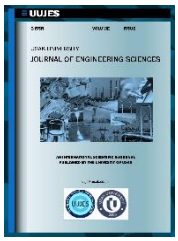

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Research article

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAKING OKADA SAFER AND BETTER FOR URBAN MOBILITY

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Abstract

Okada is the common name for motorcycle taxis in Nigeria. Despite its huge benefits to urban travel, its growing popularity has aroused serious public concerns bordering chiefly on the recklessness and unruly behaviour of Okada operators. These concerns have led to prohibition or restriction of Okada operation in some cities, which is not in the best interest of the public. This study was undertaken to determine what needs to be done to make Okada safer and better. The objectives of the study were to: investigate Okada operators' characteristics; know why and how people become Okada operators; determine the prevalence rates of various Okada crash scenarios; and to propose recommendations for making Okada safer and better for urban travel. The study found that the problems associated with Okada derive mainly from lack of training of the operators and absence of regulation of its operation. To make Okada safer and better, the study recommended the following measures: introduction of a compulsory motorcycle training program for prospective Okada operators, regulation of entry into Okada, provision of a fool-proof means of identification of Okada operators, and provision of separate Okada paths/lanes on busy corridors.

Keywords: *Okada; Okada operators; motorcycle taxi; public transportation.*

1. Introduction

It is common to see motorcycles cruising on the streets of every Nigerian town and city in search of passengers, or conveying passengers, or dropping off passengers, or waiting at road intersections and activity centres to pick passengers. Using motorcycles to carry passengers like taxis is a prominent feature of Nigeria's urban public transportation

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system. Motorcycle taxis are commonly called "Okada" in Nigeria. The origin of the name "Okada" is traced to Okada Airline, the first domestic airline in Nigeria. Passenger motorcycles were nicknamed Okada because they could manoeuvre through heavy traffic and take their passengers to their destinations as timely as Okada Airliners [1]

Other modes of public transportation in Nigerian cities include minibuses, shared taxis, taxis, and tricycles. All of these are owned and operated by private individuals. Mass transit modes (largely public owned) in the form of bus services are also available in limited number in few cities, mainly Lagos and Abuja. Taxi fares are usually exorbitant and unaffordable to most public transport riders. Services provided by shared taxis and minibuses are inadequate in capacity, very limited in coverage, unreliable and are extremely poor in quality. The vehicles are usually very old, poorly maintained and lacking in basic hygiene standards, offering no comfort to commuters [2]. Okada emerged to fill the vacuum created by these deficiencies in Nigerian urban transportation service delivery.

The emergence and growth of Okada as a public transportation mode is attributed to a combination of factors such as rapid urban population growth and sprawling of urban centres without a corresponding expansion of road infrastructure and transport service delivery; deficiencies of other modes of public transportation; Nigerian economic crisis of the 1980s – which severely undermined the capacity of individual entrepreneurs and the government to provide public transportation services to match the demand created by the rapid growth in urban population; lack of employment opportunities; ease of entry into the Okada industry, and the profitability of Okada operation [3 - 9].The use of motorcycles for public transportation in Nigerian cities began since the 1970s but only became prominent and widespread in the 1980s [3, 9].

The growing popularity of Okada is attributed to their ability to provide customized, door-to-door service, their reliability, speed and ability to navigate through traffic gridlocks; and also, their ability to access outlying neighbourhoods with deplorable roads. As feeders, Okada compliments other modes by providing last-mile connectivity from major corridors to residential areas, offices, schools, markets and other activity centers. Okada serves low density routes that are not commercially attractive to other passenger vehicles. Okada also provides employment to mainly male bread winners who are either unemployable or do not have opportunity for employment in the former sector. Okada pays way above the national minimum wage [6, 10 – 12].

Notwithstanding these huge benefits of Okada to urban mobility and economy, the growing popularity of Okada as a means of urban mobility is not without criticisms. Some critics consider Okada as a traffic nuisance because of the recklessness and unruly behaviour of Okada operators. Other critics [13] associate Okada with crime because criminal elements occasionally pose as Okada operators to rob unsuspecting passengers of their valuables, while other criminals use motorcycles to flee crime scenes.

