International Journal of Advanced Engineering and Management Research

Vol. 10, No. 03; 2025

ISSN: 2456-3676

Investigating the Service Quality of Instant Delivery on E-commerce Platforms: a Case Study of Meituan

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doi.org/10.51505/ijaemr.2025.1208 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.51505/ijaemr.2025.1208

Received: Apr 20, 2025 Accepted: May 03, 2025 Online Published: May 16, 2025

Abstract

The rapid development and widespread adoption of the Online-to-Offline (O2O) business model have given rise to the instant delivery logistics system. Over time, new forms of instant delivery have matured and entered a stable growth phase. However, ensuring service quality amid increasing market demand presents significant challenges. This study explores the key factors influencing customer satisfaction in Meituan's instant delivery service by employing the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). Through an analysis of customers' satisfactory and unsatisfactory experiences with Meituan's instant delivery, the study categorizes and examines critical incidents. The findings indicate that fulfillment efficiency, job responsibilities, service attitude, and cargo integrity are the primary determinants of customer satisfaction. Accordingly, this study proposes three mechanisms—transportation equipment optimization, delivery personnel management, and customer service enhancement—to improve customer satisfaction and foster high-quality development in the instant delivery sector.

Keywords: Meituan, Instant Delivery, Service Quality, Critical Incident Technique

1. Introduction

The Online-to-Offline (O2O) model has gained significant consumer traction by enabling seamless online transactions with offline fulfillment. Through mobile applications, users can conveniently access doorstep delivery services. As a key component of commercial logistics, instant delivery differs from traditional courier services by eliminating complex transit and warehousing. Instead, orders are directly assigned to couriers, who complete deliveries from merchants to consumers within 1-2 hours—or even shorter in certain scenarios. This model now spans various sectors, including food service, supermarkets, fresh produce, floristry, pharmaceuticals, and errand-running, contributing to a substantial market size. It stands as a pivotal element of the O2O business framework and a driving force behind its expansion.

The deep integration of technology and retail has led to the emergence of major platforms such as Meituan Delivery, Dada Express, and SF Tongcheng, with Meituan Delivery securing a leading position through its intelligent dispatching system and the world’s largest distribution

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network. Instant delivery services encompass the entire process—from order acceptance and store pickup to final delivery—requiring high efficiency within a short time frame. This workflow not only relies on platforms' smart dispatch algorithms but is also influenced by couriers' individual capabilities, delivery equipment, and traffic conditions. Given the significant role of subjective service awareness in offline fulfillment, variations in service efficiency and quality can directly impact consumer satisfaction with instant delivery platforms.

This study, grounded in existing literature, focuses on Meituan's instant delivery services by analyzing real consumer experiences. Through an examination of users' perceptions, the research aims to assess the public's overall satisfaction with instant delivery services.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Instant Delivery Service Platforms

With the rapid development of the internet and digital economy, e-commerce platforms featuring diverse business models and service offerings have emerged in large numbers, forming a multi-faceted classification system encompassing major types such as B2B, B2C, C2C, and O2O. Against this backdrop, the O2O model has gained widespread popularity due to its speed and flexibility in service delivery. Meituan, as the most representative life-service e-commerce platform in China, has built a comprehensive service ecosystem covering multiple sectors, including food delivery, instant retail, hotel and travel services, and mobility solutions. By deeply integrating online platforms with offline services, Meituan has successfully established a closed-loop commercial system that seamlessly connects merchants, delivery personnel, and consumers(Choi Yongrok et al, 2021).Based on the aforementioned studies, it is evident that merchants, couriers, and consumers maintain close and frequent interactions. The e-commerce platform's instant delivery service has established a stable ecosystem, and their interconnected relationships are illustrated in the following diagram.

