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To cite this article: Rich Mallett (02 Apr 2025): Speed traps: on the turbulent logics of the platformed motorcycle, Urban Geography, DOI: [10.1080/02723638.2025.2481841](https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2025.2481841)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2025.2481841>



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Published online: 02 Apr 2025.



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Speed traps: on the turbulent logics of the platformed motorcycle

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ABSTRACT

Motorcycle-taxis are one of the fastest ways to get around Kampala, Uganda, but they are also the most dangerous. Over the past decade, digital ride-hailing platforms have emerged on the city's streets as a self-styled solution to dangerous working conditions and low earnings in the sector, promising a dual transformation of both livelihoods and safety standards. In this article, I draw on an analysis of speed and the forces that shape it to critically explore the ways in which concerted safety initiatives combine with the precarious logics of the platform economy to produce what I term a "speed trap" – a frenetic, incoherent set of circumstances that push and pull informal transport workers in different directions by compelling slowness and recklessness at the same time. As a result, ride-hailing emerges as a risky vehicle for road safety reform and an ambiguous addition to (already) high-risk urban infrastructure.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 February 2025
Accepted 14 March 2025

KEYWORDS

Motorcycle taxis; platforms;
ride-hailing; speed; Kampala

Motorcycle-taxis are one of the fastest and most convenient ways to get around the Ugandan capital, Kampala, but they are also the most dangerous. Though accounting for one-third of all public transport trips taking place within the city, police reports suggest motorcycles were involved in 80% of all road-crash deaths registered in Kampala in 2023 (Nasasira, 2024). Countrywide, it is calculated that five people die on average every day from motorcycle crashes (Nalunkuuma, 2023); the majority of these the operators themselves. Data from the capital's largest hospital a few years back showed that more than 40% of all trauma patients were linked to road traffic incidents involving moto-taxis, known regionally as *boda bodas*, and that treating their injuries consumed at the time nearly two-thirds of the hospital's annual surgical budget (Kigera et al., 2010).

What lies behind these sobering statistics? At one level, Kampala's notoriously congested roads not only cost the city's economy an estimated \$1.5 million each day but also mean that vehicles of all shapes, sizes and powers are in near-constant close proximity to one another (Manwaring & Wani, 2021). Bad road infrastructure exacerbates this problem, creating pinch points throughout the city and potholes the size of "craters"

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(Mwenda, 2023). But what also matters, of course, are the riding behaviors of *boda boda* operators themselves: running red lights, driving on the wrong side of the road and blitzing through intersections are all common sights involving Kampala's moto-taxis, leading to their frequent portrayal in Ugandan media as "killer machines" (Naturinda & Kamoga, 2023) whose "total disregard of the very basic rules of the road" produces "sheer physical chaos" within the city (Khisia, 2018).

While popular explanations for behaviors like these pin the blame on riders' lack of training, discipline and even respect for human life – according to one of the city's former mayors, the "only qualification" needed to operate a *boda* in Uganda is "a high level of fatalism" (Clarke, 2021) – conclusions from the available public health research tell a rather different story. Across the East Africa region, studies repeatedly show that moto-taxi crashes are strongly associated with economic stress and the kinds of practices that emanate directly from this, such as speeding, working long hours and performing high-risk maneuvers (Francis et al., 2023; Kitara & Ikoona, 2022; Siya et al., 2019) – all driven by the desperate, unrelenting need to break even each day in a hyper-competitive labor market. Or as one senior figure at the Ministry for Works and Transport put it to me when talking about the capital's high accident rate, "They are just trying to make money at the end of the day, because of that rent" (interview, February 15, 2022).

Indeed, like informal transport workers in other urban contexts, *boda* riders are compelled to speed by the raw economics of their work (Agbiboa, 2019; Rizzo, 2011). Each day riders must secure and complete enough jobs so they can make enough money to cover their basic expenses and, ideally, generate some profit at the end of it all. Given both the scale of operating costs involved in this work and the forces of oversupplied labor increasingly threatening to erode returns, this is no small deal; and can sometimes give way to the kinds of reckless, unsafe and potentially lethal riding behavior that have come to tarnish the industry, as riders cut literal and metaphorical corners in quick pursuit of the next job.

