

The Dynamics of Taxi Violence in Phuthaditjhaba: An Investigation into Territorial Disputes and Governance Failures

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ABSTRACT: Taxi violence remains a persistent issue in South Africa’s transport sector, with profound implications for public safety, local governance, and socio-economic stability. South Africa is no stranger to bloody clashes between rival taxi organisations who fight to gain dominance over lucrative routes. This study examines the phenomenon of taxi violence in Phuthaditjhaba, Free State Province. It explores the root causes of conflict among the two taxi associations operating in the area, with a focus on territorial disputes and governance failures. Theoretically, it drew on Karl Marx's conflict theory, which looks at taxi associations' conflicts over routes and commuters, not just commercial disputes, but as power struggles rooted in resource control and economic inequality. This study adopted a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews as a data collection method. Observational fieldwork and document analysis supplement these interviews. Key findings highlight that factors such as competition over routes, weak regulatory oversight, and historical grievances remain a fundamental challenge in the area. The study recommends strengthening regulatory frameworks for the taxi industry and issuing licenses in a timely manner to mitigate taxi violence. This paper presents a significant contribution by providing a localised perspective, sentience and understanding of the nature of violent taxi conflicts. As such, this study contributes to the knowledge base on taxi conflicts with relevance to policymakers, local authorities, and stakeholders in the public transport industry.

KEYWORDS: Taxi Violence, Taxi Operators, Commuters, Law Enforcement

I. INTRODUCTION

South Africa is coming from a past shaped by violence and repression. Today, the country faces new challenges as democracy matures slowly. Currently, violence is complex and creative in form and is shaped by both apartheid and the mechanisms of transition itself (Dugard, 2001). In this context, we are more interested in outlining the current violence-related problems faced in the taxi industry in present-day South African societies. In the post-apartheid era, taxi violence has become more common, decentralised and criminal in nature when compared to the period before 1994, where taxi wars were instead few in number. Violence, particularly taxi violence, is an ongoing and prominent feature of South African society, as this is a country transitioning from apartheid rule to democratic rule. Most of the violent incidents that take place in the industry are associated with the mother bodies (commonly known as taxi associations). Due to its profitability and highly competitive nature, taxi operators organised themselves into associations primarily defined by region and, to a lesser extent, specific routes (Modipa, 2024). Over time, these associations gained power and began fiercely defending their territories. Taxi violence in South Africa thus reflects profound challenges within the transportation sector and also exposes larger societal issues, including economic inequalities and institutional weaknesses (Modipa, 2024).

Taxi violence has long plagued South Africa's public transport sector, with incidents often turning deadly and destabilising communities. The industry serves about 69% of South Africans who use public transportation, and it is a source of Black entrepreneurial activity (Wasserman 2019). The minibus taxi industry, an informal yet integral part of the country’s transport landscape, faces significant issues, especially concerning violence among taxi associations vying for lucrative routes, with other underlying factors fuelling conflicts within the sector (Modipa, 2024). This South African informal transport industry is infamous for its frequent spurts of deadly confrontations that are commonly referred to as “taxi wars” or “taxi violence”. The term “taxi war” is usually used to refer to the turf wars fought between taxi associations and individual taxi drivers since the 1980s (Yabagi, 2017). Taxi violence affects taxi operators, commuters, families and communities negatively due to criminality within the taxi industry. Many associations are fighting for routes across the country, and unregulated business contributes to chaos and despair on public transport. The increasing demand for transportation continues to drive the sector’s expansion, encompassing several modes of transport, including minibus taxis, e-hailing, and metered taxis.

