

FLK 276 SEMESTER PROJECT

*EXPERIENCES OF DELIVERY DRIVERS IN BOWLING GREEN, KY.*

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ASHLEY EDWARDS

Bowling Green is a town known for many things including Western Kentucky University, the National Corvette Museum, Gatton Academy, and much more, including its vast amount of restaurants. As the third largest city in Kentucky with a population of about 60,000 students, parents, teachers, nurses, bankers, and everything in between, its rumored that Bowling Green has the most restaurants per capita in the country. A sign on the interstate that leads travelers to the town's exits states that Bowling Green has over 300 restaurants, and as most inhabitants can see, the number is growing and changing every day. These range from local businesses offer fresh and local products to a string of popular chains like McDonalds and Dairy Queen, both, which there are three and two of respectively. With all these restaurants, only a select amount offers delivery. I worked at Jimmy John's, a gourmet sub shop that offers 'Freaky Fast Delivery', but we are not the only ones you will find on the road.

The job of being a delivery driver varies from restaurant to restaurant with different methods, procedures, delivery routes, uniforms, car toppers, and so on. I have many friends that I have met through delivery driving, all with unique experiences. From the route one person takes to the variation in how other drivers organize their car, occupational folklore is taking place. To better understand this, a working definition of folklore given by Martha Sims and Martine Stephens in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of *Living Folklore* state, "Folklore is informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures and our traditions, that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviors and materials. It is also the interactive, dynamic process of creating, communicating, and performing as we share that knowledge with other people" (Sims Stephens 8). The sharing of that knowledge between

coworkers at your occupation is occupational folklore. When a seasoned delivery driver share advice about a quicker route to a new employee that is an example of occupational folklore at work.

In order to better understand the experiences of other delivery drivers, I have interviewed four of delivery drivers who have driven for Jimmy John's, Vino's, Gondolier, Pizza Hut, and Domino's. Because folklore is often made up of stories and experiences shared orally, I have heard many stories about deliveries, from my own coworkers and others who discover I was a driver. The idea of warming up to a person because they have similar or shared experiences is similar to being an insider to a folk group. Through our shared experiences we are able to understand jokes, directions, and terminology others may not comprehend. Because one restaurant serves a delivery area that is not the same as other restaurants, the experiences may be similar but not exactly the same. Having worked at both Jimmy John's locations in Bowling Green, I had vastly different experiences while driving as well as inside the sandwich shop.

I asked four of the delivery drivers I knew several questions about their driving experiences. The first series of questions were about themselves (their name, age, city, sex), then I started to ask questions about the restaurant procedures (uniform, delivery area, minimum delivery cost, topper information), then finally about their personal experiences ranging from their favorite place to deliver, least favorite place to deliver, their largest tip, and more. Everyone I interviewed was willing to share information and excited to retell the stories. I found it interesting as I reviewed the answers as a whole that where some drivers strongly dislike delivering to one location, others found that to be

their favorite. These shared experiences can display trends found in Bowling Green's restaurant culture.

According to a WBKO report on the restaurant culture in Bowling Green, it is rumored that Bowling Green has the highest number of restaurants per capita than any other city in the United States. WBKO stated that the population in Bowling Green is roughly 60,000 and the amount of restaurants is around 300, making the options for food at a ratio of 1 restaurant to every 200 people. It is hard to ignore the illuminated signs for Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, KFC, and others but it does not stop there as toppers provide another form of advertising for restaurants offering delivery. I cannot remember how many times I worked as a piece of moving advertising as I wore a Jimmy John's shirt into a building. As soon as the aroma of food enters the customer, for example a hungry college student on WKU's campus who is surrounded by other students, that orders start to roll into the store from the same building, suburb, or house. Nash Gumm, a 23 year old Jimmy John's delivery driver recalled returning to campus on back to back orders to the same building. I had similar encounters with the Warren County Regional Jail, who were known well at the shop for not taking a group order and instead making orders that were under ten dollars and then calling while the driver was en route with that order to make another. Situations like this can be frustrating to the driver because it requires more gas to be used, more wear on your vehicle, and more time to be wasted returning to the same place when other delivers are in the queue.

The most prominent variant I saw when conducting the interview was that everyone had a different place that was their favorite to deliver to. Nash Gumm said his favorite place to deliver to was the dorms at Western Kentucky University. He recalled

how the tips were usually fair because students understand the struggle of working service and retail jobs. Gumm said that his least favorite place to deliver to was the Medical Center, located at 250 Park Street. He explained that, “professionals give vague directions to their locations and tip poorly, I had a \$50 delivery go without a tip”.

Alex Cook, a 23 year old who delivered for Vino’s Italian Restaurant before it closed down recalls his favorite place to deliver being the Medical Center because they were the “best tippers” while he explained his least favorite place was, Honestly the worst was the jail, it was awkward seeing people handcuffed and someone eating lunch next to them. Runner up would have to be the dorms; a lot of younger kids don’t understand the politeness/importance of tipping.”