Ride-hailing experiments in safety reform

In his ethnographic study of microbus drivers in Guatemala City, Kevin Lewis O'Neill (2021) provides an account of speed that is grounded in the daily routines of his participants. Exploring the relationship between drivers and their surrounding urban environment, he talks of the "upward drag of road congestion, poor infrastructure, and human fatigue that inevitably caps their acceleration", and the "downward pull of extortion, which compels them to drive at ever-increasing speeds" (O'Neill, 2021, p. 977). Going fast is what enables drivers to earn enough money to make all the payments necessary not just to stay in business – rent for the vehicle, rent for the route, the cost of fuel, assistants' wages, and food – but also, by paying off the various extortionists who control different parts of the city, to stay alive.

Though the dynamics and the actors are slightly different, O'Neill's ideas of "upward drag" and "downward pull" resonate strongly in Kampala's moto-taxi sector. Riders here experience many of the same forms of upward drag as Guatemala City's beleaguered microbus drivers: interminable congestion, bad roads and fatigue all matter, but so too do periods of slow business when jobs, and therefore the need for speed, are limited. There are also police arrests to contend with, which according to a survey of 370

riders I carried out in February 2022, are experienced on average every three months by riders in Kampala.¹ Also similar are the forces of downward pull, which are likewise rooted in the challenging economics of informal transport work and the ever-present need for speed that precarity compels.

But more than this, what these concepts of velocity also help us understand are the ambiguous, opposing ways in which the advent of platformisation has exerted new “external forces” (O’Neill, 2021, p. 978) upon the bodies and machines that make up Kampala’s vast *boda boda* industry. Over the past decade, digital ride-hailing platforms have emerged on the city’s streets as a self-styled solution to dangerous working conditions and low earnings in the sector, promising to transform the livelihoods of moto-taxi riders whilst raising safety standards for passengers. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Uganda’s ride-hailing pioneer and long-time market leader goes by the apt name of *SafeBoda*.

According to an early interview in CNN with one of SafeBoda’s co-founders, the company was conceived as “a market-based approach to road safety” (in Senthilingam, 2015). In essence, by making digital moto-taxi work pay better than its analogue equivalent – the company has claimed income gains of up to 50%, given riders’ ability to tap into the platform’s network of aggregated demand across the city and therefore secure more jobs throughout the day – the idea is that workers can be financially incentivised to engage in safer riding behaviors. A variant of this holds for the passenger: if the safer app-based option is more affordable, which it routinely is thanks to venture capital-enabled fare subsidies (Brail, 2022) that enable platforms to systematically “undercut prices” for customers (interview, former Uber manager, November 29, 2021), then it makes “market-rational” sense for them to hail online rather than on the street.

In addition to compulsory crash helmet use, many of Kampala’s moto-taxi platforms require riders to undergo some initial road safety training before letting them out onto the streets, whereupon a corporate “code-of-conduct” kicks in that is designed to keep riding behaviors in check. As in other ride-hailing contexts, passengers are given the option of rating their rider’s performance, which means that those who continue to engage in unsafe driving whilst working digitally stand to be rated poorly and hence potentially deactivated; something that happens, a senior manager at Bolt told me, when a rider’s rating repeatedly dips below 4.5 out of 5 stars (interview, November 19, 2021). And then on top of these measures, compliance is sometimes also secured via the deployment of “field agents” to major road intersections, whose task it is to monitor the behaviors of riders in company uniform and discipline them accordingly – a form of in-person rather than in-app management which, despite being largely overlooked in the platform studies literature, is crucial to understanding how localized platforms continue to rely on “human, non-digital” methods of control (Ciulli & Saka-Helmhout, 2024, p. 17).

