



## **Exploring conflicts among commuter omnibus crew and touts: Case of seke's selected bus ranks**

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### **Abstract**

In Zimbabwe, the greater part of urban commuter transportation is in the hands of privately-owned omnibus crew and touts, who are popular for immorality and violence. The study seeking to establish the crew and touts' most conflicts, their causes and how they resolve them was guided by an implicit theory that disenchanted and under-employed people are more likely to engage in violence since their opportunity cost of doing so is low and the Politeness theory by Brown and Levinson. Data were collected from 24 participants randomly sampled from three omnibus ranks in Seke; Makoni, C-K Junction and Unit L. The qualitative study following an exploratory enquiry used informal interviews and mobile observations before analysing data using content analysis approach.

**Keywords:** conflict, tout, omnibus crew, communication, conflict resolution, violence

### **1. Introduction**

Since the history of modern human transportation system in Zimbabwe, there have been hundreds of people earning a living out of the varied activities. There have been the formally employed; drivers and their conductors whom this study calls crew and the informal helping both passengers and the crew. These informal helpers in exchange for a token from the crew are colloquially known differently as *assistants, jiggers or mawhindi* though in this study they are referred as touts.

This study of the conflicts within the transport crew and how they resolve them is of importance in many ways; it helps the generality of the people to understand their behaviour, it helps improve passenger/crew communication, it helps devise proper and moral register for the crew and helps create effective but peaceful mechanisms of resolving conflicts. It is also important in that it helps create a link with implicit theories of poverty, deprivation and the need for patience and tolerance.

Given the appalling relationship of the staff hereafter referred to as crew and touts of different minibuses, the principal study question targeted by this research was: why do the commuter omnibus crews always conflict and possibly how do they often address their conflicts. The study therefore sought to establish general bones of contention and document some of the means through which recorded conflicts were resolved for the purpose of archiving and helping in policy formulation.

### **2. Background**

Following the removal of state-run commuter omnibuses from plying in the cities in Zimbabwe in the 1990s following a liberalization and decentralization approach, there have been thousands of privately-run 15-seater omnibuses commonly known as *makombi*. These omnibuses are run under two business models. The first model requires that a crew (driver and conductor) remit an agreed figure to the owner of the bus at the end of the day outside of their profits. It is against the desire to meet this agreed figure that the crew has to over-work so that they also make their profit for sustenance. With the second model, the

crew works for a given period remitting all the earnings to the owner of the bus before they receive fixed salaries.

It is in the first model where problems of crews having to work extra hard is experienced. The operation of commuter omnibus business requires no formal contract except that the driver proves having the required documentation to drive public transport. What then happens under such a contract is that, whenever a driver is either involved in an accident or faces police arrest, he simply leaves employment and looks for another bus without accounting for the past. The same situation also applies to the conductor who works with the driver. This loose part of the contract creates room for abuse and lawlessness on the part of the crew.

At Makoni, C-K Junction and Unit L ranks, there are an average of 25-30, 10-15 and 15-20 commuter omnibuses respectively, each manned by two crew members. At Makoni, Unit L and C-K Junction ranks, there is an average of 30, 25 and 20 touts. These figures clearly show that there are more touts than the omnibuses to be loaded. This therefore results in stiff competition and rampant cases of criminality and violence both against potential passengers and amongst themselves.

As the omnibuses ply in their registered routes, they either voluntarily or are technically forced to engage the services of touts to mobilize potential passengers. This process of mobilizing passengers is called *kubororodza* (screaming) and involves the engagement of various deceptions and dangerous antics. For filling each bus, a tout is paid an equivalence of three passengers' fares. It therefore means that for a bus from Seke to Town, a tout gets three dollars. When the touts operate, they are usually organized along political lines as each of the political parties encourage the youth to work as touts as a way of generating jobs and incentivizing their political activities (Love, 2000 and Bizina, Gray, 2014)<sup>[7, 1]</sup>.

