

Research on the Social Adaptation of Female Food Delivery Workers in Shenzhen

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ABSTRACT

In a male-dominated industry, how is the social adaptation of the emerging marginalized group of female food delivery workers? Through questionnaires, participatory observations and semi-structured interviews on female food delivery workers in Shenzhen, this study found that: in terms of occupational adaptation, they entered because of time freedom, income freedom and low threshold occupational characteristics, and expected to be able to use their own subjective initiative to maximize their income. But the flip side of this freedom also puts them in a sleepless, hurried work state, lacking deep connections with the outside world. At the same time, compared with male food delivery workers, the two major challenges of working environment exposed to the sun and rain and potential safety hazards are more prominent; In terms of economic adaptation, the income of food delivery workers belongs to commission income, and the income is mostly used for daily expenses; In terms of psychological adaptation, they are also trying to keep up with the pace of the city. Most of them are anxious and uneasy, and they do not have a strong sense of belonging to the city of Shenzhen. Finally, from the four aspects of APP, community, security, and two-way evaluation mechanism, suggestions are put forward to improve the social adaptation status of female food delivery workers.

Keywords: Female food delivery workers, Social adaptation, Urban belonging.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19, more and more female food delivery workers have gone out of their homes or factories to become a member of the army of food delivery workers. They keep cities and communities running smoothly as same as male workers. In this profession dominated by masculinity, physical exertion, and the need to be exposed to the sun and rain, how is the social adaptation process of female food delivery workers? Food delivery workers have been a field of research that has received much attention recently. Scholars' research on that mainly focuses on the characteristics of new business formats [1], labor relations [2], employment quality [3], algorithm control mechanism [4], etc. There are also studies on the social adaptation and social integration of delivery workers, conducted by scholars Zhao Li and Wang Mi [5] Huang Ai conducted ling [6], Wang Linjia [7]. But the subjects were mainly male delivery workers. Female workers are an emerging marginal group in this masculine-dominated industry. There are many relevant news media reports, and most of them are very subjective. Many aspects emphasize the hard work of the job, highlight its motherhood status, or praise the independence and self-improvement of women. In-depth academic research is very rare. Scholars Sun Ping, Zhao Yuchao, Zhang Qianyu [8] from the perspectives of the platform, gender and labor force, through field research

and in-depth interviews with female delivery workers, found that because platform labor itself has strong masculine characteristics, they need to dynamically adjust their identities, to establish the legitimacy of their own work and a sense of gain in the labor process. However, their specific social adaptation situation is still unknown. Focusing on this group, this study uses the methods of participatory observation, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, to study the social adaptation of female delivery workers from three aspects: economic adaptation, occupational adaptation, and psychological adaptation. And based on this, some relevant suggestions are put forward to improve their adaptive status.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTS AND METHODS

The research subjects selected for this study are female delivery workers in Shenzhen. Shenzhen is an important area for developing migrant workers and emerging service formats. According to data from Mei Tuan, Shenzhen ranks first in terms of the number of takeaway orders, the number of active users, food delivery, and other data. It can be seen that the research on female delivery workers in Shenzhen is representative.

Affected by COVID-19, this study adopted a combination of online and offline methods; And conducted offline participatory observation and online

semi-structured interviews from February 11, 2022, to March 20, 2022. By working as a delivery worker by myself, recommended by station heads, entering group chats, etc., I have gradually come into contact with more female delivery staff. Due to the small and scattered proportion of female delivery workers, it is difficult to collect a large sample. A total of 42 questionnaires and 19 interviews were collected from female delivery workers in this study. The duration of each interview varies from 45 to 60 minutes.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Occupational Adaptation

Occupational adaptation refers to an individual's entry into a certain occupation and the adaptation situation in this occupation. This study is described by three aspects: employment motivation, occupational engagement and occupational challenges.

3.1.1. Employment Motivation: freedom, low threshold

"Income freedom", "Work freedom and flexibility", "Low threshold and Low technical requirements" are the three major motivations for females to enter this occupation. In the O2O business model, food delivery workers are responsible for connecting the online and offline links. They have free income, and the more orders they complete, the more they earn. Most of the female delivery workers hold multiple "jobs". Some take on the role of motherhood, which makes it easier for them to take care of their families. Some have the main business, only take this work as a part-time job to increase their income. When the order price is too low or they do not want to run orders, some of them will also do some other daily work, such as a sorting job.

