

A Report on the Experience of Racism for Uber Riders and Drivers

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and Inclusive Societies

This report was researched and written on unceded Country.
We pay our respect to Elders past, present and future, and
acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities’
ongoing struggles for empowerment, healing and self-
determination.

This report was produced as part of the project
‘Prevalence Forms and Impacts of Racism in
Uber’.

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Resilience Research Centre –Dalhousie University (Canada)
Australian Multicultural Foundation
Centre for Multicultural Youth
RAND Australia
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Executive Summary

This project investigates experiences of racism in Uber, among both riders and drivers in Melbourne, Australia. The research was conducted between November 2022 and February 2023, and consisted of two case studies:

Case study 1 investigated racism in the experiences of Uber riders (passengers) using field testing methodology. It generated the first Australian data on differential outcomes for Uber riders across three ethnic groups: white Australian, East Asian Australian and African Australian. It also provided data on the geographic distribution of the rides based on the ethnicity of the riders.

Case study 2 employed focus groups to investigate Uber drivers' experiences of racism. It explored migrant Uber drivers' positive and negative experiences of driving, including experiences of racism, in another first for understandings of ridesharing and racism in Australia.

Key Findings

- **Case study 1** showed an unexpectedly low level of reported rider racism, and racism based on cancellations in South-Asian or African riders, although African riders experienced a higher level of discourteousness, a subjective measure of racism.
- The low level of rider racism may be because an average of 86.7% of drivers were non-white (South-Asian or African).
- Geography may also play a role, as riders and drivers of the same ethnicities may be sharing the same geographies.
- **Case study 2** showed that flexibility and ease of entry were the primary reasons that migrant Uber drivers in this study chose to pursue employment with Uber.
- 85% of the Uber drivers experienced racism at some time while driving Uber.
- Migrant Uber drivers also tolerated a high level of more generalised 'rider bad behaviour'.
- Rider bad behaviour was tolerated due to fear of a low star rating or bad report leading to deactivation of their account.
- Fear of deactivation resulted in profound precarity where the migrant Uber drivers in this study either put up with rider bad behaviour or risked loss of self-employment.
- As most Uber drivers in Melbourne were non-white (see case study 1) this precarity is also indicative of systemic racism.

Recommendations

Findings from this project should inform regulations of the relevant government agencies, such as the transport and employment related ministries in Australia. They can also inform Uber's efforts to improve their racism prevention and response policies and procedures.

Recommendations from this report are as follows:

1. **Improve Uber driver feedback** through regular reviews and conversations with drivers.
2. **Improve Uber's training for drivers** to inform them about safety features and their rights.
 - a. Make training accessible to non-English speaking drivers.
 - b. Include refresher courses.
3. **Increase safety features in Uber**, for example allowing cameras in the cars, and training on their use.
4. **Improve Uber's star rating and reporting systems** for drivers.
 - a. Make Uber's rating requirement for riders and drivers equivalent.
 - b. Give drivers a warning for a first reported offence before before deactivating their account.
5. **Monitor the impact** of 2024 Australian government Gig Economy legislation on Uber drivers working conditions and wages.



1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Sharing economy platforms such as Uber now play a crucial role in allocating scarce urban resources, such as housing, transport, and employment opportunities. In some cases, they have transformed the overall functioning of these industries enabling people to share these goods and services in a collaborative way. Uber is a perfect example of this transformation. As the largest ridesharing company in Australia with an estimated over 80% of the market, Uber now surpasses the traditional taxi market (Sipe, 2024).

Uber's platform links passengers (riders), who are looking to be transported somewhere with drivers who provide their car and driving services (Pettica-Harris et. al., 2018). Through this sharing of resources, it can be argued that Uber contributes social benefits for riders and drivers. For drivers, social benefits include greater flexibility and autonomy, unavailable in other kinds of casual employment, (Holtum et. al., 2022, Alexander et. al., 2021). Riders also benefit from cheaper rides and greater accountability of drivers through Uber's reporting and star rating systems.

However, sharing economy platforms also have the potential for negative social outcomes such as exclusion, discrimination and threats of attack (Suler 2004, 2016; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012) Huang et. al. 2018). In multicultural countries such as Australia, it is possible that racism may also permeate sharing economy platforms such as Uber.

1.2. Racism in Uber

The Australian Human Rights Commission describes racism as "the process by which systems and policies, actions and attitudes create inequitable opportunities and outcomes for people based on race" (AHRC, 2025). This can be on an individual or interpersonal level, institutional or systemic. It includes discriminating against, oppressing or limiting the rights of others based on their race, ethnic or cultural background.

Research on experiences of racism in Uber is limited. Studies focussing on rider racism include individual cases of racism by Uber drivers towards riders (e.g. Piracha et. al., 2019, Divinity, 2023), and larger field studies gauging the extent of driver to rider racism (Ge et. al., 2020 Simonovits and Simonovits, 2023). Research into racism experienced by Uber drivers has focused on bias on the basis of race or ethnicity, including through the star rating system (Middleton and Zhao, 2020, Tjaden et. al. 2018, Rosenblat et. al. 2017).

1.3. Racism Experienced by Uber Riders

Media coverage and incident reports have shown that Uber riders in Australia and the US have experienced racism from drivers, including discrimination, verbal abuse and threats (Piracha et. al. 2019, Divinity 2023). For example, Divinity (2023) shared an incident where an Uber driver saw that he was black and drove away without stopping, highlighting the experiences of Black riders in the US.