Cicely Walters, a 23 year old from Campbellsville, KY recalls her favorite place to deliver being the regulars who ordered frequently from Domino’s. In my own experience, those who order regularly are far more likely to tip each time versus a first time or infrequent customer. When asked where her least favorite place to deliver, she replied, “Usually trailer parks. It sounds terrible but I always had the most unusual sequence of events take place there. Also, it would be very hard to see the house numbers on the trailer so it was difficult to find. Apartment buildings were a struggle as well.”

Emily Allen, 22 year old Gondolier Italian Restaurant employee stated that she preferred delivering in “more established neighborhoods or to children”. In most situations it appears from those interviewed that children usually tip because they are given the money from their parents to go pay for it right then, and the basis for most delivery driver’s good experiences revolves around the tip. Allen replied that her least

favorite place to deliver to was also the Medical Center as it is a long distance from Gondolier.

The reaction I most often got when I told someone I was a delivery driver was usually a mix of amusement and then the condescending assumption that that meant I drove recklessly. For many delivery drivers, there is a misconception that because the deliveries are supposed to be made as quickly as possible that traffic laws are being violated. According to *Improving the Driving Practices of Pizza Deliverers: Response Generalization and Moderating Effects of Driving History* by Timothy D. Ludwig and E. Scott Geller, “Pizza delivery drivers are typically paid a commission on every pizza they deliver and usually receive a gratuity from their customers. Therefore, the faster they make their deliveries and return to the store, the more opportunities they have to earn money. From a contingency management perspective, one anticipates that making pay contingent on frequent deliveries would increase the occurrence of behaviors that reduce the amount of driving time, including driving at higher speeds. This monetary contingency is also likely to discourage specific safe driving practices (e.g., safety belt use) that are perceived to increase driving time” (Geller, Ludwig 31). This contingency model Ludwig and Geller are referring to is similar to the one Jimmy John’s and many other delivery restaurants use. However, while working at Jimmy John’s I saw that the corporate headquarters sent in branded material that always said to “be fast on the feet not on the street” and other safety propaganda. I asked Gumm if he enjoyed delivery and he replied, “Yes, the managerial staff had impossible standards on how fast we delivered, but I did enjoy the job.” He explained that the time limit for delivering to their 10-15 mile radius was “20 minutes to deliver and return to the store,” while Walters explained, “we

were never given a specific delivery time; however, they expected us to stay within a reasonable time.” Cook explained that at Vino’s, “No precise time, for example no one got a free pizza if it was under 30 minutes. It was just as soon as possible, a lot of times depended on how busy we were. People were pretty understanding about it though” and Allen said Gondolier did not enforce a time limit but her worst experience delivering, “Any delivery where you are not tipped is the worst. However, I had a very rude customer yell at me for the time it took for her to receive her order; something out of my control.” This shows that the reputation delivery drivers receive for being speedy and reckless is not one they often choose. Customers play a greater role in the speed at which most drivers will deliver.

I asked a friend if she had seen any “crazy delivery drivers” on the road to which she replied not only that she had but that they “ride my bumper or pull out in front of me and it is annoying”. Once when I was taking a delivery I noticed a note on the receipt from the customer that said “If you can get here in fifteen minutes you will get a bigger tip”, which caused me to drive faster than I would have if they had not added the note. This behavior is not necessarily the driver’s fault but the responsible of the customer who puts the ultimatum in place. When I asked Gumm, Cook, Walters, and Allen if they had been pulled over on delivery they all replied that they had not. However, delivery drivers do get pulled over and treated the same as other drivers. A co-worker at Jimmy John’s once got pulled over for not using his turning signal. That co-worker assumed because there was a topper on their vehicle that it would be acceptable to ignore traffic laws, which they found out they were not exempt from.

According to *The Driver: Adaptations and Identities in the Urban Worlds of Pizza Delivery Employees* written by Author Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich explains that delivery drivers are often risk-takers who enjoy fraternizing. On page 443, they state, “Drivers seem to regard fraternity as more important than monetary reward or control of one’s time” (Katovich, Kinkade 443). They go on to add an example of this in another field, explaining that volunteer firefighters tell one another jokes, constructing stereotypes about other departments, and creating occupational folklore while doing so. This is similar to the behavior I and other drivers experience when talking to each other. At Jimmy John’s during an off moment when the store was empty and everyone was working on simple tasks, drivers would venture onto tangents about customers, especially bad tippers, and other weird encounters we had throughout our shift. These experiences often fell flat on the sandwich makers who were not part of the insider group and did not understand our street references.

