers' Identity Management Tactics

Prior research (e.g., Kelly et al., 2010; Reid, 2015) presents the "ideal worker" as an archetype that signals a set of expectations and related behaviors—typically from managers and customers—to be enacted by workers. To meet these expectations, individuals must not only show competence, timeliness, and professionalism (Al-Dabbagh, Bowles, & Thomason, 2016), but also devotion. Devotion is often displayed by being constantly available to work at any time, such as by answering emails at night (Blagoev & Schreyogg, 2019; Perlow, 1999) and by not

taking significant time off during a week, a year, or an entire career (Bailyn, 2006; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Although these expectations are difficult, if not impossible, to meet, workers face prescriptive pressure to do so from managers and customers (Conzon, 2021; Michel, 2011; Perlow, 2012). Failure to satisfy these expectations may lead to sanctions, such as negative evaluations, delayed promotions, and lower pay (Munsch, Ridgeway, & Williams, 2014; Rudman & Mescher, 2013).

Reid (2015) examines how workers navigate the gap between the behaviors managers and customers expect—that is, ideal worker expectations—and workers' preferences regarding how they engage in their work. Some workers embrace ideal worker expectations and enact related behaviors. In contrast, many workers experience a conflict between these expectations and their own preferences for carrying out their work, and instead engage in identity management tactics to manage how they present themselves to others. Specifically, Reid (2015) found that workers either "pass" or "reveal." When passing, workers give managers and customers the impression that they are conforming to ideal worker expectations when actually deviating—for example, by not telling others they are leaving work early for personal reasons (e.g., Treflat, 2013). When revealing, workers visibly stray from ideal worker expectations—for example, by taking parental leave (e.g., Straub, Vikenburg, & van Kleef, 2020). Through such tactics, individuals manage the gap between expected work identities and their own preferences.

Reid's (2015) conceptualization of passing and revealing draws on Goffman's (1963) research on the tactics individuals use to navigate tensions between their preferences and expected identities. Goffman (1963) suggests other tactics beyond passing and revealing. For example, he notes that one may "cover" by openly acknowledging to others one's deviation from a socially prescribed identity and then draw others' attention away from this deviance (p. 102).

Goffman (1963) notes that individuals may also "withdraw" from social interactions to avoid scrutiny regarding their fulfillment of a particular identity (p. 133). Thus, Goffman's work suggests that there may be a broader array of identity management tactics than previously highlighted in the management literature.

COVID-19 and Independent Workers Respond to Customers' Expectations and Risk

During the COVID-19 pandemic, workers, especially frontline service workers, have experienced significant physical and economic risk. We define risk as an action that could have multiple consequences, particularly negative ones (e.g., Byrnes, Miller, & Schafer, 1999; Furby & Beyth-Maron, 1992). Physical interaction with others increases the risk of contracting the coronavirus, becoming ill, and transmitting the virus to others. But adjusting one's work practices to mitigate one's physical risk can limit work opportunities or negatively affect customer evaluations, which can, in turn, affect earnings. While risk is sometimes implicit in the ideal worker literature, to our knowledge, it has never been examined explicitly. For instance, health risks seem to be a consequence of workers' constant availability (Kelly & Moen, 2020; Michel, 2011), and workers who are constantly interrupted during "family time" may face strain on familial and romantic relationships (Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020; Hochschild, 1997). Yet how individuals manage risk remains unclear and undertheorized.

The lack of attention to risk may reflect this literature's overwhelming focus on professional workers (e.g., Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Kellogg, 2012). Such workers generally receive salaries, paid sick leave, health insurance, and other benefits; in addition, they typically perform intellectual rather than manual work. Hence, they experience relatively little physical and economic risk. In contrast, service workers—the largest sector of the U.S. workforce, who increasingly work in nonstandard arrangements (Katz & Krueger, 2019)—encounter greater risks

(Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018) with a minimal social safety net (Cameron & Rosenblat, 2020). As independent contractors, on-demand workers do not have guaranteed hours or income. Instead, they often juggle multiple tasks or "gigs," which can cause psychological strain and anxiety (Cameron 2021; Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2018). Their work is often physical (e.g., driving cars, assembling items), increasing their risk of harm. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these risks, as customers now expect frontline service workers (e.g., Instacart shoppers) to engage in tasks that may expose them to the virus. Below, we explore how service workers manage these risks in the face of customers' ideal worker expectations.

Research Setting, Data Collection, and Analysis

The Workplace: The TaskRabbit Platform

Founded in 2008, TaskRabbit is a digital platform that allows individual customers to hire workers to run errands, deliver items, or complete household tasks, such as assembling furniture. Customers use the platform to post their tasks and browse through Taskers' profiles, which describe workers' skills, availability, rates, and ratings, before inviting a Tasker to work on a project. At the end of the task, customers are asked to rate Taskers' performances on a one-to-five scale. These ratings influence workers' positions in the TaskRabbit's search results and whether they are given status designators (e.g., "Elite Tasker"). Similar to other digital platforms, customers have significant control over workers, in that they are their sole performance evaluators (Cameron and Rahman 2021). Given the variety of tasks offered on the platform, average pay fluctuates; in the most recently available data, TaskRabbit (2020) reported the average worker made $36 per hour.

In response to the pandemic, TaskRabbit made minor changes to its operating procedures, such as posting safety suggestions and asking Taskers to follow local health guidelines.

However, it did not conduct verifications that workers were following protocols, unlike on other platforms (e.g., mask checks at Uber; Watkins, 2020). Instead, workers were urged to use their own discretion to meet customer requests.