In their own specific ways, each of these ride-hailing measures seeks to impose new forces of *upward drag* on the “platformed motorcycle” (Cirolia et al., 2024), slowing things down and tempering risk. And, what’s more, they have generally been deemed successful in doing so. In addition to glowing press coverage during the early years, one study carried out in 2017 found that SafeBoda riders were more likely to engage in “safe riding behaviours” than their analogue counterparts, such as wearing a helmet

or not driving towards oncoming traffic (Muni et al., 2020), while wider academic coverage continues to cite the Kampala case as evidence that ride-hailing apps may hold the key to making African moto-taxi sectors a safer place to work and travel (Divall et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022; Temizel et al., 2021).

“It depends on your speed”

While observational data on helmet-wearing and traffic law compliance are useful for scoping out early effects, they do not tell the whole story. Indeed, although participation in safety trainings and adherence to professional codes-of-conduct may help slow digital riders down or deter them from running red lights, at the same time there is a contradiction at the core of the ride-hailing model that pulls in precisely the opposite direction – and which demands a more nuanced understanding of how the platformisation of riders’ livelihoods shapes the everyday nature of *boda* work.

Across the board in Kampala, all ride-hail platforms operate through gig economy arrangements that classify riders as independent contractors rather than employees, thus representing no fundamental transformation of their existing employment status.² Under this model, the livelihood promise of ride-hailing hangs not in the offer of a guaranteed wage but in the *possibility* of higher earnings, with riders effectively trading off lower “per-trip” remuneration (as the app companies depress prices) and new forms of extraction (as corporate rents get mined from each transaction orchestrated via the platform) in exchange for access to aggregated labor demand, in the hope that a greater volume of lower-paid jobs translates into more money.

Crucially, then, this is a promise that only materializes if riders are able to reach and maintain a faster, harder work-rate throughout the day, representing a powerful new form of *downward pull*. As one interviewee put it, “We are like stakeholders [under the company], I can say that. [There is] no basic salary, just commission. So it depends on your speed” (interview, February 11, 2022). What this means in practice is that digital riders must spend more time on the road, completing enough jobs that pay “little money” (interview, October 13, 2021) in order to make the endeavor worthwhile, and less downtime resting or hanging out between trips. Though there is a balance to be struck here, my interlocutor Geoffrey, a seasoned *boda boda* rider himself, summed it up with the following illustrative words: “The app’s point is not for people to get acquainted with each other. It is to keep [them] moving”.

Time and again, Geoffrey’s revealing insight came up in one form or another during conversations with riders. One interviewee, for example, explained that since moving online “I no longer have leisure time as I previously did. The app gets me busy at all times”. When later asked whether he would consider signing up with an e-commerce platform like Jumia, he replied: “I don’t think I can manage [...] Even the speed on which they deliver, you see someone being under pressure” (interview, November 1, 2020). Feeding into this is the gamification of moto-taxi work under platformisation (van Doorn & Chen, 2021), with riders offered the chance to offset low platform pay by hitting bonus-generating trip completion targets – in some cases set as high as 25 per day (interview, SafeBoda rider, November 15, 2021) – thus helping to ensure that workers are kept logged-on for longer and ready for the next “ping”.

Another rider reasoned that although digital opportunities can “increase skills and experience in someone’s career”, at the same time it carried the potential for excessive work: “I think that the traditional way of riding gives a rider peace of mind, since he is the boss of his own and has no pressure from customers. Whereas the digital way of riding overworks the person” (interview, October 14, 2021). Overwork was sometimes also cited by analogue riders as justification for remaining offline – “If you work hard [on the app] you earn much, but you get tired” (interview, October 12, 2021) – as well as other interviewees who stressed that digital pressure resulted not just in bodily fatigue, but “over-use” of one’s motorcycle too (focus group, 9 December 2021).

Speed traps and risky vehicles

It has been well-established in other urban transport contexts that gig economy models encourage and reward speed (Christie & Ward, 2023; Lefcoe et al., 2024). This includes not just how fast a transport operator drives, but also their propensity to run red lights, turn across a busy road or engage in risky driving behaviors more generally. And yet, it is precisely these sorts of factors that underpin the appalling road safety statistics found across East Africa’s moto-taxi industries, driven in turn by a simple if brutal common denominator: economic pressure.

