



Research on Chinese Takeaway Riders from the Perspective of Sociology

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Abstract. This paper explores the labor process and labor relations of Chinese takeaway riders in the platform economy from a sociological perspective. With the rapid development of the platform economy, the takeaway industry has brought about a profound impact on the labor patterns of takeaway riders while improving service efficiency. The article focuses on the challenges faced by takeaway riders in terms of time autonomy, gamification management, emotional labor and labor relations. Riders' "freedom" is more of a false freedom controlled by the platform's algorithm, although gamification management stimulates work enthusiasm, it also increases their workload and pressure. The article points out that the labor relationship between riders and platforms is ambiguous, which makes them face more uncertainty in terms of legal protection and career development. Finally, the article puts forward multi-level countermeasure suggestions, calling on the government, platforms and society to make joint efforts to improve the labor protection system, strengthen legal supervision, and improve the working environment and protection of the rights and interests of takeaway riders.

Keywords: Takeaway riders; Labor process; Labor relations; Platform economy; Labor rights; interests protection

1 Introduction

1.1 Presentation of the Problem

The development of platform economy has dramatically changed the operation mode of various industries in the past decade, and the takeaway industry is particularly remarkable, which not only improves the service efficiency of the catering industry, but also creates a large number of employment opportunities. However, in the current new economic environment, takeaway platforms often optimize the delivery process through algorithms and data analysis in order to pursue higher profits and market share. With the upgrading of systems and the strengthening of data control, the labor process of takeaway riders has been subject to stricter control, which has caused a direct impact on the employment and career stability of takeaway riders. Under such circumstances, the sociological examination of labor relations and labor process is particularly important.

1.2 Existing Research on Takeaway Riders and the Platform Economy

The existing research mainly analyzes from the perspective of labor process and labor relations. For example, Li Shenglan (2020) points out the “false freedom” of takeaway riders from the perspective of time and autonomy, and takeaway platforms highly monitor riders through algorithmic management, which leads to increased work pressure, increased labor intensity, and unstable rest time. Unstable. Deng Zhiping (2020) analyzes the working environment of takeaway riders and argues that although this management mode improves riders' motivation, it also increases their work burden and mental pressure. Schor and Vallas (2020) point out from the perspective of algorithmic and data management that takeaway platforms carry out fine management of riders, and although this digital management mode improves delivery efficiency, it also increases riders' work pressure. Exacerbates the work pressure and labor load of riders, making them feel the powerlessness of being controlled by machines. Zhao Li (2017) pointed out from the perspective of social characteristics that the takeaway rider group is often marginalized in the city, with a low sense of social identity and professional identity. Feng Xiangnan (2020) pointed out that the social identity of takeaway riders was significantly correlated with their occupational satisfaction, and the lower the social identity, the lower the rider's occupational satisfaction, and the less motivated they were to work. Que Zibing

(2021) found from the perspective of labor relations that platforms usually avoid employment responsibilities through contract terms, and takeaway riders lack formal labor contracts with platforms, making it difficult to obtain legal protection when their rights and interests are damaged. Chen Long (2020) analyzed the control of takeout platforms over riders, noting that the platforms achieved efficient management of riders through data-based management and decentralization strategies, but also exposed the problems of employer evasion of responsibility and tight labor process. Jones (2021) pointed out that takeout platforms usually define riders as independent contractors, thus avoiding the liability issues in traditional employment relationships. Maffie (2020) points out that takeaway riders face significant health risks at work, especially in terms of traffic accidents and occupational diseases, while the platform's investment in safety assurance is obviously insufficient. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) point out from the perspective of labor security that takeaway platforms have significant safety and security deficiencies in their riders' work environments, which results in riders being exposed to greater risks in their work environment.

As mentioned above, the existing literature focuses on only one aspect, either focusing on the labor process or on labor security and labor relations, with very few analyses of both, so this paper adopts a comprehensive perspective in its discussion. This paper will examine the impact of the development of the Internet and platform economy on the group of delivery riders, especially the challenges they face in terms of employment stability and occupational safety. By analyzing these issues, the paper will put forward suggestions to improve the working environment of takeaway riders and protect their rights and interests.

2 Characteristics and Problems of the Labor Process and Labor Relations of Takeaway Riders

As an emerging occupational group, takeaway riders display many unique characteristics. These features not only reflect the specific environment and conditions under which riders work, but also reveal their special position in the complex platform economy. This chapter will explore the characteristics of takeaway riders in detail from the aspects of time and freedom, gamified management, emotional labor, and labor relations.

2.1 Flexible Time and Relative Freedom

The work of takeaway riders has great time flexibility, which is an important factor in attracting many people to choose this profession. Different from the traditional full-time work, takeaway riders can choose when to pick up the order online according to their own schedule. Such flexibility allows takeaway riders to have more freedom in theory to plan their work and life, especially for those who need to balance family responsibilities or other work, which is undoubtedly a great advantage.

