

The Control of Merchants and the Protection of Consumer Rights and Interests: Taking Meituan Takeout as an Example

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Abstract: With the rapid development of Internet technology, the catering industry has undergone a digital and intelligent transformation. Takeout services have emerged as a new force, changing people's eating habits. With a rich variety of food options, efficient delivery, and affordable prices, takeout breaks through the time and space limitations of traditional dine-in dining and is highly popular in the market. However, as an emerging transaction model, the relevant laws for takeout are still imperfect, leading to many problems that affect consumers' rights and interests and social stability. Therefore, implementing scientific supervision to ensure the safety and quality of takeout food is the key to the healthy and sustainable development of the takeout industry. This paper focuses on Meituan Takeout, and analyzes issues such as low transparency of merchant qualifications, opaque information about pre-made dishes, and the kitchen environment. The research reveals the potential risks in the takeout industry and proposes improvement strategies, such as optimizing the review and qualification information update mechanism, improving the order-placing process and information confirmation mechanism, and unblocking feedback channels. The aim is to ensure food safety and consumers' rights and interests and promote the prosperous development of the takeout industry.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the ever-changing Internet technology, the catering industry is experiencing a profound transformation in the wave of digitalization and intelligence. Among them, the rapid development of takeout services has brought about dramatic changes in people's eating habits. Takeout food offers a wide variety of choices, efficient delivery, and reasonable prices. It breaks the time and space constraints of traditional dine-in dining and has quickly gained wide popularity in the market. According to relevant reports released by the China Research and Planning Institute, the market size of China's online catering takeout industry reached 1,525.4 billion yuan in 2023. It is expected to maintain a strong growth trend in the next few years, and by 2027, the market size is expected to rise to 1,956.7 billion yuan. At the same time, the number of takeout users is increasing rapidly. As of December 2023, the scale of domestic online takeout users has grown rapidly to 545 million, accounting for 49.9% of the total number of Internet users (Feng, 2024). However, due to the short-time

emergence of this emerging takeout transaction model, the relevant legal framework is still not perfect, resulting in a series of problems. These problems not only threaten consumers' rights and interests but also affect social harmony and stability. Therefore, implementing scientific and effective supervision measures to ensure the safety and quality of takeout food is crucial for promoting the healthy and sustainable development of the takeout industry.

Based on this background, this paper analyzes and explores the current situation of Meituan Takeout. It mainly discusses issues such as the low transparency of Meituan Takeout merchant qualifications, the opaque information about pre-made dishes for users, the takeout kitchen environment, as well as consumers' feedback channels and relevant compensation mechanisms. The research reveals the potential risks in the takeout industry and innovatively proposes a series of improvement strategies for the optimization path and mechanism. By optimizing the review process, establishing a dynamic qualification information update mechanism, optimizing the user order-placing

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process and information confirmation mechanism, and optimizing feedback channels, the purpose is to effectively ensure food safety and consumers' rights and interests and promote the prosperous development of the entire takeout industry.

2 OVERVIEW OF THE MEITUAN TAKEOUT PLATFORM

2.1 Platform Development History

Meituan is a technology - retail company. With the strategy of "retail+technology", Meituan fulfills its corporate mission of "helping everyone eat better and live better". Since its establishment in March 2010, Meituan has continuously promoted the digital upgrading of service retail and commodity retail on the demand and supply sides. It has been working hard with its numerous partners to provide consumers with high-quality services. Meituan Takeout was officially launched in November 2013. Initially, its main consumer group was college students. In early 2014, the anonymous evaluation function was launched. In 2015, due to the slowdown in the growth of the college takeout market, Meituan Takeout began to target the white-collar market. On September 20, 2018, Meituan was listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. On August 5, 2024, the 2024 Fortune Global 500 list was released, and Meituan ranked 384th.

2.2 Platform Operation Model

The platform model of Meituan Takeout is a two-sided market model that connects consumers, merchants, and delivery riders. It achieves profitability and development by integrating multiple resources and providing various services. Meituan optimizes existing channels to encourage users to develop new consumption habits on the platform and conduct transactions. For example, users often browse restaurant information on Meituan. In Meituan's takeout business, the traditional consumption model of "customers generate demand, make payments, merchants provide services, and receive fees" remains unchanged. Meituan still acts as an intermediary connecting customers (the supply side) and merchants (the demand side) and extracts a certain proportion of commission from each transaction (Lou, 2023).

