

THE SOUTH AFRICA MINIBUS TAXI INDUSTRY AND ITS OPERATORS: WORKING CONDITIONS DURING COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has been impacting the global and local communities in many ways. The combat against the COVID-19 pandemic has required a coordinated effort through engaging public and private service providers in preventive measures. This research paper examines the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the daily lives of South African minibus taxi operators who form private service providers. This is because, the South African minibus taxi industry plays a significant role in both rural and urban public transportation networks, employs a huge number of people and moves enormous sums of money that has a direct impact on the economy. Direct stakeholders within the South African minibus taxi industry include: minibus taxi owners, minibus taxi drivers, and minibus taxi marshals. This research paper reviews the preventive measures from lockdown level 5 to 1 taken by the government that have had an impact on the minibus taxi industry. It employed a qualitative research methodology that used interviews as a tool to collect data on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on stakeholders referred to above. The findings show there were minibus taxis repossessed, loss of wages and employment, a protest, taxi killings, loss of profit sharing, and some minibus taxi owners were forced out of business. Finally, recommendations are made for future research.

Keywords: COVID-19, Minibus taxi industry, Minibus taxi operators, Coronavirus.

1. INTRODUCTION

Everywhere in the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has created unforeseen effects in all sectors of public transport. Most of the effect was due to a decrease in the number of users during this period in most countries. In South Africa, the public transport system is divided into subsidised and non-subsidised modes of public transport. The minibus taxi industry is a non-subsidised mode of public transportation, while the bus and train industries are subsidised modes. Even though the minibus taxi industry is non-subsidised, it is responsible for providing public transport services to a significant number of people in South Africa. According to Fobosi (2021), the minibus taxi industry accounts for 68% of all daily trips made by South Africans every day. This is mainly due to the network flexibility that the minibus taxi industry as a mode of public transportation offers; it is more accessible than trains (rail transport) and, therefore, more intensively used. It is also much faster than the bus services, as it does not operate on a fixed schedule. Despite not completely shutting down during the COVID-19 pandemic as public transport is needed for everyday travel, the South African minibus taxi industry was badly affected. This was after the pandemic deemed public transport everywhere in the world unsafe for the following reasons: people on public transport have to be close to each other, and close contact was

typically considered the main route of transmission with COVID-19; people on public transport are mass gathered, and mass gatherings were considered a root cause to increase the spread of COVID-19; and public transport promotes free travel because it is affordable, and, therefore, it was considered the other route to spread COVID-19 as it promotes unrestricted movement. In this research paper, we will focus on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the South African minibus taxi industry and its operators. Below are the research questions we seek to answer in this research paper:

1. How level 5-1 of COVID-19 pandemic impacted the minibus taxi owners in the South African minibus taxi industry?
2. How level 5-1 of COVID-19 pandemic impacted the minibus taxi drivers in the South African minibus taxi industry?
3. How level 5-1 of COVID-19 pandemic impacted the minibus taxi marshals in the South African minibus taxi industry?

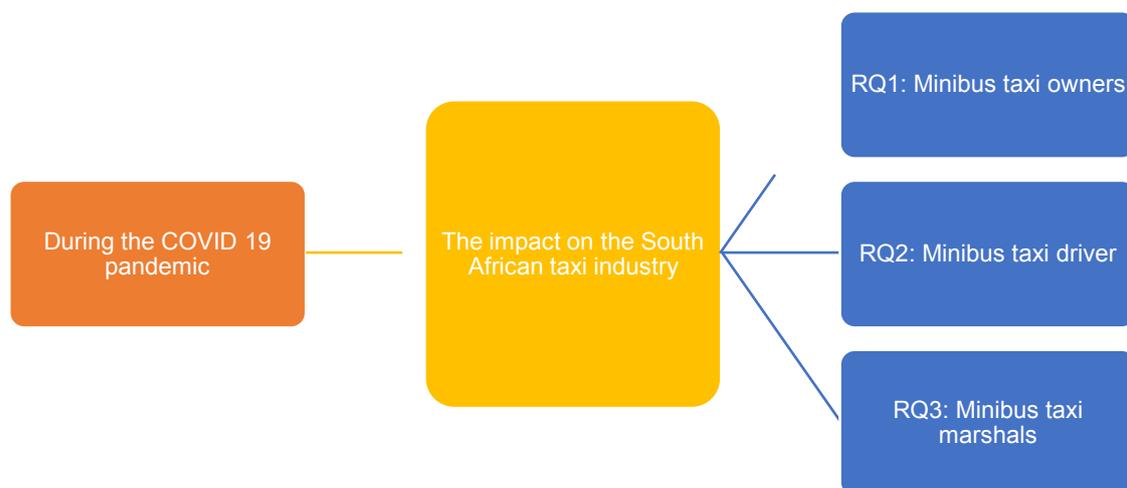


Figure 1: The study design and research questions

The latter research questions will be answered in this research paper that is divided into four sections; in the first section, a body of literature will be explored on COVID-19 and the restrictions made by the South African government. The literature review offered in this section does not omit the understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather organises the central ideas identified in this research paper. This paper contributes to the body of knowledge by reviewing the latter literature. In the second section, researchers discuss the research methodology used. In the third section, the researchers talk about how each operator was affected. In the fourth and last sections, the researchers wrap up the research paper and give more advice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Coronavirus