Despite the criticism, Molobela (2021:3) contend that the minibus-taxi industry has emerged as one of the most successful black-owned businesses. Despite the taxi industry's crucial role in public transport and employment, competition over routes and profits often results in violent clashes between associations. Taxi violence has been a recurring issue in many South African townships, including Phuthaditjhaba in the Free State. This study aims to determine the causes of taxi violence in Phuthaditjhaba, its effects on local commuters and taxi operators, and the effectiveness of governmental responses.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

State of the taxi industry in contemporary South Africa : Taxi-related violence has become a prevalent issue across all South African provinces, causing persons to lose not only their jobs but also, tragically, their lives. The pervasiveness of violence within the taxi industry has created a culture of fear and insecurity among citizens who rely on public transportation daily. This violent environment affects not only those directly involved in the industry, such as drivers, owners, and association members, but also passengers, who are often caught in the crossfire. Without adequate government oversight, taxi associations became self-regulating bodies, controlling loading and pricing practices. Taxi associations use threats of violence and violence itself to enforce their arrangements (Boudrex, 2006). They use extensive armaments and weight to resist attempts to re-regulate the taxi industry. They are often indicative of more general levels of organised crime in post-apartheid South Africa (Dugard, 2001). The root of taxi violence and the reasons for its persistence are located in the unresolved socio-economic conditions in South Africa. Studies (e.g., Sekhonyane & Dugard, 2004) reveal that taxi wars stem from economic rivalry and weak regulation.

One of the major causes of the persistent taxi violence is the contestation of lucrative routes. The competition for control and domination of routes in the industry often results in an upsurge in violent occurrences, especially gun-related murders. Taxi owners have an interest in busy routes (Sekhonyane and Dugard, 2004), and those who already control them hinder new drivers who want to join and work the same routes. They protect their territory by all means necessary, including violence. Lucrative routes are central to successful taxi operations in any country. Thus, rival owners gradually resort to violence to eradicate competition, and the assassination of rivals often adds a sinister aspect to the conflict. Another significant contributing factor to the violent outbreaks in the industry is the poorly planned development of residential areas and shopping complexes. People are required to work in those complexes, and they need to be transported. This results in major competition between operators. Mafia-like tactics, including the hiring of hitmen, are often used by rival association members to eliminate competition in the industry. Some of the people in the association hire hitmen to kill operators who are contesting with them for the same route (Khosa, 2001). Association members even go so far as to hire hitmen from remote rural areas in the country and neighbouring countries to make it difficult for that person to be apprehended (Dugard, 2001). Hitmen are usually highly skilled people with military training and played significant roles in violence during the apartheid era.

When taxi violence erupts, it affects innocent people, as the gun-for-hire men do not care about the lives of commuters (Molefe, 2016). Violence in the taxi industry not only affects the associations that are in disagreement over routes, ranks, or poaching of passengers, but also affects the community at large. According to the Gauteng Provincial Legislature (2016), problems in the volatile South African taxi industry involve several stakeholders: departmental officials, taxi operators, taxi associations, and law enforcement officials. Some civil servants own taxis and meddle in the issuing of operating licences and the approval of routes to benefit themselves. The latter is supported by Marcano (2016: 5), who asserts that "there is corruption in the allocation of routes and issuing of operating licences, forcing people to kill each other as routes are saturated". "Any person that transports passengers must obtain a public operating licence; this applies to taxi drivers, bus drivers or any driver who is transporting people for payment" (Western Cape Government 2019:1). According to the Western Cape Government (2019:1), a public operating licence is "a permit or document giving drivers permission to transport people for public gain". There are enormous endogenous problems and challenges facing the process of applying for, granting, and issuing taxi permits and licenses. In part, "this is largely attributed to corruption manifested through undue influence, forgery, fraud, conflict of interest, abuse of authority and a culture of impunity and lack of consequences management prevalent within the entire system" (Gauteng Province Legislature 2016:3). At times, officials cause confusion by issuing the same licence to different associations or to the dominant association (Molefe, 2016). Molefe further asserts that "government officials also have a tendency to side with dominant associations in their areas, stoking violence between taxi operators by granting preferential licences to selected individuals or allowing only one association to occupy a particular route". Associations also collude with officials to issue fraudulent permits and licenses. "There is also the existence of taxis that do not have licenses but operate illegally under others known as Amakhwapha"

