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“Urban Runners” and “Marginal Strivers”: The Dilemma of Identity Construction among Young Delivery Riders-Based on in-Depth Interviews with 30 Young Riders in Chongqing

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Abstract

With the rapid development of the food delivery industry, young riders have increasingly become visible in the social sphere, emerging as a dynamic force in societal development. Through in-depth interviews with 30 young delivery riders, this study reveals that these riders embody two roles: “urban runners” and “marginal strivers,” confronting multiple dilemmas in the construction of their identities. They are physical laborers racing through the city, strivers at the margins of urban life, tireless heroes of the working class, and committed practitioners navigating a challenging mission. By analyzing the underlying causes of these identity construction dilemmas, the paper proposes clear solutions aimed at promoting a positive transformation in the identity recognition of young riders, thereby creating favorable conditions for their growth, development, and social integration.

Keywords: Emerging youth group, Young delivery riders, Identity construction

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1. Introduction

The emergence of young delivery riders is closely linked to the rise and development of the “Internet Plus” economy. These riders are typically aged between 18 and 35, using motorcycles or electric bikes as their delivery vehicles for food services (Zhao and Wang, 2017). Their labor is characterized by signing contracts with specific food delivery companies, using electric bicycles or other vehicles to travel between restaurants, customers, and work locations, and receiving compensation based on the delivery of food products (Li et al., 2019). With the rapid development of the “Internet Plus” economy and the swift rise of food delivery platforms, the number of young riders has been on the rise. According to a survey by the Chinese Academy of Social

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Sciences, approximately 51% of food delivery riders nationwide are born in the 1990s. In a report released in 2020 by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the State Administration for Market Regulation, and the National Bureau of Statistics, “full-time delivery riders for food, fresh produce, pharmaceuticals, and purchasing services” were included in the emerging occupations category, highlighting the significance of young riders as a driving force for social and economic development. In April 2022, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, along with 17 other government departments, issued the “Opinions on the Pilot Program for the Construction of Youth Development-Oriented Cities”, emphasizing the need to fully utilize the initiative, enthusiasm, and creativity of young people, and to provide platforms that support their professional development. In light of this emerging youth group, a new challenge facing youth work in the era of the Party is how to inspire their enthusiasm and vitality to actively contribute to social construction, transforming them into a new force for social development.

2. Literature Review and Research Approach

Young delivery riders are both a product of the accelerating integration of the digital economy and urbanization and an inevitable outcome of China’s deepening market-oriented reforms. As an indispensable and dynamic labor group in modern cities, they serve as a vital support for urban life services and play a crucial role in driving the economic and social development of urban areas. Current academic research primarily focuses on food delivery riders in general, with limited attention given to the specific group of “young riders”. Thus, this paper conducts a literature review based on existing studies on food delivery riders and emerging youth groups. On the one hand, it reviews the literature on food delivery riders and emerging youth groups; on the other hand, it examines studies on food delivery riders and identity construction. The aim is to establish a research framework based on this existing body of knowledge.

In this context, this study seeks to fill the gap in the literature regarding the particular identity construction challenges faced by young delivery riders, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on the intersection of labor, identity, and the digital economy in contemporary urban China.

2.1. Labor Characteristics of Delivery Riders

The food delivery industry is characterized by both physical labor and emotional exhaustion. The work process of delivery riders is often marked by prolonged outdoor activities and frequent emotional fluctuations. On the one hand, young riders seemingly benefit from a more flexible work schedule (Wu and Sun, 2021). However, due to their increasing dependence on the platform and the constraints imposed by piece-rate wage systems, they are compelled to accept around-the-clock work arrangements, trapped in an endless “race against time”. This situation blurs the boundaries between work and life (Li and Jiang, 2020). According to the “2024 Employment Insights Report on Delivery Riders”, over 95% of food delivery riders work 6 to 7 days a week, with more than 80% working over 8 hours per day, and some even working up to 12 hours a day. Long working hours are a prominent feature of this profession (Wang and Wang, 2024). To alleviate survival pressures and pursue a higher standard of living, young riders are forced to extend their working hours to secure opportunities for greater income.

On the other hand, to maintain their income levels, young riders must invest time in building emotional networks and cultivating relationships to gain emotional recognition (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). Furthermore, due to the platform’s algorithms, which prioritize efficiency and profit, the subjective status and dignity of young riders as workers are often overlooked. Their labor is placed under constant surveillance, leading to an erosion of autonomy and agency. Research indicates that food delivery platforms not only break down the labor process to a calculable level, allowing for precise control and prediction of rider performance but also grant consumers the power to control and anticipate the delivery process, inadvertently adding significant pressure on the riders. This places them in a “race against speed”, where their performance is constantly monitored and evaluated (Chen and Sun, 2021).

Superficially, under the operation of food delivery platforms, riders break free from traditional workplace constraints, enjoying a sense of freedom, independence, and self-control. However, in practice, the “spatial and temporal freedom” granted to riders ultimately becomes a tool for the platform to maximize profit, subtly increasing control over riders and intensifying their work-related stress. This paradox underscores the tension

between the autonomy riders experience and the underlying mechanisms that exploit their labor for economic gain.