3.1.2. Occupational Engagement: sleepless, rushing

Behind the freedom, and low threshold, it also means that they need to compete by their time and physical. According to statistics, part-time female delivery workers work an average of 4.3 days a week, and most of them work 3-6 hours a day. They usually use off-duty or weekend time to run orders. Full-time female delivery workers work an average of 6.34 days a week, with most working 9-12 hours a day. They work in a similar way to male delivery workers, and 30% of female delivery workers will use the standards of male delivery workers to demand themselves. They often rush between high-rise buildings in the city regardless of work and holidays, regardless of the weather. When there is an order, they are at full power, and when there is no order, they always need to stare at the screen of the mobile phone, waiting for the system to dispatch the

order or grab the order by themselves, both physically and psychologically on standby at all times. In the face of physical discipline, some female workers let themselves take a break when they are uncomfortable in their menstrual period. And some of them do not rest, because "there is no money for rest". Freedom makes them have no choice but to devote themselves to work full-time.

3.1.3. Occupational Challenges

For female delivery workers, "working environment exposed to the sun and rain" and "potential safety hazards" are the two major challenges they face. In addition to the cold and rainy weather often mentioned by men, female delivery workers will also mention the challenge of "sun exposure". Some will apply a thick sunscreen before departure, and some will carry out remedies after sun exposure.

For them, who are often speeding and running traffic lights, safety hazards are also one of the major challenges in their work. High-frequency traffic safety accidents can result in loss of life or bodily injury, and property claims in light cases. In addition, female workers generally have concerns about the safety of delivering orders at late night. Because of their confidence in Shenzhen's social security, they often continue to run orders even at late night. But that will inevitably lead to remote destinations and dark environments. Once there are dangerous situations such as electric vehicle failure, traffic accident, attack, etc. during the meal delivery process, it is difficult to seek help in time. At a time when more and more women are joining the ranks of food delivery, the safety and security of their nighttime food delivery should not be ignored.

In terms of social recognition, fewer female workers feel that customers and businesses will deliberately embarrass them. On the contrary, they often encounter many heartwarming moments. Customers will be more tolerant and understanding because they are female. For example, customers will meet halfway downstairs when they hear that the other party is a female worker, helping them relieve the hard work of climbing stairs. In terms of physical exertion, they occasionally encounter some errands that are too heavy and incompetent.

3.2. Economic Adaptation

The economic adaptation of female delivery workers is the material basis of their social adaptation. This study describes the economic adaptation from the perspectives of income and consumption.

3.2.1. Income depending on delivery quantity

The income of food delivery workers is closely related to the number and price of orders, which are greatly affected by weather, holidays and social environment. The more orders they deliver, the more they earn. According to the questionnaire data, the average monthly order quantity of full-time female delivery staff is concentrated in 600-1500 orders. A small number of order kings can have more than 1500 orders. Most of them have an income of 6,000-8,000 yuan or more than 8,000 yuan. Belonging to the middle-income group, they can save some money if saving. A small number of delivery workers have an income in the range of 4000-6000 yuan. Most of them are novices, their employment time is still short, and their skills are not yet proficient. Under the "do more, get more" money-making model, they need to constantly improve their work efficiency and extend their working hours so that they can obtain higher economic income.

3.2.2. Consumption-based on daily expenses

In terms of consumption behavior, the income of female delivery staff is mainly used for "daily consumption". A small percentage of female delivery workers use their earnings to pay off debt or save. The interview shows that the female delivery staff work most of the time and they have no time and energy to consume others, especially in social and entertainment. That also further reduces the frequency of their interaction with the city, which affects their social adaptation to a certain extent.

3.3. Psychological Adaptation

Psychological adaptation mainly includes the psychological state of female workers living in the city of Shenzhen and their sense of belonging to the city of Shenzhen.

3.3.1. City Mental State: trying to keep up with the city

The daily psychological state of living in the city is an important part of their psychological adaptation. According to research data, 31% of female delivery workers often or always experience anxiety, stress, loss, helplessness and other emotions. And 57.1% of them experience those emotions sometimes. On the one hand, because of the high cost of living and the fast pace of life in Shenzhen, they are struggling to keep up with the city. On the other hand, because they are in the service industry, they are not only controlled by the Internet platform system, but also affected by the interaction of customers, merchants, station heads, and other parties.

3.3.2. Sense of Belonging in the city: migrant workers who cannot stay behind

The survey data shows that female delivery workers do not have a strong sense of belonging to the city of Shenzhen, and only a very small number (0.2%) choose to "completely integrate into Shenzhen, it is my home". In the interview, we found that they came to Shenzhen more because of the rapid development speed and more employment opportunities in Shenzhen, but in real life, they found that "the pace of life in Shenzhen is fast, the cost is high, and they can't save much money all year round. For them, Shenzhen is more of a place to make money but no a home belongs to them. "If I make enough money, I will go back to my hometown." "Shenzhen belongs to those who have skills and education."

