Improved communication as a catalyst for the minibus taxi industry’s changed negative image and increased profits in South Africa: Drivers’ views

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**ABSTRACT**

The South African taxi industry has a negative image that is associated with violence and disrespect for its clients. This has led to it losing many of its clients to other industry players leading to more violence as taxi owners lose profits. The issue of communication as a possible solution to the challenges the taxi industry experiences, from the perspectives of the taxi drivers, has not been explored. Hence, this paper sought to gather the views of drivers on the role of improved communication to bringing about peace and good relations with passengers. A qualitative approach was adopted as a form of data collection in which 12 participants were interviewed in the eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality in South Africa. The participants were selected among the taxi drivers who were asked to share their communication challenges and strategies. The findings revealed that poor communication skills and language can be a barrier to communication between drivers and passengers and between taxi associations. Effective communication strategies can contribute to economic freedom and peace. A further finding from the study is that taxi drivers, acting on their own agency, can tackle communication challenges in the eThekwini taxi industry and contribute to change.

**Introduction**

Communication that is organised in a strategic manner has been identified as essential in realising business objectives in the corporate industry. This has brought about the realisation for the informal sector to equally employ innovative communication strategies to enjoy the benefits that come with them, such as improved profit margins (Duncan, 2016). One such informal sector that could benefit from improved communication is the (minibus) taxi industry in South Africa. The taxi industry is considered significant because of its high contribution to efficient, affordable and easily accessible public transport (Mathabathe, 2020; Nipha, 2016). In a country with a population of more than 52 million, between 70% and 75% people rely on the taxi industry for daily commutes which in the process creates many job opportunities (SA Taxi, 2022; Nowek, 2023; The Conversation, 2021; Thukwana 2021). This is despite the taxi industry receiving no funding from the government for the public transport sector (Madubela, 2023; Mandane, 2020; SA Taxi, 2022; The Conversation, 2021). The spin-offs to this efficiency are evident in the enormous contribution the taxi industry makes to the country’s GDP is very low due to its informal nature (Mandane, 2020). Whilst the business can be very profitable, the minibus taxi industry’s contribution to the country’s GDP is very low due to its informal nature (Mandane, 2020).

The positives of the taxi industry are often overshadowed by its stereotypical negative public image that associates it with violence among taxi associations and disrespect for its clients (Masuku, 2016). Geldenhuys (2022) presents a chilling number of incidents in which taxi bosses have assassinated their competitors in feuds related to lucrative routes by hiring police men and hit men (*izinkabi*) to conduct these killing sprees in which some innocent taxi drivers and passengers have not been spared. In one incident, 13 taxi...
drivers returning from a funeral of a slain taxi owner were ambushed and killed when their taxi was shot at with about 250 bullets (Dlamini, 2018). Sadly, this shooting was later reported to have been by mistake because the targeted person had exchanged his vehicle with the victims not knowing that there would be assassins on their way home (Dube, 2018). Even more concerning and making it difficult to control is that families have also been found to be involved the killings of one another whereby spouses, children and siblings would kill each other for the control of the family taxi business (Ngbane, 2022). At the same time, shocking reports of violence metered against minibus taxi competitors in the form of e-hailing services such as Uber and Bolt have revealed the killing of drivers and the burning of their cars (Madubela, 2023).

This negative image overlooks “the deserved respect and patience (sense of ubuntu) they offer each day in ensuring that our lives are made easier” which has contributed to its success among black “taxipreneurs” (Massuka, 2016). It is important for the taxi industry to take it upon itself to change these commonly held views about the sector by “improving their value offer, behaviour and the image of the industry” (Liedtke, 2021). This would require that the industry players break down the barriers that have for many years hindered their interaction among themselves, their competitors and their clients by finding some common ground (Nipha, 2016).

Improved communication is in this regard one of the ways in which common ground can be found and the image of the sector changed. Communication would allow dialogue to take centre stage as a means of resolving conflicts. One of the stakeholders that are at the forefront of this business but have not been given research attention are taxi drivers.