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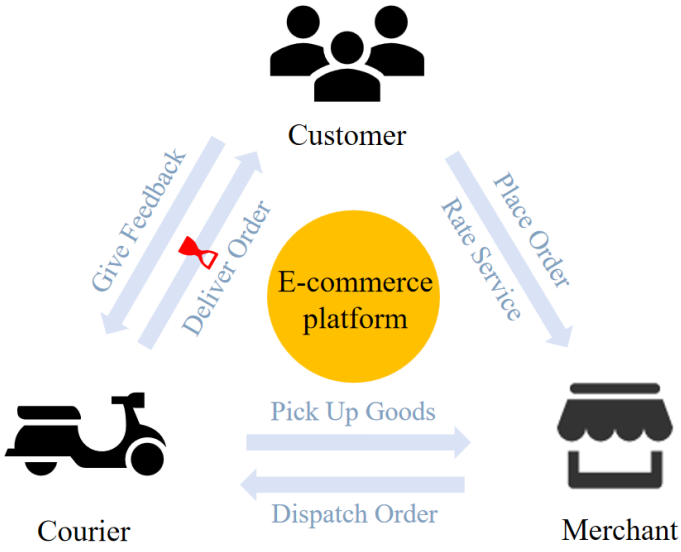

Figure1 E-commerce Platform Instant Delivery Ecosystem Relationship Diagram

Through continuous technological iterations and operational optimizations, Meituan has successfully established the world's largest minute-level delivery network. With a daily order processing volume exceeding 60 million, the platform has been consistently adapting to the growing demands of the massive instant delivery market. This network not only supports the expansion of Meituan's food delivery services but has also given rise to innovative business models such as instant retail, maximizing the value of rapid logistics within the e-commerce landscape (YileLiang et al, 2024).

2.2 Definition and Development of Instant Delivery

Instant delivery is a logistics model characterized by minute-level response times. It relies on local transportation capacity and warehousing resources to fulfill high-frequency, small-batch orders, providing highly efficient delivery services within a timeframe of 30 minutes to 3 hours. With its dynamic responsiveness and agile efficiency, instant delivery continues to evolve to meet the expanding demands of the e-commerce market(Yan Zhang et al2020).

The service process of instant delivery involves multiple stakeholders, including platforms, merchants, delivery riders, and customers, and faces various challenges as the market evolves. With the rapid expansion of the instant delivery industry, the large amount of plastic waste and disposable materials generated by the service has exacerbated the burden on urban waste management systems. Additionally, it has contributed to environmental issues such as soil contamination, microplastic dispersion, and greenhouse gas emissions(Song, G et al, 2018).

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From the couriers' perspective, despite the expanding market demand for instant delivery services, job requirements and individual characteristics may not always align to ensure high service quality. Platforms implement onboarding training and management processes, yet the unpredictable, decentralized, and flexible nature of instant delivery makes it difficult to consistently guarantee delivery timeliness, security, and integrity. E-commerce platforms offering instant delivery have established a unique commercial ecosystem in which timeliness has become a key metric for evaluating courier performance. This emphasis on speed necessitates that couriers operate under an intensely demanding work pace to fulfill delivery tasks. While this approach has significantly enhanced distribution efficiency, it may also result in a multidimensional imbalance in service quality, affecting aspects such as customer experience, order accuracy, and overall reliability within the delivery network (Zheng Yingqin et al, 2022).
Moreover, the underlying contradictions within the platform's business model present significant challenges. High commission rates imposed on merchants may squeeze their profit margins, creating financial strain. Additionally, the excessive emphasis on delivery speed can lead to the neglect of critical factors such as food safety regulation and courier service quality. These oversights directly impact customer satisfaction, as compromised food safety standards and inconsistent service attitudes may undermine the overall consumer experience despite the efficiency gains in logistics (Feldman Pnina et al, 2022).

2.3 Customer Satisfaction in Instant Delivery

The service quality and customer satisfaction of instant delivery are influenced by a combination of technological, managerial, and human factors. Due to the time constraints imposed by platform algorithms, economic incentives, and cognitive biases, delivery riders tend to de-emphasize traffic safety. Their excessive pursuit of speed and efficiency leads to increased work-related stress, causing them to underestimate their own safety risks, which in turn escalates risk-taking behaviors(Qian, Q et al, 2024). Platforms must also balance merchant priority settings with fair earnings distribution for couriers (Youming Cai et al, 2025).

