

# Better understanding and not just “an app” needed to improve public transport

When I started my vacation work at the CSIR, I was asked what innovation would be necessary to improve public transport. I immediately said we need apps for a number of interventions. At the top of the list was an app for people with disabilities. I also indicated that throwing the book at minibus taxi operators would go a long way to improving services. However, I was short on specifics.



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In order to fill in the missing detail, I was asked to carry out an ethnographic investigation entailing the life of a minibus taxi driver, as well as that of a person living with a disability. Here I only relate the story concerning lived experience of a taxi driver. The story of me using various public transport modes in a wheelchair or blindfolded are for another day.

I wanted to understand why taxi drivers drive the way they do, why they skip red traffic lights, and why some are aggressive towards customers. I also wanted to know if they were aware of these behaviours.

I started searching for a minibus taxi driver with whom I could spend several days, from the time they wake up in the morning, to the time they call it a day. Thabo\*, a driver based in Mamelodi, agreed and for two days I arrived at his house very early in the morning, drove with him throughout the day, ate what he ate, and joined in conversations he had with other drivers.

## LIVED EXPERIENCE OF A MINIBUS TAXI DRIVER

Thabo typically wakes up at 03:00 and starts his working day by 04:15. He doesn't

eat breakfast at home. Instead, he grabs tea and fat cakes (magwinya) when he arrives at the taxi rank while waiting for his chance to get a passenger load. If he doesn't get an opportunity to grab tea and fat cakes at the rank, he will only get to eat breakfast at around 09:30 when it is no longer busy.

When he leaves his house in the morning he starts working immediately, collecting people along the way who are headed to the taxi rank, free of charge. Every driver in the Mamelodi Taxi Association does the same. I found this to be a kind gesture by the drivers and the association at large because it is very dark during those early hours and likely unsafe.

At the taxi rank there would be about twelve lines of taxis, each made up of ten taxis, in what is called a “bumper to bumper” line-up. The first taxi to get a load will be the one that got to the rank first, followed sequentially by the rest. While waiting for earlier taxis to fill up, those not in the line take note of the vehicle immediately ahead of them to secure a spot to come back to, and then roam around, collecting and bringing passengers to the taxi rank. Once the first taxi gets a load of passengers and departs, the eleventh taxi joins the queue to maintain the ten taxis per line formation. The first batch of taxis (the ones that are first in line) are dispatched at exactly 05:00 with passengers.

As passengers are being loaded into the taxi, there are often about four to six



people left after the taxi is full who don't want to be left behind. They forcefully overload the taxi in order to depart as early as possible. When the driver tells them to go to the next taxi so that the vehicle is not overloaded, they just look at him and don't respond. When the other passengers inside the vehicle appeal to them to board another taxi, they respond by saying, "will you take me to work?" or, "will you go and work for my kids?".

According to Thabo, the drivers allow overloading because passengers don't listen, and the drivers don't want to waste time arguing. Although the upside of this is that the driver will get more money per ride, the downside is that they must always proactively check for road traffic police and use alternative routes when there is a perceived problem. This inevitably creates delays for passengers and results in higher than necessary fuel consumption.

Thabo departed with his passenger load at approximately 05:15 and soon spotted road traffic officers, necessitating a change in route. At a traffic light in Mamelodi I spotted two taxis driving on the road shoulder to gain quick access through the traffic light. Thabo explained that there are two reasons for this: 1) they are under pressure to collect more people along the way as quickly as possible before other drivers spot them, and 2) they want to be the first to get to the rank so that they secure an early spot in the queue.

I asked Thabo what he thought should be done to resolve this kind of driving behaviour by other drivers and he said he doesn't know. I suggested having a person to reprimand them, but he didn't think it was a good idea because drivers don't listen and usually respond in a disrespectful way. He further explained that they will say "my bra, your taxi is full

and I don't have anything". They would sometimes even ask a driver who is calling them to order to give them money for cashing in at the end of the day.

Thabo arrived at his destination (Constantia Park) around 06:50. At 06:56, he was registering his taxi at Menlyn Taxi Rank to book a spot for later in the afternoon peak. On his way back he bought a R5 newspaper from a vendor at a traffic light on the corner of Lynwood Road and January Masilela Drive. He is a regular customer and buys this newspaper every day to read while he is waiting at the taxi rank.

Thabo's second load was at at Nellmapius Taxi Rank at 07:05. No particular loading sequence was followed, which is generally what happens if there are very few or no taxis at the rank. After the vehicle was full another passenger insisted on getting in and sitting next to



me by the door. Ultimately, the vehicle was overloaded by three people. We encountered road traffic officers again and Thabo decided to drive very close to the car ahead in order to obscure officers' view. He also told the overloaded passengers to hide, myself included. After evading the police officers Thabo told me that the passengers sometimes argue viscerously with the officers if the taxi is stopped, indicating that they don't want to arrive late at work. In such cases the driver just lets passengers do the defence work. En route the driver encountered a congested road section and drove down a gravel section next to the road. He passed all the cars and gained access to the front of the queue.