2.2. Labor Conditions of Delivery Riders

According to the theory of stress interaction, stress leads to a range of negative physiological and psychological responses, accompanied by feelings of tension and discomfort, which ultimately affect an individual's cognitive processing ability. As a form of "mobility-based" labor, the work of food delivery riders is fraught with uncertainty (Chen and Sun, 2021), which brings with it the risks of unstable work and fluctuating income (Chen, 2020). This creates constant exposure to pressures such as normative pressure, time pressure, alienation pressure, and physical and mental stress (Gao et al., 2023), placing riders in a state of perpetual anxiety, making it difficult for them to maintain a stable psychological state while working. The level of job recognition and satisfaction among food delivery riders directly affects their confidence in future social integration within urban society (Huang, 2023), which in turn influences their sense of identity.

As a group that exists on the fringes of formal organizational structures, food delivery riders are disconnected from union or youth league groups, often existing in a fragmented, atomized state (Jin and Zhao, 2020). They frequently live in shared housing with modest living conditions, marked by high turnover and low community stability (Shen, 2022). This lack of social cohesion further complicates their ability to form stable community environments. Consequently, many riders view themselves as passive, disciplined "urban guides", inefficiently operating "machines" of production, compromise-driven "digital laborers", or numb, voiceless "transactional workers" (Luan and Du, 2023). Such conditions of existence lead them to detach from the vision of formal organizations, avoid guidance from mainstream values and are forced to become alienated laborers, living on the margins of society.

2.3. Characteristics of Emerging Youth Groups

Emerging youth groups are a new social force that has arisen in response to the accelerated transformation of China's economy and society. They are active in new industry sectors, including the new economy, social organizations, new media, and freelancers. This group is characterized by features such as freedom of career choice, looser organizational structures, networking for survival, and diverse value orientations. They also exhibit a trend of marginalization in terms of social status (Qi, 2019).

As this group continues to grow and develop, various challenges have emerged, drawing widespread attention from society. In terms of work conditions, emerging youth groups generally face instability in employment, long working hours, and inadequate institutional protections. In terms of living conditions, their physical and mental health is often suboptimal, with many living in rental housing. Their physical health tends to be average, and they experience significant pressure regarding personal development (Feng, 2023). They particularly crave social recognition and the realization of self-worth. In terms of career development, they face development-related anxieties, a lack of vocational training opportunities, and unclear career advancement paths (Li et al., 2021).

Faced with future survival pressures and career development challenges, emerging youth groups seek attention and recognition from society, hoping for policy support and assistance. They yearn for opportunities for self-improvement and wish to express their interests through effective channels, such as participating in political decision-making to voice their demands (Huang, 2020).

2.4. Identity Construction

Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama first proposed the concept of "self-construction", arguing that individuals, when understanding themselves, place their self-perception within a certain reference framework and construct their identity and personality based on different reference points and frameworks. The key to self-awareness lies in the individual's ability to form a self-perception through social interaction (Li and Xia, 2021). The construction of self-identity is an inherent process for individuals embedded in social connections. This construction can be divided into three parts: individual self, relational self, and collective construction (Peng, 2018).

The process of self-recognition and identity formation is represented through the mechanism of identity construction, which is reflected in the various social roles that individuals enact in social interactions. Specifically, as individuals engage in ongoing social interactions, they develop a unique system of self-awareness, the core of which is the definition and recognition of one's identity. In these broad social interactions, individuals play multiple social roles, and the formation, maintenance, and transformation of these roles are indispensable elements of identity construction, profoundly influencing the shaping and expression of self-recognition and identity.

In general, identity refers to one's position in a specific social relationship and highlights the particular place that a group occupies within a given social structure. It marks the social attributes and division of labor of social members. Typically, individual identity construction and self-recognition are consistent, involving questions such as "Who am I?" and "How do I belong to this group?" Confirmation of identity is central to one's existence within society and forms the basis for emotional belonging and the affirmation of value. Ultimately, the construction of individual identity is inseparable from the individual's self-awareness (Zhao, 2013).

In the labor process of young delivery riders, the need to establish connections with other members of society leads them to construct various identity images and play different social roles. This results in the opposition between "self" and "other", which becomes the theoretical foundation for this study.

This research focuses on a group of 30 young delivery riders aged between 18 and 35 in the Chongqing urban area. Through face-to-face in-depth interviews, field observations, and online interviews, the study comprehensively examines the respondents' working conditions, work-related stress, income, and mental states. From these insights, four dimensions of self-identity awareness among young riders are identified, revealing the identity construction dilemmas faced by young riders in the food delivery profession. Based on these findings, feasible solutions are proposed to help address these challenges and contribute to the development of effective youth work in the new era under the guidance of the Party.