Hence, this paper sought to investigate the extent to which communication as a weapon of peace and economic freedom is employed by taxi drivers as a means to change the image of the taxi industry. The investigation sought to find out among the drivers if the spirit of ubuntu (caring) exists at a small-scale level and how it can be encouraged across the taxi industry. The research question that informed the objectives of the paper is: How does effective communication or lack thereof in the taxi industry advance or impede business sustainability in eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality in South Africa? The answers to this question were obtained through structured interviews. It is hoped that the results would inform those at the top in the minibus taxi industry and the government to see how differences can be resolved and assist the industry to flourish.

Literature Review

The value of communication as a catalyst to change has been scientifically proven to be effective as it positively correlates with a variety of organizational outcomes (Husain, 2013). Effective communication helps businesses achieve growth by fostering good relationships with customers and other stakeholders (Manocha, 2023). There should also be an improvement in attitudes and positive behavioural change (Chukwuma et al., 2022). In cases where there has been challenges, improved communication can assist in overcoming barriers to business success (Alali et al., 2019). Critical to communication is the language used to convey information and thoughts that should aim not to exclude others, especially in multilingual contexts (Roya et al., 2022). In the same breath, this article explores the role of communication in improving the image of the minibus taxi industry.

One of the best ways of understanding the role of communication is to look at the celebrated passage from Karl Marx’s preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. In this seminal document, Marx (1859) argues that “it is not the consciousness of man that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness”. What Marx argues is that man is essentially a social being whose actions are conditioned by that very fact. Therefore, the social context provides the rationale for explaining the communication phenomena. Marx (1859) puts it aptly that “man is a zoon politikon in the most literal sense, not only a social animal, but an animal that can be individuated only within society”. What this means is that man cannot be divorced from society, with its norms and values. This provides a rationale for communication to play a social role. This role is explained as a choice between the competing interests of the captains of capital and those who offer the labour that produces the riches that sustain man’s existence. This, according to Marx, is the basic struggle that has been repeating itself throughout history. In an environment as diverse as the taxi industry in eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality, with several competing stakeholders and different languages spoken, in order for business to be enhanced, there may be a need for improved communication to take place in order to avoid losing customers and end violence.

Communication could involve translation and interpreting when required. This could assist customers who do not understand the language spoken and may feel alienated and disillusioned. The same can happen with taxi operators who also do not understand the documents they receive when they are written in a different language. This can extend to participation in meetings where a different language to that of the taxi operator is spoken. When the necessity for translation has been established and taking a cue from Tymoczko (2005), the translation that is anticipated to take place in the taxi industry is that which is embedded in the notion of translators as “agents”. As has been argued by Tymockzo, translators and interpreters are indeed social agents. In line with this assertion, “agency is exercised by constructing and re-constructing other’s written and oral words, pauses, silences, and gazes” (Tymoczek, 2005). Translation is regarded as a social practice which, among other things, foregrounds the role of the agents involved in the translation process. This has resulted in the conviction taking shape that any translation is necessarily embedded within social contexts. On the one hand, the act of translating, in all its various phases “is undeniably carried out by individuals who belong to a social system” (Tymoczek, 2005). On the other hand, the translation phenomenon “is inevitably implicated in social institutions, which greatly determine the selection, production, and distribution of translation, and, as a result, the strategies adopted in the translation itself” (Tymoczek, 2005). It is this choice that translators have which, when exercised in a deliberate manner, can result
in translators playing the role of “agents”, being “activists” for translation that is biased towards a particular cause. The question is, practically, how can this type of translation manifest itself?

In the context of the taxi industry in eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality, effective communication should assist the taxi industry to further enhance its operations and grow its business. The agents in this case could be the taxi drivers who interact with passengers on daily bases. Some of their passengers might not speak the same language as the drivers and the communities in which the taxi route is located. In such cases, taxi drivers have to intervene to make passengers comfortable in using the minibus taxis. There would also be no conflict between drivers and passengers.

Research and Methodology

The methodology that is followed in the study is the qualitative approach. As described by Fortune and Reid (1999: 94), the qualitative approach seeks to gain first-hand understanding of phenomena. It attempts to gain detailed knowledge of how the persons involved in the research create their social world. Furthermore, qualitative research uses a detailed description by participants to gain insight into a particular problem (Wiid & Diggines, 2021).