Data Collection and Analysis

      Semi-structured interviews. Forty-nine interviews were completed with Taskers in 23 U.S. cities. Due to COVID-19 concerns, interviews took place on the phone or Zoom. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.[1] Participants were recruited on Facebook and Reddit through ads and direct messages. We chose this sampling method because workers use these spaces as virtual "water coolers" (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016) to share information. Our initial interviews suggested that TaskRabbit demand dropped off significantly at the beginning of the pandemic. Therefore, we timed our first round of interviews (N=41) with the peak of the pandemic's second wave (August – October 2020) during which physical risk was still high and workers were accepting tasks. A second round of interviews with new participants (N=8) was conducted at the beginning of mass vaccinations (January – March 2021). (See Table 1 for inventory; Appendix for protocol and ads.) Interviews lasted an average of 57 minutes, with a range of 33 to 88 minutes. Interviewees were paid $30, an amount in-line with how much these workers earn per hour. This study was approved by the University of Pennsylvania's IRB (*Making Meaning of Uncertainty: The World of Precarious Work and Workers,* # 842950).

      Additional data sources. We also collected data from postings on Reddit forums and company information on TaskRabbit's website, Twitter account, and Instagram page from March 2020 through March 2021. Articles about gig work and the pandemic were collected from the 20

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[1] Two interviews were not recorded and transcribed. One interview was done via text with a hard-of-hearing participant. In the other interview, the recorder malfunctioned and data were analyzed based on the contact summary sheet (Miles & Huberman 1989) created immediately after the interview.

largest U.S. media sources (e.g., *New York Times*). This multimethod approach helps to assuage the limitations of relying exclusively on one data source (Alvesson, 2003).

Data analysis. We used qualitative, inductive techniques to analyze our data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initial interviews focused on broad themes regarding workers' backgrounds, skills, and customer interactions. After one-third of the interviews, we noticed variation around how workers mitigated the risks of on-demand work and adjusted our protocol to probe deeper.

Our coding process proceeded as follows. The first author read through the data, identifying several themes (e.g., customer interactions, changes with COVID-19) that were used to code. The second author then read through the coded data in its entirety and began iterating between literature and data to understand how early findings related to extant theory. As the second author defined and refined codes, the first author reread the coded passage. If she agreed, then the passage was marked accordingly. If she disagreed, they consulted the third author, who read the passage in question (and often larger blocks of text for context) and offered an opinion on the appropriate code. We applied the codes from our interview data to our secondary data (e.g., from online communities) to triangulate findings (Mathison, 1988). We used Word documents to track all codes, facilitate finding links among codes, and perform text searches. All three authors had training in qualitative coding.

We noticed that when there was conflict between workers' concerns about risk and customers' expectations, workers described engaging in identity management tactics that included and went beyond the categories Reid (2015) identified. We found that Taskers engaged in what Goffman (1963) labels "covering" and "withdrawing," which had not yet been theorized in the management literature. To check our model's robustness, we collected a second round of interviews, which confirmed the pervasiveness of physical risk and the identity management

tactics we identified. We enlisted the help of two graduate students, who had been trained in qualitative data analysis but were unfamiliar with the study, to independently code the data from both data collections. We calculated an agreement rate of .93 well above the minimal .70 threshold suggested (Cohen, 1960). In accordance with qualitative practices (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and exemplars of grounded theory development (e.g., Neeley, 2013), we stopped collecting data when we reached theoretical saturation. That is, additional interviews did not generate new codes, and "the gap in [our] theory, especially in [our] major categories" was "completely filled" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 61-62). (See Figure 1 for conceptual codes.)

--- Insert Figure 1 and Table 1 approximately here ---

Findings

Customer Expectations of an Ideal Tasker

Customers expected the ideal Tasker to display competence, timeliness, and professionalism (Table 2). Numerous customer Tweets highlighted Taskers exemplifying these qualities. In one example, a customer's Tweet said: "[NAME] was a great communicator, very professional, and friendly." Workers recognized that these characteristics were valued by customers. John described how customers expected the ideal Tasker to be "flexible" and "agile." He explained that while he was often hired to perform one particular task (e.g., assemble furniture), customers often expected him to do additional work with no prior notice (e.g., mount a TV). Customers had expectations of competence, timeliness, and professionalism for Taskers, and Taskers recognized this.

If a worker did not meet a customer's expectations, the customer could give the Tasker a low rating, which could potentially harm the Tasker's ability to secure future work. Taskers stressed the importance of high ratings, noting that reviews can "make or break your business"

(Jensen). Ratings influence workers' positions in TaskRabbit's search results and whether they are given status designators (e.g., "Elite Tasker"), which are posted alongside their profiles and signal competence and skills, thus bringing in further work. Louis said, "I've had a couple of people say, 'Well, you're an elite tasker, so that's why I hired you.'" Not only do high reviews bring in work, but low reviews can hurt Taskers' ability to get future work. Jason explained, "a bad review can ruin you… [because customers] hold the cards in their hands." In sum, workers were attuned to customers' expectations of what makes an ideal Tasker and were aware that failing to meet these expectations could jeopardize future work.

---Insert Table 2 about here---

During the COVID-19 pandemic, workers' willingness to take on physical risk became a fundamental element of what constituted the ideal Tasker, as they were now hired to do the very tasks customers felt were too dangerous to do themselves. A Tasker in New York City noted that workers were being regularly asked to stand in line for COVID-19 tests in place of customers. Many tasks (e.g., picking up meals) put Taskers at risk of interacting or being in the same space as people who were not following mandated safety measures. In the next section, we detail how workers responded – in varied ways – to gaps between their own concerns about risk versus customers' expectations of how workers should behave.

Workers' Responses to the Risks of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Some Taskers experienced a congruence between their risk preferences and customers' expectations, embracing customers' expectations of an ideal worker, including risk. However, many others experienced gaps between customers' expectations and their own risk preferences, and responded through identity management tactics (Table 3). In this new context of on-demand

work, we found different enactments of Reid's (2015) tactics of passing and revealing. We also identified two more tactics—covering and withdrawing—described by Goffman (1963).