3. "Alternative" Group: The Dilemma of Identity Construction among Young Delivery Riders

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, individuals, in the course of their growth and development, aim to rise from basic physiological needs to higher levels of self-actualization. A fulfilling, enriched life requires both external conditions that guarantee fundamental needs and an internal drive for higher-level aspirations. Therefore, an analysis of young delivery riders' self-awareness must focus not only on their "external conditions"—how the social environment meets their basic needs in terms of physiology (such as reasonable income and rest time), safety (such as job security), and belonging and love (such as a sense of professional belonging and social respect)—but also delve into their "internal motivations" and "self-actualization". This includes exploring how individuals, through role-playing, seek higher levels of fulfillment via career achievements, social contributions, and other aspects, ultimately building and reinforcing their sense of self-worth and identity.

Only when the psychological needs that arise from an individual's interactions with others and their environment are met can they generate a sense of happiness and comfort, which in turn gives rise to other forms of awareness stemming from identity consciousness (Bao et al., 2019). Recognition and acknowledgment of one's identity not only concern an individual's accurate self-positioning but also involve acceptance and internalization of the values, behavioral norms, and cultural traditions of the group to which they belong. This forms a critical foundation for the identity construction of young delivery riders.

Through interviews, we examined the identity construction of young delivery riders from four dimensions: a sense of belonging, a sense of achievement, a sense of value, and a sense of mission. These findings reveal that young riders consistently exist on the margins of society, constituting an "alternative" group that is distinct from society's general expectations of youth.

3.1. Lack of Sense of Achievement: The Laborer Enslaved by Time

3.1.1. Frequent Laborious Commuting Work

The "sense of achievement" refers to an individual's subjective psychological state regarding their satisfaction

with what they have gained (Cao and Li, 2017). It involves evaluating whether one feels fulfilled and rewarded for their efforts and the outcomes they achieve (He and Jia, 2024). Youth socialization is a critical process in which young individuals enter society, integrate into it, and contribute to it. It is a key phase in the development of youth life. For young delivery riders, the pressures of survival—such as those stemming from marriage, housing, and future career challenges—drive them to contemplate how to cope with the challenges of entering society.

One rider, for instance, shared:

“I come from a rural area. My parents have worked hard to send me to school. Now that I’ve graduated, I have to rely on myself. Also, during university, I had a girlfriend, and now after graduation, there’s the pressure of getting married. Housing prices are so high that the down payment seems impossible to reach.” (Respondent 1, 26 years old).

The enormous survival pressure forces young riders to extend their working hours to address the financial challenges they face as they enter society. This pressure is compounded by the order-pushing mechanism of the platform, driven by its profit-maximizing logic, which becomes another significant reason for the constant running around that riders must do. One rider explained:

“There are so many orders pushed by the platform. To complete them on time, I have to run between different stores, confirming whether the goods are ready. If I waste any time, I have to rush during the delivery itself to make up for it.” (Respondent 3, 33 years old).

For some riders who are exclusively dedicated to delivery, the platform automatically matches orders based on the distance between the rider, the customer, and the store, as well as the rider’s current delivery status, to ensure efficiency. These riders face frequent and large volumes of orders that they cannot control manually. One rider described the pressure:

“If I reject orders too many times or take too long to accept them, the system will reduce the number of orders it sends to me for a while, and my income will be affected.” (Respondent 7, 31 years old).

Riders are thus forced to follow the platform’s rules and schedules, striving to complete deliveries as efficiently as possible within the time frame set by the system. Their goal is to maximize the number of orders they complete to stabilize their income, reduce the financial pressures they face, and enhance their ability to withstand future risks.

3.1.2. Unexpected Emotional Exhaustion

The emotional feedback that young delivery riders receive from both customers and merchants plays a significant role in shaping their sense of achievement and job satisfaction. In the reality of their work environment, delivery riders act as a bridge between customers and merchants, bearing the emotional pressures from both sides and shouldering the additional burden of “emotional labor”. However, while they are constantly expending emotional energy, the emotional care they receive in return is relatively minimal. Customers primarily focus on the timeliness and accuracy of deliveries, while merchants are more concerned with order volume and economic profitability. In this context, there is a noticeable imbalance between the emotional investment made by the riders and the emotional rewards they receive. This imbalance often leads to a reduction in the riders’ sense of professional identity and a lack of fulfillment from their work.

One rider shared:

“During peak hours, the platform assigns more orders, and the merchants are slow to prepare the food. Time is tight, and I can only pressure the merchant. The merchant, however, often responds dismissively and impatiently.” (Respondent 13, 34 years old).

Another rider explained:

“At noon and in the evening, customers’ tolerance is at its lowest. Even if you deliver on time, you’ll still get complaints from them. I understand, but who understands us?” (Respondent 9, 25 years old).

Moreover, during the delivery process, young riders need to interact with various people, such as shop owners, building security staff, and others, navigating obstacles like delays in food preparation or building access restrictions to complete their deliveries efficiently. One rider said:

“There’s no way around it, we’re forced into this. Everyone is trying to build good relationships with shop owners. If you don’t, your orders will be pushed to the back, and your punctuality rate will be affected.” (Respondent 19, 29 years old).

Since many young riders are new to the workforce, they lack experience in managing interpersonal interactions and social relationships. As a result, they are required to invest additional time and energy to learn and practice effective communication and interpersonal strategies to establish a solid network and handle the complex, ever-changing environment of deliveries. In this process, young riders must constantly weigh the emotional investment against the financial rewards, which places higher demands on their personal skills and psychological resilience, ultimately increasing their emotional cost.