Larger field studies have explored the extent of driver to rider racism internationally. Ge et. al.'s (2020) analysis of 1,000 rides found that riders with African American names experienced twice as many cancellations as riders with white-sounding names. Simonovits and Simonovits' (2023) study of a Hungarian carpooling platform found that the ethnic minority Roma riders and disabled riders had lower ride approval rates than others. However, disabled riders received more polite responses than Roma riders; a pattern which the authors suggest may be explained by contrasting sentiments of pity towards disabled riders, and contempt towards Roma passengers.

1.4. Racism Experienced by Uber Drivers

Middleton and Zhao (2020) found gender, age, and race-based discrimination against drivers within ridesharing platforms in the US. Black riders showed less racial bias, while white riders in mostly white areas showed more prejudice. Tjaden et. al. (2018) in their analysis of data from 17,294 Uber rides, also found 'sizeable' ethnic discrimination on the basis of the perceived origins of the migrant Uber driver's names.

Bias on the basis of ethnicity can also impact drivers through the star rating system (Rosenblat et. al. 2017). While designed to encourage driver accountability, the star rating system can directly impact driver's earnings. A low rating can lead to negative consequences, such as deactivation of their account. This form of algorithmic management of migrant workers and the subsequent denial of social protections is embedded in the sharing economy and can be referred to as a form of "racial practice" (Gebrial 2022, p3). This racial practice is designed to fix a labour shortage but ultimately allows interpersonal and structural forms of racism to flourish on platforms such as Uber.

Other research on Uber driver's experiences has primarily focused on driver precarity rather than racism. Precarity in this context indicates employment experiences that are marked by temporariness and financial uncertainty (Holtum

et. al., 2022, Peticca-Harris, 2018). Holtum et. al. 2022, explored differences in motivations and experiences between migrant and non-migrant drivers in Australia. They identified that “migrant experiences are considerably more precarious than their non-migrant counterparts” (Holtum et. al. 2021 p. 296). Holtum et. al. (2022) found migrants were more dependent on the income they earned from driving and more concerned about their job security than non-migrants, making them more susceptible to job precarity. This type of economic precarity may also be considered as systemic racism as it only impacts migrants, although this was not the focus of Holtum et. al.’s (2022) research.

1.5. Aims

Ben et. al. (2021) found that experiences of racism in the sharing economy in Australia, are not well documented. Previous research on racism in Uber is mainly focused overseas, with only limited studies in Australia. This research project addressed this gap by focussing on both Uber rider and driver racism in Australia. The study into racism in Uber riders replicated Ge et. al.’s (2020) field testing methods by conducting a comparative analysis of Australian (Melbourne) Uber riders from different ethnic groups, while the study of racism in Uber drivers used focus groups with Melbourne Uber drivers to understand their experiences.

2. Case Study #1: Uber Rider Field Testing

2.1. Field Testing Methodology

Field testing involves observing people without their knowledge and recording the results, where the intention is to not interfere with the conduct of people’s everyday lives (Zschirnt 2019). Field studies have been used in a wide array of countries and demographic groups (Neumark, 2012). Zschirnt (2019) argues that field testing is an invaluable tool for discovering differential treatment in the provision of goods and services such as Uber. The differential treatment may be based on any feature or

attribute, including ethnic background. Previously in Australia similar testing methods were used to analyse ethnic-based differential treatment in the Australian rental housing market in metropolitan Sydney (Galster, MacDonald & Nelson, 2018). This study used field testing to compare Uber riding experiences of Australian (Melbourne) Uber riders from East Asian, African and white backgrounds. Data were collected from 23rd January to 17th February 2023. This study extended Ge et. al.’s (2020) research which reported on inequalities in cancellations affecting riders in the US by looking at a much broader range of variables including cancellations, directness of route, mood of the driver, experience of racism, and information about the driver such as perceived ethnicity, age and gender.

Testers’ anonymity was maintained by changing their name in the Uber App to Avatar names. Anonymous Uber gift cards were used to pay for the rides (up to AU\$50 per ride).

2.2. Field Testing Steps

Field Testing is a complex and time-consuming research method involving the following steps:

a) Recruit Testers

The first part of the field testing process was identifying and recruiting testers. To recruit testers from different ethnic backgrounds (5 African, 5 East Asian and 5 white) we partnered with the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) who work closely with young people from diverse migrant backgrounds. Following discussions with CMY and concerns about riders’ safety, we put in place additional safety measures before recruiting. We also employed testers through the Alfred Deakin Institute.

b) Employ testers

When enough testers were identified (see demographic information in Table 1 below) we started the employment and training process. We developed a training manual and online observation schedules. The training manual was based on one developed for a housing field testing research project (McDonald et. al., 2016). The Racism in Uber Training Guide for Research Assistants (Connelly, 2023) included sections explaining the research, the field testing process and procedures, testers responsibilities and safety guidelines and procedures.

c) Train Testers

A half-day training session was held at Deakin University, Burwood, for the testers. We explained how to fill in the Observation Schedule and riding protocols. The Observation Schedule included questions about the driver’s ethnicity and experiences related to racism including wait time, cancellations, rerouting, racially based comments and discourteousness (see appendix for full observation schedule). They were asked to take two rides (up to 30 minutes each ride) per day over three weeks, choosing ride locations based on their needs. Observation schedules needed to be filled in as soon as possible after each ride. Anonymity was crucial, so testers used avatar names and were asked not to initiate conversations with drivers. They were to behave normally and not mention they were conducting research.

d) Testing in the Field

The project officer (PO) monitored all rides of the field testers for the duration of the project. This included regular contact with all riders as a group and individually, monitoring the correct filling out of the Observation Schedules and distributing Uber vouchers. Testers sent receipts for all rides to the PO. Receipts contained information about the routes taken, which would later be used to map the rides. In addition, all testers shared their rides with the PO as a safety precaution.

e) Post Test Debrief

At the end of the testing period, an online debriefing session was held. This was an opportunity for researchers to thank testers and for them to share any experiences they had. Counselling was also offered but no one reported any safety issues or took up the offer of counselling. Despite the complex nature of the field testing, the 450 rides were completed with relatively few issues.

