

Perception of Taxi Services in Oman: A Cross Examination of Citizens' and Taxi Drivers' Perception

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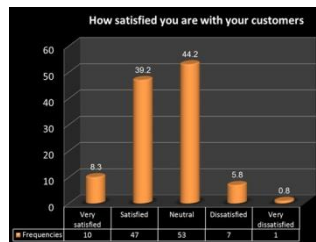
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Abstract

Short-haul public transport, particularly the passenger cars, is the most frequently utilized mode of transport in the world. Next to the private cars, taxis are the key to ensuring mobility in Oman where the state of development of public transport has been very slow. Despite having a high ratio of taxis to the private cars, the residents of Oman complain about the taxi services and their perception of taxi services in Oman is poor. Using a structured questionnaire targeted over a sample of 120 taxi drivers, this study reveals the basic statistics about taxis in Oman, their operations, the perspectives of taxi drivers and citizens about these services, the challenges to taxi business along with a few suggestions for improving taxi services in Oman. The study found that while taxis are the predominant mode of transportation in Oman, their operations are largely unorganized. Most of the taxi services are rendered on an individual basis. This paper also compared and contrasted the allegations of residents about the taxi drivers and taxi services with the responses obtained from the taxi drivers, which the taxi drivers had mostly denied. Lower number of passengers coupled with low income, insufficient parking and high insurance cost paid to the companies were identified as the major challenges confronting taxi drivers. Overall, the results reveal an expectation gap between drivers and the customers and recommend an urgent need for regulating the taxi services and by creating rules and regulations for the operators and customers.

Keywords: Public transport; perception; taxis; Oman

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Mobility is one of the major concerns of citizens worldwide. In particular, the passenger cars are the most frequently utilized modes in the European Union, which mostly applies to the rest of the world too¹. Public transport has a very low visibility in the streets of Oman. Taxis largely serve the roles of public transport in Oman, but command a sort of pseudo-monopoly. The population to taxi ratio in Oman is 70:1¹, which indicates that there is one taxi for every 70 individuals (or 14 taxis per 1000 population) in the country. In this context, the availability of taxi in Oman is much better than Qatar, UAE, Singapore, and Hong Kong where one taxi serves to 771, 267, 200, and 371 individuals, respectively². The ratio helps in assessing the need for licences, despite their accuracy³. The total number of licensed taxis in Oman is 28,137. The number of taxis in Oman seems similar to

the UK, which according to Transport for London was 20,701 in 2006⁴. Table 1 presents the region wise distribution of different categories of vehicles registered in Oman.

Taxis serve as the stepping stones to public transport as Taxi users are also public transport users⁵. Table 2 presents the ratio of taxis to the private cars within different governoratesⁱⁱ of Oman. Despite, the residents of Oman complain about the taxi services; and their perception of taxi services in Oman is poor. Oman certainly needs better mobility for its citizens. The state of development of public transport has been very slow, despite having good infrastructure and industrial growth.

ⁱ The preliminary population results at Ministry of National Economy of Oman estimates the population of 1,957,336 for the year 2010. With a figure of 28,137 taxis, the population to taxi ratio can be calculated as 69.56:1 (or 14.4 taxis per 1000 population).

ⁱⁱ The Sultanate of Oman is divided into eleven governorates (regions), and each governorate is formed of several willayats (districts). Al Sharqia and Al Batinah directorates have recently been divided into two directorates each. There were only nine directorates earlier.

