



A Survey of Challenges and Welfare Received by Food Riders in Bangkok during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the online food delivery service has dramatically become popular. Food delivery riders have become a key personnel who risks themselves to serve food for customers. Issues about riders' compensation discrimination and exclusion from social protection became shrouded in mystery. Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges food delivery riders encountered, the welfare and labor protections they received and their level of satisfaction towards such welfare and protections during the COVID-19 pandemic. The internet-based questionnaire and semi-structured interview were conducted to gather insights to address the purpose. The finding indicated that main obstacles to operating food delivery service during the pandemic included the risk of getting infection from the COVID-19 disease, financial insecurity, inadequate welfare, and insufficient daily income. The vast majority of food delivery riders were dissatisfied with the assistance provided by the government and by private delivery agencies due to the difficulty of accessing welfare and protection. For this reason, both the public and private sectors should improve labor protection and welfare of food delivery riders to be more comprehensive and accessible.

Keywords: Gig economy, Online Food Delivery Service, Food Delivery Riders, Independent Contractors, Welfare, Social Protection

การสำรวจปัญหาและสวัสดิการที่ผู้ให้บริการส่งอาหารในกรุงเทพฯ ได้รับในช่วงการระบาดของ ไวรัสโควิด 19

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บทคัดย่อ

การแพร่ระบาดของไวรัสโควิด 19 ส่งผลให้การให้บริการขนส่งอาหารออนไลน์ จึงเป็นที่นิยมน้อยลงมากผู้ขับขี่ ส่งอาหารเหล่านี้เป็นบุคลากรหลักที่รับความเสี่ยงจากการติดเชื้อเมื่อส่งอาหารให้กับลูกค้าประเด็นเกี่ยวกับค่าตอบแทนและการกีดกันจากการคุ้มครองทางสังคมที่ให้กับผู้ให้บริการส่งอาหารยังขาดความชัดเจนดังนั้น การศึกษานี้จึงมีวัตถุประสงค์ เพื่อสำรวจอุปสรรคที่ผู้ให้บริการส่งอาหารพบสวัสดิการและการคุ้มครองแรงงานที่ได้รับและระดับความพึงพอใจ ที่มีต่อสวัสดิการ และการคุ้มครองดังกล่าวในช่วงวิกฤตโควิด 19 แบบสอบถามออนไลน์และการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่ง โครงสร้างถูกใช้เพื่อเก็บข้อมูลเชิงลึก จากการศึกษาวิจัยพบว่าอุปสรรคหลักที่ผู้ให้บริการส่งอาหารประสบในการขนส่งอาหาร ช่วงโรคระบาด ได้แก่ ความเสี่ยงในการติดโรคโควิด 19 ความไม่มั่นคงทางการเงินสวัสดิการที่ไม่ครอบคลุมและ รายได้ที่ไม่เพียงพอต่อการดำรงชีวิตประจำวัน โดยผู้ให้บริการส่งอาหารส่วนมากไม่พึงพอใจต่อการมาตรการคุ้มครองแรงงาน ของภาครัฐและภาคเอกชน เนื่องจากการเข้าถึงสวัสดิการและการรับสิทธิคุ้มครองเป็นไปด้วยความยากลำบากอย่างไร ก็ตามทั้งภาครัฐและภาคเอกชนควรที่จะปรับปรุงมาตรการการคุ้มครองแรงงานและสวัสดิการของผู้ให้บริการส่งอาหาร ให้มีความครอบคลุมและเข้าถึงได้ง่าย

คำสำคัญ: ระบบเศรษฐกิจที่รองรับงานอิสระ บริการส่งอาหารออนไลน์ พนักงานส่งอาหาร แรงงานภาคอิสระ สวัสดิการ การคุ้มครองทางสังคม



1. Introduction

The emergence of digitalization and the disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic have made working through digital platforms become an opportunity for millennials to opt for flexible work schedule [1]. They have brought about a drastic change in the Thai labour market. For example, over 4 million workers were left unemployed because of the pandemic [2] and became vulnerable groups with few options, some of whom had to enter the Thai gig economy and worked as food delivery riders. With a sharp increase in infection rates, food riders appeared to be the front-liners who bore the risk of delivering food and necessary commodities during the lockdown period. The economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has caused some Thai workers to choose to work as full-time food riders. A number of those who took this as a parttime job has also increased. Unfortunately, a few statistics showed that those food riders have encountered fatal risks. For example, one in three riders got accidents during work operations, over 40% of which were serious injuries [3]. Some of them even lost their lives due to the accidents. Besides, food riders also had to bear the risk of getting infected by the COVID-19 disease. This is because some riders had to deliver food directly to the infected patients. When these riders got sick because of the COVID-19, they would possibly lose their income which immensely affected their lives and wellbeing. Interestingly, issues about riders' compensation discrimination and exclusion from social protection became shrouded in mystery [2]. This situation raises concern for the labour unions, who have been calling out for their rights to fair treatment and eligibility for social protection.