Notably, couriers' work conditions and psychological well-being directly influence service quality. The high-intensity work environment may trigger anxiety and mental health issues, posing potential risks to customers (Peng Yuxun et al, 2022). Conflicts between couriers and customers can escalate, with concerns about retaliation—popular comments such as "watch out for food tampering by couriers" have fueled consumer anxiety. Cases of couriers falsely marking deliveries as completed and subsequently taking the food themselves remain prevalent, significantly violating consumer rights.

From the customer's perspective, key factors influencing satisfaction include food temperature retention, delivery punctuality, and the smooth functioning of platform systems. Meanwhile, couriers' workload, stress levels, and consumer feedback directly affect their job performance (Mengling Wu et al, 2024). Moreover, consumers' trust in platforms and their perceived risk levels mediate the relationship between satisfaction and continued platform usage (Yu Liu et al, 2024). These findings highlight the need for a systemic approach to improving instant delivery

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services—optimizing algorithmic efficiency, enhancing courier welfare mechanisms, and establishing a multi-dimensional service quality evaluation framework.

In summary, existing research primarily focuses on courier working conditions and order fulfillment efficiency when assessing instant delivery satisfaction. However, fewer studies analyze service issues from the consumers' perspective through firsthand user experiences. Particularly, research employing the Critical Incident Technique remains scarce, despite its ability to identify key service satisfaction or dissatisfaction events directly linked to consumer experiences. This method provides valuable insights into the state of instant delivery services, addressing existing shortcomings, and proposing consumer-centered strategies to improve satisfaction levels. Therefore, this study further explores these aspects to enhance understanding and improve service quality effectively.

3. Method

Numerous studies have explored various aspects of the emerging instant delivery industry. As a leading player in this sector, Meituan Delivery holds significant representativeness within the instant delivery service market. This study employs the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to investigate consumers' experiences with Meituan's instant delivery service, aiming to assess service quality and customer satisfaction based on real purchase experiences.

3.1 Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

Originally proposed by (Flanagan, 1954), the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is a qualitative research method that systematically collects and classifies positive and negative incidents reported by respondents. Through categorization based on the nature of incidents, CIT helps identify critical factors and analyze their underlying causes. The incident data gathered in this study are classified by trained coders, who assess individual consistency and inter-coder agreement. Reliability metrics are then calculated and compared to validate the accuracy and trustworthiness of the classification process, thereby ensuring the credibility of the research.

3.2 Research Design

To capture genuine feedback and perceptions regarding Meituan's instant delivery service, an online survey was conducted among consumers who have used the service. To avoid conceptual confusion with other delivery models, the survey introduction provided respondents with a detailed explanation of instant delivery, guiding them to articulate both positive and negative incidents comprehensively.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

1. Demographic Information – This section gathered data on respondents' gender, age, education level, and occupation.

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2. Critical Incident Reporting – Respondents were asked to describe their most satisfying or dissatisfactory experiences with Meituan's instant delivery service, structured into three components: incident cause, development, and outcome.
3. Compensation and Improvement Expectations – Respondents were invited to provide suggestions for compensation measures and service enhancements.

The study sampled consumers who had previously used Meituan's instant delivery service, distributing the survey on January 19, 2024, and collecting responses until February 1, 2024. A total of 119 questionnaires were received, with 4 excluded due to unclear descriptions of satisfying incidents and 20 removed due to incomplete dissatisfaction reports. Ultimately, 115 valid positive critical incidents and 92 negative critical incidents were obtained for analysis.

4. Result

4.1 Statistical Analysis

The calculated reliability values for coder consistency were compared to examine key incidents related to customers' experiences with Meituan's instant delivery service. First, the nature of each critical incident was objectively defined to ensure that classifications accurately represented their characteristics. Through iterative refinements, five primary indicators were established: fulfillment efficiency (A), service attitude (B), job responsibilities (C), physical appearance (D), and cargo integrity (E).

Subsequently, three coders independently categorized positive and negative incidents based on these primary indicators. The coders—referred to as Coder I, Coder II, and Coder III—were selected based on their expertise:

1. Coder I is a researcher specializing in e-commerce, with eight years of academic experience in the field.
2. Coder II is a professional from the logistics industry, serving as a department manager in a logistics enterprise.
3. Coder III is a scholar in e-commerce logistics with five years of teaching experience.