Table 1 Categories of vehicles registered in Oman by 31/12/2010

Directorate	Private Vehicles	Taxis	Commercial Vehicles	Government Vehicles	Motorbikes	Rental	Tractors	Driving school	Exported	*Total
Muscat	316188	13403	100152	12612	633	9050	638	1591	1174	457653
Musandam	14023	21	1814	0	0	40	0	36	3	16006
Dhofar	39601	1528	15599	1248	0	972	31	234	33	59523
Al Buraimi	27836	1139	5893	4	0	231	3	55	4406	39738
Al Dakhliya	34006	1614	8414	1	0	44	4	329	70	44704
Al Sharqia	44129	3850	10519	1	0	90	3	357	31	59039
Al Batinah	78435	5971	19010	248	0	347	61	501	122	104966
Al Dhahira	17997	609	2633	1	0	42	5	105	32	21443
Al Wusta	614	2	530	6	0	0	0	9	0	1161
Total	572829	28137	164564	14121	633	10816	745	3217	5871	804233

Table 2 Comparison of vehicles registered in Oman

Directorate	Private vehicles	Taxis	Taxis as % of Private Cars
Muscat	316188	13403	4.2
Musandam	14023	21	0.1
Dhofar	39601	1528	3.9
Al Buraimi	27836	1139	4.1
Al Dakhliya	34006	1614	4.7
Al Sharqia	44129	3850	8.7
Al Batinah	78435	5971	7.6
Al Dhahira	17997	609	3.4
Al Wusta	614	2	0.3
Total	572829	28137	4.9

Source: Adapted from the data received from the Royal Oman Police (2011)

This paper delves upon the findings of a research grant report on public transport, which reveals the current state of transport and taxi services in Oman. It picks up the findings pertaining to the allegations that citizens have made about the taxi drivers and taxi services in the Al Batinah region of Oman and draws a cross comparison by taking note of the perceptions of taxi drivers, using statistical tools. The objectives of this study is, therefore, to reveal: (i) the basic statistics about taxis in Oman, (ii) their operations, (iii) the perspectives of taxi drivers and citizens about these services, (iv) the challenges to taxi business and, (v) to extend few suggestions for improving taxi services in Oman.

› 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

including the most traditional form of car-based services for a person or a small group travelling together, but also including significant variants in terms of the vehicle and the set of users. According to Foj, the most common mode of transport is prepared to pay a premium in return for a more personal door-to-door service. Akin to the private cars, this mode of transport is considered as the most responsive and personal form of transport by public. According to Queensland Taxi Strategic Plan (2010), taxis form a critical part of the public transport network, providing

flexible and responsive 24-hour service at relatively little cost. According to the message of Rachel Nolan, the Australian Minister for Transport in the strategic plan, taxis are not only useful to many people because of their ready availability to get around a town, but taxis also provide an absolutely critical form of transport to those having a disability or mobility problem.

The benefits of taxis are demand responsiveness, comfort or convenience like private cars, fewer hassles while searching for an address or parking, and its accessibility to elderly or physically challenged people who have a reduced ability to drive their own vehicles. Taxis which are part and parcel of a mobility chain can play a key role in complementing or supplementing public transport, particularly during off-peak hours, in sparsely populated regions, or to whom travel is difficult. Other beneficiaries of taxi services could be the youth, night shift workers, people having low-income, and all those who do not have access to a private car for financial or health reasons. Taxis which form the higher end of the public transport spectrum bridge the gap between private cars, buses, and the rail transport. By offering the highest level of flexibility and convenience, taxis cater to passengers who value comfort, convenience, exclusivity, and accessibility either during interchanges or in transferring passengers.

Over the years, taxi operations around the world have grown. These operations have become well organized with the application of modern technology. For example, Xeta operates almost 3,000 licensed taxis and Xeta vehicles supported by 200 staff, using automated high-speed GPS based closest vehicle dispatch. The industry exercises innovation by using 'cabcharge' an international taxi payment system; 'zingo' a mobile driver booking system; and 'xeta' a PDA based service. Connexion, a European Taxi Transport Company, realizes revenue of approximately 1.1 bn Euro in the Dutch taxi market from different segments such as group transport, health care institution, demand dependent, street taxi, and other. Connexion deploys a system that monitors up-to-date situation of its vehicles, around the clock, using the forecasting features to account for the delays or to achieve on-time agreement. CARS TAXI which started its first taxi service in Dubai in 2000 currently offers hi-tech information facility (e.g., touch screen system that reveal information about their collection, salary slips, deduction of fines, and leave status) to its drivers.

