

# When child care and domestic gig workers have problems, where do they turn?

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More than 15% of Americans have earned money from an online gig platform.

Using these platforms is integral to many people's everyday lives, but critiquing and pushing back against these companies' policies can be difficult, especially when platforms like Uber, Lyft, and Instacart have the money and the PR teams to shape the public conversation around gig work and gig workers' rights, says Julia Ticona, assistant professor of communication at the Annenberg School for Communication.

Ticona's recent study, co-authored with Annenberg doctoral candidate Ryan Tsapatsaris and published in the *International Journal of Communication*, examines the spaces that domestic gig workers, who are less studied than their rideshare or food delivery counterparts, use to discuss their uncensored experiences with the site Care.com, one of the largest online platforms used by nannies, housekeepers, babysitters, and senior caregivers to find work.

The researchers discovered stories from domestic workers in an unlikely place: not on popular social media platforms, but on consumer review sites. On these sites, stories from workers are interposed with stories from the people who hire gig workers, something not often seen with other types of gig work.

Unlike Facebook groups for Postmates couriers or subreddits for Uber drivers, these makeshift communities on review sites include groups that experience separate sides of the [platform](#)—gig workers and those looking to hire them.

## **The search for Care.com discussions**

When Ticona and Tsapatsaris set out to discover the spaces where Care.com users gather and talk about the platform, they checked the usual places—Facebook, Twitter, Reddit. Strangely, not much was there.

Ticona scoured Facebook groups for domestic workers and came up

short.

"The platforms are sometimes discussed there," she says, "but it's not a main topic of discussion. People mostly talk about their day-to-day work."

As a former gig worker himself, Tsapatsaris was used to finding and using online spaces to discuss the hassles of working with these huge online corporations, so he went on the hunt for places beyond social media.

"Ryan can find any place on the internet where a group of people are super engaged with a very niche topic—even if that place is hard to find on purpose," says Ticona.

He employed some sleuthing skills and found discussions about Care.com happening on odd places—review sites like TrustPilot and Better Business Bureau.

The researchers found thousands of reviews from workers and customers spread out across the internet. Interestingly, many of these reviews read like narratives, they say, and prompted other reviewers to take action against the platform.

"Somehow, people had created this community on consumer review sites," Ticona says. "They were trying to find other people who had had the same experience as them."

The researchers call this community a "counterpublic"—a place where marginalized voices can publicize, discuss, and debate issues that are important to them that are otherwise not being talked about.

**'I am not the only one that this has happened to'**

To create a community—a counterpublic—on a review site, individuals read other people's reviews and comment on them in their own. Ticona and Tsapatsaris repeatedly saw reviewers making references to other reviewers, calling them friends and wishing them luck in their future dealings with the platform.

Platform users have tried to address their issues with the company on its official social media channels, Ticona says, but these conversations are quickly squelched by the accounts, which ask users to privately message them with any concerns.

This is perhaps why users have moved to review sites to levy their critiques, Ticona says.

After analyzing more than 2,000 posts from six different review sites, the researchers found that the workers' and clients' reviews frequently overlapped on three topics: [background checks](#), communication fees, and the platform's subscription model.

The requirement to pay for background checks came up in 18% of worker reviews and in 12% of client reviews. The requirement to pay to communicate with clients or workers came up in 61% of worker reviews and 17% of client reviews. The auto-renew feature on memberships was mentioned in 14% of worker reviews and 55% of client reviews.

Reviews from both clients and workers reference one another, the researchers say. In one review, a client worries that workers aren't getting jobs because clients are required to pay to message potential hires. In another, a client points out that the site doesn't require background checks for families, but does for care workers.

The ways scholars have examined online discussions about gig work have been limited to workers, Ticona says, and the actions that come

from them directly affect workers, such as class action lawsuits against Lyft and Uber.

But on these review sites, both sides want reform. They empathize with one another's need to be heard, to present issues they want to be addressed the same way other issues in the gig economy have been addressed.

## Next steps

The discovery of this niche counterpublic created on [review sites](#) is exciting for future research, Ticona and Tsapatsaris say. Not only does it reveal where domestic workers and clients freely interact online, but it also sets a precedent for studies on other gig platforms.

"This thing that we call platform studies has become pretty specialized in terms of the type of platform that people study," Ticona says. "One of the goals of this paper was to bring this idea of a counterpublic—a shared theoretical tool that we can all use to understand these companies better and critique them in a better way as well."

And outside of academia, investigating these spaces can help regulators address urgent issues facing domestic workers and their clients—from scams to background checks to job quality.

**More information:** Julia Ticona, M. Ryan Tsapatsaris, Worker Resistance in Digital Capitalism | Platform Counterpublics: Networked Gossip and Resistance Beyond Platforms, *International Journal of Communication* (2023). [ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/17763](https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/17763)

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