The approach used by touts to load omnibuses required cooperation, where two touts would help each other on one bus. One would be shouting from about 10-20 metres away while

another would be manning the door ensuring that only genuine passengers board. His other role would be to ensure that no under-cover traffic or municipal police officer boards with the intention of arresting and impounding for picking up passengers at undesignated points and for violating traffic laws. If there are other touts presently unoccupied, they may be asked to sit in the bus so that potential passengers outside begin to think that the bus is almost full and also board. Gradually and systematically, these touts alight making way for more passengers. At the end of the day, they share their earnings. If any bus refuses to pay for the services rendered, collectively, they make sure that they discourage passengers from boarding as a way of punishing the crew. Sometimes, this measure is implemented violently and even affecting the prospective passengers (Myers-Scotton, 1983) [11].

As the touts conduct their duties, they often consume intoxicants and drugs as enhancers, thus turning them violent and immoral (Linsky, Bachman, Straus, 1995) [6]. There is an implicit belief amongst the touts and conductors that, efficiency and effectiveness are enhanced through taking intoxicants that keep them high and energetic. According to Mawadza (2000) [10] and Mashiri (2000) [9], the use of slang in speeches excites conversations while identifying people according to their trades and interests. Precisely, this is what has been noted with the touts and conductors. They have their form of language which identifies them and also used to relay special and trade specific messages like alerting of the presence of law enforcement agents. Besides slang, they also use sign language especially if the buses are in motion alerting of the presence of traffic law enforcers, abundance of potential passengers or their scarcity. This is a male only industry because of the language, dressing, and various other working conditions which are not accommodative of females.

It has often been observed that there are some elderly members of the crew who are good at addressing some of the potential conflicts from a peace perspective. Mashiri (2000) [9] refers to the use of kin terms as one of the best ways of getting attention of a stranger especially if there is a conflict. Kin terms are mostly used by elderly drivers who amongst the three groups are more cultured and mature.

With the omnibus crew, the driver usually assigns the conductor to sit on the driver's seat raving and making slight maneuvers as the bus will be loading. The driver only takes over when it will be full. The conductor usually takes his position after paying the touts their token.

The more buses a tout loads, the more money he makes. Therefore, with the rising levels of unemployment against ever increasing cost of living, more people are turning to either vending of touting for survival. According to Zimstats, (2015), there are 1 367 250 people in Chitungwiza town with 56% (765 660) being youth. Studies also indicate that unemployment in Zimbabwe staggers at 95% while 92% (704 407) of the young people are also jobless (Dodo, Makoni, 2019). Initially when the industry was introduced, the majority of the crew members were young. However, over time, there are also elderly people involved in this trade. Interestingly however is that more touts and conductors are youthful; recently coming out of education and training institutions. Over time, these either migrate to other countries for greener pastures or they obtain relevant driving

documentation before they graduate to driving, which is a more paying and more respectful job of the three. Therefore, in this industry, various age ranges are involved though the elderly are more into driving than touting and being conductors. This is not to say there are no elderly touts.

The desire by commuter omnibus crew to make as many multi-directional runs in order to make large profits and the expectations by the touts to also load as many omnibuses as possible, have always created good ground for potential conflicts. Given the fact that most of the parties in this trade are in it out of lack of employment and an ailing economy, and that the traffic enforcement agencies also demand a quota, there is serious aggression on the road. Crew members, touts and sometimes passengers get embroiled in various conflicts and incidences of violence over various reasons (Khosa, 1998) [4]. Most of the conflicts erupt in full view of the passengers and little children (Mashiri, 2001) [8]. Some of the incidences of violence are bloody and fatal while some of the inter-crew high speed chases are dangerous to both passengers and other motorists. It is against the background of these incidences of conflicts and violence that this study was conducted.