There is a growing consciousness among Nigerian authorities and the citizenry that something needs to be done about Okada; however, there is no consensus as to what exactly needs to be done. The reaction of many state governments in Nigeria to the negative tendencies of Okada operators has largely been outright prohibition or restriction of Okada operation. While some people (especially car owners) consider the prohibition or restriction of Okada as good riddance to bad rubbish [14 – 16], others think the prohibition and restriction of Okada is anti-people [17 – 19].

Prohibition or restriction of Okada operation in favour of other modes of public transportation has only made matters worse for those who rely on public transport for their daily mobility needs, given that the other available modes of public transport are

seriously deficient in quality and severely limited in coverage and capacity. Michael et al [20] investigated the implication of the abolition of Okada on transportation and crime in the city of Calabar, south-eastern Nigeria. They found that crime rate in the town did not decrease with the abolition of Okada. Armed robbery, theft, snatching of valuables and pick-pocketing (which were blamed on Okada operators) were still prevalent in the town during the period Okada was abolished. Rather, there was increase in passenger waiting time and transportation fare, especially for commuters who lived in residences with poor access road network.

The study that is reported in this paper was undertaken to determine what needs to be done to make Okada safer and better. The objectives of the study were to: investigate Okada operators' characteristics and seek to know why people take to Okada operation and how they become Okada operators; determine the prevalence rates of various Okada crash scenarios; and propose recommendations for making Okada safer and better for urban travel. The methodology involved a survey of Okada operators. The survey was done by means of structured questionnaires and face-to-face interviews.

2. Materials and Method

2.1 Participants in the Study

The sole participants in this study were people working as Okada operators at the time the survey was conducted (15th September - 29th October 2016). Participants were selected from within the city of Ilorin in Kwara State, south-western Nigeria, located on latitude 8^{o}30' North and longitude 4^{o}33' East. Fig. 1 shows the location of Ilorin on the map of Nigeria, while Fig. 2 is a photograph of Okada operators waiting to pick passengers at a road intersection. Ilorin is one of the numerous Nigerian cities where Okada is popular due to the limited coverage and poor quality of other forms of public transportation. Its choice as the study area was mainly because it was the city of residence of the author at the time the study was conducted. As such, the cost of conducting the study was significantly lower than if it were to be conducted in a distant city away from the residence of the author. It is hoped, however, that the findings and recommendations of the study can be generalized due to the similarity in the nature and quality of public transport infrastructure and service delivery across Nigerian cities.

2.2 Survey Aims and Instruments

The aim of the survey was: to determine Okada operators' characteristics; to gain insight about Okada entry requirements; and to collect information on the nature of crashes involving Okada. The survey was done by means of structured questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire consisted of questions with options from which respondents were expected to pick their response as applicable and also questions which allowed respondents to freely express their opinion on the subject matter. A sample of the questionnaire is presented in Fig. 3.

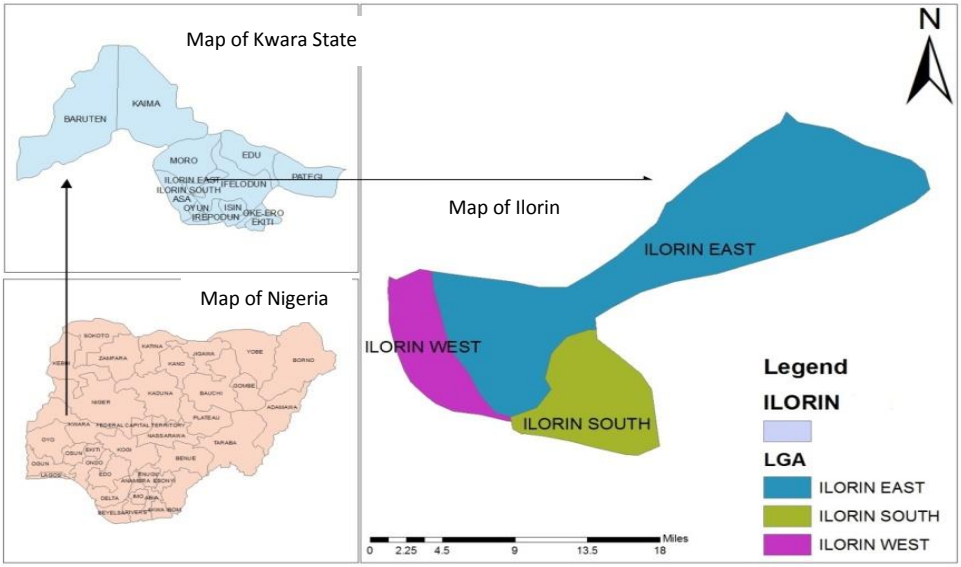

Fig. 1 Map showing the location of Ilorin (Source: GIS CLERIC, 2015)