Economic pressure is an affect that Kampala’s platformed moto-taxis know only too well. According to my survey data, those who work through the apps accumulate on average 12% higher *gross* earnings each week relative to their analogue counterparts, reflecting the greater number of jobs that access to the online world unveils. But in order to stay connected to that world they must also shoulder higher operating costs, primarily in the form of: increased mobile data costs (necessary for remaining logged-on); increased fuel costs (necessary to perform more trips); charges for the use of crash helmets and uniforms (which nonetheless remain company property)³; and, crucially, rents extracted by the platform companies (typically in the region of 10–20% per trip). As soon as these extras are factored in, the difference not only completely disappears but almost reverses: on average, digital riders take home 7% less *net* income each week. In short, the platformed *boda* rider works harder, for less.

Current trends in the wider urban economy are only deepening these pressures, for both digital and analogue riders alike. As fuel prices remain high amidst a worsening cost-of-living crisis, the earnings required to break even each day stack up. An ever-increasing supply of labor into the capital’s moto-taxi sector, facilitated in part by the new entry routes that ride-hailing has opened up, further intensifies competition over jobs; something that one Kampala-based study suggests is strongly associated with crashes in the sector (Siya et al., 2019). Meanwhile, increasingly prolific forms of hire-purchase financing, delivered by a new wave of loosely regulated “alternative lenders”, enable riders to one day own the motorcycle they are paying to access but only by eventually charging them, via protracted and stringently enforced weekly instalments, well in excess of the standard market rate – a development that Michaela Collord (2024), writing from Dar-es-Salaam, suggests might be “at least partly to blame when drivers work to exhaustion or speed, all so they can earn enough cash”.

Returning to O’Neill’s generative framework, there is something more than a little jarring about an approach to urban safety reform rooted in the logics of the ride-

hailing platform economy. For these are a frenetic, turbulent set of logics, incentivising slowness and caution on the one hand via a range of managerial techniques whilst structurally compelling speed and recklessness on the other. In doing so, they constitute a “market-based” model that imposes new forces of upward drag and downward pull *at the same time*, pincering informal transport workers in a kind of “speed trap” that pushes and pulls them in different directions, and toward ambiguous road safety conclusions.

To that end, it is perhaps fitting to close with a quote from one of SafeBoda’s first-ever financial backers, the Global Innovation Fund, whose recent assessment of its own investment impact concludes that digital ride-hailing is ultimately “a risky vehicle for implementing society-wide change such as in road safety” (GIF, 2022, p. 4). Or put differently: it seems that platformed motorcycles are not the only risky vehicles currently in motion on the pulsing streets of Kampala.

Notes

1. Fieldwork for this study took place at various points between November 2020 and February 2022, and involved: 112 in-depth, semi-structured interviews; a survey of 370 moto-taxi riders; and roughly six months’ worth of in-person observation.
2. My intention here is not to valorise stable, waged employment as *the* ‘proper job’ (Ferguson & Li, 2018), but simply to underline the absence of any kind of shift in *boda boda* riders’ basic employment status under platformisation.
3. According to SafeBoda’s terms-of-use, while the company “reserve[s] the right to charge the Driver for use of any SafeBoda equipment”, this does not “comprise any arrangement to mean that the ownership of the equipment has transferred to the Driver”.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to the many *boda boda* riders in Kampala who gave their time to participate in this research, as well as to those who helped me implement the work. Many thanks also to Alan Wiig at the journal for his support and encouragement throughout the submission process, and to one anonymous reviewer for their kind and constructive feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author received funding from the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council, which enabled the research on which this article is based to take place.

Research ethics and consent

This study on which this article is based received full research approval from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology on 1 July 2021 [approval no. SS844ES]. Informed consent to participate in the research was obtained verbally before participation.

Data availability statement

The survey dataset generated during and/or analyzed during the current study will soon be available in the UK Data Service's self-deposit data repository (currently in process). The qualitative dataset generated during and/or analyzed during the current study is not publicly available in order to protect the privacy of participants, but some parts of it may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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