

UAE Motorcycle Delivery Riders: The Perception of the Public.

Almost half of people using food delivery apps think companies could do more to protect their motorcycle riders, while 80 per cent would rather food arrived late than have safety compromised on the roads.

A survey on public satisfaction of the delivery industry was completed by Road Safety UAE, in partnership with Al Wathba Insurance, asking 1,031 people in December for their views on motorcycle couriers.

It found that 58 per cent of people believed riders were well looked after by their employer, but fewer than half (46 per cent) thought delivery couriers were relaxed about their job. Significant changes in the industry have led to better safety, with improved training, mandatory protective equipment and rest stops during summer, but experts say more can be done.

We cannot stop deliveries, as it is an industry on its own, and a lifestyle – but strong action can be taken to improve safety Saleh Jafar, president of Yasa Gulf Road Safety

Motorcycle delivery has been a huge growth market, with more than 124,000 bikes registered in the UAE and 92,000 in Dubai alone, according to the Roads and Transport Authority. Research by RoadSafety UAE found a high satisfaction rate among customers, with 63 per cent of respondents telling the survey they use food delivery apps every day.

Of those asked, 85 per cent said deliveries usually arrived on time and within expectation. Meanwhile, 80 per cent were unconcerned if their delivery arrived two minutes late, and 64 per cent told the survey they would not have a problem if food arrived five minutes late.

However, most food delivery customers were sympathetic towards motorcycle riders, and their daily challenges on the road. “These numbers underline the strong public acceptance of motorcycle deliveries and at the same time, a very high number of delivery customers are happy with the timeliness of the service,” said Thomas Edelmann, founder and managing director of RoadSafetyUAE.

“This is of fundamental importance from a road safety perspective. Considering advertised delivery times of 15 minutes and reported average delivery times of 28 minutes, two to five minutes more time for a delivery rider would mean a lot to them in terms of displaying a more safety-centric riding style. It is important for the well-known delivery brands and their riders to be aware of these customer statements.”

Almost two thirds tip riders

The generosity of customers was also reflected in survey results, as 62 per cent said they tipped their rider. And when asked about the interaction of road users with delivery riders, 44 per cent said delivery riders seemed to be in a hurry, but fewer than one in four said delivery riders drove aggressively or were a nuisance on the roads.

“We wanted to elevate the discussion about the behaviour of motorcycle riders from anecdotal evidence to a fact-based and well researched approach,” said Muralikrishnan Raman, chief financial officer at Al Wathba Insurance.

“We are a very analytical and numbers-based organisation and we saw it within our corporate DNA to team up with RoadSafetyUAE to jointly work on this highly debated area, as the convenient delivery by motorcycle became part of our everyday life and we all can relate to it one way or another.”

Convenience and technology have combined to contribute to a global shift in the way people eat meals. In 2021, Deloitte research tracked the growing appeal of food deliveries in the US, with the 2020 figure of 53 per cent of people preferring to order food online rising to 64 per cent in 2021.

The surging success of food delivery platforms was mirrored in the largest Gulf technology IPO launch in 2024 of Talabat Holding, the Middle East division of Germany's Delivery Hero, raising Dh7.5 billion (\$2.04 billion) through stock shares. Typically, delivery riders are paid per drop, adding pressures to make as many as possible within shift patterns to maximise profits. Regional road safety experts said increasing delivery fees or paying a basic salary could help reduce risk-taking on the roads.

“This issue is a long-running debate, as food delivery in Dubai has grown out of proportion with many companies eager to increase their profits,” said Saleh Jafar, president of Yasa Gulf Road Safety, a think tank focused on injury prevention and education campaigns.

“The circumstances of the drivers have always been a big concern across the country, and remains so irrespective of any new research. We must increase the fee for the drivers, as they remain very low, and that's why they are always in a hurry to deliver as many orders as they can.”

Mr Jafar said zoned areas, with more restrictions on where restaurants can deliver, could reduce the number of accidents involving delivery riders. Dark kitchens, or cloud kitchens, have gone some way to addressing those concerns.

The highly efficient production units do not have a storefront, so are optimised for delivery and located in areas with easy access to multiple residential districts. But as Dubai continues to grow at pace, Mr Jafar said more could still be done to reduce the distance riders have to travel.

“If you are in Barsha, you should only be able to order food from restaurants in Barsha,” he said. “This would mean delivery riders would not be able to collect food from restaurants in City Walk and put a driver through a 30 minute drive on Sheikh Zayed Road, for example.

“We cannot stop deliveries, as it is an industry on its own, and a lifestyle – but strong action can be taken to improve safety.”

Delivery rider deaths

Of all UAE road accidents recorded in 2023, there were 42 deaths involving motorcycle riders, and a further 1,020 recorded injuries, according to the Ministry of Interior. At Saudi German Hospital on Sheikh Zayed Road, doctors say they are treating up to 20 motorcycle delivery riders every month.

“This is the normal rate every month,” said Dr Ahmed Kamal Makhoul, an intensive care specialist at the hospital. “Mostly these delivery boys are having treatment for brain injuries, but also for long bone damage, so in their legs and arms. Of these 15 or 20 cases we get each month, two or three will die.”

A senior figure from food delivery firm Deliveroo said the well-being of “our riders, customers and partners” is at the heart of everything the company does. “We continuously work closely with local authorities to introduce initiatives to enhance road safety and rider support,” said Yazan Aburaqabeh,

director of operations at Deliveroo Middle East.

“Our efforts include comprehensive onboarding practical and theoretical safety training, improved protective gear, and partnerships with restaurants to provide resting stations and refreshments to riders.” The company also provides cooling vests and breathable uniforms to riders during the hot summer months, he added.

The National also contacted food delivery firms Careem and Talabat but neither company issued a statement.