Fig. 2 Okada operators waiting for passengers at a station in Ilorin.
Source: Field work (2016)

Dear respondent,

This is a questionnaire for an academic research work on how to make Okada safe and more beneficial. You have been contacted because of your experience as an Okada operator. You are requested to answer the questions sincerely. Be assured that your identity and responses will be handled with utmost confidentiality.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Now, answer the following questions. You can skip the ones you cannot answer.

1. What is your branch name/L.G.A.? ----------

2. What is your age in years? ----------

3. What is your marital status? ***(A)*** Single. ***(B)*** Married

4. What is your level of education?
(A) Tertiary education. ***(B)*** Secondary education. ***(C)*** Primary education. ***(D)*** No formal education.

5. Why did you join the Okada business? (You can select more than one option). ***(A)***I do not have the qualification for other jobs. ***(B)***I have the qualification but no job opportunity. ***(C)***It is easy to start. ***(D)***It is more profitable than other jobs. ***(E)***Others ----------

6. Apart from Okada, what other job/business do you do? ----------

7. How did you acquire the skills to become an Okada operator? ----------

8(a). Did you attend any training program for Okada riders? ***(A)*** YES. ***(B)*** NO.
8(b). If YES, describe the nature of the training.----------
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9. Do you get to know when your member is involved in accident? ***(A)*** YES. ***(B)*** NO.

10(a). Identify the crash scenarios involving Okada (tick as many as you find applicable)
A. Okada colliding with, or being hit by, a car.
B. Okada colliding with another Okada
C. Okada colliding with a pedestrian
D. Okada crashing alone.
E. Give other types ----------

10(b).Which of the crash scenarios listed above is most common? ----------

11. At what points do these accidents occur most often? ***(A)*** At road junctions. ***(B)*** Along road links

12. Do car drivers treat Okada as equal users of the road? ***(A)***Never ***(B)***Sometimes ***(C)***Always.

13. While riding in traffic, do you worry about being hit by a car? ***(A)*** YES. ***(B)*** NO.

14. Would you avail yourself for a motorcycle training program? ***(A)*** YES. ***(B)*** NO

15. Do you face any threat from criminals? ----------How? ----------

16. What challenges do you face as an Okada operator? ----------

Fig. 3 Sample of Survey Questionnaire

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Okada Operators' Organization

The Okada industry is not regulated by government. However, Okada operators are largely organized under the auspices of commercial motorcycle riders association. The association has structures at state level, local government area level and at branch level, which is the basic unit of the commercial motorcycle riders association. It is through the Okada riders associations - to which an overwhelming majority of Okada operators belong - that some level of operational discipline is entrenched into the industry. However, the Okada associations are mainly concerned about protecting the interests of its members and are less concerned about the wellbeing of their passengers. The association comes to the rescue of members who may get into trouble with police or other law enforcement agents, and also performs the role of identifying Okada operators in the event of accident, theft or any other event that may require information about the identity of an Okada operator. They also have the tradition of assisting members who are involved in accidents by reaching out to their families, paying up hospital bills and repairing damaged motorcycles. They also have the tradition of honouring their deceased members by attending and contributing money for their burial. Members pay subscriptions to the association on periodic basis – daily, weekly or monthly- part of which is remitted to government as revenue. They hold meetings regularly.

3.2 Okada Operators' Characteristics

Okada operation is an exclusive male preserve. The reason women are not involved in the operation of Okada might not be unconnected with the risks associated with Okada operation – high chances of being hit by a car or robbed by motorcycle snatchers – which are capable of scaring away women.

3.2.1 Age and marital status of Okada operators

The age and marital status of Okada operators are distributed as shown in Fig. 4 and Fig. 5, respectively. Energetic men of all age groups engage in Okada operation. However, majority (69%) of Okada operators fall within the age bracket of 20 - 40 years. This is followed by those aged between 40 – 50 years (27%). This shows that Okada provides the much needed employment opportunities for the teaming energetic population of male adults, most of whom are married with children. Therefore, there is every reason to accord Okada its rightful place in a country with a high and rising rate of unemployment.

