

# A sociological interpretation of "urban shuttlers" in the context of social justice

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**Abstract.** Taking social justice as the starting point, this paper takes takeaway riders and couriers as the research objects of "urban shuttlers". Through literature analysis, questionnaires and interviews, the project explores the current situation and plight of the "urban shuttlers", and provides a sociological interpretation of the four basic dimensions of social justice (protection of citizens' basic rights, equality of opportunity, distribution according to contribution, and social adjustment rules).

**Keywords:** urban shuttlers; social justice; social contribution; social return

## 1. Realistic background and introduction

With the development of the Internet economy, couriers and delivery riders have become a group of shuttlers that cannot be ignored in urban life. They often act as the delivery agents between merchants and customers after the purchase of goods, and are collectively referred to as "urban shuttlers" in this paper. In the post-epidemic era, the irreplaceable nature of the 'urban shuttle' has gradually increased. It is undeniable that 'urban shuttlers' are a microcosm of a group of people who are contributing to the development of society. The current situation of 'urban shuttlers' is analysed in four dimensions of social justice. In the dimension of protection of fundamental rights, the focus is on personal freedom and human dignity; in the dimension of equality of opportunity, the rights, interests and respect required by each individual to contribute to society are guaranteed; the distribution of contributions is analysed in terms of whether their plight is resolved; and in the dimension of social adjustment, the equality of rules after the event is concerned. In this way, it analyses whether this group of people currently enjoys a status and rights in urban life that are commensurate with their own.

## 2. Literature Review

According to Zhongmin Wu, the basic rules of justice in the modern sense should include four elements, namely, the guarantee of basic rights, or the rule of guarantee; the equality of opportunity, or the rule of ex ante; the distribution according to contribution, or the rule of ex post; and the rule of social adjustment. Justice is in fact a system of principles and concepts consisting of these four principles, each of which has its own specific and irreplaceable function, and none of which can function in isolation from the others.

The sociological study of "takeaway riders" began in 2016, and since its emergence, the number of related studies has been increasing year by year. Most of the studies have been conducted from the perspective of "urban social integration" and "emotional belonging". In recent years, the labour safety of takeaway riders has become a problematic issue. The low awareness of labour safety among individual takeaway riders, the extreme pursuit of delivery time by platform companies and consumers, the absence of trade unions and trade associations in the takeaway industry, the lag in legal regulation and administrative supervision, and the gap in social security are all ecosystem factors that have a profound impact on the labour safety of takeaway riders.

With the rapid development of the Internet and e-commerce, express delivery has become the most important delivery channel for online consumption, and the express delivery industry has

become one of the most important industries in promoting employment, improving people's livelihood and serving society. The courier industry has developed rapidly in recent years. Front-line couriers contact thousands of cities and hundreds of industries, serving thousands of households, playing an indispensable role in the smooth economic cycle, facilitate production and life, and promote social harmony. However, the courier industry employs mostly dispatched and outsourced workers, who do not sign formal labour contracts and have low social security coverage, and couriers face risks to their career development and health. Big data technology has enriched the labour sector's approach to protecting the labour rights of couriers, and has given couriers a convenient tool to defend their rights.

### **3. Introducing the four basic principles of social justice for interpretation**

In an increasingly public society, the basic way or basic condition for the construction of a "well-ordered society" is the construction of a basic social system, and a fair and just basic social and political system, in particular, is both the fundamental goal and the highest achievement of the construction of a basic social system. achievement. Therefore, the concept of social justice is introduced as a relevant interpretation of the 'urban shuttler', using the four basic principles of social justice as a basis for analysis.[1]

In previous papers, takeaway riders were referred to as "people trapped in the system". As technology in the takeaway sector becomes more advanced, the time required to calculate the delivery of takeaways has become more explicit on an intelligent basis. Through the relevant software, users can see the location of purchased items, delivery times, merchant and takeaway rider contact details. At the same time, the platform has strict requirements for delivery times for takeaway riders and the way time is calculated using technology cannot accurately calculate the impact caused by weather and traffic flow. This makes delivery riders the most rushed people in the city. Many orders may need to be delivered at the same time, and being late runs the risk of complaints and bad reviews.