When we returned to the Nellmapius Taxi Rank at around 08:30 the rank was virtually empty, so Thabo drove around the neighbourhood collecting people to bring to the taxi rank. Every other taxi was doing the same. After five minutes there were enough people at the taxi rank for seven to ten full loads. As the taxis were being loaded, the drivers were fighting about which taxi should be loaded first because some didn't want to "float" in the neighbourhood and bring passengers to the rank. A heated argument ensued and ended when passengers were taken out of one taxi which was not floating to one which was floating. Thabo soon got a full load.

On the way, he realised that one of his tyres was becoming flat. He stopped at a filling station and inflated the tyre, which continued to deflate during the journey. After delivering all passengers he headed to the nearest filling station and I helped him replace the tyre with a spare.

From the filling station he drove to Menlyn Mall, but found that the parking area for taxis was full. He parked on the sidewalk and went to buy food at a nearby stall. It was 10:30 and he was having his first full meal of the day – pap and beef stew with a can of Coca-Cola. He was not the only driver there and I realised that almost all the drivers come here to buy food. Their food varied from beef stew to T-bones and chicken, served with pap or rice. The sides included a homemade chakalaka, pumpkin, spinach and beetroot. The cost of a plate that had any type of beef together with the sides and pap or rice was R45, while the chicken option was R35.

After eating Thabo went to park five minutes away at Water Glen Mall. All the taxis that don't have space to park at Menlyn Mall and are not floating park at Water Glen Mall, which is used as a resting place for drivers while they wait for their registered afternoon spots. Thabo slept in the car from around 11:30 to 14:00. Other drivers played card games while some went to a nearby casino to gamble. This is a daily routine for the drivers.

At 14:30 Thabo got a load at the Menlyn Taxi Rank and headed to Mamelodi. On the way, he drove along the median island to avoid being stuck in traffic. By 14:40 the last passenger got off and he decided to go and repair the punctured tyre at an informal vendor under a tree in Mamelodi East, where he says it is cheaper, costing only R30 compared to a tyre shop where he could pay up to R150. He added that the person who patches wheels is much more experienced and reliable because he has been doing it for a long time. Unfortunately, the tyre was too damaged to be fixed and had to be replaced with a new one.

He drove back to Water Glen Mall and registered at 15:52. By 16:20 the new tyre was bought and fitted. Thabo then went straight to Menlyn Taxi Rank because his position on the register was imminent, as confirmed by a queue marshal. At 16:56 his taxi was full. This time around he decided to use the N1 freeway to Mamelodi because all the other routes were congested. Using the freeway meant he was going to pay a toll fee, but he didn't mind. All he wanted was to get to the destination as soon as possible so that, if time allowed, he could go back to Menlyn for another load.

We only arrived in Mamelodi at 18:25, after spending 1 hour and 29 minutes on the road, and Thabo dropped off his last passenger at 19:07. After that, he looked at the traffic and realised it was going to take him another 1 hour and 30 minutes to get to Menlyn. He decided to knock off and arrived home at 19:30, after starting his workday at 03:00.

## THE KEY TAKEAWAYS

I have the following takeaways from this investigation:

- **Road traffic congestion:** Road traffic congestion is costly to minibus taxi drivers, and their illegal manoeuvres

seek to offset this problem. Addressing this would probably require all the drivers to obey the rules of the road as any driver not obeying the rules, and benefitting, appears to trigger the rest to break the rules – a vicious cycle.

- **Cash:** Cash is a basic necessity for drivers to transact within the broader value chain, including buying of meals, newspapers, ad hoc vehicle repairs, and even gambling. Eliminating cash in the industry will likely have an impact beyond the transport system. Flexibility in this regard may be more pragmatic.
- **Survival mode:** Minibus taxi drivers operate in a survival mode. This renders the industry vulnerable to violent outbursts with every systemic shock, for example fuel price and other socio-economic shocks. Therefore, violence in the minibus taxi industry remains an ever-present structural risk.
- **Driver health:** Drivers tend to work very long hours under stressful conditions, including the feeling of being unwanted through the lack of provision of proper ranking facilities in the midst of opulence. The drivers seem to be sacrificing their welfare to provide a basic public service and are underappreciated when doing so. This in turn may be responsible for resentful driver attitudes and feelings of injustice.
- **Cooperation:** Drivers often cooperate with each other to maximise passenger loads. This behaviour results in shared operational costs and maximisation of passengers per trip. Therefore, the business of each driver should not be analysed in isolation.
- **Transport planners:** Transport planners need to empirically understand the operations of the minibus taxi industry in order to formulate responsive solutions. In this regard, planners have to work very closely with the drivers and other critical role players for more context appropriate solutions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the CSIR for this fantastic opportunity, especially Dr Mathetha Mokonyama for the eye-opening experience. I would also like to thank Rika Botha for assisting me with the necessary paperwork and administration needed to successfully conduct the research. □

\* Name changed to protect the driver's identity