(Gauteng Province Legislature, 2016:3). This results in competition between legal and illegal operators. Those who hold permits are only allowed to travel, pick up and drop off passengers at specified stops. Failure to comply with this is an offence and warrants prosecution (Molefe 2016). Fights usually break out when drivers cross their boundaries into other territories. Taxi associations have designated routes that constitute their areas of operation. Some routes are highly contested (Sekhonyane & Dugard 2004), and territorial conflicts in the taxi industry are mainly associated with access to taxi ranks and routes (Molefe 2016). “Taxi operators, at times, contribute to delays in issuing permits and licenses by late submission of all required documents” (Gauteng Province Legislature 2016:3). The overtrading and wide-scale illegal operations on specific routes were cited among the leading causes of taxi violence in the industry. To succeed in the taxi business, you need to gain the protection of the police and traffic officials in the Department (Yabagi, 2017). Government efforts to root out corruption in the industry are often undermined by corrupt police officers who conspire with criminals. The ownership of a taxi by a police officer or government official is a problem in the fight to eradicate taxi violence because they tend to be biased towards the associations with which they are registered. According to Marcano (2016:7), “the police are also pointed out as part of the problem, instead of stabilising the situation”.

Mistrust between commuters and taxi operators : The taxi industry in South Africa is not regulated. It is controlled by taxi associations, which create significant problems for commuters as they fight for positions and territorial dominance in their associations. Despite the available modes of transportation, South African transport is still plagued by several challenges. These include a lack of public transport access in rural areas, taxi violence, equity imbalances, and congestion. Many commuters in rural areas and townships rely on minibus taxis to get to and from work. However, several minibus taxis operate without licenses, and in some cases, unlicensed drivers operate them, leading to complaints from commuters affected by the violence associated with this mode of transport (Marcano, 2018). For example, the ongoing minibus taxi violence has left several minibus taxi ranks closed for two months, in an effort to bring stability and peace between rival taxi associations, the Cape Amalgamated Taxi Association (CATA) and Congress of Democratic Taxi Associations (CODETA) (Molobela, 2024). This was due to infighting among these associations over control of routes, which contributed to instability in Cape Town. The commuters were severely affected, as there was no means of transportation to and from different destinations. This led them to rely less on public transport and to use alternative modes, which are more expensive than the fares they pay for taxis. Viljoen (2021) stated that commuters are, with good reason, terrified of being caught in the crossfire as taxi bullets fly. With an estimated 82 people killed in the taxi violence this year alone, taking taxis in certain areas has become a life-threatening business with hitmen ambushing taxi drivers and conducting shoot-outs at taxi ranks (Davis, 2021). This means that commuters were left stranded and not able to go to work as the violence put everyone at risk, even taxi drivers fear for their lives as they do not know whether the people who are in their taxis are commuters or hitmen. The number of innocent people dying is increasing regularly due to taxi violence, and it compromises the future of this business, as they need commuters to commute in their taxis. Still, the safety and trustworthiness of taxi operators remain significant concerns for commuters and other road users.