Unfortunately, Oman has not made any significant progress in providing decent taxi services. Taxi services in Oman are still elementary and lack organization, service orientation and advancement. Whilst only Omanis are permitted to drive taxis, mere possession of a permit, a driving licence and a vehicle (coloured in white and orange) enables one to offer taxi service. A

study by Belwal *et al.* (2010)¹⁹, which recorded the perception of 2000 respondents in the Al-Batinah governorate, indicates that personal automobiles dominate among the modes of transport; while 48 % of the respondents use cars, taxis are used by 17.5%. This study found that despite lacking in services, taxis are still preferred by 37.6% of respondents over other possible modes of travel such as mini-buses, buses, or trains. This study, however, observed certain inhibitions among the residents about the taxi services and taxi drivers (Table 3). People were afraid of older taxi drivers, high prices of taxis and unavailability when needed, taxi

ftkxgtu" ÷ e j c t i k p i " k p c r r t q r t k c v g " their desired destinations, and rash driving.

Although unlike Russia²⁰, there is very bleak possibility of unlicensed or illegal taxis in Oman, their operations are not regulated and, therefore, lack customer orientation. At the same time, taxi services in the neighbouring countries such as UAE, Qatar, which used to be not much different in the past than Oman, have taken significant strides.

Table 3 The most pressing factors and reasons that people cite for using personal vehicles

Factors	Reasons
Comfort	People perceive their personal cars as more comfortable.
Privacy	To maintain privacy for individuals and families.
Independence	To avoid annoyance from others, to avoid males and females travelling together.
Flexibility	To attend to emergencies or any last minute changes in their itinerary.
Efficiency	To meet specific time limits and personal commitments, urgent and pressing needs, readily available, prompt, avoid waiting time for taxis.
Security	Cars carry more protective systems.
Recreation	To take family for shopping, functions, recreation and tourism.
Economy	Lack of taxis in some areas, save time and money.
Unavailability of public transport (PT)	PT not available everywhere, lack of suitable public transport modes, necessity of using car inside town areas, lack of buses with proper timing and predictable timetables, unavailability of PT in remote areas.
Accessibility	To avoid walking long to find taxis, inadequate numbers of means and their operating frequency.
Family responsibilities	To pick up and drop off family members (e.g., spouse), sick members in families.
Tradition and custom	Social values and prestige, to avoid harassment.
Passion for driving	To have recreation, fun, and enjoyment from driving and testing different makes of cars.
Climatic conditions	Hot summer.
Habitual nature	Some people are used to cars for a long time and they feel had to switch to other modes of travel.
Special needs	To bring food for farm animals, meet people from one village to other, nature of job, frequent travel needs, to go to UAE or Muscat, unplanned roaming around.
Taxi phobia	Afraid of older taxi drivers, high prices of taxis and unavailability when needed, taxi drivers increase fares and do not drop people at the desired destinations; rash driving by taxi drivers.

Source: Belwal. *et al.* 2011. Future Public Transport Services in Oman, Research Grant Report, The Research Council of Oman, pp-20

Recently, Sharjah Transport has taken several reforms for improving its taxi services and integrating taxis with the existing public transport network. Earlier, in Sharjah too, like Oman, taxi services used to be offered by individual private-taxi-licensees, particularly by the natives having low income. These reforms were mainly driven by the major obstacles such as lack of regulations, regulating authority, standard tariff system, rehabilitation programs for drivers, safety, business ethics, security, and communication skills²¹. UAE established TransAD a Regulatory Authority in 2006 to regulate the operations of taxis and limousines public services within the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. The authority monitored key performance indicators along the four perspectives (customer (availability of taxis, waiting time, safety); driver (training, working hours, wages); franchisee (operating cost, profit); and regulatory authority (demand/ supply, planning for the number of taxis)²². Qatar too had independent taxi operators before 2005 characterized by unregulated, off standard, unguaranteed, and indefinite capacity taxi services²³. Both the countries have done remarkably well in order to ensure quality taxi services. Oman is yet to receive a similar attention to this sector to move a step forward in ensuring mobility and better public transport services.