According to Zhou, Yang, Wang, Hu, Zhang, and Zhang (2020), the current human coronavirus, known as SARS-CoV-2, appeared as a public health issue on December 31, 2019, in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, as a cluster of pneumonia cases. On January 7, 2020, the etiological agent of pneumonia was formally identified as a new coronavirus (Zhu, Zhang, Wang, Li, Yang & Song, 2020). The first fatal case according to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) was reported on January 11, 2020. The latter author

further mentioned that the virus's whole genome sequence was released to the public the next day, whereby confirmed cases outside of Wuhan have been reported from Thailand (13 January 2020), Japan (16 January 2020), Korea, and another Chinese province (19 January 2020), all from people who had visited Wuhan. On January 30, 2020, the Director-General of WHO declared the SARS-CoV-2 outbreaks a public health emergency of international concern. According to Zhou et al. (2020), the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak of a new type of coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, that causes COVID-19 respiratory disease as a global pandemic. Depending on the kind of virus involved, respiratory infections range from mild, self-limiting signs to more severe manifestations (WHO, 2020). Coronaviruses are members of the Corona viridae subfamily, which consists of four genera: Alpha and Beta coronavirus members are found in mammals, while Gamma and Delta coronavirus members are found in birds and some mammals.

The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) and the Middle East respiratory syndrome-related coronavirus (MERS-CoV) are two of the most dangerous coronaviruses that infect people. Many countries have enforced this to limit and restrict virus transmission. But according to the African Academy of Science (2020), by the morning of April 24, 2020, 52 countries in Africa had officially reported cases with a total of 23,500 confirmed cases, 1,100 deaths, and 5,800 full recoveries. As of September 29, 2020, approximately 33,556,252 million cases, 1,006,450 deaths, and 24,881,239 recovered cases have been reported globally. Lastly, Europe and America were highly affected by the virus, as shown by overwhelmed health systems and high death tolls (Worldometer, 2020). As many countries were combating the spread of COVID-19 through lockdown restrictions, the President of South Africa, Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa, declared a 21-day lockdown from March 26 to April 16, 2020. A lockdown in the context of the Republic of South Africa (2020) is an emergency protocol that requires South Africans to stay home for essential purposes. Lockdowns were altered from level 5 to 1, and each level entailed certain restrictions and regulations for the minibus taxi industry. In the table below, the researchers show the period and the restrictions imposed.

Table 1: Public Transport Regulations during lockdown

Lockdown Alert Level	Restriction
Lockdown Alert Level 5 26 March–31 April 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All long-distance and inter-provincial public transport was prohibited; Public transport operations were prohibited except for transporting essential workers, and then only between 05:00 and 10:00 and 16:00 and 20:00. Minibus taxis were not permitted to carry more than 50% of their licensed seating capacity.
Lockdown Alert Level 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Permitted public transport services between 05:00 and 19:00, with a grace period of until 20:00 to drop off passengers. Loading capacity at 70% for minibus-taxis, and 50% for e-hailing and metered taxis. An increasing number of goods were deemed essential, and travel demand increased
Lockdown Alert Level 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minibus-taxis and buses were permitted to resume operations at all hours (still at 70% loading capacity), whereas e-hailing and metered taxis could operate at 50% capacity. Train services were still not operating. On 12 July 2020, the decision was announced that minibus-taxis could be fully loaded for short distances, on condition that risk-mitigation protocols related to masks, vehicle sanitising and open windows were followed.
Lockdown Alert Level 2 18 August–20 September 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All road based transport was permitted to operate at full capacity, and trains could carry a maximum of 70% capacity.
Lockdown Alert Level 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No restriction but passengers must wear masks

Source: Own table adapted from Jennings 2020

Table 1 above shows the restrictions imposed by the government. It is important to note that in alert level 5, the minibus taxi industry was permitted to operate for eight hours a day, from 5 am to 9 am and from 4 pm to 8 pm (Department of Transport 2020). The minibus taxi industry was also not permitted to reach its full capacity. On the issue of capacity, the Minister of Transport set the following rules (SA News 2020):

- A minibus that has a licence to carry 10 passengers is limited to carrying a maximum of seven passengers.
- A minibus with a licence to carry 15 passengers is limited to carrying a maximum of 10 passengers.
- The midi-bus that has a licence to carry 22 passengers is limited to carrying 15 passengers.

The minibus taxi industry did not respond well to the above rules. The South African National Taxi Council (SANTCO) and the National Taxi Alliance (NTA) have joined forces to fight for the taxi industry's demand to carry 100% (SABC News 2020). This was followed by SANTCO's call for a "national peace taxi shut down" demanding their industry relief fund of R1.135 billion rand (SABC News 2020).

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3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

A qualitative research methodology was used in this research paper by means of an interview. In the view of Cresswell (2013), qualitative research methodology focuses on the commonality of life lived within a particular group. COVID-19 was that commonality lived among minibus taxi operators. Furthermore, a cross-sectional research design because it considers a descriptive of the current situation, which in this case is the impact of COVID-19 on minibus taxi operators.