3 ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION OF MEITUAN TAKEOUT

3.1 Problems of Merchants, Prepared Dishes and Kitchen Environment

Meituan Takeout has many problems regarding merchant qualifications, the disclosure of pre-made dish information, and the takeout kitchen environment. The transparency of merchant qualifications is low. The review information is not fully publicized, and the update of qualification changes lags. It is difficult for consumers to obtain comprehensive and timely key information about the legality and standardization of merchants' operations. The information about pre-made dishes is opaque. The sources of raw materials are unclear, and the processing and production process is not disclosed. As a result, users have little understanding of the quality of the dishes. The takeout kitchen environment is worrying. The hygiene conditions are poor, and the facilities and equipment are simple or do not meet the standards, which affects food hygiene and safety. Moreover, there are loopholes in platform supervision.

When merchants apply to join the Meituan platform, although it claims to adopt a triple-verification method including optical character recognition (OCR) image recognition, system verification, and manual review, in actual operation, due to reasons such as heavy workloads of reviewers and insufficient professional knowledge, the qualification review of some merchants may not be rigorous enough. Some unscrupulous merchants take advantage of review loopholes to upload false or blurred qualification documents and get away with it. The low transparency of merchant qualifications, insufficient publicity of review information, and lagging updates of qualification changes make it difficult for consumers to obtain comprehensive and timely key information about the legality and standardization of merchants' operations (Ge, 2025).

Compared with traditional cooking methods, pre-made dishes are more likely to be contaminated by microorganisms, making it difficult for their quality to meet the standards. Notably, excessive nitrite content has become a common problem for many industrially processed dishes (Tang, 2023). The information about pre-made dishes is opaque. Consumers have no way of knowing where the raw materials come from, and the specific processing and production process is not disclosed. This makes it

difficult for users to clearly understand the quality of pre-made dishes.

At the same time, the environment of takeout kitchens is also not transparent. Among 100 selected survey respondents, as high as 67.94% of consumers pointed out problems with the delivery safety of takeout food. In addition, 84.8% of consumers expressed doubts about whether the takeout they ordered had been contaminated (Li, 2024). The poor hygiene conditions, simple facilities and equipment that do not even meet the required standards undoubtedly pose a serious threat to food hygiene and safety. And in the whole process, there are obvious loopholes in platform supervision, which fails to effectively ensure the standardization of merchants' operations and the safety and reliability of food.

3.2 User Order Issues and Liability Disputes between Users and Riders

Problems of user operation errors and system interaction are manifested in two aspects. On the one hand, during the order-placing process, consumers may accidentally select incorrect dish specifications, flavors, etc. due to reasons such as operating too quickly or unclear interface design. On the other hand, the address-positioning function of the Meituan Takeout APP may be inaccurate, or consumers may make typos when manually entering the address. The system fails to effectively remind users to confirm key information when placing an order.

The order volume of Meituan Takeout is extremely concentrated during peak hours. In order to complete more orders within the specified time, riders may drive at high speeds or take shortcuts in complex road conditions, resulting in delivery delays or damaged food. In addition, severe weather such as heavy rain and snow will seriously affect traffic conditions, increasing the difficulty of riders' deliveries and prolonging the delivery time. Some riders regard food delivery as a transitional job and may lack professional delivery skills training. For example, they do not take reasonable fixing measures when placing food, resulting in the food shaking and being damaged during transportation (Zhu, 2025). At the same time, the platform's daily management of riders is not strict enough. It fails to promptly correct and punish violations during the delivery process, allowing some bad behaviors to continue.

4 PATH AND MECHANISM

4.1 Optimize the Review Process and Establish a Dynamic Qualification Information Update Mechanism

Introduce an intelligent review system. In addition to the existing OCR technology, use artificial intelligence algorithms to deeply analyze qualification documents. Traditional information - extraction technology has limitations in functionality and cannot fully meet the requirements. In contrast, artificial-intelligence-based technology shows significant advantages and is expected to provide a more comprehensive solution. From the perspective of automatically extracting useful information from unstructured documents, artificial intelligence methods have great potential and can more efficiently and accurately extract key content (Baviskar, 2021). For example, by comparing with standard qualification templates in big data, it can identify problems such as document tampering and information gaps, improving the accuracy and efficiency of reviews.

Establish a dynamic qualification information update mechanism. The platform regularly (such as monthly) pushes qualification-information-update reminders to merchants, requiring them to confirm and update relevant information. For merchants that fail to update in a timely manner, measures such as warnings and restricting some business permissions are taken.

Consumers are not influenced by different certificate levels when it comes to protecting themselves from food - borne diseases. Therefore, an improvement plan should be launched to clarify the significance of these certificates (Kim and Choi, 2021). Establish data connections with the industrial and commercial registration, food - supervision, and other systems of relevant government departments to obtain real-time information on changes in merchants' qualifications and automatically synchronize it to the platform, ensuring that the merchant-qualification information seen by consumers is always the latest and most accurate.