4. SUGGESTIONS

4.1. Increase acceptance and recognition of female delivery workers.

For example, in terms of APP function design, since male delivery workers account for the vast majority of the occupation, the functional design of Mei Tuan APP is basically tailored for males and lacks consideration for the particularity of female delivery workers. We learned that because the APP does not have the identity of male or female delivery workers, customers often subconsciously determine that the other party is a male worker. Therefore, some embarrassing situations occur from time to time, such as being called a delivery boy in the chatbox and encountering male customers who are not dressed properly when delivering to the door. In addition, due to the special of physical strength and nighttime safety of female delivery workers, the platform can also mark and remind some too heavy errand orders or too remote night orders. Caring for female delivery workers in the functional design of the APP can help female workers adapt to this profession. It can also make female delivery workers feel that the industry accepts and recognizes them.

4.2. Increase safety measures to reduce the safety hazards of female delivery workers.

To ensure the personal safety of female delivery workers, we can start from three aspects. First of all, it is to increase the knowledge reserve of female workers about ensuring personal safety. The platform can strengthen the work safety education of delivery workers in bad weather and promote first aid training, improving their ability to respond to emergencies. Secondly, the platform should actively explore the upgrading of safety equipment to provide safety protection equipment for delivery staff on rainy days. Call on the delivery staff to wear adequate protective

gear in bad weather and extend their delivery time appropriately. Finally, for the safety of nighttime meal delivery, it is suggested that the platform can add security guarantees in the software that the worker takes orders, such as the function of the worker's one-key call for help. Once the worker clicks, the feedback will be automatically reported within 1 minute. The platform will alarm and can use the positioning information to accurately identify the location of the worker, reduce the hidden safety hazards of female workers delivering meals in the middle of the night, and provide them with the most-timely help.

4.3. Relying on community building to promote communication among female workers.

Restricted by the nature of the profession itself, the work scope of female delivery staff is relatively fixed, and the contact time with customers and merchants is short. Through participatory observation and interviews, it was founded that their communication range is mostly concentrated in their station work-group and one or two chat-groups. Currently, most of the existing groups are dominated by males. Female workers, as a professional minority group, often find it difficult to adapt or integrate. There are often only 2 or 3 female workers in a station or group, and they lack channels to meet new female companions or friends in other professions. So, the platform or related stations should focus on the social or leisure needs of female workers and create communities and activities exclusively for them, providing a platform for in-depth interaction.

4.4. Establish a more complete dialogue mechanism to ensure their right to speak.

In the process of work, the delivery staff is the bridge connecting the merchants and the customers. Once the merchants get stuck on the meal and the customers are unreasonable, the delivery staff will become the outlet for the customers to vent their dissatisfaction, and malicious negative reviews will also occur. Moreover, negative reviews are the main factor that affects their income. There is no reward for positive reviews. But once badly rated or complained, they will be punished by 50-150, accounting for most of their income. The sense of interactive experience with merchants and customers affects the economic and psychological adaptation of female workers. It is suggested that the platform can set up a "tripartite dialogue" mechanism to provide them with a more direct and effective communication channel. And establish a two-way evaluation mechanism to protect the right of delivery workers to speak. In this way, delivery personnel can be prevented from being deducted due to malicious negative reviews, thereby improving their social adaptability.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study found that, in terms of occupation adaptation, freedom and low barriers to entry are important motivations for female food delivery workers. Most of them are limited by their lack of academic qualifications or vocational skills, and their competitiveness and bargaining power in the job market are insufficient. Therefore, they often enter factories or service industries that do not require lots of skills when choosing occupations. They generally expect that they can exert their own initiatives and maximize their income under this rule of "free time and income". But the other side of this freedom also makes them fall into a sleepless, hurried work state. Long-term high-intensity work and short-term contact with others make them lack of deep contact with the outside world. This lack of social capital also affects their social adaptation to a certain extent. At the same time, compared with male delivery workers, the two major challenges of their sun-drenched working environment and safety hazards are more prominent. In terms of economic adaptation, their income depends on their order quantity, and the income is mostly used for daily expenses. In terms of psychological adaptation, they are also trying to keep up with the pace of the city. Most of them are anxious and uneasy, and they do not have a strong sense of belonging to the city of Shenzhen.

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