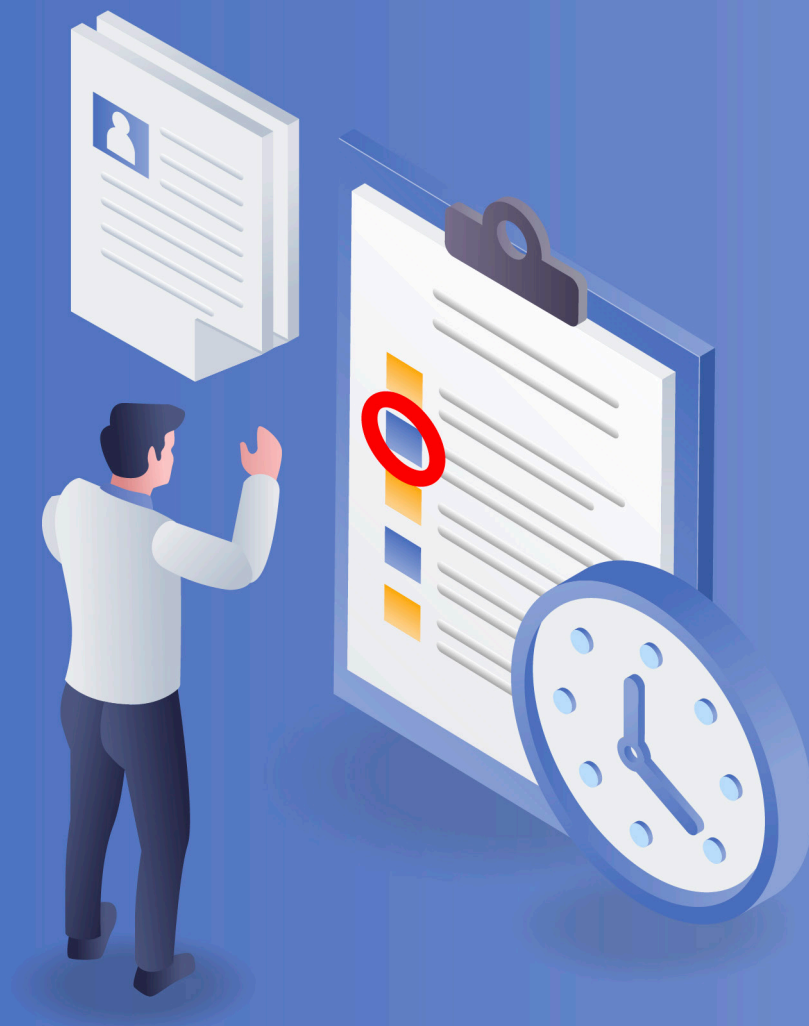




Journal of Policy and Planning (JPP)

ISSN: 3066-4543 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 3 ISSUE 1 (2026)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Okada Business and Socio-Economic Development of the Gomoa Districts in the Central Region, Ghana

Isaac Kwesi Ossuan^{1*}, Kwesi Botchwey², Kate Arku Korsah², Mabel Korsah Cunningham³

Article Information

Received: May 15, 2025

Accepted: June 10, 2025

Published: January 09, 2026

Keywords

Employment, Income, Okada Business, Road Network Transport, Socio-Economic Development

ABSTRACT

The Central Region is one of Ghana's sixteen administrative regions, with Gomoa included in this area. Gomoa consists of three districts: West, East, and Central, where most residents are farmers, mainly focused on crop production, along with a few individuals offering services. This paper examines how the Okada business contributes to socio-economic development in the Gomoa Districts. Given the study area's characteristics, cluster sampling techniques were used. Purposive sampling was also applied, as the research identified the locations of motor riders, dealers, and customers. Regression analysis was performed to determine the primary reasons why youth engage in this business. Preliminary findings indicate that the youth are drawn to the Okada business for various reasons, including job creation, income generation, social service provision, and enhancing the standard of living in rural communities throughout Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Economic growth and development in economies worldwide have always relied on the seamless movement of goods and services (Nistor, 2014). This is achievable with fast, reliable, and affordable transportation options connecting supply points to demand points. Countries must enhance their transport infrastructure, including traditional modes such as air, land, road, water, and pipelines. These modes should be accessible and affordable. Transportation is not only a private activity but also a commercial one, benefiting from attributes like cost, capacity, efficiency, reliability, and speed (Rodrigue, 2017). As populations grow, various methods for transporting both people and goods become increasingly important. Modern transportation systems are rapidly evolving within a complex framework of transport supply, operational capacity of road networks, and the mobility needs of an economy (Bardi & Novack, 2006; Rodrigue, 2017). Contemporary city planning often creates a physical separation between home and work, necessitating movement for employment, education, leisure, and other activities. Commerce requires the movement of people to facilitate business (Bardi *et al.*, 2006). Traditional transport modes such as water, road, air, and pipelines have been in use for centuries. In road transportation, vehicles, primarily cars, are utilized for transporting goods between destinations. Governments and individuals in Ghana have recognized transportation's crucial role in economic growth, leading to the enactment of regulations to govern its activities (Agyemang *et al.*, 2006; Rodrigue, 2017). The Road Fund Act 1997 (Act 536) emphasizes that a reliable and affordable road transport system is vital for Ghana's