3.2. Lack of Sense of Belonging: Youth Floating in the City

3.2.1. Temporary Transitional Jobs

A sense of belonging is the psychological state in which an individual identifies themselves as part of a specific regional or social group. This feeling involves not only the affirmation of one’s identity but also the emotional aspects of investment, affection, and attachment. It encompasses the dual meanings of belonging to a group and enjoying that belonging (Guo and Ma, 2024). In the food delivery industry, young riders have a specific career development path, with opportunities for internal promotions, potentially advancing to positions like site managers or key players in company operations. However, some young riders who have spent years studying in school, often harbor high career expectations and ambitions. These riders are generally reluctant to see themselves as “digital laborers” performing manual labor, and when faced with career development choices, they might display high career aspirations and avoid physical labor jobs.

Most young riders choose to enter the delivery industry not out of a long-term career plan or personal interest, but due to the urgency of financial needs when they were unable to secure their ideal job during the job-seeking process after graduation. Delivery work becomes a “stopgap measure”—a temporary solution driven by economic necessity rather than a well-considered career choice. For these young riders, while they may “settle” into the delivery industry, they often remain hopeful about other job opportunities and continue to pursue positions that align with their original career goals. If they receive a more attractive offer with better pay, they will not hesitate to abandon their rider role and switch to a new industry.

Therefore, from this perspective, young riders often lack the desire and motivation to invest in and develop their role as a long-term career. As a result, it is difficult for them to follow a professional or specialized development path. One rider explained:

“I can’t do this for my whole life. Delivering food is just temporary for me; I still want to find a more respectable job.” (Respondent 3, 27 years old).

The formation of a sense of belonging for young riders is influenced not only by their internal drive to pursue a “respectable” career but also by external pressures such as societal environment, family expectations, peer comparisons, and media portrayals. These external pressures shape the public’s perception of what constitutes a “successful” or “respectable” career, indirectly influencing how young riders perceive their sense of belonging. One rider expressed:

“All my classmates either became civil servants, joined the military, or made money through live streaming. I want a job that allows me to achieve financial freedom too. I haven’t told my family I’m delivering food. They have high expectations for me, so I’m keeping it a secret for now. I’ll tell them when I find a formal job.” (Respondent 22, 25 years old).

The desire to shed the “old clothes” of delivery work, the high expectations from family and friends, and comparisons with peers become the driving forces behind these young riders’ yearning for a “new identity”.

3.2.2. Absence of Growth Support

Young riders are in a unique stage of personal development, characterized by an underdeveloped belief system, relative lack of social experience, and susceptibility to emotional fluctuations. Therefore, during their career and personal growth processes, young riders are in desperate need of care, guidance, and support from organizations to stabilize their emotions, enrich their social experience, and gradually build a mature and

reasonable value system. However, interview results show that formal organizations, such as labor unions and youth leagues, have a limited presence in the lives and work of young riders, making it difficult to convey organizational support and care to them. One interviewee said:

"When I was in school, I knew I could seek help from the counselor or different departments. But ever since I left school, it's been hard to find any kind of organization." (Respondent 18, 18 years old).

As time goes by, the continuous pressure and constraints gradually erode and diminish the original drive and determination of young riders. Furthermore, the managers of the delivery stations they work for often prioritize profit and treat order completion rates as the primary measure of rider performance. This unintentionally creates a utilitarian and informal "labor-management relationship" that is driven by efficiency and output. During the interviews, it was clear that delivery station managers primarily function as coordinators of various interests, rather than as "guardians" of the riders' professional growth, thus diminishing the riders' motivation and sense of belonging, and negatively impacting their long-term career development. One interviewee recalled:

"The station manager is responsible for managing the whole site. If you have a good relationship with them, you might get more orders, and if you run into a delay, they might help you solve it. But honestly, I think the station manager is just another grassroots manager. They have to deal with a lot of stress, especially if the station's data is bad because it affects their income. So, for them, the best thing is if we don't 'cause trouble'." (Respondent 14, 24 years old).

Moreover, young riders generally lack effective and in-depth communication channels with peers, leading to a sense of social isolation and separation. Although there is some overlap between their social and workspaces, young riders struggle to integrate deeply into these environments and fail to enjoy the sense of belonging that comes from rich social interactions. As a result, they find it difficult to form strong social bonds in their hearts. Another interviewee said:

"The turnover rate in the delivery industry is quite high. Sometimes, just after you make a new friend, they might leave the job next month. There's also a gap in age between me and other riders, so it's hard for me to join in their conversations. Sometimes, it can be lonely." (Respondent 16, 33 years old).

This lack of stable social connections and the absence of organized growth support exacerbate the riders' sense of professional instability and isolation, making it even more challenging for them to build a lasting sense of belonging within their workplace or social networks.