4.2 Optimize the User Order-Placing Process and Information Confirmation Mechanism

Improving the order-placing interface design of the Meituan Takeout APP. Adopt a more concise and clearer layout, highlight key information of dishes

such as flavors and specifications, and add a pop-up window for secondary confirmation before consumers click to place an order. This allows them to check the order details again to reduce order-information errors caused by operation mistakes.

Improving the address-positioning and error-correction function. Use high-precision map technology to improve positioning accuracy. At the same time, after consumers enter the address, the system automatically associates and prompts similar addresses for easy selection of the correct address. On the order-submission page, clearly display the address information and provide an address -error-correction entry for consumers to modify in a timely manner.

4.3 Optimize Feedback Channels

Set a "One - Click Feedback" button in a prominent position on the home page of the Meituan Takeout APP. After clicking, a list of common problem types such as "Merchant Issues", "Rider Issues", "Order Issues", and -Food-Safety Issues will pop up directly. After consumers select the problem type, they will automatically jump to the corresponding detailed feedback page to fill in the specific situation and demands, simplifying the feedback process.

Use artificial-intelligence voice - recognition technology to add a voice - feedback function to the APP. Consumers can describe problems through voice, and the system automatically recognizes and generates feedback content, which is then submitted to the platform's customer service, improving the feedback efficiency. This is especially convenient for use in scenarios where typing is inconvenient.

At the same time, the feedback-response speed should also be improved.

Increase investment in building the customer - service team and introduce an AI evaluation mechanism. Artificial intelligence has been used to predict the judgment results of certain cases, model and design cases to produce specific results (Kufakwababa, 2021). Especially during peak-order hours, ensure there is sufficient computing power to handle consumer feedback in a timely manner. Use chatbots for customer service. By taking advantage of chatbots, encourage positive interaction with customers. Researchers agree that from the perspectives of both companies and consumers, the use of chatbot technology brings both benefits and challenges. For companies, the main benefits include cost reduction, time savings in customer-service tasks, and the ability to serve multiple customers simultaneously. At the same time, for consumers, the benefits include being able to obtain customer service

around the clock, allowing them to ask questions at any time, thus improving customer satisfaction (Nicolescu and Tudorache, 2022).

Finally, the Meituan platform should improve the compensation mechanism.

Introduce a consumer-loss assessment mechanism. When handling consumer feedback, customer-service staff assess the actual losses of consumers based on their descriptions and provide evidence, including but not limited to impaired dining experiences, wasted time, and additional expenses. Based on the assessment results, on the basis of the standard compensation plan, flexibly adjust the compensation method and amount to better compensate for consumers' losses and enhance consumer satisfaction. For example, if a consumer seeks medical treatment due to eating spoiled food provided by a merchant, in addition to refunding the meal fee, the platform will provide corresponding economic compensation based on medical-expense vouchers and seriously punish the merchant (China Research Network,2024).

5 CONCLUSION

Problems at the merchant, user, rider, and competition levels of Meituan Takeout are intertwined, severely restricting its development. Solving these problems can not only improve user satisfaction, merchant loyalty, and rider sense of belonging but also enhance the platform's ability to resist competition risks and stabilize its market position. Since the rise of the takeout industry, every key stage of its development has been closely associated with strict supervision and management measures. Whenever new policies and regulations for the takeout industry are introduced by regulatory authorities, on social platforms with a large user base like Weibo, they will quickly trigger enthusiastic discussions among netizens. These positive regulatory actions have greatly improved the transparency of the takeout industry's operations and effectively enhanced the public's confidence in the safety of takeout food. This paper uses the methods of literature research and case analysis to analyze the Meituan Takeout platform, summarizes the problems existing in Meituan Takeout in terms of merchant qualifications, information about pre-made dishes, the takeout kitchen environment, user orders, and liability disputes between users and riders. It further elaborates on the specific manifestations of these problems, such as low transparency of merchant qualifications, insufficient publicity of review information and lagging update of changes, unclear

sources of raw materials and opaque processing processes for pre-made dishes, poor hygiene conditions and sub-standard facilities in takeout kitchens with loopholes in platform supervision, user operation errors and system-interaction problems, and the impact of peak hours, severe weather, riders' skills, and platform management on deliveries. In response to these problems, this paper proposes improvement strategies such as optimizing the review process and establishing a dynamic qualification-information update mechanism, optimizing the user order - placing process and information-confirmation mechanism, and optimizing feedback channels, aiming to ensure food safety and consumers' rights and interests and promote the prosperous development of the takeout industry. In terms of future prospects, it is expected that the takeout industry can achieve more healthy and sustainable development under the background of continuous improvement of supervision and continuous optimization of platforms, providing consumers with higher-quality and safer services. Follow-up should continuously pay attention to the problem-solving effects and dynamically adjust strategies according to market changes.

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