

Research Article

Online Food Delivery Service, Working Conditions, and Associated Challenges: A Study on the Delivery Boys in Bhubaneswar City

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ABSTRACT

The current scenario of the post-pandemic period, characterized by digital prominence, has influenced socioeconomic life in many ways throughout the world. Online business platforms, especially in food delivery, have achieved huge success due to people's increasing access to the internet and mobile phones. It has provided employment opportunities for individuals working as "delivery boys" during the critical phase of COVID-19. This paper aims to focus on the impact of online food delivery services and explore the working conditions and related challenges faced by delivery boys, particularly in the city of Bhubaneswar. The significance of this study is to understand and acknowledge the various challenges related to the working conditions of people involved in the expanding online food delivery business and to make necessary modifications to existing policies, if necessary, to promote a better work culture and secure earnings. The working conditions of delivery boys are found to be surrounded by multiple challenges, especially in terms of personal safety and social security. Most delivery boys are young, less educated, and unaware of the social security provisions, and they are frequently exposed to the risk of accidents and other challenges. Unfortunately, existing government policies to protect the interests of those engaged in such delivery jobs, particularly in terms of access to social security benefits, are not effectively implemented.

Keywords: Online food delivery service, Food delivery boys, Working conditions, Social security

INTRODUCTION

The natural craving for food is not only to meet the biological needs of humans but also to fulfill various social, cultural, and economic purposes. Traditionally, the production and consumption of food were carried out sustainably within the values of the community and natural environment. However, in contemporary life, there has been a drastic change in the approach to food and food management. New methods and techniques have been adopted to maximize economic gain, often at the expense of cultural and ethical standards. Modernization has led to a large portion of the world's population being relegated to the role of consumers rather than producers. The advent of globalization has further widened this gap by focusing on the commercialization of food in the ever-expanding global market. Technology has played an increasingly prominent role in the food industry during this era. With the support of technological innovation and digital transformation, the food industry has experienced significant growth in recent years. One notable development in this era is the popularity of smartphone use, particularly among young people, which has been a crucial factor in the rapid growth of the online food industry. Software development companies have also undertaken numerous projects to provide high-tech solutions for the growing food business, including support for payment and delivery. These changes have promoted online business in various sectors, including health, hotels, and real estate (Roh and Park, 2019). According to the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) in 2016, Indian e-commerce firms are paying increasing attention to popular fields such as fashion, food, travel, health, and consumer services.

Eventually, online food delivery platforms have been created and gradually expanded with the support of increasing internet access to the people, leading to the global expansion of e-commerce in the food industry. The rise of disposable income, the emergence of electronic payment systems, the availability of a wide range of food supplier agencies, and hectic urban lifestyles have directly or indirectly promoted online food delivery services. All over the world, the growth of online food delivery has influenced people of all age groups, food suppliers, and service providers in many ways.

Growth of Online Food Delivery Service and its Impact

The “online food delivery service” is a service that supplies food to customers through trained delivery persons based on their demands from a restaurant, store, or independent kitchen unit. This is done by ordering through a mobile app or the websites of food delivery companies. The popularity of online food delivery is increasing worldwide. Cho *et al.* (2019) state that online food delivery platforms provide multiple choices

for consumers to select and order food. According to another study report, there has been a sudden rise in online food delivery during the second wave of Covid-19 in cities of all sizes, with a 50% increase in demand by customers in some cities.

Online delivery has created a new market and brought changes to consumers' food choices. Many food delivery companies in India offer lucrative discounts to attract consumers, such as the promotional campaign by Food panda, an online food delivery company that was able to increase its number of users tenfold (The Economic Times, 2018).

Migrants from cities have influenced the habit of online food ordering among their friends and relatives in small towns, contributing to an increase in interest in online food delivery services (Mittal, 2021). Delivery personnel play an instrumental role in supplying food to consumers based on the information received from online food delivery platforms (Troise *et al.*, 2021). This has not only increased revenues for restaurants and allowed consumers to receive their desired food at their doorstep without having to cook at home, but it has also created new job opportunities for unemployed young people, particularly during the COVID-19 period, to earn some income. Technological dependency, convenience, and faster delivery times are key reasons why consumers choose to use online food ordering and delivery services. The popularity of these services is steadily growing, and users' expectations are also increasing.

Li *et al.* (2020) have studied the impact of online food delivery in China using a sustainability framework that considers social, economic, and environmental factors. In order to sustain in the market, it is important to take into account these factors for better results. To promote social sustainability, it is necessary to explore ways to improve communication with consumers in order to regulate over-purchasing and reduce food waste. Similarly, for environmental sustainability, there should be a focus on using environmentally-friendly packaging. However, the economic factor is the most significant for the sustainability of online delivery platforms. The retention of online delivery personnel, ensuring their safety and security, along with timely delivery, are key areas of focus for achieving sustainable changes. Online delivery personnel play a crucial role in facilitating business transactions between food companies and consumers. Therefore, Li *et al.* suggest that online food companies should prioritize the needs and requirements of delivery personnel by creating a conducive work environment. The use of advanced technology, such as GPS, can also be beneficial.