Table 1. Field Tester Demographics

<i>Avatar Names</i>	<i>Ethnic Background</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>
Kwame	African	48	Male
Hodan	African	21	Female
Jamilah	African	21	Female
Abebe	African	45	Male
Machar	African	22	Male
Jin	East Asian	23	Female
Mei	East Asian	28	Female
Diwata	East Asian	26	Female
Linh	East Asian	20	Female
Yao	East Asian	23	Male
Alice	white	33	Female
Julie	white	38	Female
Susan	white	25	Female
Tim	white	37	Male
Grace	white	28	Female

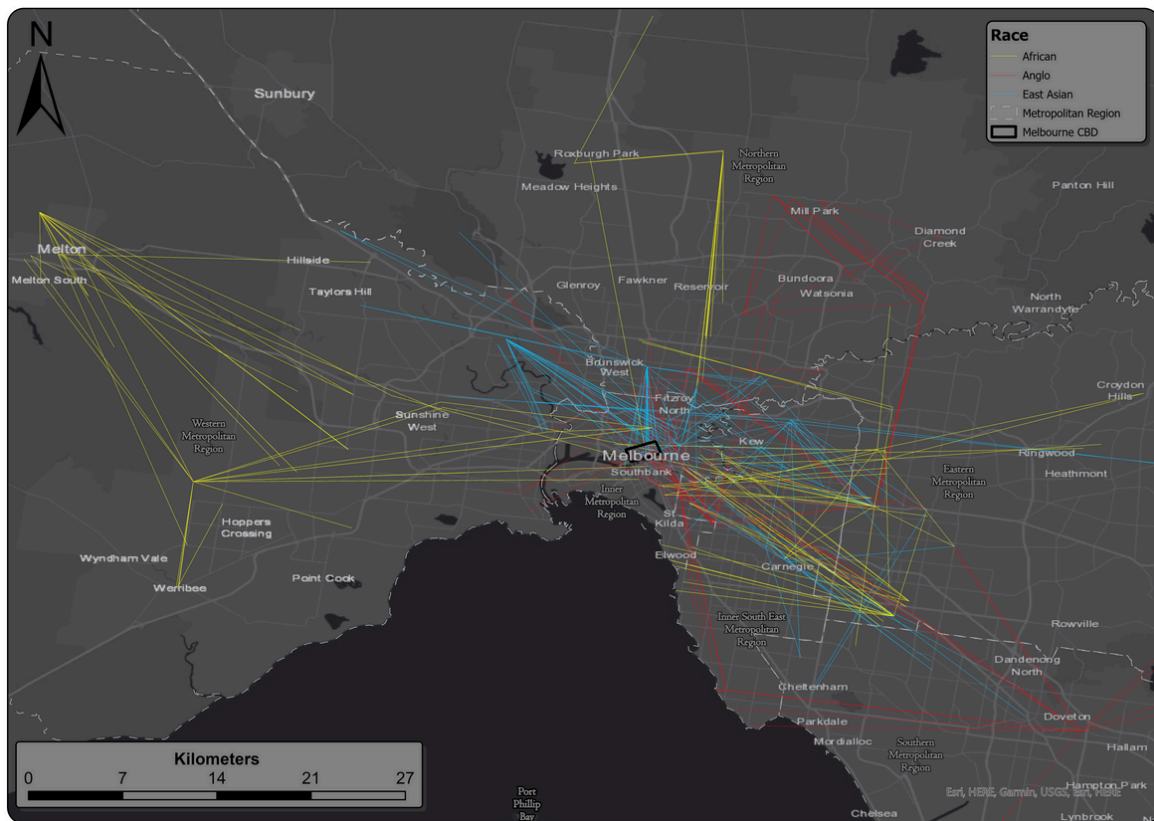


2.3. Field Testing Findings: Geography

The East Asian, African, and White rides had different geographies in Greater Melbourne. The spatial pattern of the rides was extracted and collated from the Uber receipts for individual rides received by the testers. For every ride, Uber generated a receipt and sent it by email. The receipts contained information on the origin and destination of the rides. The origin-destination data was mapped for all rides (Figure 1). Figure 1 shows that most journeys for all testers started from a single point, which is most likely their homes. Three different colours were used to represent rides by the three ethnic groups. Yellow lines mark journeys by African testers, blue lines by East Asian testers, and red lines by White testers. The three sets of journeys are in somewhat different regions of Greater Melbourne.

East Asian Australian tester rides were largely undertaken in the inner to medium rung areas of Greater Melbourne, where East Asian Australians are concentrated in higher socioeconomic areas (Newton et al., 2022). White Australian rides were mostly in the affluent East and South areas of Melbourne, extending to somewhat outer regions in those directions (Butt, 2023). In contrast, most African Australian rides were in lower socioeconomic outer northern and western Melbourne, areas with significant concentrations of African migrants (Butt, 2023). This ethnic pattern of rides aligns with the broader ethnic distribution of non-white migrant communities and white populations in Australian cities (Piracha, 2022; Piracha, 2023).

Figure 1. Spatial Distribution of rides



Sources: Built by collating information on Uber ride receipts

2.4. Field Testing Findings: Observation Schedules

Riders were asked to fill in observation schedules based on their experiences. Below is a summary of the data from observations schedules from a total of n=450 rides, with n=150 rides for each ethnic rider group.