A review of literature uncovered that most of the studies about gig workers and labor protection appeared to be conducted in western countries and other Asia-Pacific regions [4-8]. These research studies may not be applicable to Thai context. Yet, a few studies in Thailand were conducted in the first quarter of 2020 when the crisis was less severe than that of today [1-2]. Unfortunately, findings from these studies may not be fully used to explain about what these gig workers encountered and their satisfaction of labor protection that they received during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand [2].

The present study aims to explore the challenges food delivery riders encountered during the COVID-19 crisis, labor protection policies they received and their satisfaction of such policies. Thus, this research focuses on three research questions: What were the challenges which food delivery riders had to encounter during the pandemic? What was food delivery riders' perception of benefits from the labor protection act during the COVID-19 situation? What was their level of satisfaction with labor protection policies in Thailand? Our findings demonstrate the exploitative relation between food delivery riders and private enterprises that needs to be reformed. To develop fairness in the gig economy, we suggest possible approaches which could mitigate the gap between employees' inequality including improving platform work, strengthening employment policies, and establishing a comprehensive social protection system.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Participants



In regard to the questionnaire, one-hundred food delivery riders from 4 major private agencies (Grab, Lineman, Foodpand, and Robinhood) voluntarily participated in this study. They had residences located in various parts around Bangkok and vicinity. Stratified random sampling was used in this study. Among 100 riders, the majority were male (91%), female (7%), and LGBTQ (2%) with the age range of 26 to 50 years old. 45% of the riders worked for Grab; 35% for Lineman. These two companies offered more satisfying incentives than other agencies. Over 50% of the riders have worked for more than 1 year, and 15% of them have worked as a rider for 1 year. Meanwhile, those who have worked less than 1 year are accounted for 33%.

2.2 Research Instrument

This study was conducted with a mixed-methods research design. The instruments were a self-completed (internet-based) questionnaire and in-depth interview.

2.2.1 Internet-based questionnaire

An online self-completed questionnaire consisting of 12 questions was constructed and distributed via Google Forms. Four questions were asked about riders' demographic information. Four questions were used to elicit the riders information about their challenges and welfare which they received during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two questions were asked about their satisfaction towards the provided welfare and social protection, and one question was asked to get their view about the importance of social protection and fundamental welfare using 6-Likert scale (1= Least Important, 6= Most Important). The last question was asked about their future expectation of social protections. The questionnaire items were validated by an expert to ensure their validity.

2.2.2 Structured interview

Two questions were asked to obtain in-depth information about riders' perception and requirement for labor protection. It took around 5 minutes to interview each rider. The in-depth insights of all riders were noted with prior consent. The interview was conducted through a face-to-face format with the following in-depth questions:

What are the labor protection policies and welfare you receive in COVID-19 situation?

What would you expect to receive if the labor policies of delivery workers were improved?

2.3 Setting

This research was conducted mainly in Bangkok and the vicinity where there was a high demand of food delivery service.

2.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data were gathered from October to November 2021. The SPSS program was used to analyze the quantitative data and provide descriptive statistics including percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. The researchers read and examined the data to sensitize themselves with the riders' view and categorized into themes.

3.Result and Discussion

3.1 What were the challenges which food delivery riders had to encounter during the pandemic?

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics illustrating challenges encountered by food riders (Multiple responses)

Challenges and difficulties	Percentage (%)
Risk of getting infection from COVID-19	30.0
Financial insecurity	19.9
Inadequate income	15.2
Inadequate welfare	14.4
Psychological risk	11.6
Job insecurity	9.0

As can be seen in Table 1, the findings reveal challenges which food delivery riders have encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the food riders (30%) perceived the risk of getting COVID-19 infection as the challenge since riders who were infected could definitely lose their income during their recovery. According to [9], there have been 29,948 COVID-19 related deaths and 4,434,511 infection cases reported in Thailand since the pandemic began. This emphasizes that COVID-19 measures which implemented by government is still not effective. Meanwhile, 9.9% of the riders perceived financial insecurity as the challenge because financial insecurity is what lead to the health risks and mental well-being of delivery riders.

3.2 What was food delivery riders' perception of benefits from the labor protection act during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Table 2 Descriptive statistics showing food riders' perception of received welfare and benefits from the labor protection act during the pandemic (Multiple responses)

Welfare and Benefits from the Labor Protection Act that Riders received	Percentage (%)	Number of responses
Liability insurance	28.7	43
Social security	25.3	38
None	14.7	22
30-bath healthcare coverage	11.3	17
Health insurance	6.7	10
Government welfare	5.3	8
Section-40 welfare	4.7	7
COVID-19 health insurance	3.3	5



As can be seen in Table 2, 28.7% of the food riders revealed that they did receive liability insurance from the employers. However, some of them mentioned the impractical requirements for the insurance, for instance, the complicated system and the bureaucratic system of the Thai government official in approving the riders' insurance. In addition, 25.3% of the food riders believed they received the social security coverage which they had to pay out of their own pocket for their safety and other benefits. Unfortunately, 14.7% believed that they did not receive any welfare or benefit and what we can conclude from this table is that most riders seem not to be informed about certain social security rights they can receive from the government. Due to the insufficiency of government welfare, only 5.3% of total participants had received this benefit. Lastly, section-40 welfare (4.7%) and COVID-19 health insurance (3.3%) are the two additional emerging findings that some riders had suggested as other common policies they received in the COVID-19 situation.