---Insert Table 3 about here---

Embracing. When embracing, workers did not experience conflict between their concerns about risk and customers' expectations, and engaged in actions that potentially exposed them to COVID-19. For some Taskers, the pandemic allowed for them to increase their income by taking on risks others would not. Trevor explained excitedly, "I'm making the most money [during the pandemic] I've ever made." He noted that this was not without the chance of getting sick. In fact, he had caught COVID-19 from a customer. But, he added, "I'm also 25. So, I wasn't scared of getting it." Other Taskers viewed the risk of getting COVID-19 as small relative to the meaningful interactions they could provide others during lockdown and social distancing. Referencing a three-hour conversation with a customer regarding their shared diagnosis of bipolarism, Jasper said, "I don't mind giving people some social interaction in a time where they don't get it ... I've actually found that people, in this moment [of] time, seem to be more vulnerable and more interested in actually talking about what's going on in their lives."

Taskers also accepted physical risk as an inherent part of their work, noting that on-demand jobs already entailed dangerous working conditions. When asked if he was concerned about the virus, John replied no, noting he was more concerned about the safety of his vehicle and his person when in certain neighborhoods. Noting one apartment where he felt "unsafe," John described "stepp[ing] on the floor joints ... and [it] felt like I was going to fall through" and was worried about "breath[ing] in mold." By viewing the pandemic as providing financial or social benefits, or by interpreting COVID-19 as just another form of physical risk inherent in their work, some Taskers embraced risk as part of what it meant to be an ideal Tasker. When

Taskers did not embrace this image of the ideal Tasker, however, they turned to one of the following four identity management tactics.

   Passing. When passing, workers presented as ideal Taskers while engaging in actions that deviated from customers' ideal worker expectations but were invisible to the customer. Some Taskers, for example, changed the services they provided to avoid physical contact with others. In doing so, they were able to "pass" as ideal workers because the customers who hired them could not see that they had selected out of riskier tasks, as such details were not visible on the platform. Tatum "scaled back" from offering delivery, errands, and waiting-in-line services on TaskRabbit to "minimize the amount of contact" he had with others. Explaining why he did this, he noted that he wanted to "cut down on my chances of catching the virus." Similarly, Barry switched from offering in-person to remote computer support to avoid putting his health at risk after finding that customers would not maintain physical distance during in-person tasks.

   Some workers passed by altering their customer base—for instance, by making their profile visible only to repeat customers and, in effect, passing as ideal to these customers while not being available at-large. Lloyd explained that he was concerned about COVID-19 because his brother, a nurse, was "very worried about COVID" and advised Lloyd "to take every precaution." Lloyd balanced this advice with his financial concerns. He decided only to work with repeat customers, rationalizing that "since I was already working with [them] before it's not any more exposure to someone outside of my circle." To discourage customers from hiring them, some Taskers radically increased their service fees for tasks they felt could lead to them catching COVID-19 to discourage customers from hiring them. One Reddit forum user explained, "I have one or two [tasks] that I don't really do [because of COVID-19] so I set it to $200 [i.e., much higher than is usually charged]." He encouraged other Taskers to set their fees as high as $500

for tasks they felt were risky during the pandemic. In sum, passing in this context takes advantage of the features of the platform, as workers can change the conditions and terms of their work without the knowledge or approval of the organization or its customers.

Revealing. When revealing, Taskers made visible to customers their efforts to mitigate risk without trying to refocus customers' attention on how they were meeting ideal worker expectations. Some workers changed their self-presentation. Seth described arriving at a customer's home in safety gear to protect himself from catching the virus: "I felt safe [from COVID-19] all through [working on TaskRabbit] because I was wearing my mask, my gloves, and everything." And Kat, noted that she wore her mask "the whole time" and that her cleaning behaviors were visible: "I wash my hands right when I go in and then bleach whatever I touch beforehand." Throughout the interview, Kat frequently stressed the importance of wearing a mask, which helped her feel "safe" from the virus. Neither of these workers connected these precautions to professionalism or to the benefit of the customer.

Some workers also adjusted their interactions with customers to avoid physical contact. Bijorn eschewed touching those who hired him and requested customers maintain physical distance: "No handshakes. No close contact." Other workers asked that customers not be present while they worked. Lloyd explained, "One customer, she'll leave me in her apartment to work … Sometimes I've built [furniture] in the hallways of their apartment buildings or in a separate room with the door closed." He openly told customers that he did not want to be close to them because of the risk of COVID-19 exposure. Jason similarly described his safety measures as self-advocacy and, notably, did not frame them as a part of being a good Tasker: "I'd say about 25% of my customers, I've had to ask them to wear a mask… A few times I've had to kick it up one more level if they seem a little bit confused or annoyed." By "kick it up," Jason elaborated that

he told customers, "I've got family that I'm going home to, that I've got to make sure [the task] is safe." Jason is revealing because he articulated his needs unabashedly, advocating for his own interests rather than attempting to "pass" as an ideal worker who is willing to take on extra risk for his customers.

Covering. When covering, Taskers openly deviated from customers' ideal worker expectations (as in revealing) and also drew customers' attention away from this deviance. On their TaskRabbit profiles, workers reframed their risk-related behavior as evidence of care and concern for customers. One Tasker's profile stated: "Gloves, mask & all careful practices to keep us both healthy & happy." . Through this language, the Tasker was telling customers that his safety precautions were for their benefit and not only himself. Barry, whose COVID-19 concerns were introduced above, offered remote computer support. When customers asked for in-person assistance instead, he emphasized to them that their well-being, not only his own, was why he only offered remote services: "I let them know that 'I'm going to keep you safe.'"

Another way workers covered was by refocusing customers' attention on other ideal-type behavior (e.g., competence) rather than risk-related behavior. This often took place before Taskers were officially hired, when they were negotiating the details of a particular task. Dawn was attentive to safety protocols to stay "safe" against COVID-19 since she is "high risk... because of [her] asthma" and "had to really be careful." Before accepting a task on the platform, Dawn told customers that all work "has to be completely contactless," but then immediately emphasized her overall competence: "I would just say [to customers], 'If you would like to know about my skill level, you can read the reviews.'" While she acknowledged her safety concerns, she also highlighted her skills, fulfilling customer expectations of competence. Covering allowed Taskers to mitigate the risks of working during the pandemic while protecting their presentation

as an ideal worker. In contrast to passing (in which Taskers do not mention their risk-related behaviors to avoid customer backlash) and revealing (in which Taskers unabashedly self-advocate and potentially face backlash), covering entails workers to reveal their risk preferences to customers and then draw attention away from this deviance. As such, covering enables workers to mitigate both physical and economic risk.

