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Reflecting on Rideshare Accessibility: Past, Present, and Imagined Futures

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Access Past and Present

The Rise of Rideshare

Rideshare services such as Uber and Lyft have become increasingly popular in the past decade. While Uber and Lyft are the primary rideshare services used in the United States, the concept of rideshare has also boomed on an international scale, with apps like Ola and DiDi. As these convenient transportation services become more and more integrated into our daily lives, it is important to reflect on the past and current natures of rideshare accessibility and imagine a more accessible future where rideshare services cater to access needs.

As a student on campus without a car, I rely on rideshare services to get to volunteer opportunities, safely travel to nearby areas late at night, and sometimes just to save the time of an inconveniently long bus ride. For me, and other students like me without many access needs, Uber and Lyft are two incredibly convenient ways to get around safely and efficiently. With the press of a button or two, we can expect a wait time of a few minutes before being assigned to a driver, and even on a particularly busy evening, we rely on our drivers to show up within 15-20 minutes of our initial request. However, for people with disabilities, the rideshare experience looks quite different.

While completing the research and analysis for this project, we learned about the harsh realities of attempting to use rideshare services as a person with access needs. Specifically, for people with “apparent disabilities” like wheelchair users and people with service animals, discrimination by rideshare drivers is a highly likely occurrence. Rideshare app users with disabilities have reported drivers repeatedly canceling ride requests, the app charging extra fees, or drivers refusing to take them due to their access needs.

Rideshare Discrimination and Access Needs

During our research of rideshare users' experiences with apps like Uber and Lyft, we found many repeating struggles regarding the services' accessibility.

According to an article in Forbes Magazine, a 55-year-old student at Arizona State University claims that she has been repeatedly denied service with her guide dog by rideshare drivers. Specifically referring to Uber and Lyft which she uses often, despite being a frequent user of these services, this woman has encountered “quite a few denials”. Without access to rideshare rides, her ability to get around easily and efficiently is impeded. She relies on her guide dog and needs him with her at all times. She describes some of the rejection she has experienced as “pretty intense”. She has gotten cursed at, yelled at, and discriminated against. Under both federal and company policies, Uber and Lyft drivers are required to always accommodate service

animals regardless of allergies, religious reasons, or other objections. Drivers who disobey the laws of the company, refusing service to passengers with guide dogs should be penalized. Although both Uber and Lyft claim that drivers in violation of these standards will be removed from the platform, many users don't believe that to be true. Fortunately, both Uber and Lyft's apps have help centers and other support services where you can file complaints about these incidents. Lyft, for example, has an option to check your trip history and file specific complaints about your experience or the driver's behavior.

Another issue many users face is having a rideshare driver cancel on them once they realize the passenger has a wheelchair or another device. Both Uber and Lyft require their drivers to accommodate wheelchairs if physically possible although many users have been rejected even in these cases (Hawkins, 2022). The simple solution would just be to request a larger car like "UberXL" etc. However, this can be more expensive than a typical Uber making them inaccessible to those on a budget. Additionally, it is difficult for passengers because there are times when drivers themselves are too small or unable to help carry a wheelchair or they simply do not have space in their car, however, it is difficult on rideshare apps to tell this before paying for a ride.

Some wheelchair users do not even attempt to utilize rideshare apps although they would be extremely convenient if available to them. In an article by the Chicago Tribune, Justin Cooper, a plaintiff in a lawsuit against Uber, shared that his wheelchair cannot transfer into a typical Uber vehicle. He recognizes that there are wheel-chair accessible vehicle options however he also acknowledges that these cars would take much longer to arrive and be a lot less consistent due to the limited availability of accommodating options. One woman recounted how she was able to get a wheelchair-accessible rideshare to a movie theater but had to wait over an hour to find a ride back due to back-to-back driver cancellations. In many cases, it is nearly impossible for wheelchair users to even hail a wheelchair-accessible Uber and Lyft due to their location and lack of options in their area further emphasizing the challenges of using rideshare services for those with various mobility needs.