3.2 Research Paper Participants

The demographic profile of the selected participants is shown in the table below.

Table 2: Demographic profile of participant

Participant	Gender	Age	Years within the industry	Position with the industry
Operator 1	Male	45	19	Minibus taxi owner
Operator 2	Male	46	10	Minibus taxi driver
Operator 3	Female	42	15	Minibus queue marshal

The table shows that all the minibus taxi operators are represented in this research paper. It is interesting to know that the participants are aged 42 and above and have been operating in the industry for more than 10 years. This research paper's participant profile is

similar to that of Theron and Ukpere (2021). The latter mentioned study also investigated the impact of COVID-19 on the minibus taxi industry, but the participants were from Johannesburg CBD.

3.3 Data Collection

As latter mentioned this research paper followed a qualitative research methodology in form of an interview. This interview was semi structured to investigate the impact that COVID-19 has had in the minibus taxi operator daily lives. It is also important that a similar research paper on COVID-19 conducted by Theron and Ukpere (2021) also followed that same form of data collection. The questions revolved on the following topics or themes. These themes were findings from:

- Loss of wages and employment.
- Minibus taxis repossessed.
- Taxi killings.
- Loss of profit.
- Affected wellbeing.

3.4 Ethical Consideration

Foieser and Pojman (2012) define ethical consideration as a philosophical subject that deals with moral or professional standards and distinguishes between good and bad behaviour. Moreover, Oates, Kwiatkowski, and Coulthard (2010) defined ethics as rules and norms that describe the circumstances under which research will be carried out. Ethical permission was obtained from the participants. It is also key to note that the minibus taxi operators who are part of the sample were informed through a cover letter that their participation is voluntary, their response will remain anonymous, and they have the right to withdraw at any stage of the focus group interview. Furthermore, the interviews were recorded with the permission granted to researchers.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings in the table below summarises the responses of the 3 participants on how COVID-19 impacted them individual.

Table 3: Responses of participants

Participant	Lockdown Alert Level 5	Lockdown Alert Level 4	Lockdown Alert Level 3	Lockdown Alert Level 2	Lockdown Alert Level 1
Operator 1: Minibus taxi owner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affected well being • Loss of profit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affected well being • Loss of profit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affected well being • Loss of profit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of profit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of profit
Operator 2: Minibus taxi driver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affected well being • Loss of wages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of wages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of wages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of wages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of wages
Operator 3: Minibus taxi marshal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affected well being • Loss of wages 	-	-	-	-

The findings from the table above show that during lockdowns alters 5 and 3, a participant who is a minibus taxi owner lost profit and was also affected emotionally. During lockdown levels 2 and 1, the participants only lost profits. Moreover, this participant excerpted that:

"COVID has forced many of my colleagues out of business and the banks repossessed almost 20 taxis in the association I belong to... business was so bad in some associations that members started killing each other, especially during level 5 and 4."

The findings from the table above show that during lockdowns alter 5 and 4, a participant who is a minibus taxi driver lost wages and also affected wellbeing (emotionally and physically). During the alter level 3 to 1, the minibus taxi driver only lost wages. Moreover, this participant referred to COVID-19 as a disease, not a virus, and excerpted it in the following manner:

"This disease killed us. We did not have money and a lot of people lost their jobs."

The findings from the table above show that during lockdown alter 5, a participant who is a minibus taxi queue marshal lost wages and was also affected emotionally and physically. During lockdown alter level 4–1, the participant indicated that she was not affected. Moreover, this participant excerpted that *"The Department of Roads and Transport in Gauteng took over the cost of paying queue marshals from the association."*

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings show that the COVID-19 pandemic has had different impacts on the minibus taxi operators. All the participants' wellbeing was affected, especially during lockdown level alter 5. It can be said from the findings of the minibus taxi owner that taxi killings, minibus repossessions, and loss of profit were the key impacts on him and other minibus taxi owners. In regards to minibus taxi drivers, it can be said that loss of wages was a key impact. In regards to a minibus queue marshal, it can be said that COVID-19 did not impact them so much as the government subsidized the cost. Even now, post COVID-19, the minibus taxi industry continues to play a vital role in all of South Africa. The researchers recommend the following:

- The government should take over the cost of paying queue marshals.
- The minibus taxi industry should be subsidised to avoid killings.
- In response to the bank repossession of minibus taxis, the researchers recommend that bank interest charges should be regulated by the government and subsidies should be granted.
- The government should also pay damages caused by COVID-19 to minibus taxi drivers as they are now paying taxi relief funds to minibus taxi owners.
- Lastly, the minibus taxi industry should be regulated to avoid taxi killings.

6. DEDICATION

To the late minibus taxi leader of the Vaalwits Taxi Association, Mr. Siphon, who was the voice of the minibus taxi industry, especially in the Vaal region. Mr. Siphon was shot on January 29, 2022. I also dedicate this research paper to all the minibus taxi owners who died due to violence in the minibus taxi industry.

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