Uber Driver Ethnicity

An average of 86.7% of the Uber drivers in the field test rides were non-white. Over 50% of drivers were from South Asian backgrounds. The fact that most Uber drivers were non-white, means this research is not a measure of white drivers’ racism towards racialised passengers.

Wait times

There was no difference in waiting time for African, East Asian and white testers. For all three groups the average waiting time was quite low,

Table 2. Summary of field tester observations

	Riders' ethnicity		
	African	East Asian	White
<i>Driver's Ethnicity</i>			
Non-white (%)	92.9	84.2	83.2
South Asian (%)	52.7	46.7	46.9
Waiting times (min.)	5.2	5.3	5.4
Cancellations (%)	8.7	14	17.7
Rerouting (%)	6.7	8	9.5
Discourteousness (%)	6	2	2
Race based comments to testers (%)	7.3	4.7	0
A conversation took place (%)	16	9.3	1.3

at about 5 minutes, indicating a high availability of drivers in a competitive market. Smart et al., (2015) in an Uber-funded study, discovered that Uber provided lower fares and shorter waits than taxis in less affluent areas of Los Angeles.

Cancellations

The cancellation rate was 8.7% for African riders. It was 14% for East Asian riders and 17.7% for white riders. This result contradicts the hypothesis that more racism is levelled against African and East Asian passengers. It is in stark contrast to Ge et al. (2020) who found that passengers with African American-sounding names were twice as likely to have their Uber ride cancelled as those with white-sounding names.

This pattern of cancellation could be explained by the prevalence of non-White drivers in Uber in Australia. Our field testing indicated that most Uber drivers are of South Asian or African background. Also, riders and drivers of the same ethnicities might be sharing the same geographies, including areas of residence as concentrated in the North and West of Greater Melbourne. The shared geographies of African riders with African and South Asian drivers, may explain the lower cancellation rates.

We also hypothesise that the higher cancellation rates for white and East Asian riders may be related to how much demand there is for Uber in different areas. In affluent and inner areas (where white and East Asian rides were taken) the demand for Uber services may be higher, so this may explain why the cancellation rate is higher for those riders.

Rerouting

Rerouting refers to the driver deviating from the originally planned route to the destination. It may be done to save time, or to increase time and distance (and thus the fare). Rerouting was 6.67% for African riders. It was 8% for East Asian riders and 9.52% for white riders. This pattern is not statistically different and does not indicate racism. The slight differences could again be explained by the shared geography of riders and drivers as explained above.

Discourteousness

Finally, the passengers (riders) were also asked to record if they felt the driver was discourteous, as a subjective indicator of the experience of racism. Two percent of the White and East Asian riders felt that the drivers they encountered in the test rides were discourteous. It was six percent for the African riders, indicating a higher exposure to racism.

Drivers' racially based comments

Participants were asked: "Did the driver make racially based comments to you, about people from your ethnic background?"

None of the white riders reported any racially based comments in this regard.

East Asian riders reported seven instances of racially based comments. The following comment is an example of a typical instance reported by the East Asian riders:

"They weren't really loaded comments, more casual conversation - driver was of a migrant background and wanted to chat..."

African riders reported eleven instances of racially based comments. In three cases, no explanation was given by the rider on what the driver had said. In a number of cases, it was comments such as:

"Was funny but he thought I was his friend from high school named Machar but then said Sudanese are very good friends."

"The Uber driver said he was from Sudan. He told me I looked as if I could be Somali and I confirmed I was..."

For African riders, there were two reported cases of racially-based comments that could indicate racism. In one case a driver from India asked the rider:

"The one who gave me service asked me if the crime rate was high in my country."

In the second case, the rider discussed a comment by a driver from Hungary,

"Driver asked about my work since I was being picked up from the office. He assumed that I worked for Muslims (I am visibly Muslim and wear the hijab). He asked whether I was from Somalia - which I said yes. Then he starts talking about what he knows about Somalia and mentions how he picked up 'some Somalis that live in the public commission housing' and assumed that I lived in that area... He also mentioned how good my English was."

Using the tested variables of cancellations, wait times and rerouting, our study shows little evidence of racism, and particularly ethnic-based discrimination, toward Uber riders. Importantly, since the majority of drivers in our sample of rides were non-white, our assessment was based on discrimination that would have come from non-white drivers. While these objective measures of ethnic-based discrimination showed largely

insignificant results, we did find a threefold likelihood of reporting (subjective) discrimination experiences in the form of discourteousness among African riders. Furthermore, racially based comments by Uber drivers toward Uber riders were more evident. These constituted seemingly benign comments on race, but did involve loaded stereotypes such as associating certain ethnic groups with geographic areas of lesser status, and more overt racism that equated certain ethnic groups with crime. While racism may not appear to have impacted the service provided, it did have some impact on the experience of the Uber rider taking the service.

3. Case Study #2: Uber Drivers' Experiences

3.1. Methodology: Mini-Focus Groups

Two research team members conducted ten one-hour mini focus groups interviews of two drivers each (a total of n=20 drivers), to discuss experiences of Uber driving and racism. We chose these over larger focus groups to facilitate more intimacy and encourage openly sharing sensitive experiences.

The research team partnered with the Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) Australia in Melbourne to recruit Uber drivers for the mini focus groups. Recruitment was done by four AMES bi-cultural workers who had connections to migrant communities of various national and ethnic backgrounds.