Private cars in the Gulf are unlimited and are a status symbol, as elsewhere in the world. Door to door public transport is needed realizing that it is not only just an economic, but also a social issue²⁴. Majid Al-Mandhry, the General Manager of Oman National Transport Company feels that there is a rising awareness at the governmental level of the fact that cars are killing cities and that there is a need for concrete actions. He opines that taxis should still be used, but as a relay to public transport systems at interchanges, for example, to reduce congestion and pollution²⁵.

To strike a balance between road usage and private car ownership, transport policy of Singapore applied various schemes of ownership restraint and usage such as Vehicle Quota System (VQS), purchase of area licenses during peak hours, the Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) scheme, and the promotion of Public Transport²⁶. Singapore too has brought about a significant change in its taxi services (mainly through deregulation, full liberalisation, removing barriers for the new entrants, refining offerings and introducing innovative packages continuously to attract both hirers and consumers²⁷. Oman needs a reformation of taxi services in line with countries like UAE, Qatar, and Singapore. However, a study q h " e q p u w o g t u ø " c p f " v c z k " f t k x g t u ø " the importance of this need.

> 3.0 MEASURES AND METHODS

This research took account of both secondary and primary data sources. A review was made of earlier studies and sources of information to assess the state of taxi services in Oman. An earlier study conducted by Belwal *et al.* (2011) was identified as the base study, as it recorded the perception of 2000 residents from the Al Batinah governorate in Oman. H t q o " v j g " d c u g " u v w f { perceptions of taxi services were observed and 14 key points were identified for recording the perceptions of taxi drivers and for the e t q u u " e q o r c t k u q p " q h " g o i n e s a r e l i s t e d j g t ø u " as statements in Table 15. In order to compare and contrast the perceptions of residents and taxi drivers, Omani drivers operating on the Muscat-Buraimi route in the Al Batinah region were taken the main targets, for the perceptions of residents in the base study were mainly focused on these taxi drivers. A sample size of 120

taxi drivers was drawn, based on the population of taxis (5971), 95% confidence level, and 10% confidence interval. The selection of taxi drivers was made according to the convenience sampling approach and the responses were recorded using a structured questionnaire, administered to the targeted taxi drivers. The questionnaire carried certain demographic and job-related questions that probed their work status, age, happiness with their profession, the offices with whom they deal with, their mode of operation, their perception of the rental car as well as the state-run public transport and metered taxi services were also obtained to assess their willingness to support the overall public transport infrastructure. Their agreements or disagreements with the quality of taxi services, their reaction on public transport initiatives, and the challenges faced by them were also measured.

The taxi drivers were asked to rate the 14 statements on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (1 to 5 respectively). The significance of the responses made by the taxi drivers were tested using one sample t test, taking neutral response at the middle as the test value. The statements were judged at 5% level of significance and a significant variation from the middle value was judged using the SPSS software. The perceptions of taxi drivers on public transport initiatives, and the similarities and differences in perceptions were investigated.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Table 4 presents the profile of sample respondents. Sixty-two percent of the taxi drivers were full-time drivers, while the remaining worked on a part-time basis. Approximately, 72% of them were between 26 to 45 years of age (Table 5). Full-timers were happier than the part-timers (F=7.751, P=.006), whilst drivers working for the company (Table 6 and 8).

The sampled taxi drivers responded that they are satisfied with their customers (t = -8.0; 4 : .000). Their satisfaction was found significantly different than the neutral response and was towards the satisfied side of the scale. This response was secured at the beginning before their reactions were taken on the statements regarding public transport company. A significant difference in satisfaction was observed according to age, work status, or mode of operation.