Withdrawing. In the most extreme response to the pandemic's risk, some workers left TaskRabbit because they could not reconcile their risk concerns with customers' ideal worker expectations. Diego stopped working on TaskRabbit because he did not want to catch COVID-19: "I haven't done one [task] in three months. I haven't done any gig economy stuff since the end of March, when the pandemic hit . . . I can't take that risk, getting sick." He said he hoped to return to TaskRabbit once mass vaccination began and it was "safer out there." Some workers who left the platform had already returned at the time of our interview with them. Dakota described how he and his fiancée decided to stop working on TaskRabbit for several months: "When March 15th happened [local restrictions started due to increased cases] me and my fiancée decided that we were going to stop doing side work for a couple months." They waited for conditions to improve, and by summer had returned to TaskRabbit: "[We decided] these are the risks that we're going to have to take. So, we both made a joint decision to say, 'It's okay for me to start doing side work again.'"

Others left TaskRabbit indefinitely with no plans to rejoin. "I thought of [working] when Corona was starting up," Melvin explained, "but I did not want to put myself in that situation. I also didn't want to say, 'Hey, I'll do the job, but you have to be out of the apartment.'" Melvin experienced conflict between his personal risk preferences (he did not want to be in contact with others and risk COVID-19 exposure) and customer expectations (he wanted to be able to

complete tasks on customers' terms). As noted above, early in the pandemic, Barry switched

from offering in-person to remote computer support (*passing*) but was frequently asked to

complete work in-person. Although he tried to emphasize that remote work protected customers'

health (*covering*), roughly half of his customers still pressured him to meet in person. Frustrated

by this, and wanting to minimize his chance of COVID-19 exposure, he cancelled many jobs; in

the month that we interviewed him, he had only accepted and completed one task (*withdrawing*).

When tensions between customer expectations and Tasker preferences around physical risk

became irreconcilable, some Taskers found passing, revealing, and covering to be inadequate,

and thus left the platform either temporarily or indefinitely, taking on more economic risk.

Discussion

By examining frontline service workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper

makes several theoretical contributions. First, we emphasize how risk relates to what it means to

be an ideal worker. Extant theory on the ideal worker—which focuses on professional workers in

lower-risk conditions—identifies availability as a central mechanism through which workers

signal devotion (e.g., Feldman, Mazmanian, & Reid, 2020). Our research identifies another

signal of devotion: taking on risk. While this paper focused on describing physical risk,

economic risk was implicit in workers' accounts. Indeed, workers faced a risk trade-off, as

mitigating risk in one domain, physical or economic, often increased risk in the other. For

instance, refusing to be in the same room as customers could lower ratings and diminish

workers' chances of being hired for future work. In contrast, when workers want to mitigate

economic risk, they are often willing to take on any task, regardless of the potential physical risk

(e.g., coming into close contact with individuals who refuse to follow safety precautions).

Although the pandemic brought the risks of work front and center, this risk trade-off is faced

everyday by many workers, including couriers (Gregory, 2021), sex workers (Ruebottom &
Toubiana, 2020), prison guards (Decelles & Anteby, 2020), and the many workers who find
themselves in "bad jobs" (Spreitzer, Cameron, & Garrett, 2017). Understanding how risk is
experienced and managed by individuals extends ideal worker theory so that it is more inclusive
of workers beyond professional settings.

Building on Goffman (1963), we add to the management literature two identity
management tactics that intimately relate to how workers navigate risk: withdrawing and
covering. Covering allows workers to save face with customers, protecting themselves physically
while meeting customers' expectations. Withdrawing allows workers to eliminate physical risk
and is easy for on-demand workers who can move on, off, and between platforms. However, it
increases economic risk, as workers may lose income. Although withdrawing has been hinted at
in previous research on "opting out" (Stone, 2007) or moving to the "mommy track" (Hill,
Martinson, Ferris & Baker, 2004), we formalize its relationship within the ideal worker
literature.

In addition, we show how workers may regularly rely upon combinations of identity
management tactics when responding to customers' ideal worker expectations. While previous
research finds that individuals may change tactics with different audiences (e.g., coworkers vs.
clients; Reid, 2015), we identify how workers use different tactics with the same audience (e.g.,
revealing with one customer, *covering* with another, and, if not successful, *withdrawing*). This
suggests that when facing immediate risk-related concerns, workers may weave together identity
management tactics to creatively navigate the gap between ideal worker expectations and risk
preferences. The independent workers in this sample have a temporary relationship with the

platform and its customers, and thus more latitude to respond to expectations than individuals in organizations, who must negotiate exceptions with managers (e.g., Bowles et al. 2019).

Finally, this research also responds to calls to enrich scholarship on identity management tactics (DeJordy 2008, Jones and King 2014). Extant research has primarily focused on how workers manage social identities out of concern for maintaining legitimacy and avoiding stigmatization from coworkers (e.g., Mohr et al., 2019). In contrast, this research shows how risk that arises from work itself can also motivate identity practices. Taken together, we show that individual risk preferences are another "invisible" (Clair, Beatty & MacLean, 2005) influence that shapes individuals' identity management tactics.

