

Original Paper

Discursive Construction of Delivery Workers in *China Daily*

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Abstract

This article introduces a corpus-based critical discourse analysis to explore how this linguistically-oriented approach can be a helpful complement to the studies of news discourse and beyond. It demonstrates how to use this approach to examine how China Daily constructs the image of delivery workers between pre-2020 and post-2020. It is achieved by analysis of keywords and collocational network of delivery as well as some of its concordances. Findings show that the image of delivery workers in China Daily has a shift during the two periods, mainly turning the negative into the positive, which helps the public have a better understanding of this occupation and promote their social integration.

Keywords

Discourse analysis, delivery workers, corpus, China Daily

1. Introduction

Spearheaded by Alibaba, the annual November 11 event, a 24-hour extravaganza enables consumers in China and beyond to access discounted products on Alibaba's portfolio of online sales platforms, including its Taobao marketplace and Tmall platform. Logistics is one of the essential factors in the development of online shopping, whose rapid advance has also driven the speed of the express industry. Therefore, the ever-evolving development of China's express industry not only continues to promote the prosperity of e-commerce and logistics, but also plays an indispensable role in improving residents' consumption demand and increasing social employment.

Delivery workers are a new type of employment group emerging in this platform economy, who are engaged in the parcel collection and parcel delivery, customer relationship maintenance, and business promotion of express delivery. There are data released by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China on *the National Recruitment Ranking of 100 Occupations Larger than Job Seeking*, showing that delivery worker has been in the top 10 of the most lacking jobs for three consecutive years. To help the public have a better understanding of delivery workers, this article

does a corpus-based critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore how the image of delivery workers is discursively represented in a Chinese mainstream newspaper published between 2006 and 2022.

2. Literature Review

CDA originated from critical linguistics, aiming at analyzing the relationship between discourse and social context, and revealing the hidden ideology in language use, especially in news discourse, which has established itself as an interdisciplinary paradigm characterized by problem-oriented principle (Wodak, 2001). Compared with traditional discourse analysis methods, CDA not only focuses on describing and analyzing the linguistic features of discourse, but also more on combining the linguistic dimension with the socio-cultural dimension, which inevitably can be easily combined with other humanities and social disciplines, such as sociology, communication and political science, and thus has an interdisciplinary nature, which means that the diversity of its research factions (Baker et al., 2008). News is a reflection of social reality, and language is the medium of communication in social contexts. The introduction of CDA in the 1990s deepened the study of modern news discourse. Some scholars have outlined seven linguistic strategies for news discourse analysis, among which the combination of critical discourse analysis and corpus analysis makes it easier to find out the correlation between the linguistic forms of news texts and their functions and meanings from a qualitative and quantitative point of view (Bell, 2006). Previous studies related to delivery workers mainly focus on the two topics—how to optimize the last-mile delivery and the difficulties (Ali et al., 2021; Dai et al., 2023) of delivery workers' survivals and development (Liang & Liu, 2020; Wang & Shao, 2018).

It has been found that many scholars at home and abroad have made great contributions to the development of CDA, both practically and theoretically. However, the research material selected for CDA is partial and incomplete, so there are still some criticisms of CDA, and much less is known about the discursive characteristics and construction of delivery workers in news discourse. Although there are many studies related to CDA, relatively few studies have been conducted using corpus methods, especially on the discourse of delivery workers in news discourse. Therefore, combined with the corpus-based CDA, this study is aimed at exploring the discursive characteristics of the reports on delivery workers from the perspective of corpus linguistics more systematically and more scientifically.

3. Method

This study collects all the articles containing delivery worker in *China Daily* from 1 January 2006 to 31 December 2022, with a total of 2,192 articles, aiming to investigate how the media discourse constructs the image of delivery worker over two periods and the reasons behind it.