3.3. Ambiguous Sense of Value: The Contradictory Hero in the Mountain City

3.3.1. The Struggling, Heroic Commoner

The sense of value refers to an individual's positive emotional experience through self-evaluation and judgment of their worth in social life. Its core is the self-assessment of one's value and how one feels about themselves based on that assessment (Huang et al., 2003). For young riders, the seemingly insignificant acts of helping others during delivery become a bridge for them to integrate into society and establish connections with various social sectors. These actions are important ways for them to assume social responsibility and demonstrate their social value, thus confirming their role as members of society.

Through their collective efforts, young riders have created a distinct and recognizable image for their profession, showcasing their professional spirit and helping society better understand and appreciate this group.

"When I encounter tourists asking for good places to eat, I feel really happy. At least they trust me, thinking that I know the local scene. I even helped a pregnant woman down to the ambulance once. When people said thank you, I felt proud." (Respondent 27, 24 years old).

From the interviews, it is clear that young riders possess the natural qualities of youth, such as a sense of justice, responsibility, and integrity. They are often quick to step up in times of crisis, offering their help and demonstrating a willingness to contribute to society. This "heroic" spirit is ingrained in their character, and they take pride in their ability to help others in critical situations.

“How could I not know? I was part of the rescue! I helped transport emergency supplies. As a Chongqing person, if I have the ability, I must help—this is what it means to be straightforward like us Chongqing people!” (Respondent 17, 26 years old).

Heroes often emerge from the most ordinary backgrounds. The various outstanding qualities possessed by youth are evident in the profiles of young riders. Despite the relentless pace of their daily lives, young riders do not lose the distinctive, vibrant qualities that come with youth. However, these qualities often conflict with the nature of their work, which can erode their sense of personal value and fulfillment over time, as the exhausting demands of the job clash with their aspirations for recognition, growth, and social respect.

3.3.2. *The Ordinary Citizen Who Struggles in Vain*

Although young delivery riders can find a sense of social responsibility through acts of courage or selflessness, they also cannot escape the anxiety of feeling like they are stuck in a cycle of mediocrity. On one hand, the discrepancy between their identity as a “rider” and societal expectations leads to a diminished sense of self-worth. They often view themselves as occupying a lowly position in society.

“What’s there to be proud of? I’m just a delivery rider. Honestly, what’s the difference between me and the cart pullers from back in the day?” (Respondent 30, 27 years old).

This sense of inferiority is exacerbated by their inability to connect their work as a delivery rider with any higher social value. They struggle to reconcile their everyday labor with the societal respect afforded to workers in other professions, such as sanitation workers or public servants.

“Being a delivery rider is nothing compared to sanitation workers. At least they’re making the city cleaner. Us? We’re just running orders for our survival. Contribution? Don’t joke with me. All I do is run orders. What contribution do I make? Am I feeding the world?” (Respondent 22, 25 years old).

The monotony of the work, the emotional exhaustion, and the constant survival pressures lead many riders into a state of internal conflict. Their thoughts are clouded by contradictions: on one hand, they yearn for a better life, but on the other, they are trapped by the daily struggles of their existence. Their internal battles are often reflected in the tensions between their dreams and the harsh realities they face.

This internal contradiction causes them to oscillate between periods of exhaustion and renewal. They sometimes feel physically and mentally drained by the daily grind, yet at other times, a flicker of hope or ambition reignites their spirit, pushing them to strive for something better despite the overwhelming difficulties. They are caught in a struggle—struggling against the monotony of life, struggling against the societal devaluation of their labor, and struggling to find meaning in the face of seemingly endless challenges.

These young riders embody a paradox: they are often seen as ordinary workers performing monotonous tasks, yet within them resides a sense of aspiration, a drive for something more. Their psychological state is shaped by the tension between their self-perceived low status and their deep-seated desire for personal growth and recognition, leaving them in a constant state of inner turmoil and existential questioning.

3.4. *Faint Sense of Mission: Struggling Missionaries in the City*

A sense of mission is a transcendent call that originates from within, compelling individuals to engage in life roles in ways that offer purpose (Dik and Duffy, 2009), meaning, and alignment with values and goals that benefit others. It emphasizes not only the realization of personal value but also contributing to the greater good of society (Xie et al., 2016). For young delivery riders, their professional identity and life trajectory both reflect their shared struggles as part of the larger youth demographic but also reveal unique challenges specific to their roles in the gig economy.

One of the most striking features of this group is that, at the beginning of their careers, many young riders perceive themselves as “failures” or “rejects” of traditional career paths. Entering the delivery business is often a result of necessity rather than a conscious career choice. This perception stems from a skewed self-image, where many young riders regard themselves as having been marginalized by society due to their perceived lack of competitive skills, leading them to take up low-skilled, low-status jobs like delivery riding. This self-imposed psychological limitation, rooted in feelings of inadequacy, exacerbates their identity anxiety and contributes to a diminished sense of agency in contributing to society.

"I'm still struggling through life, trying to find my way. As for the so-called 'youth responsibility', I want to, but I just can't do much about it." (Respondent 13, 34 years old).

Despite these feelings of resignation, a deeper analysis of their inner world reveals an unexpected undercurrent of concern for the nation's future and its role in national development. Many young riders, although burdened with the pressures of survival and labor, carry a genuine, though sometimes unspoken, sense of duty toward their country and a desire to contribute to the revival of the nation. This sense of mission is often evident in their emotional responses to national events or media portrayals of young people sacrificing for the country's development.