Table 4 Work status of sampled taxi drivers

Work Status	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Full Time	74	61.7	61.7
Part Time	46	38.3	100.0
Total	120	100.0	

Table 5 Distribution of age of sampled taxi drivers

Age group	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
18-25	22	18.3	18.3
26-35	44	36.7	55.0
36-45	43	35.8	90.8
More than 45	11	9.2	100.0
Total	120	100.0	

Table 6 Happiness status of sample taxi drivers

Happy	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	52	43.3	43.3
No	28	23.3	66.7
Can't say	40	33.3	100.0
Total	120	100.0	

Table 7 Offices with whom Omani taxi drivers deal

Offices	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
ROP	61	51.7	51.7
MOTC	24	20.3	72.0
None	16	13.6	85.6
Other	17	14.4	100.0
Total	118	100.0	

Table 8 Taxi mode of operation for offering services

Mode	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
As an individual	83	69.2	69.2
As a company	33	27.5	96.7
As association	4	3.3	100.0
Total	120	100.0	

Table 9 Taxi perception of national transport company

Perception	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
As supporter or partner	96	80.0	80.0
As a competitor	24	20.0	100.0
Total	120	100.0	

Table 10 Perception of national transport company

Perception	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
As supporter or partner	53	44.2	44.2
As a competitor	63	52.5	96.7
Other	4	3.3	100.0
Total	120	100.0	

Table 11 Driver need for public transport

Need	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	70	58.8	58.8
No	49	40.2	100.0
Total	119	100.0	

Table 12 Taxi awareness of public transport

Aware	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	66	55.0	55.0
No	54	45.0	100.0
Total	120	100.0	

Table 13 Taxi f t k willingness to go for metered services

Willing	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	72	60.5	60.5
No	47	39.5	100.0
Total	119	100.0	

Table 14 Taxi d t k x g t u ø government and other support

Government and other support	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	18	15.0	15.0
No	102	85.0	100.0
Total	120	100.0	

Table 15 A E t q u u " e q o r c t k u q p " q h " V c z k " F t k x g t u ø " t g u r q p u g " v q " v j g " e k v k |

Statement	t	α	p
There is no upper age limit for taxi drivers in Oman	-6.579	.05	.000
Passengers are afraid of old-age taxi drivers	-7.762	.05	.000
Taxi drivers in Oman charge high prices for their services	10.966	.05	.000
Taxis are not available to the passenger all the times	2.270	.05	.025
Taxi driver do not drop people at the desired destinations	3.267	.05	.001
Taxi drivers drive rash most of the time	2.497	.05	.014
Taxi driver do not take care of the passenger's needs and concerns	4.304	.05	.000
Taxi drivers smoke in the car without thinking the trouble it causes to the passenger	2.970	.05	.004
Taxi drivers do not switch the ACs on when requested	.148	.05	.883
Passenger wastes a lot of time while waiting for taxis	.660	.05	.510
Fewer taxis are available in the villages than the city centres	-3.452	.05	.001
Taxi drivers are opportunists in general	5.407	.05	.000
Taxi drivers do not maintain their taxis in clean conditions	6.040	.05	.000
Taxis account for a large number of accidents in Oman	6.848	.05	.000

The drivers agreed to the statement that there is no upper age for taxi drivers in Oman (see Table 15). They also agreed significantly to the proposition that passengers are afraid of old-aged taxi drivers. The taxi drivers disagreed significantly to the proposition that taxi drivers in Oman charge high prices for their services. They denied that taxis are not available to the passenger all the times. The taxi drivers also denied that taxi drivers do not drop people at the desired destinations. They also denied that Taxi drivers drive rash most of the time. They further denied that Taxi drivers do not take care of the passenger's needs and concerns. The taxi drivers also denied to the customer allegation that they smoke in the taxi without thinking the trouble it causes to the passenger. They also refuted that Taxi drivers do not switch the ACs on when requested. Their opinion was divided pertaining to the proposition that passengers waste a lot of time while waiting for taxis. However, they agreed to the allegation made by the customers that fewer taxis are available in the villages than in the city centers. They denied to the allegation that taxi drivers are opportunist in general, and that they do not maintain their taxis in clean conditions. They vehemently denied that taxis account for a large number of accidents in Oman.