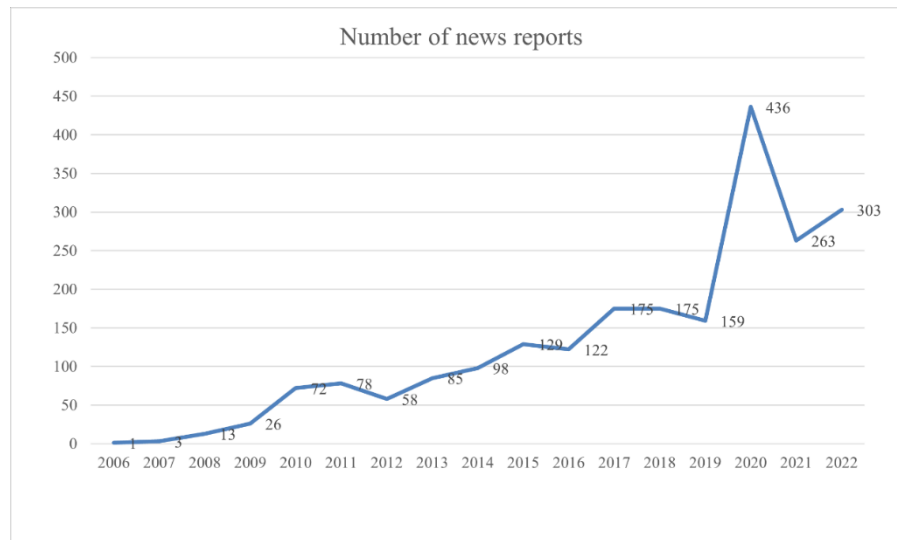


Figure 1. Number of News Reports on Delivery Workers

Figure 1 shows the number of news reports on delivery workers from 2006 and 2022. Clearly, it can be seen that the coverage of delivery workers was sporadic before 2010, and started to trend upwards in 2010 until the first peak in 2020, and although it has since slowed down and trended upwards again, the number of reports for the whole year in 2021 and 2022 is still higher than it was before 2020.

There is a strong link between this trend and the events taking place. At the beginning of 2020, a sudden outbreak of novel coronavirus ravaged China. This epidemic is a major public health emergency that China has encountered since the establishment of New China, with the fastest transmission speed, the widest range of infections, and the greatest difficulty in prevention and control and it is the most serious infectious disease pandemic to occur worldwide in a century. The group of delivery workers played an irreplaceable and significant role during and after the epidemic, which can account for the further attention by media and the public. Therefore, this study divides these reports into two sub-corpora: the Corpus of Delivery Workers before 2020 (2006-2019) and the Corpus of Delivery Workers after 2020 (2020-2022). The following table presents the general information about the two corpora.

Table 1. General Information of the Two Corpora

Data source	The corpus before 2020	The corpus after 2020
Number of texts	1,194	1,002
Number of tokens	935,490	892,764
Number of types	37,313	33,225

As shown in the above Table, 1,194 and 1,002 pieces of news reports on delivery workers from *China Daily* are collected respectively, and thus two corpora about delivery workers are built. And data of tokens and types in both corpora are close to each other, which adds credibility to this comparative study. The corpus data is crucial, providing an entry point for the interpretation of CDA, and CDA theory is used to explain these ideologically significant linguistic phenomena reflected in the corpus (Baker, 2006). Therefore, this study borrows two corpus tools—WordSmith Tool 6.0 (Scott, 2014) and LancsBox (Brezina et al., 2015)—to further explore and compare the discursive construction of delivery workers from both quantitative view and qualitative view.

4. Keywords Analysis

In order to observe the thematicity of *China Daily*'s reports on delivery workers, we used CROWN (Xu & Liang, 2011) as the reference corpus, and obtained keywords from both corpora through WordSmith Tools 6 (Scott, 2014) (see Table 2 and Table 3). Keywords are not high-frequency words in the corpus, but words with a relatively high frequency of reproduction compared to the reference corpus, and the higher their thematic nature, the more helpful it is to reflect the focus information of the corpus content (Scott, 2010). By conducting corpus analysis on keywords and words related to them, some discourse information of the text can be revealed, such as macroscopic semantic structure, topic, and theme. In other words, these particular words identified in the corpus are of great significance in revealing people's perceptions of things (Qian & Tian, 2011). Taking this as a starting point, by using Wordsmith 6.0, Crown Corpus serves as the reference corpus and the following table is about the top 30 lexical keywords in the Corpus of Delivery Workers before 2020 (2006-2019).