In recent years, research and government programs have placed their primary focus on the formalisation of the South African minibus-taxi industry (Fobosi, 2020). However, slow progress has been made in formalising the industry. From this perspective, there seems to be a gap between policy and the actual business of the taxis. This literature highlights that the government and researchers have spent time and resources attempting to find effective ways to formalise the taxi business, while neglecting to assist in developing taxi-driving behaviours on the roads and towards commuters. The driving behaviour of most taxi drivers is usually reckless, as they habitually break many road rules, and taxi fares are not stagnant but fluctuate with peak times and weather (Ngubane, 2020). Reckless and negligent driving is common among taxi drivers, putting commuters at risk of losing their lives due to their noncompliance with road rules. Taxis are often seen as unsafe and operating in a way that is abusive to passengers, and illegal operators in the industry have contributed to violence in the sector (Arrive Alive, 2021). South African taxi drivers are usually associated with vulgar language, affronts, pushing passengers around, speeding, jumping red robots, obstructing traffic, and illegal turns and stops. It is this behaviour that has led to distrust between commuters and taxi operators. As such, it is of paramount importance for law enforcement agencies to prioritise the safety and needs of commuters, as they are always caught in taxi violence and living in fear in their communities, as bullets are the order of the day between rival taxi associations. Through a collaborative strategy, the industry can be made safer, more reliable, and more efficient for all stakeholders involved. This unregulated environment enables operators to sidestep legal requirements, often resorting to violence to resolve disputes or enforce their own rules. Taxi violence in Phuthaditjhaba has led to significant loss of life, property damage, and instability. This study further argues that taxi violence reflects deeper systemic struggles over resources, dominance, and survival, as explained by Conflict Theory.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conflict theory perspective : This study is grounded in conflict theory, rooted in the work of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and other nineteenth-century social critics, such as Max Weber and George Simmel. This study applies conflict theory as a sociological lens to understand the root causes and persistence of taxi violence in Phuthaditjhaba. Conflict theorists believe that social order results from dominant groups making sure that subordinate groups are loyal to the institutions that are the dominant groups' source of wealth, power and prestige. Tischler (2010) further asserts that "the superior groups will use coercion, constraint, and even force to help control those people who are voluntarily loyal to the laws and rules they have made". Tibbetts (2012) supports this statement and adds that laws are created and enforced in ways that ensure superior groups suppress subordinate groups. In the context of taxi associations, the Dominant group (bourgeoisie equivalent): Large, well-established taxi associations or those with government backing monopolise control over main routes. Oppressed group (proletariat equivalent): Smaller, new independent operators with fewer resources, access, or political influence. These groups are competing for limited economic resources: passengers, profitable routes, and control over high-demand areas (e.g., shopping malls, city centres). Prior research shows that structural inequality and competition over limited resources lead to violence and instability. According to Marx's conflict theory, taxi association rivalries over routes and passengers are not just business disputes; they are power struggles rooted in economic inequality, resource control, and class conflict. These struggles reflect broader systemic issues of exploitation, domination, and resistance in capitalist societies.

This theory applies to this study, as it offers a comprehensive understanding of the causes of misconduct, conflict, and violence in the South African taxi industry. It postulates that the modern-day South African societies are in a mode of constant change, and this dynamic process creates fundamental conflicts of interest within and among their various groups. Conflict in the South African minibus taxi industry arises from violent battles among associations and owners for wealth, power, and dominance. This creates a conflict as certain taxi operators who wield greater power keep accumulating wealth, while the rest only dream of achieving it. The taxi industry is constantly changing. To date, many of the violent conflicts in the minibus taxi industry have resulted from inequalities within the sector, intolerance, poor negotiating skills, greed, and oppression. According to Tischler (2010), when social order cannot be maintained through rules and laws, minority groups rebel, often resulting in change. In addition, he further asserts that conflict theorists are concerned with who benefits from particular social arrangements and how those in power maintain their position and continue to reap benefits from them. Tischler (2010) further argues that the ruling class is seen as a group that spreads specific values, beliefs, and social arrangements to enhance its power and wealth. The social order then reflects the outcome of a struggle among those with unequal power and resources. Tibbetts (2012) asserts that the state of inequality resulting in repression creates a sense of injustice and unfairness among members of the less powerful groups, and such feelings are a primary cause of crime. Furthermore, Kendall (2008) posits that the competition for power among various groups in society is the primary cause of crime, violence and conflict. Society is in a state of perpetual conflict due to competition over limited resources. Those with power and wealth (the ruling class) use their position to oppress and exploit those without it (the working class).