The requirements for recruiting Uber drivers were that they were from non-white backgrounds, were comfortable conversing in English, were currently driving Uber, and were available and willing to attend a one-hour focus group. We offered a one-hundred-dollar supermarket voucher to compensate them for their time and were also flexible about the time and location for the focus group. The final sample consisted of 20 drivers from African, Middle Eastern, East Asian and South Asian backgrounds, residing in different areas of Melbourne. We matched drivers from similar backgrounds and areas, who were also often acquaintances or friends, to increase comfort and openness and facilitate greater discussion during interviews.

Mini (2 researchers x 2 participants) focus groups were conducted between November 2022 and February 2023, ran for one hour and were conducted in English in public locations convenient to the drivers, such as a public library. On two occasions drivers received help with translation during the discussion, once from a bi-cultural worker from AMES and once from another participant.

The interview schedule included questions about positive and negative experiences of Uber driving and instances when they felt discriminated against or disrespected or had other negative experiences that may or may not be related to ethnicity. We also asked about how these experiences were dealt with by Uber and what if any suggestions they had about how their experiences could be improved.

Interview recordings were transcribed using the Dictate/Transcribe option in Microsoft Word and checked for accuracy. They were then de-identified and coded using abductive methods. Thompson (2022) describes abductive methods as setting parameters for which you are initially looking for, but being open to findings outside these parameters, in a two-step process. The first step in the coding process identified text in the transcribed mini focus groups that reflected the main categories of research questions that were asked. In the second step, the categories were further coded to understand themes that emerged in each category. We also took notes during and after the interviews and discussed key points as a form of preliminary analysis. The findings below represent the common themes that emerged.

3.2. Driver Demographics

The Uber drivers in the mini focus groups were from Middle Eastern, East Asian, South Asian and African backgrounds. Their home countries were Pakistan, China, India, Eritrea, Sudan and Iraq. All drivers were male. Their age range was from 20 to 50 years old with, and most were in their 30s. The length of time they have lived in Australia varied from one year to 23 years, with four coming to Australia as children. All drivers except for those who came to Australia as children had previous educational qualifications from their home country, including five with master's degrees, seven with bachelor's degrees and four with diplomas or certificates. Four people had, or were in the process of, converting or upgrading their qualifications in Australia to masters with two people undertaking additional bachelor's degree,

and seven people completing additional certificate or diploma level study, some as a condition of their visa.

Most drivers with previous educational qualifications reported that they had professional careers in their chosen field in their country of origin. However, only three were able to work in their professions in Australia. The most common work they did prior or in addition to Uber driving were in security, hospitality, factory/warehouse work and other driving (e.g., truck or taxi). One driver specifically stated that he felt he was being discriminated against for being a migrant when he applied for jobs other than Uber.



Table 3. Demographics of Uber Drivers

*NS= not stated

Driver	Age range	National background / country of birth	Residence in Australia	Qualifications in Home Country
1	20-30	Pakistan	4 years	Bachelors Degree
2	31-40	Pakistan	8.5 years	Masters
3	NS	Pakistan	12.5 years	Masters
4	NS	Pakistan	12 years	Diploma
5	31-40	China	7 years	Bachelors Degree
6	41-50	China	23 years	Masters
7	20-30	China	4 years	Masters
8	41-50	China	3 years	Bachelors Degree
9	31-40	India	7 years	Diploma
10	20-30	India	2 years	Bachelors Degree
11	NS	Eritrea (refugee in Kenya 7 years)	4.5 years	(attended school)
12	NS	Eritrea (refugee in Kenya 10 years)	6 years	(attended school)
13	NS	Eritrea (grew up in Egypt)	17 years	Bachelors Degree
14	NS	Eritrea (came from Kuwait)	1 year	Double Bachelors Degree
15	31-40	Sudan	20 years	(attended school)
16	31-40	Sudan	20 years	(attended school)
17	31-40	Iraq	a long time	Bachelors Degree
18	31-40	Iraq	a long time	Diploma
19	31-40	Iraq	12 years	Bachelors Degree
20	31-40	Iraq	7 years	Masters

3.3. Findings: Positives of Uber Driving

Focus group participants cited ease of entering the industry as a key positive of driving for Uber. Anyone, including a new migrant, who meets certain minimum requirements can become an Uber driver in Australia (Uber Technologies Inc., 2023a).

A related theme among the focus group participants was that Uber allows drivers to choose when they are paid, after each ride or weekly (Uber Technologies Inc., 2023b). Not having to wait for payment was a very high priority for almost all drivers. They talked about needing to earn money to “put food on the table”, and “pay the bills”.

The other primary reason for choosing Uber was flexibility around hours of work. Currently in Australia, Uber drivers are allowed to work up to 12 hours a day. Five drivers reported working full-time 8-12 hours per day, five or six days a week. However, the majority worked part-time, fitting Uber driving around their other jobs (where they had multiple jobs) and family commitments. Four drivers expressed that this flexibility allowed them to help care for and spend time with their families.

Other positives of driving Uber included the freedom of being one’s “own boss” and being able to decide when and where they work. Some Uber drivers chose to work in peak periods when there was the most work and the rates of pay were higher. Some had preferences about which parts of Melbourne they preferred to drive in. Several said getting to meet people and learn about “Australian culture” from them was a positive. Some Uber drivers said talking to riders was also a great way to improve their English skills, seen as helpful in getting other jobs.

Table 4. Summary of Positives of Uber Driving

Positives/ Reasons for Uber driving	Percentage*
Flexibility	75%
Ease of Entry -Ability to earn Money, Pay the bills	55%
Meeting People, Learning English	40%
Convenient, Easy to become a driver	25%

*Percentages sum to more than 100% because drivers could choose multiple categories

3.4. Findings: Negatives and Rider Bad Behaviour Encountered While Driving Uber

Alongside the positives of Uber driving there were also various negatives. Drivers gave many examples of rider bad behaviour including drunkenness, safety issues, disrespect, aggression and violence, as well as instances of racism and other forms of discrimination as we elaborate below.