Although Uber and Lyft have catered to the immediate needs of many across the world, there is great room for improvement surrounding the support of service animals and mobility device users. People with apparent disabilities have faced rude attitudes from drivers and felt like "second-class citizens." Several wheelchair users experienced drivers arriving at the pickup location and then driving away once realizing that their passenger used a wheelchair. Put simply, people with disabilities are not able to request rideshare services with a simple button click, but instead face rudeness, exceptionally long wait times, and refusal of service. The discriminatory treatment and rude attitudes by rideshare drivers underscore the importance of rideshare companies' responsibility to educate their drivers on disability etiquette.

Rideshare and the ADA

The Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, is a federal law that was put into place to end discrimination against people with disabilities in everyday life. In terms of specific enforcements, a few of the things that the ADA prohibits include employment discrimination, inaccessible transportation, and inaccessible public offerings. More broadly, the ADA aims to

make the world a safer and more accessible place for all citizens, beyond ability level, due to the wide-serving benefits of universal design.

When the ADA was initially drafted and signed into federal law, its main target in terms of enforcing accessible transportation, was public transportation. But, as Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) like Uber and Lyft continue to grow, it is clear that the ADA falls short in several ways (“ADA Title II’s Impact on Transportation Network Companies”, 2024). In the coming decades, we can expect even larger technological leaps, which will likely transform the way we use transportation.

Rideshare Access Advocacy Efforts

Due to the ever-changing nature and limitless potential of technology, it is clear that legislation like the ADA needs to be continually evolving. Disability justice organizations and accessibility advocates will likely need to keep fighting for their access needs, which is a long and arduous process. While the scope of this final project is primarily focused on Uber and Lyft due to their local relevance, disability rights activists and accessibility advocacy groups have been fighting for better rideshare accessibility for years and have filed complaints and lawsuits against various rideshare companies. Winning the legal battle against rideshare companies is no easy feat. There seem to be endless ADA loopholes and complicated legal ambiguities which make the lack of high-quality accessible rideshare service hard to prosecute. In addition, even after lawsuits have been successfully settled, the results are often “the floor” of the ADA, with the bare minimum accommodations being provided to disabled users.

From a more optimistic standpoint, universal design and accessibility are concepts that have been represented in the media more and more frequently in the past years. With that, I hope that future leaders in the transportation space keep these principles in mind and consult people with disabilities and advocacy groups within the space during the creation of their services, rather than try to patch up access holes after gaining popularity.

Uber and Lyft ADA Compliance Lawsuits

Uber and Lyft have both tried to argue that they do not fall under the category of transportation companies, which makes them exempt from ADA regulations under Title II and III (“Ridesharing and the ADA - DRCNH”, 2020). However, in the court of law, most judges have not supported this argument, allowing lawsuits against the rideshare companies alleging ADA non-compliance to move forward. Both Uber and Lyft were recently sued based on the allegation that they were not complying with ADA laws. Uber settled its lawsuit in 2022 and Lyft settled its lawsuit in 2020.

Uber agreed to resolve a lawsuit in 2022 which alleged that they were not in compliance with Title III due to a policy that charged passengers with disabilities wait time fees. This was viewed as a form of discrimination against passengers with disabilities, who may need more than the standard two minutes provided to get into a vehicle. According to the U.S. Justice Department, the complaint led Uber to agree to pay back millions of dollars to over 65,000 riders who dealt with discriminatory wait time fees in addition to other reparations. Additionally, for

the length of the two-year agreement, Uber agreed to waive wait time fees for all Uber riders who certify that they or a frequent companion need more time to get in an Uber due to a disability. Uber will provide refunds to disabled riders who do not have waivers. The company agreed to advertise the wait time fee waiver program and train its customer service representatives on the waiver program and refund process.

According to the U.S. Justice Department, in 2020, Lyft came to a settlement agreement on a lawsuit alleging that some of its drivers refused to give rides to people with disabilities who used foldable wheelchairs or walkers. The complaints that formed this lawsuit were primarily from one user who was repeatedly discriminated against by Lyft drivers due to being a wheelchair user. As part of the settlement, Lyft paid damages ranging from \$4,000 to \$30,000 to four complainants with disabilities and a \$40,000 civil penalty to the United States. Lyft also agreed to update its wheelchair policies and educate drivers on these policies and driver expectations. A complaint procedure for driver accountability was also rolled out as a result of this lawsuit.