Table 2. Top 30 Lexical Keywords before 2020

Rank	Keywords	Keyness	Rank	Keywords	Keyness
1	China	9781.44	16	growth	1075.01
2	delivery	7190.52	17	sales	1071.59
3	Chinese	4404.28	18	cities	1063.05
4	said	4323.19	19	rural	1050.83
5	online	2594.73	20	people	1036.17
6	express	2304.89	21	Alibaba	968.33
7	workers	2236.53	22	products	817.81
8	logistics	1884.30	23	goods	805.10
9	commerce	1763.86	24	rights	786.94
10	market	1738.32	25	sector	774.60
11	companies	1633.57	26	shopping	764.73
12	billion	1419.27	27	parcels	762.77

13	services	1401.93	28	migrant	705.40
14	industry	1193.98	29	customers	677.76
15	development	1168.18	30	international	642.60

As is demonstrated in Table 2, the statistics clearly shows that the words *China, delivery, Chinese, online, express, workers* have higher keyness, and the words *logistics, commerce, market, companies, services, industry, development* have a relatively higher keyness, which present the background and the media focus before 2020. In addition, there are some words with a comparatively low keyness, containing *Alibaba, products, goods, rights, sector, shopping, parcels, customers* and so on. In the first 20 years of the 21st century, due to the rapid development of the Internet and e-commerce enterprises, online shopping became one of the important consumption methods for the general public, and delivery workers, who are responsible for the timely and accurate delivery of express mail, parcel, products and other items entrusted by customers to their destinations, also became one of the occupational groups that people frequently contact in their daily lives. Thanks to the development opportunity, micro and small businesses and express service industries have seized the opportunity of the new trend to keep pace with the 21st century. The following samples are extracted from the reports of delivery workers before 2020.

Sample 1: Online shopping, a sector with sales of 513.1 billion yuan or 3 percent of the total retail sales in China last year, has created half of the demand of express services and **made China the world's third-largest express delivery market**, trailing the United States and Japan. (November 23, 2011)

Sample 2: The market value of China's express delivery market - **the fastest-growing segment of the postal sector** - is expected to reach 400 billion yuan by 2020. (December 31, 2013)

Sample 3: Every day in China, about 16,500 new enterprises are established, and 40,000 people find new jobs in towns and cities. **China now has the world's largest express delivery service market**, employing more than 3 million people, who send everything from meals to fridges around the country. (October 2, 2019)

It can be implied from the above examples that it has taken China less than a decade to make the great leap from third place to first place in the global express delivery market. All of those numbers displayed that logistics industry was at the high-speed development of economy period. A closer look across the three examples indicates that in the second decades of 21st century, China's e-commerce industry has greatly contributed to the development of the courier service industry, which has contributed to the rapid and high-quality development of the economy. The booming express industry has not only brought convenience and efficiency, but also created a large number of employment opportunities for the society, especially the occupation of deliver workers, and thus benefited the public's livelihood. In addition to concentrating on their own work, delivery workers began to play other parts in the society since 2020. Table 4.2 is about the top 30 lexical keywords in the Corpus of Delivery Workers after 2020 (2020-2022).