Drunken Behavior

Ninety percent of (18 of 20) drivers reported experiences of drunken riders. These experiences were at night, usually on the weekend, often involved young people, and ranged from riders falling asleep in the car, refusing to wear their seatbelts, swearing and wanting the music turned up loud, to sexual propositions, riders fighting with each other and vomiting. Vomiting seemed to be a very common occurrence (35% of drunken riders were vomiters) with one driver who carried sick bags saying he once used 166 sick bags in a 12-month period. Drivers had to clean their cars after riders vomited and the smell could last for days. The aggression and violence were sometimes also the consequence of drinking alcohol and included making unsafe or unreasonable demands of the driver (for example wanting to suddenly change lanes or routes) and then yelling at them or damaging the car when the driver refused.

Many drivers said they felt unsafe, and some chose not to drive at night or in certain areas, particularly the outer South Eastern and Western suburbs of Melbourne. Uber’s safety page points out that the safety features include an emergency assistance button, GPS tracking, follow my ride facility, phone anonymisation, and 24/7 incident reporting (Uber Technologies Inc., 2023c). However, not all drivers were aware of these features, while some were aware but did not use them. While most drivers were aware of the emergency button and some used it or called police in rare circumstances, most incidents drivers dealt with were not considered emergencies by them.



Table 5. Summary of Negatives of Uber Driving

Negatives/Rider Bad Behavior	Percentage*
Drunken Behavior Vomiting	90% 35%
Reported Racism (see table 6)	85%
Disrespect, safety issues	55%
Working Conditions -including pay	35%
Aggression/violence	20%

*Percentages sum to more than 100% because drivers could choose multiple categories

Reported Racism

Some drivers were familiar with racism and willingly shared their experiences. Others initially reported little or no racism. However, further discussion sometimes suggested they had underestimated it. In the end, 85% of drivers acknowledged some experience of racism but often said it was not common.

There were several examples of Islamophobia, with Muslim drivers being asked invasive questions about their religious practices (e.g. how many wives/marriages they can have) and other questions related to their knowledge of or possible involvement with terrorist groups and terrorism. Some drivers did not see this as racist but as ignorance caused by one sided media reporting. Some also refused to talk about their background or religion to riders, or said they came from a different country that was not associated with terrorism (e.g. Egypt or Turkey).

Drivers also experienced stereotyping and racism based on the dark colour of their skin, their name or country of birth. Some examples are: *“Because of brown skin people are surprised you can speak good English”*; *“Cancelling the ride when they see my [African] name”*. One example of racism based on anti-Chinese racism is *“[Driver] [a]sk me. Are you Korean? Are you Chinese? I don't want to say because they don't like Chinese. But Japanese is*

OK”. There were also examples of white supremacist attitudes experienced by drivers, including two drivers who were told to go back to where they came from. One African driver also recounted a violent and very disturbing incident, which he perceived was race-based, where he was lured to a remote location and assaulted.

Disrespect

Some of those participants who said they experienced little or no racism later reported that they experienced disrespect and distrust related to their ethnic background. Many drivers said they had experienced distrust about the route they were taking, suspicions that they were taking the long way so they could earn more (even though Uber’s prices and routes are pre-determined). Three drivers felt riders looked down on them, because they talked to them rudely or didn’t talk to them at all and would not look at them. Others felt that riders treated the car disrespectfully or expected to be waited on. Two drivers said they didn’t tell people (e.g. their children’s friends’ parents) that they were Uber drivers as they felt Uber drivers were disregarded as lower class.

Working Conditions

Drivers were keen to discuss a variety of other issues affecting them in the context of Uber. One of the biggest issues was related to working conditions, particularly unfairness in relation to complaints reporting and the star rating system. Uber Community Guidelines specifies that the expected behaviour of drivers and riders is “to treat everyone else with respect, help keep one another safe and follow the law” (Uber Technologies Inc., 2023d). The star rating system is two-way and allows both the driver to rate the rider and the rider to rate the driver based on their experience (Uber Technologies Inc. 2023e). In addition, drivers and riders have the option to report behaviour that violates the Community Guidelines. However, according to drivers the consequences of these actions are very different and unfairly favours riders. Drivers must maintain a high star rating – if their rating falls below 4.6 they risk being suspended (being taken off the App), while it appeared to drivers that riders who have a low star rating are not necessarily taken off the app and even if they are, can get someone else to order the Uber for them.

In addition, drivers felt that the burden of proof for reporting was much higher for them than for riders. Some drivers consistently reported incidents, but often only got an automated response. One of the most common reports was about riders vomiting in the car, where drivers had to provide photographic proof in order to get

reimbursed (by the rider) for cleaning. Others said they didn't report incidents as they didn't have time and two said a lower level of English meant they didn't understand what to do. However, most drivers feared that a rider's report (even if trivial or false) could result in them being taken off the App. Many said that Uber believed riders' description of events (even without proof) over drivers. Many knew drivers who were taken off the App temporarily or permanently immediately after a rider reported a serious incident even though it was false. Many drivers felt their only choice was to put up with riders' bad behaviours (e.g. drunkenness, disrespect, racism and aggression) so they didn't risk being taken off the App because of a low star rating or rider report and lose their income.