The coders' primary role was to identify the content of critical incidents and categorize them accordingly. To ensure the precision of personal classification consistency, the classification process was conducted twice, with an extended interval between each round.
For positive incidents, individual classification consistency results are presented in Table 1. For negative incidents, individual classification consistency results are shown in Table 2. The number of critical incidents classified by each coder was consistent across all cases.

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Table 1 Personal classification consistency (satisfaction events)

Individual Classification Consistency	Consistent Cases	Proportion (%)
Coder I	105	91.30%
Coder II	86	74.78%
Coder III	89	77.39%

Table 2 Personal classification consistency (dissatisfaction events)

Individual Classification Consistency	Consistent Cases	Proportion (%)
Coder I	81	88.04%
Coder II	68	73.91%
Coder III	69	75.00%

Pairwise comparisons were conducted between coders to assess classification consistency for both satisfactory and unsatisfactory incidents. The identical classifications recorded by all three coders were documented. For positive incidents, the results of inter-coder consistency are presented in Table 3. Similarly, for negative incidents, inter-coder consistency results are shown in Table 4.

Table 3 Mutual consistency among classifiers (satisfaction events)

Inter-Coder Consistency	Coder 1	Coder 2	Coder 3
Coder I	105		
Coder II	68	86	
Coder III	106	73	89

Table 4 Mutual consistency among classifiers (dissatisfaction events)

Inter-Coder Consistency	Coder 1	Coder 2	Coder 3
Coder I	81		
Coder II	63	68	
Coder III	89	71	69

$$A=\frac{\frac{2M_{12}}{n_1+n_2}+\frac{2M_{23}}{n_2+n_3}+\frac{2M_{13}}{n_1+n_3}}{N} \quad (1)$$

$$R=\frac{(N\times A)}{1+[(N-1)\times A]} \quad (2)$$

Where:

R = Reliability

N = Number of coders

A = Average interjudge agreement

M = Number of identical classifications among coders (e.g., M_{12} represents the number of samples classified identically by Coder 1 and Coder 2)

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n = Number of samples judged by each coder (e.g., n_1 represents the number of samples categorized by Coder 1)

The consistency data for satisfactory incidents and unsatisfactory incidents were substituted into the formulas above. The results of average interjudge agreement and reliability calculations are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Average mutual consistency and reliability data results

Critical Incident	Average Interjudge Agreement (A)	Reliability (R)
Satisfactory Incident	0.82	0.93
Unsatisfactory Incident	0.81	0.93

4.2 Empirical Verification

To determine whether the classification meets research requirements, a reliability analysis was conducted based on the method proposed by (Holsti, 1969). The consistency among the three coders was assessed, with the classification deemed reliable if the reliability value exceeded 0.8 (Latham &Saari, 1984)(Smith & Houston, 1985). In this study, the reliability value for satisfactory incidents (R_1) was 0.93, and for unsatisfactory incidents (R_2) was 0.93—both exceeding 0.8, indicating strong inter-coder agreement. These findings confirm that the classification process is credible and provides meaningful reference values for further analysis.

4.3 Empirical Results Analysis

Based on the classification of positive and negative critical incidents, the proportions of each primary indicator were calculated, with the results presented in Table 6.

Table 6 Ratio of primary indicators

Primary Indicator	Satisfactory Proportion (%)	Unsatisfactory Proportion (%)
Fulfillment Efficiency (A)	49.57	33.88
Service Attitude (B)	22.17	16.12
Job Responsibility (C)	16.23	23.01
Physical Appearance (D)	5.80	5.43
Cargo Integrity (E)	6.23	21.56

In instances of customer satisfaction, the factors influencing satisfaction levels, ranked from highest to lowest in impact, are fulfillment efficiency, service attitude, job responsibility, cargo integrity, and physical appearance. Conversely, in cases of dissatisfaction, the determinants affecting customer perceptions, in descending order of significance, are fulfillment efficiency, job responsibility, cargo integrity, service attitude, and physical appearance.