The study focuses on communication in the taxi industry in order to gain more insight into what happens in the taxi industry in eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality. There is no baseline study that has been done into communication that takes place in the taxi industry in eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality. To conduct this study, six taxi associations in eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality were selected. These are associations where the dominant languages spoken are English and IsiZulu. The taxi associations that were the subject of the research are:

i. Umlazi Taxi Association - This is a taxi association of mainly IsiZulu speaking taxi operators of African origin. There are some taxi operators of Indian origin who speak English;

ii. Chatsworth Taxi Association - This is a taxi association of mainly English-speaking taxi operators of Indian origin. There are some taxi operators of African origin who speak IsiZulu;

iii. KwaMashu Taxi Association - This is a taxi association of mainly IsiZulu speaking taxi operators of African origin. There are some taxi operators of Indian origin who speak English;

iv. Phoenix Taxi Association - This is a taxi association of mainly English-speaking taxi operators of Indian origin. There are some taxi operators of African origin who speak IsiZulu;

v. Pinetown Taxi Association - This is a taxi association of mainly IsiZulu speaking taxi operators of African origin. There are some taxi operators of Indian origin who speak English; and

vi. Sydenham Taxi Association - This is a taxi association of mainly English-speaking taxi operators of Indian origin. There are some taxi operators of African origin who speak IsiZulu and a few so-called Coloured taxi operators who speak Afrikaans.

In each of the six taxi associations, two taxi drivers were selected. In total, a minimum of twelve participants were interviewed. The steps that were followed involved identifying the taxi ranks to be focussed on; locating participants and establishing rapport; and planning for and executing data collection. The nature of sampling that was used in this study was therefore purposive sampling (Babbie and Mouton, 2009).

Interviews were conducted with the participants face-to-face at times convenient to them. Responses to the questions were recorded down. Where the responses were not clear, clarity was sought from the participants. In addition to the responses being written down, the interviews were recorded to make it easy to reference the points that were not clear. In cases where participants were completely physically unavailable, a variety of purposive sampling methods was used. These would include conducting the interviews on the telephone, asking them to record their responses and asking some to fill in the tool on their own. The research tool was flexible enough to allow all these methods.

In this study, the researcher selected a structured approach to interviews, which used an interview guide as a preferred research instrument. This interview guide consisted of a set of standard questions which traversed a number of themes to be covered in the interviews. The interview guide had four (4) questions in total, which were standard across all interviews, regarding communication and how improved communication contributes to peace and business growth for all stakeholders.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves getting meaningful information from unstructured responses and several methods have been proposed. These include, ethnographic, narrative, phenomenological and constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 1998). Although grounded theory which involves the identification of categories and emerging concepts from texts somehow captures some useful information (Strauss and Corbin, 2014), this study focused on thematic analysis where coding of the texts would be the most appropriate approach (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis allows the researcher to focus on different ways of analysing the data. This approach is flexible and analysis can be done across the entire dataset, or deal with a particular phenomenon in depth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Meaningful themes are developed from the data and in this study, each question in the interview guide was treated separately. The development of the codes encompassed different approaches including the researcher’s theoretical understanding of
the problem at hand, looking at the codes previously used by other researchers in the same topic and as well as an inductive code development based on the data to be collected.

**Ethical Considerations**

In conducting the study, one of the foremost ethical considerations was not to do any harm to the participants. In this regard, the privacy and anonymity of the participants was assured as the group that participated in the study was a small group out of the hundreds of taxi stakeholders in eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality. Prior permission was sought from the taxi associations whose taxi drivers were involved in the study before the interviews took place as well as from Central University of Technology, Free State. Lastly, the study was not intrusive at all as no personal information was sought.

**Findings and Discussions**

In this section, the results of the study are presented and relevant interpretation given. The results are based on questions the participants had to respond to on how communication is handled between the taxi drivers and passengers. The presentation and interpretation of responses is thematic. Verbatim responses are listed and codes (D) are utilised to indicate different drivers’ responses.