Some drivers also felt that the payment system was not fair because of the low eventual rates of pay. While they accepted that they were in effect

working for themselves and therefore not entitled to benefits such as holidays or sick leave, they said that once car expenses are considered the rate of pay is generally very low. Some pointed out that the amount drivers earn has reduced while Uber's cut has increased over the years, with longer-term drivers still earning more per hour based on earlier rates. Those with less experience who had started more recently, were paid less, with a much higher rate (one driver said it was 30%) taken out by Uber. They said that because of this, some drivers worked 12 hours per day, non-stop, to make enough money.

Racially Based Comments Towards Other Drivers

Some Uber drivers also made comments about other drivers that were racially based, for example, that Indians are bad drivers or that they are racist, that Chinese people and people with brown skin are racist, that African guys (Sudanese in particular) and Arabs are more aggressive.

Table 6. Racism Reported by Uber Drivers

Category of Racism	Percentage (of all drivers)*	Examples/Quotes
Islamophobia	45%	"Some people they ask about 4 marriages that are allowed to Muslims and Islam..." "People are ignorant, can't differentiate between Iran and Iraq, ask questions and make assumptions about our culture and religion "
Stereotyping/racism based on (brown/black Skin/name/country)	40%	"Because of brown skin people are surprised you can speak good English"; "Cancelling the ride when they see my [African] name"
Anti-Chinese racism	10%	"Ask me. Are you Korean? Are you Chinese? I don't want to say because they don't like Chinese. But Japanese is OK"
White supremacy	10%	"...Why don't you go back to your country?"
No reported racism	15%	

*Percentages sum to more than 100% because some reports of racism included multiple categories

3.5. Findings: Drivers' Suggestions for Improvements in Uber

Drivers had many suggestions for how Uber could improve drivers' working conditions. These fell into the categories of a fairer reporting and star rating system, improved safety and wages. Some drivers felt that the star rating system should be the same for drivers and riders; that both should have to maintain a high star rating to keep providing and using the service. Drivers felt they should not be immediately taken off the App for a simple mistake or first offence, with one participant suggesting a warning system and another requesting more time to respond to rider reports/complaints. With regards to safety, many drivers suggested allowing cameras to be installed in their cars. They felt this would act as a deterrent to some riders and provide evidence for reports.

Associated with this, were further suggestions for more driver education with how to deal with different types of difficult behaviour and manage safety. With regards to wages, there was a suggestion to make the percentage for new drivers fairer and to have a minimum wage. There was also a suggestion for an incentive to motivate drivers to take a break, particularly for drivers who work more than 8 hours.

Drivers across the board seemed grateful for the opportunity to talk to us about their experiences with Uber. They were happy that someone listened to them, their concerns, the challenges they face, and what they'd like changed. Several drivers thanked us for holding the mini focus group and doing the project and one said that 'we're doing Uber's work for them'. This may be something else Uber would want to take on – regular reviews, and conversations with drivers.

4. Analysis

4.1 Case Study #1 - Comparing Uber Rider Results to the US

Case Study 1 was informed and methodologically shaped by previous US studies of Uber that tested for discrimination against African American Uber riders, a group that is historically disadvantaged in the US (Ge et. al., 2020). Using field testing, their research focussed on ride cancellations based on the name of Uber riders. Ge et. al. (2020) found strong evidence (double the cancellations) of discrimination

against riders with African American sounding names compared with those with white sounding names. Using similar methods with different ethnic groups in the US, a comparison between taxis and ride-hailing services (including Uber) also found some evidence of discrimination against black riders in Uber, although this was more prevalent in taxi services (Brown, 2020).

In recognition of the multicultural demographic of Australia, we conducted our field testing using Australian testers from East Asian and African backgrounds, similarly, giving them names that could be associated with their ethnic background, and compared those to Australians with white sounding names. However, we found no evidence of racism based on the names of the riders with East Asian or African names in cancellations. In fact, we found those with white sounding names had a higher rate of wait times and rerouting than those with East Asian or African sounding names. We hypothesise that this may be related in some way to the overlapping geography of riders and drivers, and higher demand in areas where those with white sounding names live.

We also expanded the scope of the field testing, asking riders to collect additional information including courteousness of drivers and experiences of racism in different categories. While we did find some racism exists, especially for those with African sounding names and backgrounds, it was at a low level. The overall findings of a low level of racism compared to the US could be explained by the ethnicity of Australian drivers, and their precarious labour market position. Most Australian drivers are non-white migrants dependent on this insecure work, which may discourage them from challenging discriminatory behaviour.

4.2 Case Study #2 - Uber Drivers' Profound Precarity and Systemic Racism

Rosenblat et. al. (2017) describe how customer rating systems are used by companies such as Uber for worker evaluation but that this can lead to discriminatory impacts in employment outcomes. Uber can decide to take drivers off the App due to low star ratings or negative reports from riders. None of the drivers in this research described losing their jobs because of their star rating or negative reports but they knew others who had this experience and were fearful that they might. In similar findings to Peccita-Harris et. al. (2018) we propose that this leads to profound precarity where drivers either put up with difficult working conditions or risk the loss of their self-employment.

Our research revealed an ethnic dimension to this precarity. Case study #1 showed that 83-93% of the drivers were non-white (see Table 2) indicating a high proportion of migrant drivers in Melbourne. Similarly to Holtum et. al. (2022), our findings revealed that migrants in Australia are attracted to Uber driving because of the flexibility and financial opportunities. White non-migrants may find this work unattractive because of the bad behaviour of riders and the reliance on star rating for future work. The precarity of this work and lack of avenues of recourse may also dissuade them from taking up this work.