However, despite the apparent high degree of time freedom that takeaway riders have, this freedom is actually limited by the platform's algorithms and the volume of orders. Platforms assign orders to riders based on algorithms, and there are more orders during peak hours (e.g., lunch and dinner time), so riders often need to work during these hours to earn more. In addition, the working hours of riders are also affected by factors such as weather, transportation and market demand, so they actually do not have much time at their disposal. Therefore, the time freedom of takeaway riders is more of a relative freedom than an absolute freedom.

2.2 Gamified Management

Takeaway platforms usually use gamified management to motivate riders. This management style makes riders feel competitive and challenged in their work by transforming various aspects of their work into game elements, such as tasks, levels, rewards and rankings. Riders can earn points and rewards for completing orders, and platforms also set daily tasks, milestones and other incentives to increase riders' motivation.

Gamification management does have some effect in improving efficiency and motivating riders. However, this type of management may also lead to excessive competitive pressure on riders. Some riders have to invest more time and energy in their work, and even continue to work under bad weather and exhaustion, in order to get more rewards and higher rankings. In addition, incentives for gamification management often conflict with rider safety and health; for example, platforms may incentivize riders to deliver food faster by shortening delivery times, but this may lead to riders violating traffic rules or even having traffic accidents.

2.3 Emotional Labor and Evaluation Mechanism

The work of takeaway riders involves not only physical labor, but also a large amount of emotional labor. Emotional labor refers to the labor that needs to regulate and manage personal emotions in order to meet work requirements and customer expectations. For takeaway riders, emotional labor is mainly reflected in the

interaction with customers and platforms. During the delivery process, riders need to face a wide variety of customers, and sometimes need to deal with customers' complaints, questions or even reproaches. In these situations, riders need to maintain a friendly attitude and professional service in order to meet customers' expectations and maintain their own ratings and reviews.

In addition, takeaway riders also need emotional labor in their interaction with the platform. The platform evaluates the performance of the rider through the evaluation system. The evaluation score of the rider directly affects the quantity and quality of the orders they can receive. Therefore, riders need to strive to maintain a high score, which often requires them to control their emotions when they encounter unfair evaluations and communicate and complain with the platform's customer service. The demand for emotional labor increases the work pressure of riders and also affects their mental health.

2.4 Difficulty in Determining Labor Relations

The labor relationship between takeaway riders and platforms is a complex and controversial topic. Although riders have similar job responsibilities to traditional employees in many respects, they are often considered by platforms as independent contractors or self-employed rather than as formal employees. This definition of the labor relationship makes riders legally ineligible for labor rights and benefits enjoyed by formal employees, such as social security, health insurance, and paid time off.

This loose labor relationship brings a lot of uncertainty to riders. First of all, their income fluctuates and is highly affected by order volumes and platform policies. In addition, riders usually have to bear the risks and costs they face at work, such as traffic accidents and equipment damage. The lack of legal protection makes it often difficult for riders to obtain effective legal support and protection when they face labor disputes or damage to their rights and interests.

3 Labor Characteristics of Takeaway Riders and Causes of Problems

In the context of the rapid development of the platform economy, the characteristics of the takeaway rider group and the problems they face have attracted widespread attention. To understand these phenomena, it is necessary to conduct in-depth discussions from multiple dimensions, such as false freedom, individual characteristics, employment system, national and legal framework, and youth's pursuit of freedom.

First, the "false freedom" faced by takeaway riders is a key issue. Platforms often attract workers through the concept of "flexible employment", ostensibly giving riders the freedom to choose their working hours and location. However, this freedom is often not what it seems. Takeaway platforms use algorithms to accurately manage riders' working hours, frequency of orders and speed of delivery, resulting in riders falling into deeper constraints while pursuing their freedom. Riders are forced to take orders at the time specified by the platform and at a high-intensity work pace, with almost no real rest time. This working condition of "being free" makes the riders suffer from greater psychological and physical pressure under the cover of apparent freedom.

Second, the social background and identity characteristics of takeaway riders make them more susceptible to the platform economy; many come from rural or marginalized social groups and lack the social support networks and career development opportunities available in cities, so they choose to enter the takeaway industry, which has a lower threshold. However, low-threshold jobs pose challenges to career development and economic security, and riders mostly lack the vocational skills and social capital to achieve long-term career planning and economic stability, which exacerbates their identity crisis and adaptation difficulties. Meanwhile, many young people choose to become takeaway riders out of the pursuit of flexible working hours and life autonomy, but in reality, in order to pursue higher incomes and quality of life, riders are forced to work long hours and are trapped in a cycle of constantly squeezed work, sacrificing true freedom.