socioeconomic development. Road transportation is a key component of the social safety net, facilitating wealth distribution through trade and employment opportunities in both urban and rural areas (Road Fund Act 536, 1997). Therefore, national economic growth targets are closely tied to transportation. The use of motorbikes in Ghana has recently surged due to their ability to respond quickly to emergencies, becoming increasingly common in cities and underserved communities, particularly where road conditions are poor during rainfall. It is essential to give due attention to this emerging transport system, known as Okada.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Kumar (2011), the emergence and expansion of motorcycle taxis in many African countries can be linked to the inadequacy of road transport services (including taxis, troskies, coaches, and ride-hailing services) provided by both the state and private individuals, as well as market deregulation that has led to the rise of informal operators. In several African nations, including Ghana, many individuals, such as security personnel and emergency response teams, face significant traffic congestion, particularly during peak hours in the morning and evening. As a result, many individuals opt for motorcycle taxis, commonly known as Okada. This service originated in northern Nigeria around fifty years ago and has since spread to other regions of Africa, including Ghana. The widespread use of motorcycle taxi services in Africa is evident in the variety of local names used to describe them, such as Okada (Ghana), Okada or Alalok (Nigeria), Kabu-kabu (Niger), Boda-boda

¹ West End University College, Kasoa and Institute of Development and Technology Management, Cape Coast, Ghana

² Institute of Development Studies, Africa Research University, Zambia

³ Queen's University, Kingston. Ontario, Canada

* Corresponding author's e-mail: Isaackwesiossuan@gmail.com

(Uganda and Kenya), Zemidjan (Benin), Oleyia (Togo), and Bendskin (Cameroon). In Lagos, Nigeria's most populous city, there are over 200,000 Okada operators, providing direct employment to more than 500,000 people, which gives them considerable political influence. Additionally, Agyemang Frimpong *et al.* (2020) note that countries like India and other developing economies have utilized motorcycle taxis since 1979, with their operations being legalized in 1981 when the Goa Government began issuing permits. In Ghana, tricycle cargo vehicles, designed for transporting goods (commonly referred to as Aboboyaa), and passenger tricycles known as "Yellow Yellow" or Pragyia are frequently seen alongside traditional two-wheeled motorcycles, serving various purposes. Motorcycles have historically been used for both personal and official purposes (Agyemang Frimpong *et al.*, 2020). The Ghanaian government, through agencies such as the Driver Vehicle Licensing Authority (DVLA) and the Ghana Police Service (GPS), is responsible for ensuring proper registration and safe operation of motorcycles. The Motor Transport and Traffic Department (MTTD), a division of the Ghana Police Service, is tasked with verifying the roadworthiness of all types of motorbikes. Ghana's economy grows at an annual rate of approximately four to eight percent based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) figures. However, this growth does not correspond with an increase in transport services, particularly in rural areas where the transport network is inadequate. Drivers operating in rural communities often report vehicle issues due to poor road conditions, especially during the rainy season. A journey that would typically take thirty minutes can be completed much faster by motorcycle. Drivers frequently charge high fares and may refuse to transport passengers to their destinations during the rainy season when many roads become impassable. Consequently, the poor road network results in significant delays, making short distances take much longer to traverse. To address these challenges in the rural Gomaa districts, young people have turned to the commercial motorcycle taxi business, known as Okada. This has provided an alternative source of income and employment, helping to reduce rural-to-urban migration and support local economies. The Okada business has also significantly alleviated traffic congestion in cities during peak hours. The research supports the findings of Levy and Wong (2010), who advocate for the services provided by youth through the commercial motorcycle business, commonly referred to as Okada. Despite these contributions to the socioeconomic development of rural Ghana, there is limited literature on Okada transport services, with existing studies primarily focusing on negative aspects such as accidents, theft, and other issues. This research article aims to explore the positive economic contributions of Okada services, particularly in the three districts of Gomaa. There is a notable lack of research in the central region of Ghana regarding the services offered by the Okada business, highlighting a significant gap in primary literature. In Ghana, the most common brands available