**The Effects of Communication Breakdown**

The first question that was posed to the respondents was:

*How does the communication breakdown between taxi drivers and passengers affect business in the taxi industry?*

The responses that were received were captured as:

D1. “Business becomes slow when passengers think the communication problems are because we are rude.”

D2. “It affects it negatively because the IsiZulu speaking passengers sometimes don’t want to get onto the taxi when there is an Indian guy.”

D3. “Some passengers who speak IsiZulu take taxis that are driven by IsiZulu speakers but these are few this side.”

D4. “Some taxi drivers get impatient and leave passengers who speak a different language behind.”

The responses reveal the negative effect of communication breakdown to the sector. This occurs because taxi drivers are perceived to be rude. At the same time, communication breakdown is due to language differences that are borne out of the multilingual nature of the South African society.

The responses continued as follows:

D5. “So, we try to encourage the other taxi drivers that we work with, even if you can see that the passenger is wrong, speak politely with them.”

D6 “Speak to the passenger like a normal person… not like they are a crazy person.”

D7 “It affects it seriously because sometimes when the passenger and the driver don’t understand each other the driver goes past the destination due to a communication breakdown.”

D8. “The communication breakdown causes conflict and conflict leads to violence and then affects business negatively.”

This reveals efforts made by taxi drivers to address challenges in their space. They guide and advise one another on how to deal with customers. This is partly because they realise the dangers of poor communication in the sector. It has the potential to affect working relationships with customers and may lead to violence. Most of all it affects business because passengers have other options, such as the e-hailing service.

The communication breakdown between the taxi operators and the passengers has been identified as having a negative impact on the business. It was mentioned that the communication breakdown manifested as rudeness of taxi operators as identified by the passengers and this is said to slow down the business. Some passengers have been reported to avoid taxis that were driven by drivers of a different race or language. On the other hand, the drivers themselves were becoming impatient with some passengers who speak a different language and ended up leaving them. However, they were being encouraged to be polite to the passengers and speak to them as normal people. It was also reported that there were situations where the passengers were found to have been dropped past their destinations due to communication breakdown, thus fuelling violence.

**The Positive Impact of Improved Communication on Business**

The second question that was posed to the respondents was as follows:

*If language and any other communication processes were as smooth as possible, what impact would this have on increasing the business in the taxi industry?*
The responses that were received were captured as:

D1. “There would be more understanding between taxi drivers and passengers.”

D2. “… there would be peace”.

D3. “… and it would bring harmony between passengers and taxi operators.”

Improved communication was generally perceived as essential to bringing about peace and harmony in the industry. This shows that drivers are aware of the risks involved for them when there is violence between owners, associations and competitors. With communication there could be peace and safety for all.

The responses continued as follows:

D4. “If the language was not a problem, our business would be blooming because a lot of people are afraid to go to the taxi ranks because they are afraid of getting lost because sometimes drivers don’t understand their language.”

D5. “It would increase business …”.

D6. “The taxi business would be one of the best with more money and …”.

D7. “Business would increase as when the communication process is smooth more people will use the taxis.”

D8. “Also, there are a lot of crimes that occur due to language barrier, a white person would not go to Chatsworth rank, because they would feel unsafe but if everything was clear and transparent like in airports, because both are modes of transport and carry passengers but the level of security is different.”

D9. “I think the language barrier contributes to the lack of safety.”

D10. “Less communication problems, less tension, more money.”

D11. “The lack of understanding passengers not only in terms of language but also emotional communication.”

A certain portion of conflict is as a result of people speaking different languages. As shown earlier, the participants were selected from the same municipality. Yet, the municipality is linguistically diverse in accordance with South Africa that is multilingual. The dominant language is IsiZulu in the province and the municipality. This puts drivers under pressure to be multilingual themselves so they can serve their clients effectively. In instances where the language is a barrier, they are able to assist each other with translating and interpretation. Less communication challenges means more money which translates to the sector success and secured jobs for many.