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4.4. Analysis of Positive Critical Incidents

4.4.1 Timely Fulfillment by Couriers

Among 49.57% of the positive incidents, customers described the delivery as fast, on time, or even ahead of schedule. The most fundamental expectation of consumers is timely receipt of goods, which aligns perfectly with the concept of instant delivery. As the instant delivery model matures, customers are shifting their focus from product attributes to the expected delivery time provided by the platform, using it as a benchmark to evaluate whether couriers meet their expectations. Most consumers hope that merchants will promptly accept their orders post-payment and that couriers will respond efficiently. Ensuring basic service reliability—such as on-time or early deliveries—effectively enhances consumer satisfaction by meeting expectations regarding purchased goods and services.

4.4.2 Friendly Service Attitude of Couriers

22.17% of respondents indicated that couriers demonstrated professionalism and attentiveness. Meituan's couriers provide thoughtful reminders and considerate service, which not only improves customer experience but also strengthens customer loyalty. In reality, the physical delivery of goods fulfills customers' material needs, while warm greetings address their emotional needs. Even though interactions between couriers and customers are brief, timely responses to messages, problem resolution, and comprehensive after-sales service foster trust and recognition of the courier workforce. This contributes positively to market growth and brand reputation.

4.4.3 Couriers' Commitment to Responsibilities

Within 16.23% of positive incidents, keywords such as "dedicated," "responsible," "timely communication," and "climbing ten floors on foot" appeared frequently. Couriers are responsible not only for delivering goods but also for route familiarity, cargo protection, and maintaining a professional service attitude to build strong customer relationships. Even under adverse weather conditions and during peak order periods, many couriers successfully complete deliveries on time and offer additional services. Apart from their sense of duty, their performance is shaped by platform regulations. This underscores the importance of platform management in enhancing service quality. Additionally, couriers' professional ethics and sense of responsibility significantly influence instant delivery service quality, making them critical factors in career development within this industry.

4.5. Analysis of Negative Critical Incidents

4.5.1 Delivery Delays

More than 30% of negative incidents were related to untimely deliveries. Late deliveries impact the freshness, safety, and expectations of purchased items. Several uncontrollable factors—including weather conditions, merchants' meal preparation time, platform route planning, traffic

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conditions, and couriers' transport tools—often contribute to delays. Since fulfillment efficiency is the most sensitive factor affecting consumer satisfaction, it directly influences purchasing decisions and after-sales evaluations. Given platform safety considerations and courier workload management, when deliveries are delayed, platforms must offer timely customer service and necessary compensation to mitigate dissatisfaction.

4.5.2 Lack of Responsibility Among Couriers

23.01% of negative incidents reported issues like "wrong delivery location without apology" and "failure to inform customers upon delivery." Despite Meituan's strict courier service requirements, some couriers failed to communicate in a timely manner, deliver to the correct location, or bring items directly to customers' doors, falling short of customer expectations. Variations in couriers' competency, familiarity with delivery areas, and adherence to platform policies contribute to these service lapses. The subjective work ethics of couriers—such as customer interactions, job commitment, and labor rights awareness—directly impact their service performance. Platforms should adjust reward and penalty policies, enhance management models, and simultaneously ensure labor rights to boost courier motivation and platform loyalty.

4.5.3 Cargo Damage During Delivery

21.56% of consumers reported instances of food spillage, damaged packaging, and couriers failing to handle such issues promptly. Most Meituan couriers self-provide electric bikes equipped with fixed delivery boxes, but different items require specific transport conditions—e.g., cakes need refrigerated transport, and beverages require stable, non-compressed delivery methods. Couriers must balance multiple orders, drive safely, and work within strict time constraints, adding pressure to cargo integrity. To prevent goods from tipping over or spilling, couriers should double-check package seals and accept orders based on their transport capacity. Meanwhile, platforms should upgrade transport methods for different types of goods and offer reasonable compensation to couriers and consumers in cases of cargo damage.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Instant delivery services have evolved into a fast and convenient model widely favored by the public, becoming an integral part of consumers' daily lives. Based on the analysis of satisfactory and unsatisfactory critical incidents, this study identified four key factors significantly influencing customer satisfaction: fulfillment efficiency, job responsibilities, service attitude, and cargo integrity. Among positive incidents, fulfillment efficiency, service attitude, and job responsibilities collectively account for over 70% of cases. Similarly, among negative incidents, the combined impact of fulfillment efficiency, job responsibilities, and cargo integrity exceeds 70%.