Table 3. Top 30 Lexical Keywords after 2020

Rank	Keywords	Keyness	Rank	Keywords	Keyness
1	delivery	6517.83	16	residents	1434.91
2	China	6142.09	17	measures	1405.95
3	said	4454.74	18	development	1319.29
4	covid	3920.37	19	people	1202.25
5	Chinese	3429.04	20	commerce	1153.34
6	province	3376.63	21	medical	1141.57
7	workers	3271.62	22	express	1082.18
8	online	2252.66	23	market	1077.51
9	epidemic	2188.53	24	companies	952.11
10	pandemic	2101.67	25	orders	939.90
11	outbreak	2093.25	26	city	934.74
12	Wuhan	2044.27	27	supply	917.16
13	coronavirus	1637.67	28	industry	885.82
14	services	1527.77	29	enterprise	884.36
15	logistics	1480.22	30	production	834.47

It can be found that the words *deliver*, *China*, *Chinese*, *workers*, *online* still have higher keyness. Except those same words, attention also needs paying to other words carrying higher keyness, including *covid*, *province*, *epidemic*, *pandemic*, *outbreak*, *Wuhan*, *coronavirus*, *services* and *logistics*, which are closely related to the background of that time and accordingly the context in which couriers work has changed.

Sample 4: For days, the streets of **Wuhan**, capital of Hubei province, and **epicenter of the novel coronavirus outbreak**, have **been deserted**... While the majority of residents have opted to remain at home, people such as Yuan Shuang are doing their bit to ensure that the city of 11 million people does not come to a complete halt. **Workers at logistics companies** such as Best Freight as well as JD and Suning's delivery branches have also been **risking their health to transport supplies from outside Wuhan**. (February 7, 2020)

Sample 5: The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has dealt **a heavy blow to service industries in Asia-Pacific countries**, with sectors such as tourism, catering, **express delivery** and retail hardest hit. Apart from providing direct financial subsidies to help these sectors survive, governments in some countries have been proactively guiding local enterprises and labor forces to develop new business approaches and skill shifts to adapt to the "new normal" of this difficult time. (July 11, 2020)

As can be learnt from Sample 4, Wuhan received a very large amount of attention in the early stage of the epidemic. At the beginning of the epidemic, the whole city was as silent as if it had come to a standstill. After the outbreak of the new crown pneumonia epidemic, a number of courier companies suspended the

work of receiving and dispatching. But there were still couriers like Yuan Shuang, who sent protective materials to hospitals, transported vegetables and daily necessities for the community, and packed and sent luggage for the evacuated medical team members during the epidemic. Sticking to the front line, they were an important force in the fight against the epidemic in Wuhan.

It can be told from Sample 5 that the pandemic brought about serious influence to many countries and their people, including the through disruption of the order of daily life. With the first place put in people's life safety and health in China, numerous workers, whose work can be dealt with by computer or other online tools, were required to work from home as much as possible. However, the outdoor service of logistics during the hard time made delivery workers more difficult to accomplish their daily work, and thus the Covid-19 pandemic still struck a serious blow to express delivery industry and its workers.

To sum up, it is obvious that delivery workers have various characteristics before and after 2020. In the earlier period, benefiting from the mushroom growth of China's economy and its logistics industry, couriers have the great opportunity to further enter the society and offer their professional services to the public. In recent three years, their functional role has turned into a respectable and admirable one, for the main reason that what they delivered was not only the basic parcels but also daily supplies to those who were suffering a lockdown because of the pandemic. A deeper conclusion is that most delivery workers fully performed their duties and contributed themselves to the development of the society. In order to probe the discursive characteristics of delivery workers, a further exploration will be conducted by observing the collocations.

5. Collocational Network of *Delivery*

Through observing the keywords lists, it can be found that *delivery* has high keyness in both corpora and this word is of significance to couriers' performance in their work. In consequence, the word *delivery* is chosen as the node word and its collocations will be analyzed to explore the discursive characteristics of delivery workers before and after 2020.

LancsBox 6.0 as the analytical tool is applied to make a collocational graph network. For the purpose to ensure the validity of data in both corpora, this study sets span between L3 and R3, MI above 5 and collocation frequency above 10 instances per million words in each corpus. In the collocation graph, the length of lines between each collocate and node word shows the strength of them, and the deeper the round dot is, the bigger the frequency of collocate (Dong & Buckingham, 2018).