"Every day from 10 o'clock in the morning to 10 o'clock at night, in fact, you still have orders in your hand at 10 o'clock, and when you have finished delivering the orders, it's more than 11 o'clock. In fact, there is no time to eat in a day, including the routine of life and rest, all is chaotic. When the weather is bad, it's raining or even snowing, he asks that you don't take time off work and you have to deliver. You have to go!"

Based on actual interviews with the group of takeaway riders, it is clear that there are always situations where working hours are forced to be extended and meal times cannot be determined due to the strict restrictions on working hours imposed by the system. As riders, they do not form an employment relationship with the Meituan platform, but more of an alliance.[2] Good and bad reviews are their most effective and direct reward and punishment system, as they are directly related to the commission of each order. Such a labour relationship may seem extremely flexible, but in essence it is a form of invisible bondage for takeaway riders.

The platform system is constantly shortening the delivery time of takeaway riders in order to meet the needs of consumers to enjoy a fast and efficient service experience, so the riders have to race against time to deliver meals to customers, speeding, going against the traffic and running red lights become their helplessness. They are forced to race against the clock at the expense of safety. They describe themselves as "walking a tightrope every day".

### **4. The relationship between the social contribution and the social rewards of being a "city shuttle"**

With regard to the perceptions of takeaway riders, the riders interviewed for this study felt that what they gained from being in the industry was mainly money and the flexibility of dealing with people, but otherwise their perceptions were low. And what is generally felt most is discrimination,

rejection and disrespect from consumers, neighbourhood security and property, and city residents, which is what hurts their self-esteem the most.[3]

"Some neighbourhoods have a sign saying 'No takeaway riders allowed', isn't that a modern version of 'No Chinese or dogs allowed?' Also, for example, this customer lives in a building right at the east gate and residents of the neighbourhood can walk in through the east gate, but riders just can't enter through that gate, they can't even walk in, so where can you explain this behaviour?"

Takeaway riders may also encounter accusations and even abuse from passers-by when they speed or drive against the clock because they are worried about their orders running out of time. In their daily contact with customers and city dwellers, they feel even more indifference and discrimination. This indifference and discrimination makes takeaway riders tired and also distances them from the unfamiliar city, making them unable to integrate into the city and feel the warmth of the city, feeling that they are always just passing through the city.[4]

While takeaway riders feel the indifference and disrespect from residents of strange cities, others experience a touch of warmth and genuine affection behind the skyscrapers. When an order runs out of time, the rider will usually communicate with the customer, and some customers will warmly tell the rider, "It's okay, take your time, I'm not in a hurry, just be safe. Such warm words and understanding from the rider would make him feel better for at least half a day. However, not many riders consider such a very reasonable customer, probably only about 5%.

Although the labour process, working hours and reward and punishment mechanisms of takeaway riders are controlled by the platform system and outsourcing companies, unlike workers in traditional labour relations who are stoic and helpless in the face of labour disputes, takeaway riders will adjust themselves in terms of values and emotions on the one hand, and use reasonable and legal channels to defend their legitimate rights and interests on the other.

When they encounter prodding, accusations or even abuse from customers during the delivery process, most takeaway riders choose to hold back and ignore them, not arguing with them because they know that arguing may lead to bad reviews and complaints from customers, bringing more serious economic losses. [5]Other riders with a good mindset will put themselves in the customer's shoes and keep their minds relatively smooth and relaxed by adhering to the safety first principle.

## 5. Summary and reflection

With the development of the platform economy, takeaway riders, as one of the new industry groups, have gained more employment opportunities. However, this study finds that takeaway riders, who are engaged in high-risk, high-intensity and high-speed work, lack a sense of security, happiness and access, and show emotions such as helplessness, anxiety and anger, and the overall social mindset of this group is not optimistic. With the expansion of the group of takeaway riders, paying attention to and improving the social mindset of this group, improving their working situation and living conditions, and making the takeaway industry more standardised The development of this group is an important goal of social governance and an important basis for ensuring the stable and harmonious development of society.

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