(Global Positioning System) tracking helps delivery boys find out the exact location of the consumer and reach the destination on time. However, sometimes rushing to the destination place exposes delivery personnel to physical risks such as accidents (Chuen and Tung, 2022).

Alternative Job Opportunities by Online Food Platforms and its Challenges

As the global economy rapidly changes, the pattern of the employment market is also changing fast across the world. The ILO Report (2015) reveals the fact that business, economy, and work have been influenced by the increasing use of digital technology in recent years, resulting in revolutionary changes. However, the change is not very encouraging for employees absorbed by companies on a contractual basis. The changing work environment is also experiencing job insecurity associated with future insecurity (Giddens, 2009). Now, there is a growth of contractual workers at the workplace, as observed by sociologists. “Firms avoid direct employment of workers and reduce their employment responsibilities and costs, but at the same time provide less security to them” (Haralambos *et al.*, 2014; Sargeant, 2016). In the tertiary sectors, poor working conditions with a lack of proper training, low wages, and increasing workload under constant surveillance with the help of advanced technology are not creating a conducive work environment (Paul and Jean, 2007, pp. 210-214).

Undoubtedly, online food delivery companies have created new job opportunities for unemployed youth, particularly during the period of COVID-19 in the labor market. They are basically known as ‘food delivery providers’ or ‘food delivery boys’ who are associated with the terms and conditions of their work. “With the growing demand for home delivery of products purchased online, the ‘delivery workers’ or ‘delivery boys’ who deliver the product at the customer’s doorsteps have become the backbone of the e-commerce industry” (Maheswari and Mukerji, 2015). Usually, the nature of the job is temporary, and their working conditions are often associated with many challenges (Chuen and Tung, 2022). In the name of reforms, recent changes in the existing labor laws by the Government of India are also more exploitative than before. These legal

“Reforms” are referred to as “anti-labor rights in their substance” (Cox and Singhvi, 2020). Some of the recent changes allow companies to reduce the number of workers and increase working hours compared to the previous condition of eight hours per day. This reflects the exploitative nature of the employer, adversely affecting the working conditions of the workforce. “The challenges of India’s largely informal job market, combined with an unsatisfactory labor rights record, have carried over into the digital marketplace” (Iqubbal, 2021). However, the fact is that the role of delivery boys in the growth of e-commerce cannot be denied. They take on many responsibilities, starting from receiving food orders to delivering them to the customer’s doorstep, and contribute to the growth of the business.

In the case of delivery boys, who are bike riders, they are always in a hurried state to reach their destination on time and thus face accidents. The riders, who are usually

male, old, and less educated, are always under financial pressure, which is the reason why they are engaged in such jobs. During times of crisis, they do not always receive social security benefits. It is only in cases where they have received support from their colleagues and companies that they have access to health prevention measures. A study report by Tran NAT *et al.* (2022) states, “many riders and drivers have been forced to work longer hours than before and serve high-risk customers and zones, including hospitals and quarantine facilities.” Although online delivery jobs are easily obtained, they are risky and full of uncertainties. The nature of the job is not only physically strenuous but also mentally exhausting, which is often observed in the case of motorcyclists or bike riders. These people have a greater exposure to crowded traffic and harsh weather conditions (Heiland, 2021).

Van *et al.* (2011) have formulated a model to understand the risk associated with online delivery boys. The model explains some objective and subjective factors related to risk and its consequences. There are many types of risks associated with the job, but the present study primarily focuses on the health and safety risks and the level of awareness among delivery personnel regarding social security measures.

Studies also reveal that these individuals, despite facing many challenges, continue their work to ensure customer satisfaction (Nasreen and Purohi, 2018). Nasreen and Purohi find solutions to the challenges related to their work by providing better working conditions, job security, and access to social security, which contribute to meaningful work involvement and job satisfaction. In mega-cities of China, ensuring the health and implementing effective safety measures for thousands of food delivery riders is important and necessary for the growth of private businesses and the workers’ health (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The proposed study demands an in-depth study to explore the implications of ‘online food delivery service’ on ‘delivery boys’ and the related challenges in the city of Bhubaneswar. As the study is interdisciplinary in nature, the review of literature from various sources includes journal articles, national and international policies, study reports, and other grey literature. The lack of an adequate number of research studies in this field, particularly in Odisha, consequently led to the development of an exploratory approach in order to identify possible areas of investigation and provide necessary suggestions for future research. The study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The study is propelled by the following objectives

- To focus on the online food delivery service and its impact on present society.