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- **Research Design:** This study utilised a qualitative case study research method. This research method provides an in-depth, qualitative exploration of a bounded, real-world phenomenon within its specific context, using various data collection methods to understand its complexity (Crause, 2015). The fundamental goal of a qualitative study is to gather and create knowledge while analysing and understanding human experiences (Neuman, 2014). Furthermore, the study employed a phenomenological research approach. According to Kendall (2008), phenomenology is a wide-ranging form of study in which the researcher seeks to gather information that explains how individuals experience a phenomenon and how they feel about it.
- **Data collection Method:** This study used primary data collected through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were purposively conducted with 11 taxi operators. According to Kendall (2008:55), semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to "gain a detailed understanding of the participant's beliefs, perceptions, or account of a particular topic." The advantage of a semi-structured interview is its flexibility, which allows participants to introduce issues the researcher had not considered (Crause, 2015). Furthermore, observational fieldwork and document analysis (e.g., news reports, municipal records) supplement these interviews. According to Hall (2016), observations in qualitative research involve gathering rich, descriptive, and subjective data about people, behaviours, or phenomena in their natural settings. These observations focus on interpreting characteristics and qualities rather than numbers, aiming for a deep understanding of

experiences, attitudes, and social interactions. According to Kelleher (1993: 126), it allows previously unnoticed or ignored aspects to be seen and forces the observer to familiarise themselves with the subject.

- **Population :** The target population for this study included taxi operators (e.g., drivers and owners) operating in Phuthaditjhaba from the two taxi associations in the area: QwaQwa United Taxi Association (QWAUTA) and Pan African Taxi Corporation (PATC). The town's strategic location and reliance on minibus taxis for daily transportation make it especially vulnerable to conflict among taxi associations competing for dominance over profitable routes. Taxi violence has been extensively documented in urban centres like Johannesburg and Cape Town, but remains under-researched in smaller towns like Phuthaditjhaba.
- **Study area :** The research site for this study is Phuthaditjhaba (Setsing Shopping Complex), situated in the Eastern Free State Province in South Africa. The complex has five formal taxi ranks and two informal taxi ranks.
- **Sampling techniques:** This study employed two non-probability sampling techniques to select participants. These sampling techniques include purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is used when selecting participants who are better positioned to provide relevant information to fulfil the research objectives (Maxwell, 2013). In this study, purposive sampling was used to identify and recruit initial participants who met the study's criteria. The sampling method is intentionally used because participants can provide information as outlined and required by the researcher. The snowball sampling procedure was also used because it was best suited to this research study. According to Bhardwaj (2019), the snowball process collects samples quickly and is cost-effective. Upon identifying and recruiting initial participants, the researcher requests referrals to other participants who share similar characteristics (Neuman, 2014). After purposively identifying the initial participants, the snowball sampling procedure began. The initial participants identified were asked to refer to other participants who met the inclusion criteria. This process continued until saturation was reached. This study depended heavily on the involvement of identified information-rich participants. Braun and Clarke (2013) confirm that snowball sampling involves recruitment through the researcher's and participants' networks.
- **Ethical considerations:** It is imperative to consider ethical issues in every research study. Hall (2016) indicated that the ethics of science concern what is wrong and right in research. The researcher notes the following ethical principles: **(1) Informed consent:** in this research study, the researcher asked for permission from participants and those who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study before interviews. In addition, they were informed that they have the right to answer only the questions they are comfortable with. **(2) Confidentiality:** the information obtained during data collection was kept confidential. The researcher omitted details such as participants' names and the associations they belong to. Pseudonyms are used for the research participants. No information directly linked the research participants to the data anywhere within the study. Under no circumstances could the information have been traced back to specific participants.
- **Limitations of the study :** Limitations had to be carefully examined so that the validity and reliability of the study were not compromised. The relatively small scope of the study is among these limitations. Although the trustworthiness of this study cannot be questioned, the researcher acknowledges that the sample was limited. Also, given the sensitive and volatile nature of the role players involved in the topic under investigation, it was deemed prudent, for safety reasons, to refrain from extending the investigation too widely.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This section presents the findings and analysis gathered through interviews and one group-focused interview with taxi operators from Phuthaditjhaba (Setsing shopping complex taxi ranks), using written notes, which proved suitable and valuable for generating the findings and analysis. As indicated under the methodology, 11 taxi operators were interviewed to gather their opinions, views and experiences on the ongoing taxi conflicts in the area.