Future Research

Future research can build on the insights offered in this paper. First, scholars can continue to expand the literature's understanding of the ideal worker by examining workers in contexts where risk is salient, such as in even riskier customer-facing jobs (e.g., day laborers) or in nations with weaker social benefits (e.g., the Global South). Data from managers and customers would provide a more nuanced understanding of how these workers navigate risk. Future research could also consider additional types of risk (e.g., legal, environmental). Second, while this study did not focus on gender, it raises questions relevant to women's experiences. Female workers face additional physical risks, including sexual assault (for a review see Cortina & Berdahl, 2008). Women in our sample were aware of these risks, and some were victims of such crimes. As a result, many changed the services they offered (covering) or left the platform (withdrawing). Future work can further examine how gender intersects with workers' understandings of risk.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of our study are relevant beyond the gig economy and beyond the current pandemic. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, work's physical risk became a pervasive concern to most workers. Because simply interacting with others can lead to virus transmission, many workers—including those in "good jobs" (e.g., lawyers, consultants)— now face increased risk in their daily activities (e.g., meeting with team members or clients). Professors, for example, who teach at universities that forbid faculty from requesting students wear masks now face trade-offs between economic and physical risk (Chotiner, 2021). Thus, during the pandemic, our findings are broadly applicable to many workers.

Beyond the pandemic, however, more and more workers are being funneled into "bad jobs" (Kalleberg, 2011) in which taking on physical risk is routinely expected by customers and even encouraged by organizations. For example, during inclement weather, delivery apps offer additional financial incentives to workers (Goldberg, 2021). Many "bad jobs" are in the female-dominated service sector (e.g., domestic work) and embedded in histories of societal power disparities based on gender, race, and social class (Hoobler & Masterson, 2019; Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020). Due to these disparities, and because many of these individuals are contractors, they face a tension between openly and confidently mitigating risk versus satisfying customers' expectations.

To avert the negative consequences of this tension, workers in "bad jobs" may benefit from joining what we refer to as *risk support groups*—groups of peers who strive to manage work-related risks. Whether in-person or virtual, informal or sponsored, such groups could morally support and empower workers by teaching them options for navigating risks and the potential repercussions of these choices. Such groups could create a sense of worker solidarity in often solitary work. In the informal economy, such groups have lowered the rates of sexually

transmitted infections among brothel workers (Ghosal et al., 2020) and taught nannies how to deflect employers' sexual advances (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). In the formal economy, these groups have led to less risk-taking behaviors in macho work cultures, such as oil-rigging and firefighting (Ely & Meyerson, 2010; O'Neill & Rothbard, 2017). Relatedly, customers, organizations, and media need to be prudent regarding moralizing lower-paid workers with higher risk exposure as "heroes," as this heightens customers' expectations of workers without providing substantial job-related protections (Cameron, Chan, & Anteby, 2021; Hennekam, Ladge, & Shymko, 2020). Strengthening the government's social safety net for contractors— ensuring minimum wage, paid sick leave, and workers' compensation (Ravenelle, Kowalski, & Janko 2021)—would allow workers to better meet customers' expectations without jeopardizing their own health. Risk is becoming part and parcel of work, and workers need to be equipped with tools to manage it.

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Table 1: Participant Inventory

# - Round	Name	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	City	Main Types of Work
1 - 1	Amelia	31	Female	White	Austin, TX	Cleaning, Organizing
2 - 1	Harry	24	Male	Asian	Bay Area, CA	Furniture Assembly, Computer Help
3 - 1	Dawn	31	Female	White	Columbus, OH	Furniture Assembly, Home Repairs
4 - 1	Mateo	36	Male	White	Austin, TX	Moving, Delivery
5 - 1	Diego	36	Male	Asian	San Francisco, CA (metro)	Moving
6 - 1	Lloyd	32	Male	White	Chicago, IL	Furniture Assembly, Moving
7 - 1	Nick	55	Male	White	Chicago, IL	Home repairs, Cleaning
8 - 1	Tatum	46	Male	White	Boston, MA	Delivery, Furniture Assembly
9 - 1	Jevon	29	Male	White/Hispanic	New York City, NY	Furniture, Delivery, Moving, Home Repairs
10 - 1	Jake	36	Male	Black/Hispanic	San Antonio, TX	Furniture Assembly, Moving, Yard Work
11 - 1	James	31	Male	White	New York City, NY	Furniture Assembly, Line Waiting
12 - 1	Kat	34	Female	White	Philadelphia, PA	Cleaning, Delivery, Yard Work, Cooking
13 - 1	Desmond	44	Male	White	Bergen County, NJ	Yard Work, Furniture Assembly

14 - 1	Jasper	32	Male	White	Phoenix, AZ	Cleaning, Cooking, Personal Assistant
15 - 1	Melvin	34	Male	White	Philadelphia, PA	Furniture Assembly, Moving
16 - 1	Jensen	33	Male	White	Los Angeles, CA	Home Repairs, Moving, Photoshop
17 - 1	Jarvis	30	Male	White/Hispanic	Chicago, IL	Home Repairs, Furniture Assembly
18 - 1	Kole	25	Male	White	San Diego, CA	Furniture Assembly, Moving
19 - 1	Donovan	27	Male	White	New York City, NY	Moving, Furniture Assembly
20 - 1	Dakota	27	Male	White	Washington, DC (metro)	Home Repair, Furniture Assembly
21 - 1	Jennifer	58	Female	White	Biloxi, MS	Online Studies, Yard Work
22 - 1	Henry	23	Male	Black	New York City, NY	Online Studies
23 - 1	Scott	24	Male	Hispanic	Los Angeles, CA	Cleaning, Furniture Assembly, Moving
24 - 1	Bernard	21	Male	White	New York City, NY(metro)	Groceries, Delivery, Personal Assistant
25 - 1	Bijorn	30	Male	Black	McAllen, TX	Programming
26 - 1	AJ	19	Male	Hispanic	Washington, DC (metro)	Programming, Personal Assistant
27 - 1	Blake	37	Male	Black	New York City, NY	Home Repairs
28 - 1	Jeb	26	Male	Black/Hispanic	Los Angeles, CA	Home Repairs, Furniture, Cleaning