- To explore the working conditions of the online food delivery boys and the challenges involved.
- To provide necessary suggestions for better working conditions.

As per the requirement of an in-depth study, the case study method has been adopted with a sample of 50 respondents who are ‘delivery boys’ engaged in food delivery services in the city of Bhubaneswar. The study relies on convenient sampling, and the data is collected through a semi-structured interview schedule.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Usually, online food delivery platforms hire personnel as food delivery boys at a very young age so that they can successfully carry out work that requires a lot of physical strength. Significantly, a certain age group, particularly young individuals, are expected to develop a customer-friendly behavioral pattern, which is reflected in their interactions with customers. It was found that 74 percent of the respondents are in the age group of 18 to 30, while elderly respondents above the age of 40 constitute only 3 percent of the total. The remaining 23 percent are from the 30-40 age group. The present status of unemployment in the post-pandemic period has affected youth in all social categories. Job opportunities available in such online commercial business units are primarily open to those who are well aware of job availability and possess basic digital skills. 60 percent of delivery boys engaged in online food delivery services belong to the general category, followed by 23 percent from the scheduled caste, and the rest from other categories. The educational qualifications of the respondents are mostly up to graduation, although the majority of them have an intermediate level of education, accounting for 70 percent of the total. Only 20 percent of them are graduates, while the remaining 10 percent have below matriculate qualifications.

Working Condition and Monthly Income

Delivery boys employed by companies like Swiggy, Zomato, etc. serve as full-time or part-time workers. These companies provide a good opportunity in the jobless situation of the pandemic and post-pandemic period to earn something. Individuals who have completed school education, possess a two-wheeler with a valid driving license, and a personal smartphone are selected for the job after a satisfactory interview process. Individuals who do not fulfill all of these conditions fail to qualify for the job. Out of all respondents, 76% have all the required conditions for the job, and the remaining 24% have bought a motorbike in order to enter into this job. They are recruited either through recruitment agencies or personal interviews. The income of the delivery boys varies from each other based on the number of working hours, number of delivery

orders completed, and customer ratings. 80% of the respondents are doing a full-time job, and the remaining 20% are doing a part-time job as delivery boys. The working hours are usually from 11 am to 11 pm. Part-time workers used to work on the weekends, particularly on Saturday and Sunday.

Table 1: Working Condition and Working hour of the respondents (full time)

Working condition	Working hours	No. of respondents	Percentage (N=50)
Full-time	Up to 8 hours	08 (16%)	40
	8-12 hours	22 (44%)	
	12-15 hours	10 (20%)	
Part-time	Up to 5 hours	02 (04%)	10
	5-8 hours	02 (04%)	
	8-12 hours	06 (12%)	
Total		50	100

As perceptible in the Table 1, 80 percent of respondents work as full-time workers and 20 percent as part-time workers. Part-time workers are mostly students who want to earn for their personal expenditure during Saturdays and Sundays. Usually, full-time workers spend a maximum of 15 hours a day at work, whereas part-time workers spend a maximum of 12 hours a day. Forty-four percent of delivery boys work 8 to 12 hours a day, whereas 20 percent of boys work even 12 to 15 hours per day to earn more.

Table 2: Monthly income of the respondents

Monthly Income	Frequency	Percentage
Rs. 10,000 - 20,000	20	40
20,000 - 30,000	23	46
30,000 - 40,000	07	14
Total	50	100

As observed, delivery boys earn a minimum of Rs. 10,000 to a maximum of Rs. 40,000 per month, and the average monthly salary of a delivery boy is Rs. 20,000 to 30,000. Those people who work hard to earn more send money to their families in the village and keep very little for their own expenditure (Table 2).

Social Security Awareness and Risk Involved

Every human being has the right to social security, and it helps to maintain a stable and positive relationship with the work environment, thus increasing labor productivity.

In the words of the International Labour Organization, “social security is the protection that a society provides to individuals and households to ensure access to healthcare and to guarantee income security, particularly in cases of old age, unemployment, sickness, invalidity, work injury, maternity, or loss of a breadwinner” (ILO, 2001). The ILO further clarifies that social security for workers contributes to the country’s development. “Various types of social security measures relevant to labor productivity include healthcare, pension, cash sickness, maternity insurance, work injury schemes, unemployment benefits, etc.” (ILO, 2001). As per the Directive Principles of State Policy, there is an emphasis on social security legislation in India. The Employees’ Compensation Act, 1923, has the objective to provide the payment of compensation to employees by employers for any injury caused by an accident during working hours (Annual Report, 2020-21).