for both private and commercial use include Royal, Haojue, Apsonic, and Boxer, with affordability varying based on users' purposes and purchasing power.

Schematic Representation of Okada Services in the Gomaa Districts, Ghana

Okada transport has significantly contributed to socio-economic development, especially in recent times, by augmenting the existing transport system. Riders play a crucial role in national development by providing passenger transport services to diverse groups, including teachers, bankers, health workers, school children, and farmers in areas with limited vehicular access. They operate on almost all types of roads, except those with major river crossings. Some riders have adapted their motorbikes to carry cargo, transporting goods from farms to market centres. Initially designed for these services, tricycles are also used, while motorbikes can be employed for heavy loads in the absence of tricycles. In cities, some riders offer ride-hailing services, picking up food from restaurants for clients. They provide various services in both urban and rural areas, including filling gas cylinders upon request. The okada business has brought significant relief to the public and the economy, offering an affordable, convenient, and accessible transport option. However, the industry faces challenges, including safety concerns, as many riders neglect to wear helmets and disregard traffic regulations. Regulating the business has become a major challenge for road transport authorities, given the exponential growth in demand.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was gathered through questionnaires featuring closed and open-ended questions directed at Okada riders. Interviews were conducted with officials from the Drivers Vehicle and Licensing Authority, involving fifteen representatives from this department. Additionally, focus group discussions included patrons of the business, as well as local mechanics and electricians. Simple random sampling was employed to select DVLA officials, while purposive sampling targeted business patrons and motor mechanics, engaging these individuals as researchers encountered them. The primary data comprised responses to twenty questions from the administered questionnaires to Okada riders. Focus group discussions also contributed to primary data collection, integrating mechanics and electricians who congregate in the area.

The Drivers Vehicle Licensing Authority in Winneba served as a valuable source of secondary information, enhancing the study's findings. The sample size was calculated using the Cochran formula, acknowledging that many motorbikes remain unregistered and undocumented.

Discussions

The research indicates that the Okada business has

established a firm presence in Ghana, particularly in rural areas, complementing the existing transport system in the Gomoa districts. In regions where road conditions are poor, especially during the rainy season, Okada services emerge as the preferred option for commuting. These services are swift and convenient for users. Fare rates are relatively moderate compared to traditional modes of transport. Furthermore, commercial motor operators are adept at responding to emergencies in areas lacking ambulance or taxi services. The booming Okada business in Ghana, especially in the Gomoa districts, is largely due to high demand and profitability. The challenging road conditions in underserved communities, combined with the flexibility of this transport mode, have solidified its role in these areas.

CONCLUSION

The Okada business not only fills critical gaps in the transport system but also generates employment in the Gomoa districts. Although governments have made efforts to create opportunities for youth, progress remains limited. Our educational system often emphasizes theoretical knowledge over practical skills, hindering entrepreneurial development. For young individuals in underserved communities, Okada businesses present viable employment opportunities, fostering self-reliance among youth in Ghana. It is essential for society to embrace these services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative to enact the Motor Taxi Law to safeguard the lives of young Ghanaians engaged in this business. Proper regulation can significantly improve traffic conditions in urban areas while facilitating the transport of goods from supply points to demand centres. Prioritizing the Okada business can mitigate

unemployment in rural and peri-urban areas and alleviate the pressure on cities caused by rural youth migration. Encouraging Okada operators to join associations will enable better access to training and financial support. Public awareness campaigns, particularly for women, should promote the use of crash helmets while using Okada services. Additionally, the government should consider subsidizing popular motorbike brands, making them more affordable for youth. Reducing the prices of petroleum products and spare parts in rural areas will also lower service delivery costs in the Gomoa enclave. Regular training for riders is crucial to ensure safe driving practices, ultimately protecting lives in the communities they serve. Simplifying the licensing process for youth is also necessary to enhance their participation in this sector.

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