Territorial Disputes : The study findings suggest that contestation of lucrative routes is a contributing factor to taxi violence in Phuthaditjhaba. The lucrative routes, combined with a surplus of vehicles, intensify the circumstances. Taxi owners have an interest in busy routes (Sekhonyane and Dugard, 2004), and those who already control them hinder new drivers who want to join and work the same routes. In reference to Marx's

Conflict theory, taxi association rivalries over routes and passengers are not just business disputes; they are power struggles rooted in economic inequality, resource control, and class conflict. They protect their territory by all means necessary, including violence. Lucrative routes are central to successful taxi operations in any country. Competition over routes is not just business; it is a struggle for survival and power. These struggles reflect broader systemic issues of exploitation, domination, and resistance in capitalist societies. Members affiliated to PATC believe that QWAUTA wants to monopolise the taxi industry in the area and does not want them to operate there. One participant said:

“They always come to fight us, accusing us of operating on their routes and yet we do not use the same routes unless they merge in intersections. If it is not that they accuse us of working illegally.”

This finding complies with conflict theory, which claims that “superior groups will use intimidation, control, and even force to help constrain those people who are not in the same line of work. Some routes are highly contested (Sekhonyane and Dugard, 2004), and territorial conflicts in the taxi industry are mainly associated with access to taxi ranks and routes (Molefe, 2016). An essential aspect contributing to the conflict in South Africa's minibus taxi industry is the intense competition for profitable routes; this competition often escalates into confrontations between taxi operators (Modipa, 2024). Reports from Phuthaditjhaba indicate persistent conflicts between taxi associations, reflecting struggles for economic dominance and recognition. This reflects Marx's idea that those in power use their position to protect their interests and suppress competition. For example, *“while we respect everyone's right to protest, the escalating violence associated with this strike is both worrying and disturbing. Tragically, two lives have already been lost, and several others have been injured.”* (DA Free State). The root of taxi violence and the reasons for its persistence are located in the unresolved socio-economic conditions in South Africa.

The study further finds that taxi operators affiliated with PATC believe that the registration/joining fees required from them to join or be part of QWAUTA are proof enough that they do not want them to be part of the association. One participant said:

“Currently, when you want to join their association, you will be required to pay joining/registration fees up to R30000.00. However, you have not even started working, that is too much money.”

According to Matlala (2019), there is stringent gatekeeping by taxi associations, limiting access to new operators and sometimes charging prohibitively high fees that some taxi owners cannot afford. From a Marxist lens, this is a clear case of the ruling group protecting its economic power through institutional control, while the oppressed group pushes back against exploitation and exclusion. Taxi associations use threats of violence and violence itself to enforce their arrangements (Boudrex, 2006). Conflict theory suggests that the lack of economic opportunities for everyone in the homeland often causes this. As a result, rival associations organise themselves and disagreements escalate into violence. If taxi drivers or smaller groups organise for access or fairer rules, that is a form of resistance to power structures — a key Marxist concept. Taxi operators have created a monopoly in which only their cars can operate on lucrative routes. Without adequate government oversight, taxi associations became self-regulating bodies, controlling loading and pricing practices. The latter is supported by Tibbetts (2012), who states that laws are thus created and enforced in ways that allow superior groups to suppress inferior groups. This mirrors Marx's idea that the ruling class shapes laws and ideas to protect its dominance — a form of ideological control.