Risk of Accidents

All respondents agree that there is an increasing risk of accidents as they are expected to deliver food on time. Eighty percent of them are not aware of the insurance benefits that have to be provided by their respective online food delivery companies. As a result, they fail to claim financial or other medical assistance from those companies. None of the respondents have availed such facilities so far. In some cases, they are not even aware of the helpline numbers for those risky areas during the pandemic period when they face any trouble. This shows the apathetic attitude of those delivery companies who are least bothered about the safety and security of their employees.

Customer Behaviour and Rating Pattern

The rating pattern is used to determine customer satisfaction, which is considered essential for a successful online business. Customers are anonymous groups whose ratings affect the earnings and careers of delivery boys. Orders are received by delivery boys based on the rating standard, which constantly puts pressure on them to perform their best. Although 68% of the respondents support the rating pattern, the remaining 32% do not. They believe that the rating pattern can be exploitative at times. If a delivery boy fails to achieve the required number of ratings, their identification number is temporarily blocked, resulting in fewer orders and reduced income. In some cases, they may even lose their job, as reported by a Swiggy delivery boy. None of the respondents have personally experienced bad behavior from customers, but they have heard about unpleasant experiences from their friends while dealing with customers.

Exposed to bad weather, pandemic situation and uneven shift timing

Delivery boys are often exposed to heavy rainfall, scorching heat, and harsh weather conditions while working. During the pandemic, online delivery has provided lots of income opportunities as well as challenges at work. 90% of the respondents give positive comments about experiencing good income during the pandemic, but at the same time, they were exposed to people's fear as they used to look at them with suspicion of carrying the coronavirus.

Job Satisfaction and aspirations

Though the online business model is new, it is full of opportunities for both employers and employees. People involved in online food delivery also have previous job experiences. 64 percent of the respondents had already experienced jobs before entering this sector. When comparing their current job experience with their past, 70 percent of respondents are satisfied with their current job. However, uncertainties in job conditions and excessive physical strain at work adversely affect their job satisfaction. In order to understand how their families perceive the dignity attached to their profession, it is revealed that 75 percent of the respondents' families have a positive response towards their work, although it demands more family time from them. However, there is an obvious reason why they cannot spend quality time with their family members - their hectic work schedule and heavy work pressure. Since most of the respondents are very young, they have pre-determined goals and aspirations that they want to fulfill in the future. 73 percent of respondents are optimistic about pursuing their future goals and finding a better source of income. Currently, they are working to meet the basic requirements of their life, fulfill family needs, and if possible, save money for their future goals.

Suggestive Measures

Suggested measures to improve the working conditions of online food delivery boys, based on the suggestions of the respondents and findings of the study, are as follows:

- There should be a provision of a fixed amount of minimum salary every month, rather than completely relying on customer's orders and ratings.
- To avoid too much stress at work, food delivery companies should reduce penalties in case of late delivery.
- Delivery boys must be provided with safety measures and necessary equipment at no cost, such as a helmet, sanitizing liquid, hand gloves, and a first-aid kit, for their personal safety and hygiene.

- There should be at least one day break with payment from companies, to spend some quality time with their loved ones.
- Delivery boys, who are basically bike riders, must be aware of traffic rules and other business rules through proper guidance and training.
- Companies must take the responsibility to raise awareness among the employees about available social security provisions, in order to obtain benefits in times of need.
- Regular monitoring of the mental health status of delivery boys is equally important to enable them to perform their best.
- Companies should take overall responsibility for the good health, safety, and security of delivery persons, in order to foster a healthy work environment.

CONCLUSION

The fast-changing, globalized world is further exposed to the dynamics of social change during pandemic and post-pandemic situations. The use of social media, online shopping, and the inclusion of digital technology as part of everyday living has created a favorable ground for online delivery businesses. Food delivery service is one of the fastest-growing businesses in the present scenario, which provides a choice of food at the doorstep of customers in a shorter period of time. Bhubaneswar, being the smart city of the country, has created a conducive base for the successful business of online delivery companies. The food delivery agents, popularly known as “food delivery boys,” have an opportunity to earn in the jobless condition of the post-pandemic situation. They are surrounded by multiple challenges at their workplace and working conditions, especially related to their personal safety and social security. Most of the delivery boys are young, less educated, and unaware of the social security provisions, and they are frequently exposed to the risk of accidents and other challenges. They are often grappling with the challenges of job uncertainties, physical strain, alienation, and the risk of injuries at work. Unfortunately, existing government policies to protect the interests of those engaged in such delivery jobs, especially in terms of access to social security benefits, are not being effectively implemented. Online delivery jobs are temporary engagements for many delivery boys as they aspire to have a stable and secure mode of earning in the future. With the growing business of online delivery companies, there should be more support and security provisions for them, with an empathetic understanding.

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