29 - 1	Seth	35	Male	Black	Philadelphia, PA	Personal Assistant
30 - 1	Tegan	40	Male	White	Philadelphia, PA	Handyman Service, Moving
31 - 1	Meredith	29	Female	Black	Los Angeles, CA	Deliveries, Errands, Organizing
32 - 1	Macie	25	Female	Black	New York City, NY	Personal Assistant, Cleaning, Online Studies
33 - 1	Maria	39	Female	White	Buffalo, NY	Personal Assistant, Data Entry
34 - 1	Bruce	26	Male	Black	New York City, NY	Delivery, Cleaning, Home Repairs
35 - 1	Emerson	24	Male	Black	Philadelphia, PA	Cleaning
36 - 1	Polly	25	Female	Black	Miami, FL	Delivery, Waiting in Line
37 - 1	Amanda	24	Female	Black	New York City, NY	Cleaning, Errands, Delivery
38 - 1	Leslie	26	Female	Black	Los Angeles, CA	Delivery, Cleaning, Errands, Moving
39 - 1	Eli	40	Male	Black	Philadelphia, PA	Home Repairs, Moving
40 - 1	Alisa	28	Female	Black	Los Angeles, CA	Furniture Assembly
41 - 1	Sally	28	Female	Black	San Francisco, CA	Delivery
42 - 2	Lady	35	Female	Black	Philadelphia, PA	Furniture Assembly
43 - 2	David	28	Male	White	Denver, CO	Furniture Assembly, Moving, Delivery
44 - 2	John	48	Male	White	Houston, TX	Furniture Assembly

45 - 2	Jason	22	Male	White	Rock Hill, SC	Yard Work, Home Repair
46 - 2	Trevor	25	Male	White	Atlanta, GA	Home Repair, Yard Work, Furniture Assembly
47 - 2	Barry	48	Male	White	San Francisco, CA	Computer Help, Programming, Delivery
48 - 2	Amber	26	Female	White	Atlanta, GA	Cleaning, Organizing
49 - 2	Louis	53	Male	White	Los Angeles, CA	Furniture Assembly, Moving, Delivery, Computer Help

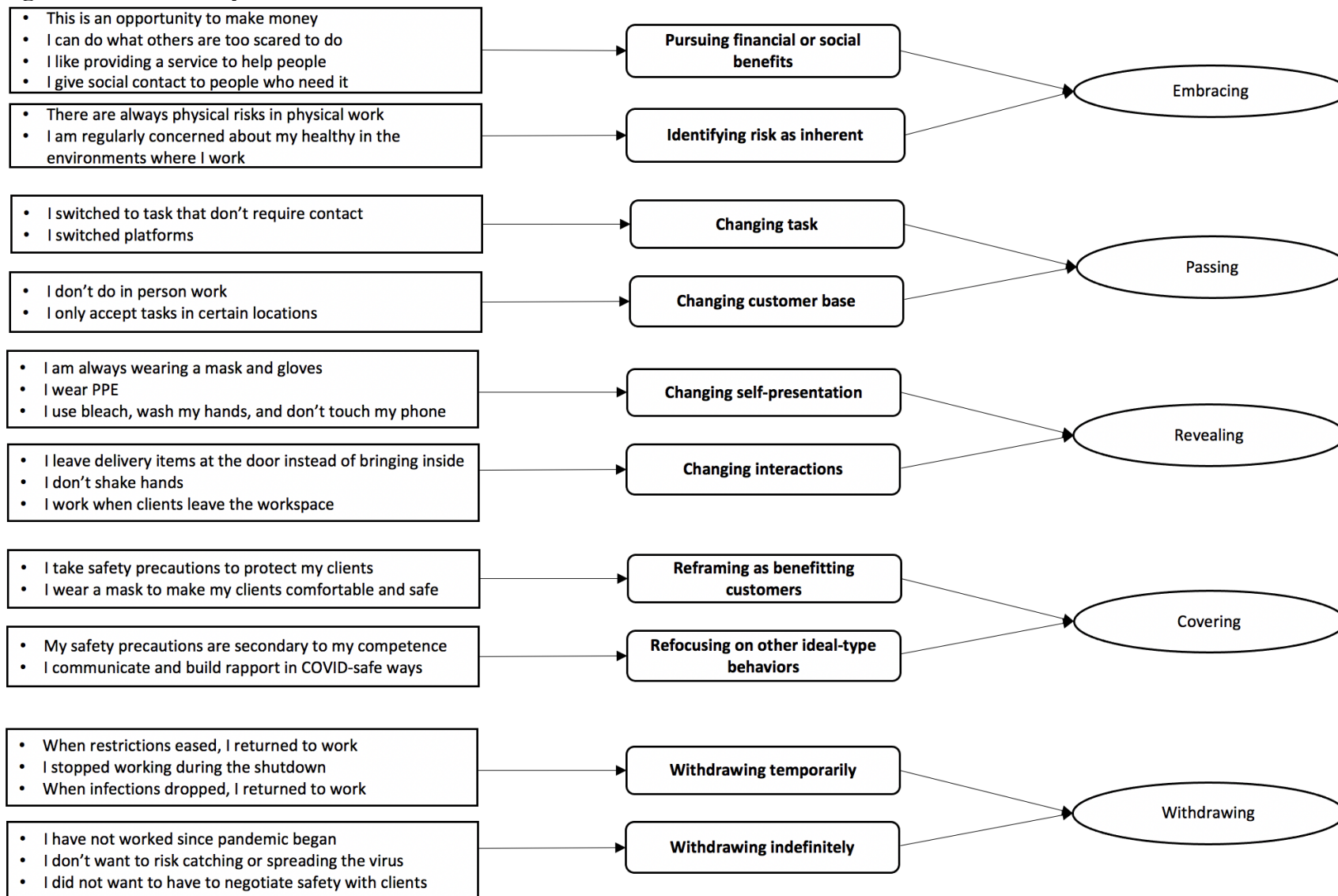**Table 2: Ideal Worker Characteristics of Workers on TaskRabbit**