Smooth communication processes have been identified as pivotal in bringing more understanding between taxi drivers and passengers as well as bringing peace. Good communication was also noted to result in a blooming business since more people are believed to no longer have the fear of going to taxi ranks. It is said that they would be afraid of getting lost if the drivers were known not to understand their language. Consequently, criminals were known to take advantage of the language barrier and contributing to the lack of safety. In general, the operators saw less tension as being related to more money, meaning they would make more money in this scenario. Below we shall capture the responses on the five sub-themes that emerged on the languages used for communication in the taxi industry.

The Impact of Improved Communication on The Upliftment of Taxi Drivers

The third question was as follows:

How do you think improved communication in the taxi industry will advance the upliftment of taxi drivers to achieve economic freedom?

The responses that were received were captured as:

D1. “That would really help us because that would mean that even the ‘sock money’ increases.”

D2. “Maybe it would lead to drivers being paid some more, gaining economic freedom.”

D3. “Have their own taxis after saving money.”

D4. “The drivers can use the extra money to save for buying their own taxis.”

D5. “… and have our own taxis and stop being drivers, get economic freedom.”

This reveals how dealing with communication challenges can affect business positively and lead to taxi drivers taking more money home. They have an ambition to be part of this lucrative taxi business and they can identify ways in which they can benefit from contributing positively to its success. Improved communication is their vehicle to success. Making more money implies a bigger
share for them in terms of the amount of money they would be able to keep aside. This reveals how having more money can lead to taxi drivers “graduating” from being drivers to being owners, thereby achieving economic freedom.

D6. “They will have peace with customers,…”
D7. “It would lead to economic freedom for taxi drivers if customers would be satisfied and use our taxis more.”
D8. “I think it would help a lot because if you learn something new your attitude changes, most people complain about the attitude of taxi drivers.”
D9. “It can assist in developing themselves in terms of articulating themselves well, in terms of communication and being good drivers.”

The responses further reveal how improved communication from drivers can contribute to improved business. The results showed that the benefits of smooth communication in the taxi industry would allow the taxi drivers to earn more money that would give them the opportunity to buy their own taxis. Not only will this benefit the taxi drivers, but there will also be peace between them and their customers since the taxi drivers are currently labelled as having a bad attitude.

The Impact of Improved Communication on Taxi Owners

The fourth and the last question was:

How do you think improved communication in the taxi industry will help taxi owners to grow and expand their business in order to achieve economic freedom?

Below we shall capture the responses that emerged on the impact of improved communication in the taxi industry for the taxi owners.

D1. “When the communication process is smooth, taxi owners can make more money and buy more taxis”.
D2. “They will have more taxis when everything is sorted on the communication side.”
D3. “… and even start other businesses, achieving economic freedom.”
D4. “… and maybe expand their business and go into other businesses.”

This reveals how tackling communication challenges can help business, thereby making it possible for operators to expand their business. This would in turn secure and expand job opportunities for more drivers. There will also be economic benefits for the country. Resolving communication challenges can lead to improved business and make it possible for taxi operators to move into other businesses.

The impact of the effective communication in the taxi industry will not only help the taxi drivers but also the owners. According to the responses, the most relevant and outstanding word is “businesses”, an indication that the taxi owners are likely to look into other businesses and not just one. For instance, nothing prevents them from equally being part of the e-hailing sector. This would be unless the taxi associations do not permit that.

Conclusions

The main finding from the study is that improved communication can contribute to economic freedom for taxi drivers and taxi owners. Furthermore, the results showed that the benefits of smooth communication in the taxi industry would allow the taxi drivers to earn more money that would give them the opportunity to buy their own taxis. Not only will this benefit the taxi drivers, there will also be peace between the taxi operators and the customers since the taxi drivers are currently labelled by customers as having a bad attitude and operators are associated with violence. A further finding from the study is that taxi drivers acting of their own agency, can tackle communication challenges in the eThekwini taxi industry. As argued earlier, the theory that the experiences of marginalised individuals can play a role in their own economic development is demonstrated by the role played by the taxi drivers. Through their own agency and by taking initiatives to improve communication in the minibus taxi industry, the economically marginalised taxi drivers claim a stake in the economy and take steps towards economic freedom.

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