Table 16 What will taxi driver do when public transport becomes operational

Action	Frequency
Will continue driving taxi	33
Can't say now	28
Will join the public transport company	11
Will reduce the price	7
Will look for another job	6
Will look for monthly subscribers	4
PT might not be available everywhere	4
Y k n n " y q t m " c e e q t f k p i " v q "	3
Will sell or rent my car	3
Will target tourism and the hospitality sector	3
Will give up work	3

While enquiring about their plans in a mass implemented public transport scenario, a quarter of them reasoned to continue driving taxis and almost a quarter were indecisive. The other responses are expressed in Table 16 along with the frequency of respondents expressing that reason.

Table 17 Challenges faced by taxi drivers

Challenges	Frequency
Fewer passengers	25
Low income	20
Insufficient parking	10
High insurance cost	8
Not enough government care	7
No clear authority to refer to	7
No cooperation from Royal Oman Police	5
Waiting for the passengers	4
Maintenance and spare parts cost	4
Rejection of their complains	3
Passengers' cooperation in term of cleanliness	3
Some private cars working as taxis	3
Sun, heat, and humidity	3

Furthermore, 69% of the sampled taxi drivers had their individual taxis, and remaining had some affiliations with a company or an association. The research probed taxi drivers as to how they perceive the rental-car companies. While 20% of the drivers considered the rental-car operators as partners, 80% considered them as competitors (Table 9). Likewise, the 44% of the taxi drivers considered Oman National Transport Company (ONTC) as a partner, while the majority 55% considered it as a competitor (Table 10). 59% of the sampled taxi driver affirmed a need for good public transport in Oman (Table 11). While 45% of them were not aware of metered taxis, only 61% of those who were aware looked forward to going metered (Table 12 and 13). The taxi drivers dealt with only a few government offices (Table 7); however, only 15% of taxi drivers accepted that they get some sort of support from the government or other associations (Table 14).

Among the challenges faced by taxi drivers, most of them cited a lower number of passengers, low level of income, insufficient parking and high insurance cost paid to the companies as the top four reasons. The other reasons are expressed in Table 17 along with their frequency of citations. Further to these the taxi drivers extended few other reasons such as presence of a large number of taxis, frequent breakdowns and no alternative work, no special taxi companies that can employ drivers, not enough respect for older drivers, long working hours, taxi stands without amenities, and absence of governmental financing and regulation authorities.

› 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Taxis are the predominant mode of transportation in Oman. Taxi operations in Oman are largely unorganized. Most of the taxi services are rendered on an individual basis. Taxi drivers reveal a lack of governmental support to the industry. Taxi drivers mostly

to be an expectation gap between drivers and the customers. This needs to be addressed, preferably by regulating the taxi services and by creating awareness of the rules and regulations among the operators and customers as well. Taxi drivers do not feel any competition from the car rental companies but from the public transport providers. Therefore, taxi drivers need to be taken into confidence to make them a part of broader public transport infrastructure. The industry needs to be regulated and organized like the other countries of the Gulf. The recent initiatives taken by countries such as Singapore, UK, and Australia should be studied to offer a better mix of services. There is a need for benchmarking the best industrial practices to ensure a better design of taxi and PT infrastructure; adoption of proper regulatory base and methods; R&D, technology orientation, and training of drivers; development of legal policies and enactments; the record keeping of taxi operations; and for the establishment of an information system. To life of passengers as well as taxi drivers, government bodies such as municipalities, police, and regional directorates of concerned ministries need to work closely with the transport operators.

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