### 3. Methodology

Data were collected from 24 participants who had been randomly sampled from three omnibus ranks in Seke, Chitungwiza; Makoni (7), C-K Junction (10) and Unit L (7). Of the 24 participants, six were drivers, six conductors and 12 touts. The 24 participants were taken from a population of over 140 people inclusive of drivers, conductors and touts. The distribution of the participants was as follows; Makoni had two drivers, two conductors and three touts, C-K Junction had two drivers, two conductors and six touts and Unit L with two drivers, two conductors and three touts. Age ranges were not considered to allow a cross-sectioned collection of data. These three ranks were selected for their hyper-activity and large numbers of omnibus crews characterised by conflicts.

At Makoni, C-K and Unit L ranks, during peak hour, there are an average of 25-30, 10-15 and 15-20 commuter omnibuses respectively. Some omnibuses to Mbare, Machipisa or Harare city start their journeys at these ranks.

The study conducted qualitatively following exploratory enquiry collected data through informal interviews and mobile observations. The study sought to answer the following questions; why the crew engaged in conflicts, what form of language is used in public and how they resolved the conflicts. Data were analysed using content analysis approach which allowed the creation of themes and their grouping according to similarities, trends, behaviours, feelings and mannerisms.

### 4. Theoretical Framework

The basic theory adopted in this study is an implicit theory that disenchanted and under-employed people are more likely to engage in violence since their opportunity cost of doing so is low. Crew members of the commuter omnibuses that ply the Harare city, Machipisa and Mbare routes believe they are in their jobs not out of their failure to attain the required skills and knowledge for better and more paying jobs, but because of a failing economy. Therefore, they have become disillusioned as they see no hope in their lives. The theory that people who feel unfairly

treated are more prepared to participate in violence also to some extent, explains the violent behaviours exhibited by commuter omnibus crews especially among themselves. The crew members have condemned themselves to poverty and conflicts where they are engaged in violence characterised by obscene and immoral language use in public.

The study also adopted Brown and Levinson's (1987) [2] Politeness Theory. The critical argument in the Politeness Theory is that some discourse actions are by nature intimidating to face and in consequence require improvement through what Brown and Levinson (1987) [2] and Mashiri (2000) [9] call politeness strategies (PSs). Politeness theory is listener-centred and underscores improvement and moderation of the request as the key purpose for employing politeness strategies. The study also argues that the use and selection of proper and polite register by the crew has two purposes; builds good rapport between crew members and that it presents the crew in good light to the passengers and the rest of the people.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Why the crew engaged in conflicts

The study established a variety of factors behind crew and touts conflicts and violence. In their plurality, most factors revolve around the grievance perspective, which argues that deprivation or marginalization triggers conflict and that violence is a normal way of resolving grievances. Some of the grievances are economic, such as poverty, economic recession, unemployment, under-employment or inequality. The study established that while there was a general dislike for conflicts and violence the world over, some conflicts in this regard were healthy and necessary. According to the study, some conflicts helped eliminate some individuals from the commuter omnibus business as they would have depicted dangerous features for the public. Besides, they also helped participants rediscover themselves.

There were 16 participants (4 drivers, 5 conductors and 7 touts) who indicated that the use of foul language in public by some crew members and touts contributed to about 3 in every 10 incidents of violence. Of the seven touts, five indicated their preparedness to engage in violence if it meant ensuring that they were to earn more money. Others revealed that there was an element of frustration emanating from their failure to secure formal and decent jobs commensurate with their academic qualifications. One actually said;

*'Mdara, pano ndirikutsvaga raramo. Anondivharira mwena webond, anoirasa. Ndinokiya rough. Anenge achida kudya ega, ko ininiwo?'*

(Old man, I am here to look for survival. If anyone blocks my efforts, it is unfortunate, I will fight badly. I also want to earn a living.)

These participants revealed that there were crew members and touts who had accepted this trade and had become career touts, career conductors and career drivers that they were prepared to die protecting what sustained their families. They indicated that career touts were those who had become hopeless of ever achieving anything in life and had no option. Career conductors were those that had had an opportunity to find a commuter omnibus to work as a conductor unlike touts but would never obtain drivers' licences to graduate to becoming drivers someday. Career drivers were those drivers who were either

contented with driving mini-buses or had failed to upgrade themselves into long distance haulage truck or bus drivers, a more respected career.