Access Futures

Steps Forward

Uber offers UberWAV, a service specifically offering wheelchair-accessible rideshare vehicles. UberAccess and UberAssist are services with drivers who have been educated on how to help riders with assistive devices transfer into and out of a rideshare vehicle. However, these services are not widely available in the way that the typical Uber and Lyft services are. Simply put, these services do not currently offer the same quality of service to disabled users as they do for people without access needs.

It can certainly be difficult to stay optimistic and keep fighting for higher quality rideshare services that cater to the needs of people with disabilities and do not view them as inconveniences. However, it is important to view technology as a vehicle for accessibility improvements. Across the nation, improvements are being made. Uzurv, an adaptive TNC that prides itself on door-to-door service for people with disabilities, is one notable offering. From the Uzurv website, it is “an efficient scalable TNC model built from the beginning specifically for paratransit.” Uzurv is an example of a service provided with the needs of people with disabilities at the forefront of their mission. Their business model allows them to partner with public transit companies as well as private transportation companies in order to expand paratransit offerings. To date, 36 transportation programs in 15 states and Washington, D.C., have used Uzurv (Hunter, 2024).

Imagining Access Futures

It is necessary to reflect on what work needs to be done to create a more accessible future for people with disabilities. Accessible transportation is a critical component of this imagined future. Unfortunately, it is likely that disability advocacy groups and allies across the nation will need to continue to share a large burden. It requires significant coordinated effort to tear down existing systems that lead to discrimination and inaccessibility in the realm of transportation.

But, at this current moment in our technologically driven landscape, as newer technologies like rideshare take off, it is crucial to continue fighting for access needs and demanding a seat at the table. Companies will need to listen to their disabled users and learn from past mistakes to strategize ways to uplift disabled voices during their design process and ensure that their products are widely accessible.

In a more gradual sense, by expanding disability studies education and uplifting the voices of those with lived experience, it is possible for us to fundamentally transition to a more accessible future for all; one that is built upon universal design principles and true inclusivity. From accessible transportation research studies being conducted by the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute to companies aiming to expand paratransit offerings in U.S. cities, in the future rideshare companies may be pressured into implementing better accommodations and acknowledging disabled people as equally deserving consumers. Every step taken toward improving transportation accessibility is important in making future rideshare services and transportation technologies view the needs of disabled people as a requisite of their services instead of an optional DEI feature to be workshopped following user complaints.

Digital Accessibility Summary of Uber and Lyft Mobile Apps

In the world of modern transportation, rideshare apps like Lyft and Uber have revolutionized how people travel. While both companies provide innovative alternatives to traditional taxis and private transportation, they differ in their approaches to accessibility, inclusivity, and user experience.

When looking for the Lyft app, it's easily noticeable due to its neon pink color. For blind or low-vision riders, Lyft integrates VoiceOver and TalkBack, popular screen-reader technologies that facilitate smooth navigation within the app. Similarly, for deaf or hard-of-hearing drivers, Lyft includes features that notify riders of their communication preferences. Text-based communication is encouraged, and the app uses visual alerts, such as screen flashes, for new ride requests. One unique feature of Lyft is Women+ Connect, which allows women and non-binary riders to pair with drivers of similar identities for added comfort and safety. For users with mobility challenges, Lyft's app says it provides wheelchair-accessible rides, ensuring that individuals with mobility devices such as wheelchairs or walkers can travel with ease. But when investigating this further, Lyft only offered wheelchair-accessible vehicles in a handful of cities.

The Uber app is also easy to find on an iPhone with white text on a black background. Uber's platform says it supports individuals using mobility devices, such as wheelchairs, walkers, and canes, ensuring they can book rides without barriers. But, similarly to Lyft, these options (UberWAV-Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle) are only available in select areas. This again is very misleading in the app and gives a sense of false hope to users. When checking to see if Ann Arbor was a WAV location, it was not. Uber like Lyft also caters to low-vision and blind riders through VoiceOver and TalkBack integration. For deaf or hard-of-hearing drivers, Uber includes flashing trip notifications, text-only messaging options along with calling, and prompts for riders to input destinations to avoid miscommunication.

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