As shown in Table 3, migrant Uber drivers are often highly educated and skilled (ABS, 2019) but have been unable to gain employment in their fields of expertise because of many reasons (Rajendran et. al., 2019) including discrimination against them due to their accents (Spence et. al., 2022). Many migrants then take up less attractive work with low entry barrier work such as Uber. In comparison to non-migrant drivers Holtum et. al. (2022) found that migrant drivers have an economic dependency on the platform and are “considerably more concerned about poor customer ratings and less confident about their personal safety than non-migrant drivers” (Holtum et. al. 2022: p.304). This aligns with our findings regarding driver fear about being taken off the App and therefore putting up with racism and bad behaviour from riders. Our research confirms an ethnic dimension to profound Uber driver precarity in Australia.

All companies that operate in Australia are legally prohibited from discriminating against workers on the basis of ethnicity (AHRC, 2023). Uber also has its own policies that discourages racism (Uber Technologies Ltd, 2023d). However, Uber’s use of the star rating and complaints reporting system and the profound precarity that results could be described as a form of systemic racism. Systemic racism occurs “when racially unequal opportunities and outcomes are inbuilt or intrinsic to the operation of a society’s structures” (Banaji et. al. 2021:2). In the case of Uber, its present operation is dependent on migrant workers who feel they have no better alternative than this profoundly precarious work.

4.3. Improving Uber Drivers’ Rights

At the time of this research, drivers had little recourse for the precarious working conditions they had to endure. If they do not keep riders happy by overlooking the racism and bad

behaviour they experience, they risk a low star rating. If they complain, they risk the rider blaming them or making a counter complaint. In either of these scenarios, they risk being taken off the App and experiencing financial uncertainty.

These issues have continued unchecked because of the way these industries have operated. As a previously unregulated industry, ride sharing companies such as Uber have been able to operate with relative impunity with regards to workers’ rights. Cristiano (2018) pointed out that on the one hand workers are classified as independent contractors but on the other, Uber controls many aspects of their activities.

The Australian government recently recognised this anomaly and the employment-related challenges it creates, and worked with Uber and other companies on legislation to address these issues. In July 2024 legislation was passed by the Australian government to improve workers’ rights in the ‘gig’ economy. According to the Australian council of Trade Unions (2024):

“gig economy workers are now defined as ‘employee-like’ and are entitled to key rights and benefits that other workers enjoy”.

The key rights and benefits include a fair wage, safe working conditions and protection from unfair deactivation. However, the legislation is yet to be fully tested and it is unclear if this will lead to an end to migrant Uber driver precarity in Australia.

5. Conclusion

This study found that there is a complex landscape of multiethnic drivers and ethnic geographies of drivers and riders in play in the Uber service in Melbourne, Australia. Field tester observations unveiled noteworthy patterns in Uber rides. Wait times were consistent across African, East Asian, and white testers. However, cancellation rates exhibited variations, with higher percentages for East Asian and white riders, potentially attributed to driver-rider geography and demand disparities. Rerouting and cancellation percentages followed a similar trend.

While some instances of comments related to testers’ ethnic backgrounds were reported, overt racism was minimal and confined to African riders, who also experienced a higher level of

discourteousness. East Asian and white riders experienced no overt racism, indicating a relatively low incidence of racial discrimination. Overall, the findings suggest that while challenges and disparities exist, the Uber platform in Melbourne generally provides equitable service to riders of different ethnic backgrounds.

The mini focus groups with Uber drivers from diverse cultural backgrounds in Australia shed light on the experiences of these individuals within the gig economy. The drivers, originating from Middle Eastern, East Asian, South Asian, and African countries, were all male, spanning ages from 20 to 50 years. The drivers' educational backgrounds and professional careers in their home countries did not help them to find work in Australia in their professions. While many found refuge in driving for Uber due to its ease of entry and flexible working hours, they faced challenges with rider behaviour including rampant drunkenness, disrespect, and safety issues.

A substantial portion of drivers reported instances of racism, Islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination. Some felt unsafe due to riders' bad behaviour, which occasionally escalated to violence. Working conditions, specifically the star rating system, and issues related to safety were common concerns. Drivers called for a fairer rating system and improved safety measures.

In a similar way to other sharing economy platforms, Uber has transformed the overall functioning of the ride sharing industry in Australia. This seems to greatly benefit riders who now have access to the advantages of the sharing economy, including cheaper Uber rides. In addition, Uber drivers also benefit from the ease of entry and flexibility that Uber provides. However, our research has shown there is also a significant cost to drivers from participation in the sharing economy.

Many of the Uber drivers who took part in this research said that they were grateful that someone had finally listened to them. They expressed great hope that their concerns and recommendations would be relayed to Uber. While the new Australian government legislation is a most welcome attempt to improve Uber drivers' rights, we also strongly recommend re-engaging with Uber drivers down the track to see if it has made a difference to them.



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Appendix

Table 7. Rider Observation Schedule

1	What do you think the ethnic background of your Uber driver is?
2	How long did the Uber Ride take to arrive? (min)
3	Was the Uber Ride delayed (longer than the advised time in the App)?
4	If yes, what caused the delay (if known)?
5	Was the Uber Ride cancelled?
6	If the Uber Ride was cancelled more than once, how many times was it cancelled?
7	Did your driver change the route (significantly) or was the ride cost (significantly) more than quoted?
8	If yes, did your driver give a reason for the change?
9	What was the tone or mood of the driver?
10	Did the driver make racially based comments to you, about people from your ethnic background?
11	Did the driver make racially based comments to you, about people from other ethnic backgrounds?
12	If yes, which other ethnic background (if known)
13	What were those comments based on?
14	Can you give a brief description of the comment(s).

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