"Every year during the National Day parade, I watch it and tear up. It's hard to believe how much the country has changed; it's touching." "I haven't watched all of The Awakening Age, but I've seen clips. When I see young people from that era sacrificing for the country's cause, and I compare it to myself, still delivering food, it's hard not to feel conflicted." (Respondent 25, 31 years old).

Though their survival pressures compel them to keep moving, deep inside they harbor the ambition to serve society and contribute to national development. They hold on to these ideals, trusting that, when society calls, they will answer. Their perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity reflect a latent belief in their responsibility to the greater good, even if their current role seems far removed from this lofty mission.

4. Analysis of the Causes Behind the Identity Construction Dilemma of Young Delivery Riders

Through an in-depth analysis of young delivery riders' self-awareness, it is found that they are caught in a struggle to construct their identities due to the contradictions between their pursuit of an ideal life and the realization of their values. In this process, they simultaneously play four roles: the physically laborious worker rushing between the cities, the marginalized struggler on the outskirts of urban life, the tireless everyday hero, and the struggling practitioner of a mission. In the face of this dilemma, this article will analyze the causes and influences of the identity construction dilemma of young riders from three dimensions: their survival and development, the labor process, and organizational coverage.

4.1. "Excessive Survival Pressure" and Insufficient Future Expectations

Survival pressure mainly refers to the inability of the salary level and development prospects of the profession itself to meet the living needs of young delivery riders and their future development plans. According to interviews, young riders are generally in a state of long working hours, high work pressure, and low compensation.

The root cause of this is twofold. On the one hand, young riders seek economic independence to meet their desired standard of living. They are in a critical period of socialization and must rely on economic independence to establish themselves in society. This leads them to increase their work intensity to earn a higher income. Compared to other professions, income in the delivery industry is unstable and directly tied to the number of orders completed each day. Due to factors such as family responsibilities and the pursuit of a better life, young riders often extend their working hours in an attempt to secure a cushion against future uncertainties.

On the other hand, young riders face a dilemma. Delivery stations are subject to performance assessments, and platforms, driven by the pursuit of maximum profit, have increased their scrutiny of riders' work. To maintain their income level, young riders must adapt to high-intensity work conditions. At the same time, due to their lack of competitiveness in the job market, they struggle to find better job opportunities in the short term, leaving them with no choice but to stay in their "temporary" position as riders.

The survival pressure faced by young riders results in a high-intensity, low-compensation work environment, which is the inevitable consequence of fierce social competition and limited personal development opportunities. Caught between the urgent demands of survival and the longing for a better future, young riders accumulate feelings of fatigue and frustration in the monotonous, repetitive work process. This leads to a strong sense of rejection of their "rider" identity, manifesting in negative attitudes towards work. Many attempt to escape the identity by self-learning new skills or searching for alternative job opportunities, but often find themselves stuck due to a lack of sufficient resources and support.

4.2. Frequent “Emotional Exhaustion” and Insufficient Social Integration

Hochschild’s concept of emotional labor refers to the “performance” individuals engage in at work to cater to others, emphasizing emotional concealment and emotional management. The goal is to influence others’ emotional experiences through one’s emotional expressions (Holly, 2020). Based on interactivity and experience, emotional labor is categorized into four types: emotional labor that stimulates positive emotions in oneself, emotional labor that calms negative emotions in oneself, emotional labor that stimulates positive emotions in customers, and emotional labor that calms negative emotions in customers (Zhang, 2021).

Young delivery riders face the dual challenge of stabilizing their income and managing survival pressure. Driven by the pursuit of on-time delivery rates, they find themselves navigating between multiple social groups, including merchants, customers, security guards, and station managers, thus being forced to invest “emotional capital” into emotional labor.

First, they are immersed in high-intensity work, requiring them to maintain a positive emotional state while managing relationships with various parties. On one hand, they need to accurately identify customers’ emotional states during interactions and provide high-quality service. On the other hand, they must overcome personal fatigue and negative emotions, proactively maintaining good emotional relations with merchants, security guards, and others. By turning external work relationships into internal friendships, they seek conveniences for delivery, ensuring that their orders are completed on time, especially during peak hours.

Second, beyond the labor itself, they are required to invest additional emotional effort to maintain good relationships with their delivery station managers. The station manager is a core figure in the business, responsible for overseeing the station’s operations, optimizing delivery processes, and assessing riders’ performance. Since these evaluations directly affect the riders’ income, station managers wield considerable power over the riders’ professional fate. To avoid penalties for delays caused by traffic jams, slow restaurant service, or bad weather, riders may go out of their way to “appease” the station manager, building a good relationship with them, rather than face income reductions from complaints or poor performance evaluations.