Ideal Worker Characteristic	Exemplary Evidence - Customers' Views of the Ideal Tasker	Exemplary Evidence - Workers' Recognizing Customers' Expectations of the Ideal Taskers
Competence: Performs task to customers' specifications	"Just used @TaskRabbit for the first time… {clapping hand emoji} flawless execution." (Bennett - Customer Tweet)	"My customer—a new customer—was monitoring me and he saw the way I was performing the task, he was really impressed." (Seth - Interview)
Timeliness: Prompt service, e.g., quick reply to customers' queries on platform, on time for task, performs work fast	"Just had a great experience with a Tasker for a customer holiday gift. They helped redeliver it to a new address within a few hours. So much faster and less hassle than getting a mail service involved." (Danielle - Customer Tweet)	"[The customer is] expecting someone who's going to be efficient, fast." (Barry - Interview)
Professionalism: Polite and respectful during customer interactions	"[NAME] is putting together all our items and he is ON TIME**,** professional and super good at his job. I will 100% be using him again." (Tyler - Customer Tweet)	"I try to make the experience for the customer as good as possible so maybe they'll have you back. Being personable, being conversational if they want to talk to you - [don't] make the customer nervous that you're stealing their pills or something." (Trevor - Interview)
Risk Tolerance: Willingness to take on physical risk to perform work	"Thank you TaskRabbit. My folks are older and concerned they were low on some supplies, and I am several time zones away. [NAME] was friendly, helpful and got them all they needed today- including fresh fruit and veg. We appreciate your service!" (Gracie - Customer Tweet)	"I was hired to do a task for a customer in her home right in the beginning stages of shelter in place... She did not make sure I was safe by any stretch of the imagination. She wasn't taking the pandemic seriously... Working within close quarters with someone who is just deciding to buy furniture because 'What the hell? I'm bored during a quarantine and I'll have some poor soul go over and assemble whatever it is for $60.' It is not worth it." (Flora - Reddit forum)

Table 3. Identity Management Tactics in Response to Physical Risks

Tactic	Exemplary Evidence	
Embracing Enacting customers' ideal worker expectations of devotion	**Pursuing Financial or Social Benefits** "[Working during the pandemic] is weighing the risk [of catching COVID] versus the reward [of making money]… I do feel like I'm at risk, but I feel like it's worth it…. I'm working less hours for more money than working a nine-to-five." (Jason - Interview)	**Identifying Risk as Inherent** "Every day there's a physical risk ... COVID is definitely a concern of mine, but because it's so hot [in Arizona] I actually have heat cramps on a daily basis. So when I come home, sometimes I'll work 10 or 13 hours. And by that point, my body is just hot enough. And so there's been once or twice where I've come home and my wife's been like, "We might have to go to the hospital because you can't use your hands because they're cramping so bad from sweating and exerting yourself all day." (Jasper - Interview)
Passing Presenting as an ideal worker while engaging actions that deviate from ideal worker expectations and that are not visible to the customer	**Changing Tasks** "I changed my profile to "outside work only"... [I want to] be safe [from COVID] and err on the side of caution." (Sammy - Reddit forum)	**Changing Customer Base** "I do my best to be as safe as I can … Having to ride the subway was a no-go in New York. I [worked in] a one-mile radius in Brooklyn where I lived, or a mile and a half, where I could ride my bike to the job. Compared to my work area prior to that—which was pretty much all of Manhattan and half of Brooklyn—it was a small work area." (Melvin - Interview)
Revealing Openly engaging in actions that deviate from customers' ideal worker expectations without trying to refocus the customers' attention	**Changing Self-Presentation** "I felt safe [from COVID]… because I was wearing my mask, my gloves, and everything...due to the virus. (Seth - interview)	**Changing Interactions** "I make sure to maintain social distance. If they're going to supervise I make sure they are actually wearing a mask. I make sure they wipe their hands, if they're going to actually come closer." [I: You feel comfortable telling

		them these things?] "Interviewee: Yes I do." (Tegan - Interview).
Covering Taskers deviated from customers' ideal worker expectations to meet their own risk preferences but then drew attention away from their deviance	**Reframing as Benefiting Customers** "I will still be having serious conversations on health and safety before [meeting with] every customer probably through next year…[I explain to customers that] I'm under no illusions that I can't get COVID out in the community and spread it to [them]." (Nick - Interview)	**Refocusing on Other Ideal-Type Behaviors** "[Before offering to do or accepting a remote task] I share my academic qualifications… [Customers] respond pretty well to that mostly because they kind of see my credentials. [I am] actually getting more work than before the pandemic." (AJ - Interview)
Withdrawing Departing from on-demand work or the platform temporarily or permanently	**Temporarily** "[In May, I thought] I'm a potential super spreader for this virus so I really shouldn't work if I don't have to….[I want] to feel … safe in terms of the virus…[Then in September,] I looked at the numbers for infection in New York and I was like, 'Well, things seem low. Let's just start working [again].' … [I] looked at the infection rate and it was lower so [I] felt comfortable." (Donovan - Interview)	**Indefinitely** "I am considered high-risk due to my asthma and immune system… People are not taking [COVID-19] seriously… No task (especially [assembling a] wardrobe) is worth my health or the health of my family." (Georgia - Reddit forum)

Figure 1: Data Analysis Structure

- This is an opportunity to make money
- I can do what others are too scared to do
- I like providing a service to help people
- I give social contact to people who need it

→ **Pursuing financial or social benefits** → **Embracing**

- There are always physical risks in physical work
- I am regularly concerned about my healthy in the environments where I work

→ **Identifying risk as inherent**

- I switched to task that don't require contact
- I switched platforms

→ **Changing task** → **Passing**

- I don't do in person work
- I only accept tasks in certain locations

→ **Changing customer base**

- I am always wearing a mask and gloves
- I wear PPE
- I use bleach, wash my hands, and don't touch my phone

→ **Changing self-presentation** → **Revealing**

- I leave delivery items at the door instead of bringing inside
- I don't shake hands
- I work when clients leave the workspace

→ **Changing interactions**

- I take safety precautions to protect my clients
- I wear a mask to make my clients comfortable and safe