Governance Failures : The findings highlight that the Department of Community Safety, Roads and Transport (CSRT) struggle to manage the demand for operating licences. According to the Western Cape Government (2019:1), a public operating licence is “a permit or document giving drivers permission to transport people for public gain”. The study uncovered significant issues, including a backlog of applications for operating licences and conflicts of interest in which law enforcement officials hold business stakes in the taxi industry, undermining their capacity to enforce the law independently. In part, “this is largely attributed to corruption manifested through undue influence, forgery, fraud, conflict of interest, abuse of authority and a culture of impunity and lack of consequences management prevalent within the entire system” (Gauteng Province Legislature, 2016:3). Some participants attributed some of the causes of the struggles and unresolved issues of taxi route contestation in the area to the permit board. One participant said:

“We have applied for permits in the last year, but until now we have not received them. Meanwhile, affiliated drivers disclosed that some drivers received permits in the past year”.

The participants' responses suggest that the main problem with the Department is the delay in issuing operating licences. The study further found that taxi operators from both associations are affected by the delay in issuing operating licenses. “Taxi operators, at times, contribute to delays in issuing permits and licenses by late submission of all required documents” (Gauteng Province Legislature 2016:3). The non-issuance of operating permits encourages unlawful loading practices in taxi ranks as well as on local routes. The latter is supported by Marcano (2016: 5), who asserts that “there is corruption in the allocation of routes and issuing of operating licences, forcing people to kill each other as routes are saturated”. All participants attested that acquiring an operating license is a frustrating process. Some participants said:

“It takes a long time to get our permits, and yet I have a car that I have to pay for every month; as such, I cannot sit with it and do nothing. I have to work.”

“It is hard to secure an operating permit if you are a standalone taxi owner, especially in a place that has a huge taxi association. They are preferred first before us.”

From the above replies, one can deduce that the bone of contention is the delay and biased distribution of operating permits. Furthermore, the study finds that some taxi vehicles from PATC operate without required permits, known as "pirating," intensifying tensions as legal operators from QWAUTA view these undertakings as unfair competition. The activities of QWAUTA support this finding on 12 August 2025, when the association staged a stay-away in Phuthaditjhaba to protest pirated taxis in the area. The protests left commuters stranded, affecting the daily operations of schools and businesses in the area. The lack of adequate regulatory oversight, limited vehicles and routes contributes to the cycle of violence, with taxi associations often resorting to violence or intimidation to protect their territories (Moloto, 2024). This is supported by the sporadic acts of violence that transpire between the two taxi associations in the area. *For example, on 16 June 2023, at the Setsing complex, a physical altercation between PATC taxi operators and QWAUTA-appointed private security occurred, leading to one member of PATC being shot and killed.* Without sufficient government oversight and strict law enforcement measures, taxi associations became self-regulating bodies, setting pricing and loading practices. Government efforts to root out corruption in the industry are often undermined by corrupt police officers who conspire with criminals.

Futile Law Enforcement : The findings suggest that government and law enforcement officials' participation as taxi operators/owners has further compounded this issue, generating internal conflicts that impede effective industry regulation. “Taxi associations also collude with officials to issue fraudulent permits and licenses” This results in competition between legal and illegal operators. Clashes usually break out when drivers cross their boundaries into other territories. To succeed in the taxi business, you need to gain the protection of the police and traffic officials in the Department (Yabagi, 2017). One participant said:

“The current incidents of taxi conflict are terrible. What makes it worse is the fact that government officials and traffic inspectors have their taxis operating within taxi associations.”

According to Boudreaux (2006), government officials' ownership of taxis leads to taxi-related violence, as they tend to target taxis from rival associations and protect the associations in which they have an interest. Molefe (2016) further asserts that “government officials also have a tendency to side with dominant associations in their areas, stoking violence between taxi operators by granting preferential licences to selected individuals or allowing only one association to occupy a particular route”. Corrupt transport department officials may allocate one route to two different taxi associations without negotiations for joint ventures, which naturally results in oversaturation of routes, conflict and clashes (Kubheka, 2021). As such, corruption extends beyond the police, with some politicians also holding interests in taxi businesses, leading to complex conflicts of interest and contributing to the inefficiency of law enforcement in handling taxi violence (Modipa, 2024). In recent years, police officers as well as traffic officers have been accused of aiding violence and overlooking those who break the law, and being involved in the taxi industry as investors. One participant said:

“The reason why traffic officials do not assist us is that some of the illegally operating taxis they own, so they have to arrest their drivers as well.”