In this context, young riders invest emotional effort to maintain relationships with various parties but often feel marginalized. From the customer’s perspective, they are typically labeled as “delivery workers” and viewed as the lowest tier in the service chain. From the merchant and station manager’s perspective, they are more like a part of the order process rather than individuals with emotional and professional development needs. This instrumental role perception further erodes the riders’ internal recognition of the value of their work. Moreover, security guards’ vigilant attitude toward them, viewing them as “outsiders”, intensifies their sense of isolation. This continuous surveillance and differential treatment exacerbate the riders’ feelings of exclusion, making it difficult for them to integrate and develop a sense of social belonging.

As young riders constantly switch between roles in the eyes of customers, merchants, and security guards, this frequent role adjustment not only fails to promote their positive recognition of their rider identity but strengthens their sense of marginalization. This, in turn, deeply affects their acceptance of their professional identity.

4.3. Insufficient Coverage and Significant Organizational Disembedding

Organizational disembedding refers to the state where delivery riders are unable to integrate into professional organizations and lack connections with unions, youth leagues, or other formal and informal groups. This results in them remaining in an isolated, disorganized state. High levels of organizational disembedding are a significant factor contributing to the lack of a sense of belonging and identification among young riders. It also causes them to have a blurred understanding of their career and responsibilities, as well as the relationship between the individual, society, youth, and the nation. This leads to the erosion of their sense of social responsibility and mission, ultimately causing ideological deviation.

Young delivery riders possess characteristics common to both the delivery rider group and the broader youth group. Due to relatively limited social experience, they tend to be intellectually active but lack stability, seek individuality yet are prone to blind conformity, and have values that are easily influenced by external factors. These traits further affect their recognition of their rider identity.

On one hand, young riders' work is often carried out in isolation, causing them to be disconnected from the core of society and thus have low levels of organizational participation. In traditional professional fields, civil servants, employees in public institutions, and corporate workers enjoy stable work environments, strong group connections, and abundant organizational care, which maximizes the effectiveness of organizational activities. However, the delivery industry, as a product of the rapid development of "Internet Plus" technologies, faces shortcomings in terms of management systems, organizational construction, and support mechanisms. As a result, young riders are often subject to the management system of individual delivery stations, where their personal development lacks effective support. Additionally, the high mobility of work and the individual nature of the work process mean that relationships with colleagues are relatively sparse, further deepening the riders' sense of marginalization.

On the other hand, the attention of mass organizations to the group of young riders is insufficient, and the influence of party and league organizations remains weak. Although young riders have garnered the attention of various levels of government and the Communist Youth League, with the recognition that this group represents a "new social class" and its development is increasingly significant to China's social structure changes, in practice, there are still issues such as insufficient attention to the riders' interests, inadequate ideological guidance, and incomplete coverage of mass organizations. This leads to a lack of security for young riders in their work, making them more vulnerable to ideological shocks, as well as unclear future development paths.

5. Conclusion

This paper, based on a micro-level analysis of the career process of young delivery riders, uses in-depth interviews to comprehensively explore their self-identity. It reveals that young riders exhibit dual identities as "urban runners" and "marginalized strivers" in their real-life situations. Immersed in the vast urban logistics network, young riders are driven by both internal and external pressures of survival and labor. They navigate busy and congested streets, interacting with various social groups, to meet stringent delivery times and manage a high volume of orders.

In this process, the physical and mental limits of young riders are continuously tested. Their rest time is fragmented by incoming orders, and they rely on taking continuous orders and racing against time to ensure income stability, responding to their aspirations for a better future. Faced with a surge in orders, physical exhaustion, and a lack of social recognition, young riders' sense of identity gradually fades. Their labor motivation becomes more short-sighted, and their sense of mission becomes increasingly blurred. The working environment is full of uncertainty and challenges. Fatigue, frustration, and other negative emotions accumulate quietly, eroding their enthusiasm for work and social responsibility. The delivery service has transformed into a monotonous "race against time" and "battle for survival", reflecting the hard labor of the "marginalized striver."

Although young delivery riders humorously refer to themselves as "urban runners", they have never given up on their aspirations for a better future or abandoned their identity as builders of the city. They demonstrate resilience as workers, viewing themselves as "strivers" weaving through the urban landscape. They embrace helping others and stepping up in times of need as part of their professional ethos. In the battle with high-intensity physical labor and emotional exhaustion, they carve out a place for themselves and gain a certain degree of "autonomy," injecting new meaning into their identity as young delivery riders.

Driven by the pursuit of social recognition and a sense of social responsibility, these riders affirm their societal value and transform "digital laborers" under the platform algorithms into active contributors to social development. This shift promotes the enhancement of their labor value. Therefore, to overcome the development challenges faced by young delivery riders, collaborative efforts from multiple parties are needed to better guide them toward the identity of social strivers. In light of this, several recommendations are offered as follows:

First, optimize the employment service mechanism and enhance the professional competitiveness of young delivery riders.

- a. Actively develop personalized career guidance services: Based on individual characteristics and career development needs, provide career development guidance and consultation services to help young riders clarify their career direction and enhance their overall capabilities.