3.2.2 Educational status of Okada operators

Fig. 6 shows the distribution of educational status of Okada operators. Only 12% of participants did not have any form of formal education at all. 19% had only primary school education. Majority (53%) of the participants had secondary school education with 16% having tertiary education. This shows that there is very high literacy level among Okada operators. The high literacy level among Okada operators makes them amenable for training.

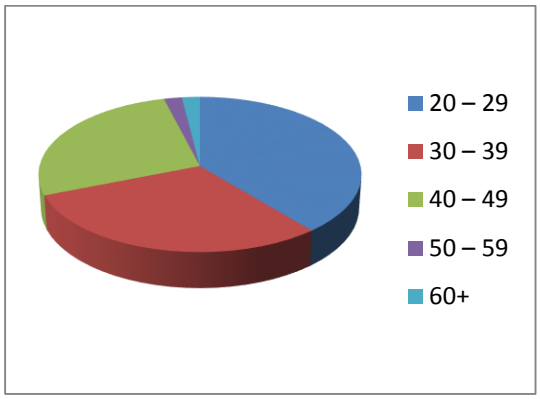

Fig. 4 Age distribution of Okada operators

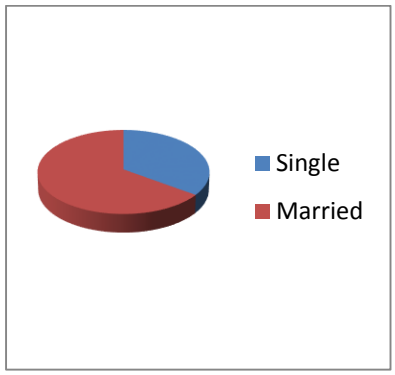

Fig. 5 Marital status distribution of Okada operators

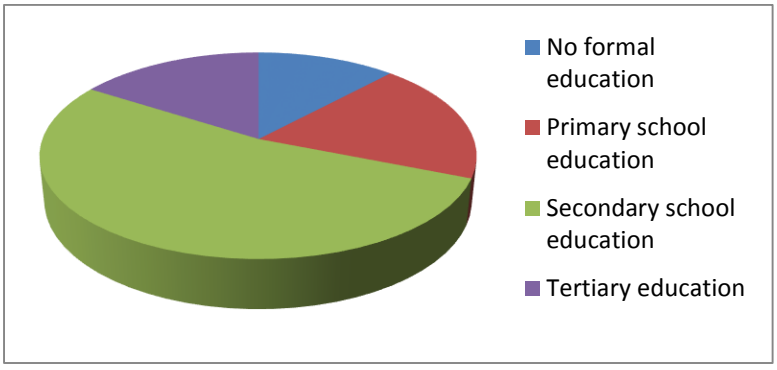

Fig. 6 Educational status distribution of Okada operators

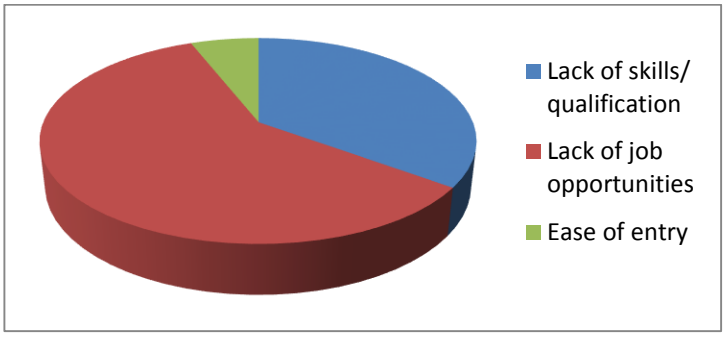

Fig.7 Reasons people take to Okada operation

3.3 Why People Take to Okada Operation

Participants were asked to state why they decided to become Okada operators. Their responses are presented in Fig. 7. 35% of participants lacked the basic qualification for employment in the formal sector. 59% cited lack of employment opportunities in the former sector as their major reason for joining Okada operation. This result reveals that there are two major categories of people who engage in Okada operation, namely those who are not qualified for employment in the formal sector because they lack the requisite education, and those who have the educational qualifications but lack employment opportunities. The bottom line is that those who engage in Okada operation have little or no other employment opportunities.