→ **Reframing as benefitting customers** → **Covering**

- My safety precautions are secondary to my competence
- I communicate and build rapport in COVID-safe ways

→ **Refocusing on other ideal-type behaviors**

- When restrictions eased, I returned to work
- I stopped working during the shutdown
- When infections dropped, I returned to work

→ **Withdrawing temporarily** → **Withdrawing**

- I have not worked since pandemic began
- I don't want to risk catching or spreading the virus
- I did not want to have to negotiate safety with clients

→ **Withdrawing indefinitely**

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Appendix 1
Advertisements in Online Communities for Interviews

We found online Tasker communities through web searches and then asked moderators of Tasker groups to post ads in their communities, if they thought they would be of interest to their members. The following is a sample ad placed on the first author's Facebook page and public Reddit Tasker communities:

> Facebook post: Hi everyone! I'm working on a research project with [University name] that's looking at what it's like to work outside of traditional organizations, specifically how gig workers are adjusting to the pandemic. I'm interested in interviewing those who offer services via TaskRabbit. The interviews are completely confidential and take about an hour. The pay is $30. Please message me if you're interested or know anyone who may be!

Interested individuals completed a short questionnaire sharing their location, tenure, hours worked, and skill. Beyond looking for individuals with varied backgrounds and experiences, we focused on interviewing those who had pre-pandemic work experience on TaskRabbit and had completed in-person tasks. These two categories were most salient to our theoretical concept of interest, understanding risk.

Brief Pre-Interview Survey
Our pre-interview survey was as follows:

> If you are interested, can you please share the following:
> ● First Name:
> ● City/State:
> ● How long have you been working on TaskRabbit?
> ● How many hours do you work per week on TaskRabbit?
> ● What types of tasks are active on your account?
> ● Is morning, afternoon, or evening best for you for an interview?

Interview Protocol (Complete)
In our semi-structured interviews, questions, listed below, were not always asked in the precise order listed. We also often asked detailed follow-up questions that were customized to each participant.

> **<u>Work History</u>**
> ● Tell me a bit about your work experience - What type of work were you doing before the virus? What work are you doing now? Why did you choose to do this type of work? Did you/do you know anyone else doing similar work?

- How do the types of work compare?
- What do you think about gig work?
- Do you see this work as a stepping stone, building your career or something else?

Current Work Experience
- Tell me about working at TaskRabbit:
- Where do you start your day working?
- How do you interact with the app?
- Have you ever had a problem with using the app? How did you resolve it?
- Have you even been blocked/kicked off the app?
- What do you think about the app?
- Do you feel like you are being monitored at work? Tell me more (why/why not). How did this compare to other jobs you've had?
- Do you see yourself as an employee or an independent contractor?

Differences between TaskRabbit and other apps
- What other platforms do you work for? How do they compare?
- Do you do anything else for other sources of income?
- What does working on the TaskRabbit platform allow you to do that is different from other platforms?
- What are some things you really like about TaskRabbit as a platform?

Interactions with customers
- Can you tell me about a positive experience with a customer?
- Can you tell me a negative experience about a customer?
- Did you contact the platform company? How (Email, phone)? How was it resolved? Were you satisfied?
- What do you think your customers expect of you as a Tasker?

Feedback and Input
- Do you feel like you have the opportunity to give feedback at your job? Is this important to you? Why or why not?
- Does TaskRabbit ever ask for your feedback or input? If so, how? How frequently does this occur?
- Do you feel like you have a "voice" with the organization and how it runs? Please explain.
- Have you had any problems with TaskRabbit? How did you resolve them?

Success in Work
- What do you think makes a great Tasker?

- Do you have any tips or tricks in doing this work?
- What does a successful workday look like to you?

Treatment in Work
- How do you feel about TaskRabbit?
- Have you ever experienced any unfair treatment?
- Do you feel that TaskRabbit is good or bad for people like you?
- Are things working out as you expected, why or why not?
- Is there anything you would change about the work?
- What advice would you give to users of TaskRabbit during the pandemic?

Current Work and the Virus
- Have you been working on the platform during the pandemic? How did you decide to work/not work?
- How has the virus changed how you're doing work at TaskRabbit, if at all?
- Have the types of tasks you've been doing changed?
- If a worker has taken a break from gig work? Do you think you'll return to this work post-virus?
- How does the virus make you think about work?
- Do you feel safe working at TaskRabbit?

Customers and the Virus
- What are your interactions like with customers? Are customers following safety protocols (e.g., wearing masks, gloves, not covering their face with the masks)?
- Have the customers changed?
- What do you think your customers expect of you?

Payment and the Virus
- Has the amount you've been paid changed?
- Are you getting hazard pay? How much?
- How much did you make before the virus?
- Is this your sole source of income? What are the other people in your family doing for money?
- If you had the choice of making more money ($2/hr) or having health insurance which would you choose?

TaskRabbit Platform and the Virus
- How do you think TaskRabbit is handling the virus?
- What are they doing well?
- What could they be doing better?

- Has the virus changed the way you think about gig work?

Valorization of Essential Work
- Do you think you are getting recognition for doing this type of work? Is it the customers, or the company, or something else that makes you think this way?
- The news often talks about gig workers being a hero, do you feel like a hero? Why or why not?

Future Working Conditions
- Would you like to continue doing the work you are doing now?
- What do you think you will be doing 3 to 6 months from now? What about 1- 2 years from now?
- What are you most looking forward to?
- Is there anything important that we haven't talked about?
- Where do you see yourself six - twelve months from now? Five years from now?

Background Questions
- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- What is your ethnic background?
- Where do you live?
- Are you married? Do you have any children?
- What was your work before TaskRabbit?
- How long have you been working for TaskRabbit?
- What is your rating on TaskRabbit?
- How many tasks have you completed on TaskRabbit?
- How long do you think you will continue doing this type of work?
- How much do you make from this type of work in a week/month? Overall across all of your income sources? How much did you make overall last year?