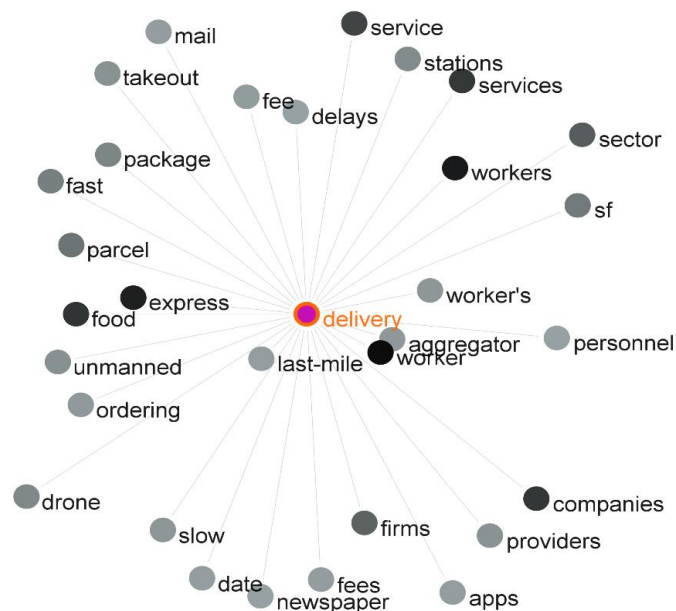


Figure 2. Collocational Network of Delivery before 2020

After the observation of 错误!未找到引用源。 , here comes the conclusion that the lexical words above collocated with *delivery* can be roughly divided into three groups: employment market, occupational difficulty and career prospect. The first group are characterized by these lexical words *aggregator*, *personnel*, *companies*, *firms*, *sf*, *stations*, *parcel*, *services* and *express*, the second group by collocates *last-mile*, *delays*, *package*, *slow* and *fees*, as well as the third group with words *fast*, *unmanned*, *drone* and *apps*. To further understand the collocations and observe their specific context, the following examples are extracted from the Corpus of Delivery Workers before 2020.

Sample 6: To achieve these goals, the Ministry of Commerce will integrate resources to enhance the ability of rural areas **to upgrade their infrastructure facilities and market access channels**. Express delivery companies such as SF Express, YTO Express and China Postal Express and Logistics **have built more than 50,000 service centers and depots in rural areas**, covering 56.8 percent of the nation's villages and towns. The Chinese government has pledged to create more than 10 million urban jobs and to ensure that the registered urban unemployment rate does not rise above 4.5 percent this year, according to the Government Work Report unveiled in March. (June 13, 2015)

In Sample 6, with the support of national government departments and related policies, the express delivery industry is thriving. In order to accelerate the construction of rural infrastructure and connect its market access, the major courier companies actively expand employment opportunities and create rural courier network, which has eased the pressure on the job market.

Sample 7: Greater supervision of the industry is also urged, after postal authorities canceled the licenses of 116 couriers in the past year **for allegedly losing mail and poor sorting**. Such complaints plague China's fragmented but booming express delivery industry, where **delay, damage and outright loss of packages** continually erode operators' reliability and reputations. (January 25, 2013)

In Sample 7, postal authorities have taken action to punish part of couriers and improve the logistics industry. Some complaints about delay, damage and outright loss of packages exerted an influence on both deliverymen and their companies. It is clear that once a package is on the road to its destination, it becomes vulnerable to even more unfortunate events. Delivery workers can experience delays due to circumstances like slow traffic, road closures, or difficult drop-offs. Even with excellent packaging, there's always the risk of item loss or damage while in transit. Traffic accidents, worker errors, and other unexpected circumstances can prevent packages from arriving safely, which will pose an underlying threat of responsibility and reputation to the couriers and this sector.