Indeed, unemployment rate in Nigeria has been on a steady rise for several decades, as can be seen in Fig. 8, which was plotted with data obtained from Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics. Between the Third Quarter of 2018 and the Second Quarter of 2020, the country's rate of unemployment increased from 23.1% to 27.1% [23]. Presently, 52% of Nigeria's working population is either unemployed or under-employed [24].

The study also reveals that many people combine Okada operation with a variety of other occupations. Such people take to Okada operation so as to augment their income from other occupations which are either low-paying or seasonal. Fig. 9 presents the responses of participants when they were asked to tell if they had other occupations apart from Okada. Only 16% indicated that they had no other occupations apart from Okada. Other occupations which participants listed include farming, craftwork, night watch, and a variety of other engagements. Some people had abandoned their original occupations for Okada operation, obviously because they found it more profitable. Some Okada operators are enrolled into school, others are saving to enrol into school or to start a different business. Others are investing their incomes into farming and other businesses.

3.4 Becoming an Okada operator

Okada operation is a free-for-all. This has been identified as one of the factors that are responsible for the growth of Okada on the supply side. No special training, skill or experience is required of new entrants. Entry is open to any interested person who has access to a motorcycle. Leaders of the Okada association who were interviewed indicated that new entrants are only required to register with any local branch of the association of their choosing. Registration only involves payment of a membership fee and a demonstration of the ability to ride motorcycle. Even there are people who operate without membership of the association, but such persons are liable to be held and harassed by the Okada task force - a group of overzealous young men hired to collect levies and enforce compliance with association's membership requirements.

Participants were asked to tell how they acquired the competence to become Okada operators. All (100%) of them stated that they learned how to ride motorcycle at home. Some said they were instructed by a relation, while others said they learned on their own. It shows that Okada operators develop their riding skills on the job with no prior knowledge of traffic rules and signs. It is sacrosanct that operators of motorised transportation are adequately skilled in the art of driving and conversant with the rules of the road. This is why motorists are required to be trained and licensed before taking to the road. But Okada operators are not required to train to develop their riding skills and become acquainted with traffic rules and signs before joining Okada. They usually learn how to ride motorcycle in their rural homes only to migrate to urban areas to become Okada operators. This is partly responsible for the unruly behaviour among Okada operators.

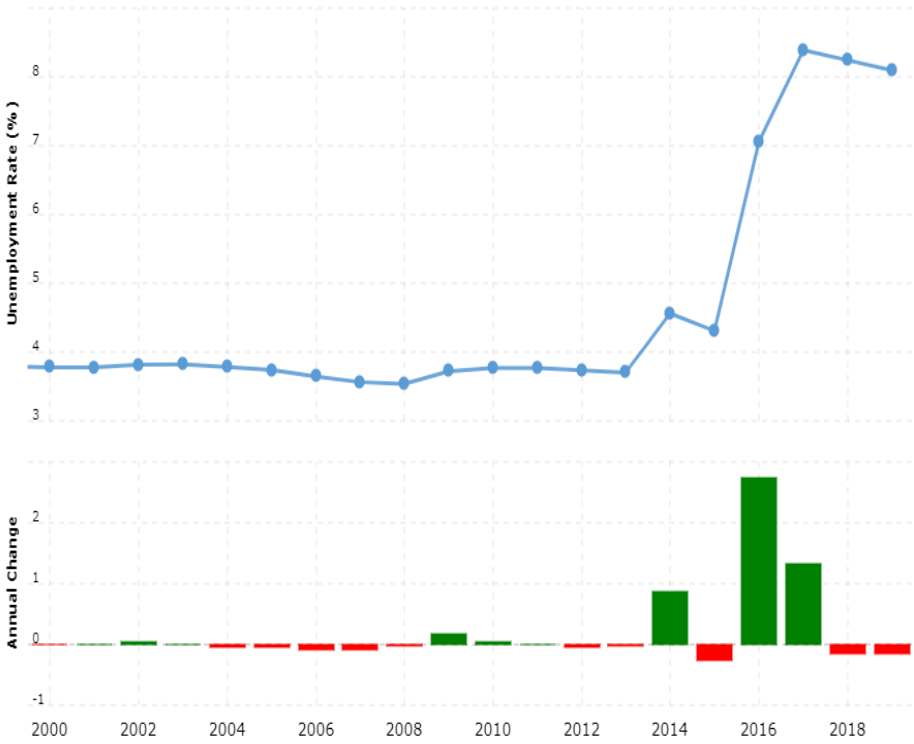

Fig. 8 Unemployment rate in Nigeria. Source: Macrotrends LLC [22]