Once again, changes in employment patterns are one of the major reasons for the problems faced by takeaway riders. With the rise of the platform economy, the flexible employment model has been widely used around the world. This model breaks the traditional labor relationship by defining riders as "independent contractors" or "self-employed", allowing platform companies to manage their workforce at lower costs and with higher efficiency. However, this employment model also means that riders lack stability and security in their work, their income fluctuates greatly, and they are often not covered by social insurance such as healthcare and pension. This "informal" labor status, while increasing flexibility to some extent, also deprives riders of the protection they should have against work-related risks, making them a vulnerable group in the labor market.

Finally, the lagging national and legal frameworks further exacerbate the plight of takeaway riders. The current labor legal system is mostly based on the design of traditional employment relationships, while the new type of labor relationships brought about by the platform economy have failed to be incorporated into the effective regulation of the law in a timely manner. Takeaway platforms circumvent traditional employment responsibilities through complex contract terms, blurring the labor relationship of riders and making it difficult for them to seek legal assistance in the event of labor disputes and workplace accidents. This lack of legal protection makes riders vulnerable in the face of powerful platforms, further weakening their bargaining power and job security.

4 Countermeasures and Suggestions for Safeguarding the Legal Rights and Interest of the Group of Takeaway Riders

In order to circumvent and solve the many problems faced by takeaway riders in the platform economy, systematic adjustments and reforms need to be carried out at multiple levels, covering the reinforcement of platform responsibilities, the improvement of the labor protection system, the updating of laws and regulations, and the enhancement of social awareness. The following are some feasible measures and suggestions from different perspectives.

First, platforms should take more social responsibility and improve the existing management model. While pursuing efficiency and profit, platforms should pay attention to the working environment and labor conditions of riders. For example, it can optimize algorithms to reduce excessive monitoring of riders, reasonably arrange order-taking and delivery tasks, and avoid riders being in a high-intensity working condition for a long time. At the same time, the platform can introduce more caring mechanisms, such as setting up a flexible working system, so that riders can freely adjust their working hours in case of emergency.

The State needs to improve and perfect the labor security system to provide stronger protection for flexible workers. Although the platform economy has changed traditional labor relations, the government should still ensure that the basic rights and interests of riders are protected by formulating labor security policies for flexible employment groups and clarifying the responsibilities and obligations of platforms. For example, it should promote the inclusion of flexible employers in the social security system, so that takeaway riders are entitled to basic insurance coverage for healthcare, pensions, and work-related injuries, especially in the area of occupational injury insurance, to ensure that they can receive adequate legal and financial support if they suffer from health problems or work-related injuries.

The current legal system urgently needs to be updated to adapt to the new model of employment in the platform economy, especially in the labor relationship between takeaway riders and platforms, where the improvement of labor laws is crucial. The state should enact special legislation to more strictly regulate the labor practices of platform companies, ensuring that riders enjoy the basic rights of employees at the legal level, rather than being categorized as "independent contractors" or "self-employed" to avoid the responsibility of the platform. In addition, the law should establish a more convenient legal aid mechanism to ensure that riders can obtain relief and compensation in a timely and effective manner, to better protect their legitimate rights and interests.

In short, the problem of takeaway riders in the platform economy cannot be solved by a single action of one party alone. It requires the joint efforts of the platform, government, law and society. Only through the coordinated promotion of multiple parties can we effectively avoid and solve the complex problems faced by takeaway riders in the current platform economy, so that they can obtain their due dignity, security and development opportunities.

5 Conclusions

Reviewing the current situation and challenges of the takeaway rider group, although the rapid development of the platform economy has provided this group with a large number of employment opportunities, it has also brought about problems such as damage to labor rights and interests, limited career development, and unclear labor relations. Most takeaway riders come from marginalized groups in society, and face multiple difficulties such as low professional identity, unstable income and lack of labor protection. The joint efforts of the government, platforms and society are particularly important to improve the working environment of riders, strengthen labor protection and promote the improvement of relevant laws and regulations. In terms of updating labor laws and improving the labor security system, the state and society need to take on more responsibility to provide more comprehensive and powerful protection for takeaway riders.

Looking ahead, the situation of takeaway riders is not only part of the flexible employment pattern under the platform economy, but also a microcosm in the transformation of the entire labor market. With the advancement of technology and the popularization of platform management, more and more workers will face similar problems of unstable employment, ambiguous labor relations, and insufficient protection of their rights and interests. The future labor pattern will be more diversified and flexible, but how to promote economic development while protecting the basic rights and interests of workers is an important issue for the government, enterprises and society to face together. A fairer and more reasonable labor market requires improving laws and regulations, upgrading the level of social security, and fostering collaboration among all parties to provide a dignified and safe working environment for all workers.

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