Two drivers talked about a case where two conductors had fought after one of them had refused to help the other one with some fare change. The two indicated that while there was need to help each other with fare change, it had in that case been noted that the other part had presented himself in a rude manner. According to observations, some engaged in violence for not taking lightly advice to either bath or brush their teeth since they worked with the public.

Nine other participants (3 drivers, 2 conductors and 4 touts) talked about conflicts emanating from refusal by a conductor to allow a tout to load a commuter omnibus. The fact that touts believe they are entitled to loading all the buses, makes them force themselves into some buses and start mobilizing passengers even if the conductor wants to do it himself. Four conductors indicated that there are also instances when bus crews connive to punish some touts by denying them permission to load their bus. In other cases, touts are allowed to load and before the driver decides to speed off without paying the tout for the work.

Besides the desire to load as many buses as possible, there are some touts who also want to monopolise by declaring their interests on all the buses while others may not have. On the part of the bus crew, they also endeavor to make as much profit as possible by plying more trips. The achievement of more multi-directional runs (trips), as per the observations, lie either in the efficiency and effectiveness of the touts loading the bus or in the crew cheating others and driving in a disorderly manner; that which is dangerous to both motorists and the travelling passengers. According to 21 participants (6 drivers, 6 conductors and 9 touts), competition for passengers, accounts for at least seven in every 10 recorded road rage cases in Seke. It seems the drivers tend to gain travelling time by driving aggressively competing for passengers.

It is evident that road rage is a direct result of exhaustion and competition for passengers as the crew tries to earn daily set profits. What then becomes worrisome, according to mobile observations, is the fact that when they engage in violence, no matter how bloody it is, they fight in public threatening the safety of their passengers. They also present a nasty picture of themselves especially to the children who then develop a negative picture about commuter omnibus crew and touts.

Failure to adhere to *mushikashika* rules was one of the cited reasons for conflicts. *Mushikashika* is an illegal passenger pick-up point often found in the city of Harare where omnibuses quickly fill up with rushing passengers. At these pick up points, omnibus crews follow no rules except to disorderly shout out for potential passengers. According to nine participants (6 touts, 2 conductors and 1 driver), there are some omnibuses that just come disrupting order and snatching passengers from the already loading omnibuses. These disruptions often, according to the participants, delay omnibuses from filling up quick enough before Traffic and Municipal police officers arrest them. It is such instances that conflicts and violence often erupted amongst the crew members who also operate in groups.

According to eight participants (4 drivers, 4 conductors), *mushikashika* pick-up points provided an opportunity to make more trips thus improving their profits as they were not required

to queue for hours in the official rank at Charge Office main rank. One tout remarked;

*'Mushikashika unombotti yambutsa fanike rank yakazara zvayo kana kuchinaya'*

(These illegal pick-up points sometimes help us especially when the rank queue is long or when it's raining)

pped anywhere possible passengers were seen. Observations revealed that drivers returning into the stream after abruptly stopping to pick-up or drop-off passengers at sporadic points or carrying out overtaking movements interrupted vehicular streams building confusion and dangerous situations. The other drivers in the streams would then be forced without warning to either stop or break thus precipitating anger. Because of the desire by all the omnibus drivers to record as many multi-directional runs as possible for profit reasons, the blocked crew would confront the other immediately starting physical fights.

Observations and six interviews (5 drivers and 1 conductor) revealed that in formal ranks, there were some drivers who jumped queues that would sometimes have over 20 other buses parked waiting for their turn to load. It was those already queuing who would get infuriated and team-up against the transgressors. Often times, transgressors would severely get beaten by several touts and rank marshals.