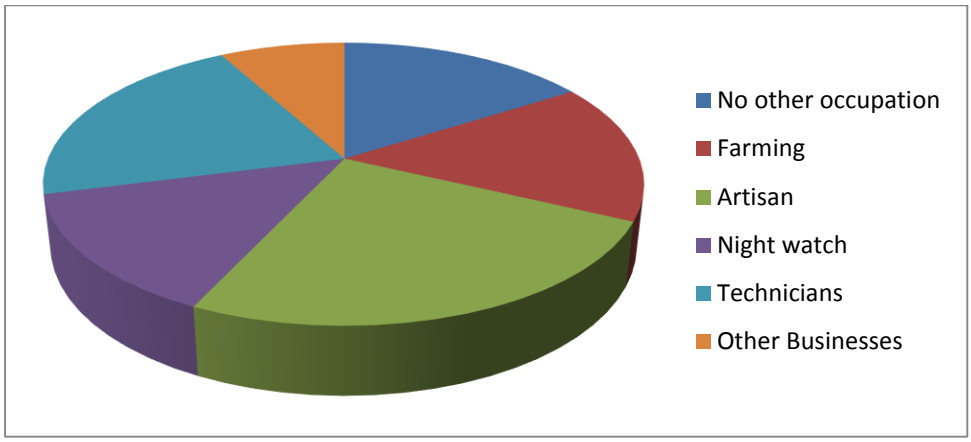

Fig. 9 Other occupations of Okada operators

3.5 Nature of Okada Crashes

Okada is associated with an alarming share of urban traffic accidents in Nigeria, a phenomenon that has attracted serious concerns and sharp criticism against Okada. This section presents the different Okada crash scenarios together with their prevalence rates.

Besides being eye witnesses to most road traffic accidents by virtue of their always being on the streets, Okada operators also have the tradition of giving financial and moral support to their colleagues who are involved in traffic accidents. As such, all Okada operators do get to know each and every time their member is involved in traffic accident, and also know pretty well how the accidents happened. For this reason, the experience of Okada operators was relied upon to determine the prevalence rate of the different crash scenarios, including Okada-car crash, Okada-Okada crash, Okada-pedestrian crash and Okada crashing alone. Table 1 presents the responses of participants when they were asked to indicate, based on their experience and the accident reports they receive, which of the crash scenarios is most prevalent. 86% of the respondents indicated that Okada-car crash scenarios are the most prevalent type of crashes involving Okada, and are also the most fatal of all Okada crashes. 78% of participants indicated that cars are their greatest safety threat on the road and agreed that they do worry about being hit by a car while on the road. The reason for this fear is that most motorists do not always recognize Okada operators as equal users of the road. This was confirmed by participants when they were asked to indicate whether motorists treat them as equal users of the road. Their responses were as presented in Table 2.

Table 1 Okada crash scenarios and their prevalence rate

Accident type	Most common
Okada-car crash	168 (86%)
Okada-Okada crash	****
Okada-pedestrian crash	****
Okada crashing alone	8 (4%)
No response	20 (10%)

Table 2 Okada Operators' responses to the question of equal treatment

Questions/Responses	Never	Sometimes	Always	Total
Do motorists treat Okada operators as equal users of the road?	88 (45%)	92 (47%)	16 (8%)	196 (100%)

3.6 Recommendations for making Okada Safer and Better

3.6.1 Introduction of compulsory motorcycle training program

It is sacrosanct that operators of motorised transportation are adequately skilled in the art of driving and conversant with the rules of the road and proper driving behaviour. All the Okada operators who participated in this study indicated that they did not have any

formal training before riding on the road. They usually learn how to ride motorcycle in their rural homes and migrate to urban areas to become Okada operators without any prior training on motorcycle riding and road safety precautions, thereby endangering themselves and other road users.There is need to design a motorcycle training program for prospective Okada operators that will impart them the knowledge and skills that will enable them develop high riding standards with the ability to anticipate and control situations to reduce accident risks and ride safely and effectively in all conditions. This training program should be made compulsory and a prerequisite for licensing to use a motorcycle in traffic. A study by Johnson and Adebayo [21] on the Effect of Safety Education on Knowledge of and Compliance with Road Safety Signs among Commercial Motorcyclists in Uyo, Southern Nigeria, showed that safety education had a positive effect on the knowledge and compliance to road safety signs among motorcyclists.