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Notably, couriers' physical appearance has a relatively low impact on customer satisfaction, suggesting that Meituan's management of couriers' professional image is relatively effective. To enhance customer experience, platforms and couriers must adapt to consumer needs and socio-economic development trends, leverage their competitive advantages, identify existing issues, and implement improvement measures. As platforms oversee operations and couriers execute offline fulfillment, both parties bear the responsibility of maintaining positive customer relationships and driving high-quality growth in the instant delivery sector.

5.2 Recommendations

To improve service quality and address existing shortcomings, instant delivery services should focus on five key areas: fulfillment efficiency, job responsibilities, cargo integrity, service attitude, and physical appearance—refining these aspects to build a distinctive service model. Under lawful and regulatory compliance, this study considers industry development trends and platform dynamics, proposing three management mechanisms aimed at optimizing platform operations, alongside concrete recommendations for enhancement.

5.2.1 Transportation Equipment Mechanism

a. Optimization of Courier Matching Algorithms and Real-Time Time Estimation
To achieve efficient and stable transportation, courier task allocation, substitute dispatching, and customer preference-based matching must be continuously refined. The platform's algorithmic model should be regularly updated to accommodate unpredictable variables such as severe weather conditions, traffic restrictions, road accidents, and cargo attributes.

b. Real-Time Performance Monitoring via Helmet Recorders
Helmet-mounted cameras and audio recorders should be used to monitor couriers' fulfillment process. In cases of accidents, traffic violations, or disputes, the real-time footage and recordings can help platforms intervene promptly and mediate conflicts. Strict penalties must be imposed on traffic law violations and actions compromising consumer rights to ensure safe and professional delivery practices. Strengthening courier accountability through transparent monitoring can also enhance their motivation and performance.

5.2.2 Courier Management Mechanism
a. Educating Couriers on Labor Laws and Strengthening Offline Supervision
For gig-economy couriers, their employment relationship with the platform must be clearly defined. Platforms should provide guidance on labor insurance, commercial insurance, and accidental coverage contributions, ensuring legal protection for couriers and fostering greater platform loyalty.

b. Regular Offline Training Programs
Professional training should be introduced to improve couriers' service quality and competencies, covering proper communication, handling unexpected situations, customer privacy protection,

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and traffic regulations. Quarterly assessments should be conducted to maintain high training standards and strengthen couriers' expertise.

c. Implementation of a Clear Reward and Punishment System
By establishing performance-based incentives, couriers can develop a stronger sense of professional value, boosting their work enthusiasm and sense of belonging. Platforms should also enforce work accountability and safeguard couriers' labor rights to reduce negative attitudes toward short-term gig work and improve long-term engagement.

5.2.3. Customer Service Mechanism

a. Enhancing Customer Service to Protect Consumer Rights
Once a courier collects the order, they should notify the customer via message or call about the packaging status, estimated delivery time, and delivery method. To improve customer experience, couriers can offer personalized services, such as holiday greetings, thoughtful reminders, message cards, and friendly notes.

b. Strengthening After-Sales Service
The platform should contact customers via phone or SMS to inquire about their experience, including confirmation of order receipt, delivery service satisfaction, and improvement suggestions. In cases of dissatisfaction, the platform can compensate consumers with discounts, vouchers, or refunds, reinforcing customer loyalty and maintaining strong engagement.

The optimization strategies for instant delivery platforms proposed in this study serve as reference points for businesses and service providers in the sector. Additionally, the recommendations may offer insights for regulatory authorities, contributing to the stable and sustainable development of the instant delivery and logistics industry.

Acknowledgements

This research work was funded by the grant from the Guangdong Science and Technology Program (China) under Grant No. 2024A0505050036, and the grants from the Department of Education of Guangdong Province under Grant Nos: 2021WTSCX093 and 2020GXJK168. We deeply appreciate their financial support and encouragement.

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