Observations established that amongst the touts, there were divided along political lines with some seemingly aligned to the opposition while others aligned to the ruling regime. Therefore, their approaches to loading buses differed with some being more aggressive while others were polite and better cultured. According to three touts, political alignment was encouraged as a way of neutralizing the opposition that allegedly was using poverty and joblessness as a campaign trump card. Besides, the ruling party thought it an incentive to the active youth to forcibly join touting wherever suspected opposition youth operated.

## 5.2 Form of language used in public

Observations revealed that most touts had no respect for passengers and could fist-fight in full view of their passengers and swirling obscene verbal insults. It was observed that most of the language used by touts is slang and largely informal and full of caricature. According to 11 participants (5 drivers, 2 touts and 4 conductors), most touts enjoy using obscene language because they will be intoxicated while others are of a street vagrant nature who now no morality.

According to 17 participants (2 drivers, 5 conductors and 10 touts), the widely used language in this trade is slang and some street lingo whose meanings are only known within the circles. It was reported that slang is often used just to keep their communication exciting considering that they work under harsh conditions. Lederer (1997) [5] aptly noted that slang allows speakers to break the ice and engage into more informal and sociable conversations. Some of the street lingo is specifically meant to deceive security agents and to cut them off some of the conversations especially to do with operational strategies.

Observations and 10 interviews (2 drivers, 3 conductors and 5 touts) revealed that there is use of kin terms as relational social honorifics to neutralize explosive conversations. According to

Mashiri (2000)<sup>[9]</sup>, the use of kin terms is one of the best ways of getting attention of a stranger since it is polite cordial, respectful and courteous. Such kin terms may include the following; *ingonswisisai mukoma* (May you please understand), *maita basa guru vahanzyadzi* (you have done a great job sister) and *pamusoroi tete* (excuse me aunt).

## 5.3 How they resolved the conflicts.

Data collected from both the interviews and mobile observations pointed to the employment of various strategies for resolution of conflicts. There was a fusion of both exogenous and endogenous approaches to conflict resolution with some methods taking more prominence than the others. One of the most prominent methods used in addressing conflicts was physical fights. This was common amongst touts and with touts against drivers and conductors. It appears most touts preferred physical fighting as the easiest and most efficient measure of redressing problems. According to six participants (4 drivers and 2 conductors), in a week, they witnessed an average of 15-18 fights amongst the touts and another 5-7 pitting touts against the crew members. Under normal circumstances, these statistics are abnormal given that the parties have to work together on a daily basis.

Talks according to 22 participants (6 drivers, 6 conductors and 10 touts) were another common approach used to resolve conflicts especially involving drivers and conductors. Because of their level of education and civilisation, drivers and conductors understood the fact that they needed each other even if they often competed for passengers. They also realized the need to respect the passengers. These argued that they could not afford to misbehave because they were permanently seen in the same omnibuses unlike touts who could move from one bus to the other without tarnishing anyone's reputation.

It was revealed that talks ranged from inter-crew mediated; driver-to-driver, conductor-to-conductor, and driver-to-conductor to those initiated by the aggrieved parties. It was indicated that it was easy to hold talks with the drivers and conductors unlike touts.

Kin terms are employed as politeness-enhancers especially amongst the drivers and a few educated conductors. Whenever conflicts erupt, there are some members who are naturally polite and well groomed who immediately intervene to restore sanity. It is such individuals who apply such terms as '*ndinokumbirawo* (I beg you), *musadaro* (don't do that [politeness]), *ndapota* (please), *ndinzweiwo veduwee* (may you please listen), *ndinokumbira ruregerero* (I beg your forgiveness), *ndatenda* (thank you), *maita basa* (thank you), and *muchenjere kurovera* (mind knocking on that)'.

The application of such relational social honorifics has a bearing on the cultural practices of the people whose childhood socialisation might have been based on strong religious beliefs especially those of *unhu/ubuntu*. What also comes to the fore is the fact that some of these crew members and touts have relations which they would want to preserve by presenting good morals and behaviour.