3.6.2 Regulation of entry into Okada

The inherent deficiencies in Nigeria's urban public transportation system have created a niche for Okada. As such, the earlier it is accorded its rightful place as a mode of public transport, the better for the country. One of the ways to accord Okada the recognition it deserves is to regulate it. Nigeria's urban public transportation system generally is informal, but it is dangerous to allow Okada to continue to operate as an unregulated informal sector because of its inherent vulnerabilities. Entry into Okada should be subjected to strict regulation to ensure that only those who have passed through a compulsory basic training on how to ride motorcycle on the road safely should be licensed to become Okada operators.

3.6.3 Identification of Okada operators

The fact that the public has no way of identifying Okada operators has the effect of encouraging bad behaviour among Okada operators, given that they can get away unnoticed. It makes it easy for criminal elements to pose as Okada operators and rob unsuspecting passengers and disappear unnoticed. It also makes it easy for criminals to use motorcycles to flee crime scenes unnoticed. Such incidences are usually blamed on Okada operators in general, and have been cited by authorities to justify the prohibition or restriction of Okada. Prospective Okada operators should be required to pass through a mandatory registration process in which relevant information about them will be collected and stored in a central database. Those who have passed through the Okada registration process shall then be issued a personal identification number (PIN) which can be used to access information about them in the database. Okada operators should be obligated to wear reflective vests with their PIN boldly written on them. The PIN should also be conspicuously stamped on their motorcycles. And members of the public should be properly educated to patronize only Okada operators who have PINs and should always take note of the PIN of their rider. The database of Okada operators in every state of the federation should be hosted on the World Wide Web such that members of the public anywhere can obtain information about any Okada operator whose PIN is known.

3.6.4 Provision of Okada paths/lanes on busy corridors

Okada paths/lanes should be provided to separate Okada from other motorized traffic, especially on busy corridors. Separating Okada from other automobiles will drastically reduce the rate of Okada-car crash, which is presently the most prevalent and fatal form of accidents involving Okada.

5. Conclusion

The study sought to explain how Okada became a popular means of urban mobility in Nigeria. The study also investigated Okada operators' characteristics and sought to know why people take to Okada operation and how they become Okada operators. The prevalence rates of various Okada crash scenarios were also investigated. Finally, recommendations were made on how to make Okada safer and better. The study arrived at the following conclusions:

i. Nigeria's urban public transportation system is broken thereby creating a niche for Okada, which provides mobility services that cannot be provided by other public transportation modes in Nigeria; hence its criticality to urban mobility.
ii. Okada is indeed a critical sector of the economy providing the much needed employment for energetic men of all ages and of all educational backgrounds, most of whom are married with children.
iii. Majority of Okada operators are educated up to at least secondary school level. This is an important characteristic because it indicates that Okada operators are very well amenable for training.
iv. People take to Okada operation because they have little or no other source of livelihood. Many people combine Okada operation with a variety of other occupations which are either low-paying or seasonal. Some Okada operators are enrolled into school, others are saving to start school or start another business.
v. Okada operates as an unregulated informal sector. People do not undergo any form of training nor require any license to become Okada operators. People simply learn how to ride motorcycles in their rural homes and relocate to urban centres as Okada operators with no prior knowledge of traffic rules and signs.
vi. The problems associated with Okada derive mainly from lack of training of the operators and absence of regulation of its operation. Prohibition or restriction of Okada does not solve the problems associated with it but only complicates the mobility challenges of urban residents who do not own or have access to cars.
vii. Regulation of entry into Okada will ensure that only those who have acquired high riding standard and are conversant with the rules of the road will become Okada operators. This will entrench a level of responsibility and operational discipline among Okada operators.
viii. Providing the public with a fool-proof means of identifying Okada operators will make it difficult for criminal elements to infiltrate the ranks of Okada operators to perpetrate crime.
ix. Okada-car crash scenarios are the most prevalent type of crashes involving Okada, and are also the most fatal of all Okada crashes. Separating Okada from other automobiles through the creation of Okada paths/lanes – especially on busy corridors - will drastically reduce the rate of Okada-car crashes.

Acknowledgment

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