Sample 8: Chinese engineers soon will have a world-record-holding product to offer to express delivery companies: **the largest civilian drone**. Engineers at Beihang Unmanned Aircraft System Technology, a part of Beihang University in Beijing, are designing a drone that will be able to **fly 1,500 kilometers carrying 1 metric ton of cargo**. They plan to finalize their design before year's end and construct a prototype in 2019 for test flights scheduled to start in 2020. Mass production will begin if test flights are successful, and **a drone-based delivery network is expected to take shape around 2025**, said Zhang Shuo, chief designer at the Beihang technology company, in an exclusive interview with China Daily. (Ma 31, 2018)

In Sample 8, the rapid development of the courier industry has driven the professional difficulties of the courier gradually into the public eye. China's technology sector and engineers are committed to developing efficient, time-saving and labor-saving equipment to help couriers solve the last-mile delivery challenge. Within the next decade, courier work based on drone operations may bring great convenience to both couriers and receivers.

From what have been analyzed, we can learn that before 2020, the profession of courier is an emerging one, with both opportunities and challenges. The following figure is about the collocational network of *delivery* after 2020.

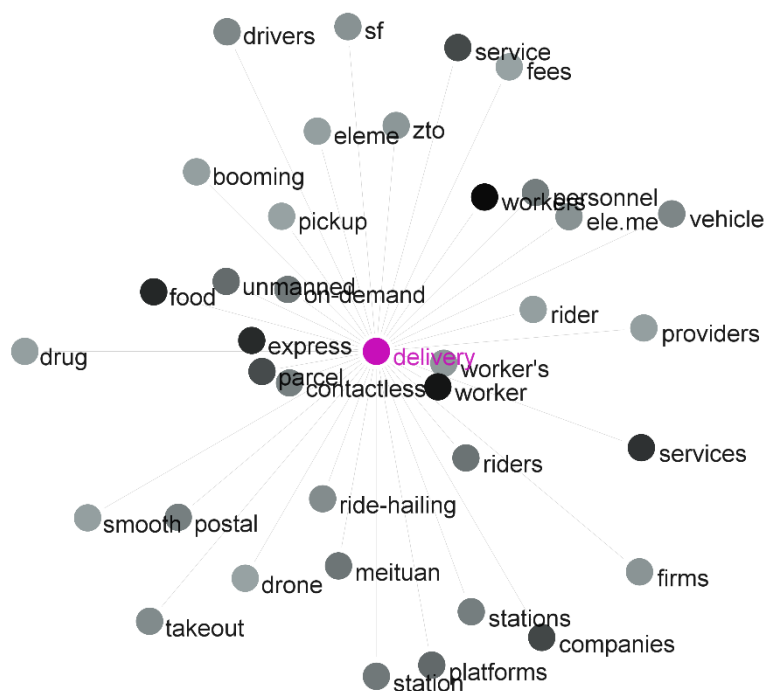


Figure 3. Collocational Network of delivery before 2020

As shown in Figure 3, it can be learned that after 2020, the collocates of delivery are different from those before. The salient collocates in the graph above are *workers*, *on-demand*, *unmanned*, *contactless*, *pickup*, *food*, *drug*, *sf*, *zto*, *eleme*, *meituan* and other words. Combine with the special background since 2020, we can sum up: (1) The words *on-demand*, *unmanned*, *contactless*, *pickup* highlight the change of logistics characteristics, including delivery method and delivery requirement, meaning that deliverymen shoulder more important obligations and responsibilities during this period. (2) The words *food*, *drug*, *takeout* suggest that apart from riders shipping those living materials in food delivery sectors like Ele.me and Meituan, couriers from express delivery companies, such as SF and ZTO, participate in the fight against the Covid-19. Several examples are shown below for enhancing our comprehension.