Seven touts indicated that there are instances when they collectively impose sanctions on their peers as a way of instilling discipline. The seven participants revealed that in cases where they realize that some individuals are continually causing problems and conflicts, they agree to isolate them from the shifts,

implying that they would not get paid for the day. If need be, they can collectively fight an individual creating conflicts.

This collectivity by touts shows how they work and thrive especially in the face of adversity. In public, these present themselves as rude, immoral, war-like, criminal, violent and cruel people. This, to some extent helps them to maintain grip on some of theirs who are violent.

Drivers were noted to be in the habit of socially isolating others especially as a way of punishing deviants. It was reported that isolation effectively worked as a form of sanction against those considered deviants and trouble makers. Four conductors and 6 touts also indicated that touts too had a strategy of denying deviants an opportunity to load buses thus starving them of daily earnings. If a member of these groups had been targeted for isolation, it meant that the rest would not alert him in the event of danger and other undesirable incidences. This form of sanction continually exposed the deviant to problems which required him to either pay bribes or simply get arrested. Therefore, it served as an effective behaviour regulator and method of resolving conflicts.

Thirteen participants (5 drivers, 3 conductors and 5 touts) pointed out that verbal insults were an effective form of ending some conflicts. However, it was noted that verbal insults left permanent memories in the parties thus nurturing the differences for possible future eruption. It was also mentioned that if parties to a conflict exchanged verbally, it got stimulated and fueled up by the passengers' responses and reactions. In such cases, verbal insults could escalate to physical fights.

Social control is a critical function. 18 participants (5 drivers, 6 conductors and 7 touts) indicated that in society, there is need to devise means of making sure that members do not hurt or conflict with each other. They pointed out that violence, from this viewpoint, proves failures in the control process. All the 18 participants showed that they understand the need for community in-built regulatory systems as a way of maintaining order and preventing conflicts. In other words, the participants implied that there are some sector specific methods of addressing sector specific challenges.

## **6. Conclusion**

There are some crew members and touts who now believe that working in this transport business is a condemnation of the entire life so much so that they see no light in their lives. As such, they have adopted an attitude which they believe allows them to perform their duties without shame especially in the eyes of their school and college peers. There is more of a feeling of outright failure and to ensure a conducive working environment, they often abuse intoxicants which then drive them wild.

What is glaring in most crew members and touts in this study is the fact that effective communication is rarely practiced. It seems everyone in this business is busy so much so that their levels of patience and tolerance are at their lowest. The study did not establish what really was in their minds during the conflicts and what other psychological implications may be recorded from such people in the long term. What is evident from this study is the need for a review of what is socially constructed about the commuter omnibus crew and touts and what they too think about society.

While most touts and omnibus crew members present themselves as ignorant and illiterate, the majority of them are either skilled in some areas or degreeed from universities. They simply cannot secure jobs owing to an ailing economy. It may be that, frustration over failure to get formal employment could be contributing towards their reckless behaviours. The study also shows that there are various conflicts and challenges faced by both omnibus crew and touts. The study also shows that while some of the conflicts are externally precipitated, the majority are a result of either poor communication or intoxication by alcohol and drugs. It has also been observed that some of the behaviours and conflicts recorded are to some extent, driven by political systems as part of a continuous campaign programme ahead of any election.

The study established that the methods used to resolve some of the conflicts are sometimes inappropriate given the circumstances and the calibre of parties involved. The most preferred and applied measures like physical fighting, isolation, verbal insults and economic sanctions often fail to produce intended outcomes due to the attitudes of both parties; conflicting and resolving. Often, parties administering resolution measures will be enjoying the same conflicts so that they benefit business while watching as entertainment. It has almost become a trend in the commuter omnibus trade that whoever joins has to lose some morals, misbehave and repeatedly engage in violence. In this regard, there is need for a review of mental attitudes on the part of both omnibus trade workers and the public as way of addressing crew and touts' conflicts.

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