According to Tischler (2010), conflict theorists are interested in who benefits from particular social arrangements and how those in power maintain their position and continue to reap benefits from them. Furthermore, the misuse of power extends beyond the industry players to certain officials within licensing and transport boards. The absence of consistent regulation has allowed disputes over fares, licensing, and routes to intensify, creating opportunities for criminal elements within the industry (Marcano, 2018). Addressing these deregulation issues in the taxi sector requires an integrated approach involving the government, taxi operators, drivers, and commuters. According to Molefe (2016), “the police are also pointed out as part of the problem, instead of stabilising the situation”. The interview responses gave the impression that the incidents of taxi-related violence are a further indication that violence in the taxi industry has reached crisis levels, and multi-sectoral intervention strategies must be implemented. The following section discusses interventions to address this scourge effectively.

Recommendations: The South African minibus-taxi industry plays a key role in fostering entrepreneurship, which contributes significantly to the country’s economic growth, job creation, and social development. Based on the findings, the study makes the following key recommendations:

Issuing of operating licenses: The Department of CRST should implement strategic recruitment: prioritise filling vacancies, with a focus on permit board posts. This will help reduce delays and turnaround times caused by insufficient capacity to process operating permit applications. This can also include digitalising the administrative processes by adopting e-governance systems to reduce manual workloads and improve efficiency. Furthermore, the Department of CRST should consider conducting lifestyle audits of all officials within the Department involved in issuing operating licenses as part of its fraud and corruption prevention measures. The Department should also consider establishing a process or system to determine whether all stakeholders in the issuance of operating licenses are competent to hold office and have no relations in the taxi industry. This would make dealing with taxi-related conflicts more effective. Corrective actions should be taken against officials who are selling permits.

Strengthening regulatory frameworks for the taxi industry: The Department of CRST should regulate the taxi industry by establishing a legislative framework and policies that would enforce laws governing the industry and ensure their application. The function of the state is to ensure the safety and security of the people in the country, and this responsibility has been given to the Ministry of CRST to provide quality services to all commuters and ensure their safety, as this is of great importance to the industry and the Department of Transport. In a joint approach, taxi associations should work with the Department in formulating legislation and policies governing the industry. This would help end the conflict and violence that continue to plague the industry due to competition over routes, fights over money, and territorial dominance. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for proposing sustainable interventions that promote safety and socio-economic development.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study provides an analysis of taxi violence in Phuthaditjhaba, with a view to determining its causes and exploring prospects for effectively combating its occurrence. The study recognises that the causes of conflict between the two taxi associations are the control of routes and the gatekeeping of other taxi operators from entering this business. The literature section highlights key issues such as challenges of the taxi industry in contemporary South Africa, vulnerability of public transport, and mistrust between commuters and taxi operators. According to Marx’s conflict theory, taxi association rivalries over routes and commuters are not just business disputes; they are power struggles rooted in economic inequality and control over resources. These struggles reflect broader systemic issues of exploitation, domination, and resistance in capitalist societies. Key findings of this study indicate that territorial disputes —fights over profitable routes —are among the main factors in taxi conflicts. Governance Failures —concerning the permit board and ineffective law enforcement — are further contributors to taxi-related struggles. A lack of structured oversight allows conflicts to proliferate, particularly over profitable routes, entry fees, and power dynamics within associations. Since the taxi industry operates mainly outside government regulation, it is challenging for authorities to implement policies that would address the sector’s systemic violence.

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