Sample 9: Chinese e-commerce and delivery or courier companies are fast embracing **contactless delivery to meet rising demand** from health-conscious Chinese consumers who find themselves staying indoors mostly due to the novel coronavirus outbreak. Contactless delivery refers to dropping off take-away food parcels or other packages at a designated pick-up spot in residential communities or on office premises, which is considered **a natural evolution of current practices in the courier industry**, and could make the service more efficient and hygienic. Agreed Xiang Feng, vice-president of YTO Express, contactless delivery is **more acceptable to Chinese consumers** and represents **the latest innovation in the country's courier and logistics sector**. (February 19, 2020)

In Sample 9, during the epidemic, courier demand increased rather than decreased. Due to the special nature of the spread of the epidemic, courier companies were quick to introduce no-touch delivery methods to meet the needs of the public. Couriers also actively cooperated with the new delivery policy, so contactless delivery became the best delivery method during the special period.

Sample 10: **One million orders** were delivered on Sunday. **Food, masks and spring clothing** top the list for online shoppers, said Jin Xiang, manager of the Wuhan administration center of ZTO Express, “Express delivery enterprises are **vital for daily life**, and the restoration of our company means normal life is not far away.” Chang Yan from JD Hubei branch said that from Jan 23 to March 19, **JD transported more than 60 million emergency medical supplies**, with a total weight of 30,000 metric tons. **More than 8,000 tons of medical materials and living necessities** from across the country were sent to Hubei. “What we deliver is not only food but hope for people who cannot go outside,” said Wu Hui, a deliveryman in Wuhan who continued working after the lockdown. (March 24, 2020)

Sample 10 tells us that in this fight against the epidemic, everyone is guarding our common home in their own way. The residents of the lockdown zone adhere to the policy of “staying indoors”, which means physical isolation is used to achieve non mobility and minimal contact, minimizing the possibility of potential infected individuals infecting others and reducing the risk of hidden transmission. The couriers are both common people and heroes. In times of crisis, they stepped forward to deliver living and medical supplies to the residents of the lockdown area.

From what have been analyzed, it can be found that after 2020, the work background, working hours, and job responsibilities of delivery workers have all changed, but what remains unchanged is their purpose of serving the people with their own efforts.

In the past 20 years, the consumption level of the people and the support of society have greatly promoted the development of the courier group, while in the past three years, the courier community has fully utilized its professional characteristics and advantages, bringing countless conveniences to the people and society affected by the epidemic.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The finding to emerge from this study is that after discussing the keywords analysis and collocates of *delivery* as well as some typical concordance lines from both corpora, it can be found that before 2020, terms like *commerce*, *market* and *companies* with higher keyness told that delivery workers work in the environment where the express delivery industry develops at a quite high speed, while after 2020, terms like *epidemic*, *outbreak* and *coronavirus* have higher keyness, showing that delivery workers work in an abnormal economic environment which has brought them new chances and challenges.

The rapid development of the express delivery industry inevitably brings some disadvantages to delivery workers, the most prominent of which is the exploitation of deliverymen, including low wages, high work intensity and restricted labor time. Therefore, the problems of large scale but low quality, fast

development speed and insufficient advantages in the express delivery industry are becoming increasingly prominent. High-quality development of the express industry is also the inevitable requirement to follow the laws of economic development. The development of any industry has to go through the process of quantitative change to qualitative change. Express industry development should also follow this law, when the business volume accumulated to a certain stage, must turn to quality improvement. High-quality development of the express delivery industry is to maintain the sustained and healthy development of the express delivery industry is an inevitable requirement, and therefore has a very great practical significance and far-reaching historical significance. To promote the high-quality development of the express delivery industry, it is not only necessary for express delivery enterprises to strengthen self-regulation, but also for the completeness of legal construction and many other aspects. Consequently, the shift in express delivery industry from high-speed development to high-quality development partly impacted on the discursive construction of news reports on delivery workers, in which the image construction of delivery workers roughly turned negative into positive. The slowdown in the nation's economy during the epidemic provided an opportunity to carefully consider the high rate and quality of growth in the delivery industry. High-quality development cannot continue to follow a crude approach to development, but must be problem-oriented to ensure healthy and sustainable development. In addition to improving the quality of service of couriers, more attention should be paid to the protection of the rights and interests of delivery workers.

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