- b. Establish a career development training system for young riders: In response to the current situation and future development trends of the food delivery industry, implement targeted vocational skills training and personal development courses to improve young riders' professional qualities and enhance their future development potential.
- c. Improve the career development system for young riders: Considering young riders' expectations for future career development prospects, establish clear career advancement channels for them, and provide the necessary training and support to enhance their management skills and capabilities. At the same time, opens up employment channels in related industries such as logistics, warehousing, and e-commerce. Encourage and support young riders to expand into these fields by providing cross-industry training and internship opportunities, helping them acquire more skills and improve their overall capabilities.

Second, expand social service projects and focus on the rights and interests of young delivery riders.

- a. Provide comprehensive social security support: Governments, enterprises, and social organizations should work together to improve the social security system for new types of workers, including work injury insurance, health insurance, etc., ensuring that riders' basic safety and health at work are protected. At the same time, establish a rider assistance fund to provide emergency aid to riders who encounter accidents or life difficulties, alleviating their concerns.
- b. Optimize platform services to protect riders' rights: Use intelligent scheduling systems to reasonably allocate orders, reduce riders' workload, and ensure their rest time. Add a rider rights protection section in the app to provide legal advice, complaint reporting, and other services, responding promptly to riders' needs and protecting their legitimate rights. Explore the establishment of rider health records, offer regular physical check-ups, health lectures, and other welfare services to pay attention to riders' physical and mental well-being.
- c. Build rider-friendly urban communities: Draw on successful experiences such as Beijing's "Rider's Home" and Shanghai's "Little Brother Post" to set up more rider service stations in urban communities. These stations would provide rest areas, charging stations, drinking water, and other convenient facilities, creating a warm and comfortable resting environment. Additionally, measures such as adding bike lanes and optimizing traffic lights should be taken to improve riders' working conditions and reduce safety risks. Furthermore, strengthens societal recognition and respect for the rider profession by organizing events like rider cultural festivals and awards for outstanding riders, enhancing riders' sense of professional honor, and promoting the comprehensive development and social integration of the young rider group.

Third, promote organizational coverage and care to enhance the sense of urban belonging for young delivery riders.

The food delivery industry is a product of the rapid development of the Internet, and its scale and expansion speed have exceeded the process of perfecting national industry systems. This has led to a lack of institutional norms and safeguards for the professional development of the industry. Against this backdrop, young riders are often on the margins of society, lacking broad social recognition and attention, and their growth and development rights are not adequately protected. Therefore, it is necessary to expand the effective coverage of organizations, strengthen the bond with young riders, and adhere to the principle of "adapting to the situation", enhancing the effectiveness of ideological guidance by listening to issues and solving practical problems.

- a. Improve the care system for young riders and fully leverage the bridging role of various organizations. To improve the care system for young riders, efforts should be made to explore the diverse development of youth social organizations. By using the approaches of "self-building, joint building, dependent building, and integrated building," various organizations should be spontaneously established among young riders, registered and managed by the community or street organizations where they are located, and provided with corresponding support and services for their future development.
- b. Rely on the community and street party and youth league organizational systems to strengthen communication and contact with the young rider group. Given that young riders work in diverse and unstable locations, efforts to guide their ideology should be focused on their living environments. The community street party and youth league organizations should become the forefront of ideological education

for riders. These organizations need to conduct in-depth research on the work and living conditions, as well as the ideological trends of young riders. They should take full advantage of new media platforms to establish a regular communication mechanism and integrate functions such as theoretical propaganda, legal education, cultural exchange, and rights protection into a new portal. Based on this, communities with the necessary conditions can start to establish identity files for the young rider group, continuously monitoring their growth and development. Surveys on the ideological state of young riders should be incorporated into the regular agenda of community street parties and youth league organizations, with work focused on guiding their ideological trends, behavior patterns, social influence paths, and political participation.

- c. Promote the establishment of social networks among young riders and build platforms for communication and friendship. Fully leverage the positive role of peer support and organize various activities to encourage riders to step out of their daily work circles and expand their social networks. This will allow them to connect with more young riders and engage in positive communication, breaking the isolation between work and life. This will provide young riders with more psychological support and help alleviate the mental strain they often experience.

Fourth, increase the selection and promotion of exemplary young riders to enhance their sense of professional identity. Role models are visible philosophies. It is important to focus on selecting role models who are close to young riders, showcasing their talents, highlighting their professional value, and inspiring young riders' sense of professional identity.

- a. Create a "Rider Star" honor selection system. The selection can be based on multiple criteria such as the rider's work performance, service attitude, and social contributions. Regularly organize "Rider Star" selection events and widely promote their stories through social media and news platforms to establish industry benchmarks and enhance riders' sense of professional honor.
- b. Establish a "Rider Role Model" sharing and exchange mechanism. Organize regular exchange meetings, inviting outstanding riders to share their work experiences and life insights. This will create a platform for learning and communication among riders, promote mutual motivation and growth, and improve the overall sense of professional identity within the rider community.
- c. Implement "Rider Culture" promotion projects. Use various forms such as documentaries, microfilms, and short videos to showcase the daily work, struggles, and social contributions of young riders, enhancing society's positive perception of the rider profession. Additionally, organize events such as Rider Culture Festivals and skills competitions to enrich the spiritual and cultural life of riders, further strengthening young riders' pride in their profession and society's recognition of their role.

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