3.3 What was food riders' level of satisfaction with the labor protections?

Table 3 Descriptive statistics showing riders' satisfaction level towards labor protections and company's welfare.

Satisfaction towards Labor Protections and welfare	Level of Satisfaction				
	Unsatisfied	Least Satisfied	Satisfied	Quite satisfied	Most satisfied
Labor protections	32%	26%	32%	10%	0%
Company's welfare	19%	15%	29%	33%	4%

Table 3 shows the food riders' level of satisfaction towards labor protection policy and their company's welfare. Thirty-two percent and twenty-six percent felt unsatisfied and least satisfied with the labor protections, respectively. An analysis of the qualitative data also reveals that the food riders had negative attitudes towards the Thai labor protection policy and believed that the Ministry of Labor had little awareness and insensitivity towards social welfare and rights protection of this marginalized group of labor in Thai society. Besides, thirty-three percent and twenty-nine percent of the food riders were quite satisfied and satisfied with company's welfare such as fuel or food rewards, respectively. These were common perks every rider received after they registered for the job which benefitted them during their daily work operation. The finding revealed that the majority of food riders such as those worked for the Grab food were satisfied with high flexibility working hours. Some riders were satisfied with low initial investment cost such as uniforms, delivery kits, etc. They also revealed an interesting fact that their private food delivery agencies offered loan with no interest. However, those who felt dissatisfied with the labor protections complained about the system of offering more benefits to those in higher ranks only. They believed this was unfair to other employees.



“There are benefits such as discounts on fuel or food, but not everyone receives them equally. It would be better if there were standard welfare for all riders, not in rank order.” (Interviewee No.81, Grab rider)

Meanwhile, 19% of the food riders were unsatisfied with the company’s welfare, saying that the welfare was not comprehensive enough and that the system was highly oppressive to food riders. Most of the food riders have not received the liability insurance even though they were expected to achieve the required delivery goals per month. Otherwise, they would not receive benefits. There are possible explanations for this. This is due to their employment status labelled as ‘independent worker’ [1] or ‘independent contractor’ [7]. The legally identified status would affect getting neither suitable coverage regarding wage discrimination, unionization, leave rights, and health security nor the government’s labor support in order to encourage business corporations to provide employees with fair labor rights [10].

Unexpected Findings

Findings have revealed 3 unexpected issues as follow:

1. The conditions for getting higher compensation and liability insurance.

An analysis of qualitative data uncovers that only those who worked in the central part of Bangkok received higher compensation and liability insurance. This could be unfair to all food riders. They believed that no matter where they work, they should receive appropriate compensation and the liability insurance.

2. Unfair conditions of contracts for foreign riders.

Another unexpected finding is that those foreign food riders who came from neighboring countries did not get similar support or protections similar to food riders with Thai nationality. There were quite a number of workers from neighboring countries in the food delivery sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the findings revealed that provided welfare does not cover for foreign riders due to the contract restriction but supports only Thai riders.

3. Section 40 and COVID-19 insurance

We also found that food riders commonly received benefits and compensation according to the Section 40 of the Social Security Right Act and the COVID-19 insurance during the pandemic crisis. According to the [12], the Section 40 is categorized as one of the social security welfares which covers food riders in Thailand. However, most riders have to pay for this protection policy themselves to ensure safety in their lives when an unexpected situation occurs (i.e accident, disability, death, etc.). On the other hand, delivery agencies claim to provide COVID-19 insurance for their riders by offering COVID-19 vaccinations along with compensation for riders who are infected.

Suggestions for Service Improvement

This study offers possible suggestions for improvement.



1. Private delivery agencies and the government should provide riders with fair compensation and benefits.

The participants have suggested that private delivery agencies should provide fair compensation and benefits. For instance, private agencies designated that those delivering food in downtown Bangkok received higher rate of compensation than those in other areas did. They believed that no matter where they deliver, they should receive the same rate of compensation. In addition, the majority of the riders requested that the indemnity for loss of income due to accidents should be applicable to all riders rather than being restricted to only those have worked for at least 6 months. Due to this matter, Supawit Sirikanjan, a specialist in labor law from Thammasat University, proposes that the government should set fundamental standards for riders including wages, welfare and accident insurance [12]. The government and private food delivery agencies should work together to satisfy riders with the fundamental standards on received benefits and welfares.

2. Private delivery agencies and the government should provide the liability insurance for all riders.

Private delivery agencies should provide liability insurance to all food delivery riders with no condition. They should offer food delivery riders with more secured safety accessibility and significantly help mitigate losses incurred from accidents with the support of the government.

Suggestion for future research

Since this research only focuses on food delivery riders from major private agencies in Bangkok and vicinity, there might be the possibility that riders who live in other provinces may have different challenges. Consequently, we suggest that future research should explore food delivery riders' satisfaction towards the protection policies in different major provinces such as Chiangmai, Phuket, Udonthani, etc.

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