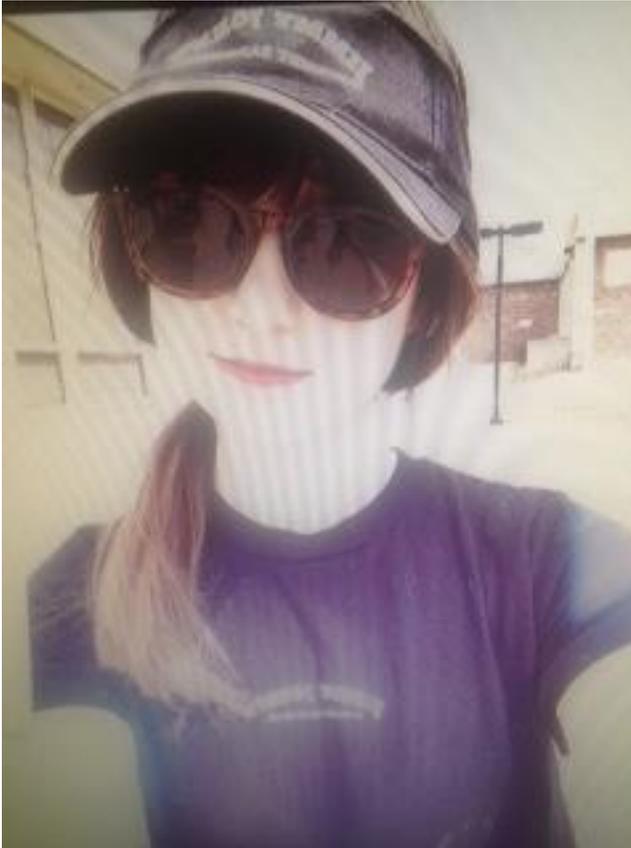
A common problem drivers also face is that they are not the creators of the food. Most delivery drivers are responsible for delivering, taking order on the phone, and other tasks that are away from the food because they have to leave the restaurant so often. Since the food creators do not get paid in tips and never see or speak to the customer, the speed and precision they put into the food can be less than if it were an in-shop order. When I asked Gumm, who was a coworker of mine at Jimmy John’s, he explained that he rarely made the food unless the restaurant was ‘dead’, terminology used in various jobs to explain there are no customers at the time. Often during these ‘dead’ times were the first opportunities for a driver to learn about the process of creating the food. Walters explained that some days were so busy that she simply walked in, grabbed her deliveries,

and walked right out. Allen said that at Gondolier she occasionally helped get the side items ready, such as breadsticks, soup, or plastic dinnerware. At Jimmy John's, drivers were responsible for preparing their own bag for the order as well as remembering to get the correct chips, a napkin per sandwich, a straw, and the drink – which is the most frequently forgotten item. Often the disconnect between the driver and the food is what leads to error in the delivery. When a food employee takes a delivery order over the phone with little knowledge of the delivery area, they can make errors in the address, apartment number, and even take order outside the designated area.

Another common misconception delivery drivers face is the idea that only males perform this job. When I began my job at Jimmy John's, I was not the only female driver and there had been many come before me. However, when customers called in their delivery orders, they often would say things like, “tell *him* to come to the back door” or “have *him* call when you get there”. Even in Kinkade and Katovich's article, they said delivery driving was a “male oriented job”. This instance is interesting as well because when I interviewed the select drivers, the two females, Walters, Allen, and myself all said that we did carry pepper spray and I even kept a box cutter in my car in case someone tried to attack or rob me. The males, Gumm and Cook, said they did not carry pepper spray but Cook admitted to having a pocket knife on him occasionally for safety. Walters explained that her worst delivery experience: “I was lost and couldn't find the correct house in the dark, so I called the customer and asked for better directions. Once I delivered their food they didn't leave a tip then proceeded to call me back and ask for a date. He even said that his kid thought I was pretty. Even if he left a tip that was not appropriate.” These situations happen often when delivering, possibly in part to the

fact that once the food is dropped off the driver leaves giving the customer a sense of confidence to act in the moment. I once had a car of two older men make a comment about my appearance while still in the car. These types of experiences can make all drivers feel uncomfortable and may lead to females leaving the field which causes this misconception about it being a male-oriented job.

Delivery drivers share and experience unique and sometimes thrilling situations that make the job fun. All of the drivers I interviewed said they enjoyed the job despite the wear their cars received. Although there are still misconceptions on the stereotype of delivery drivers, it is clear that the customers are the top priority and their satisfaction, and lots of gas, is what keeps the delivery industry and their culture going.



This is an image of me wearing the signature Jimmy John's shirt and visor. I took this while delivering to South Central Kentucky Community College.



Another image of myself, this time in the signature Jimmy John's hat while waiting in traffic.



This is an image of my car with the Jimmy John's official topper, and on the trunk is a Jimmy John's French bread box – which are used to deliver large orders – and next to my car is two Jimmy John's catering bags filled with Jimmy John's box lunches. This was the largest order I ever took at Jimmy Johns and it was to the WKU baseball field.

## Bibliography

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