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The Erasmus logo, featuring a stylized, handwritten-style script of the word "Erasmus" in a dark blue or black color.

**Renegotiating Social Identities on Ride-sharing
Platform: a Mobile Ethnographic Study of *Pathao* and
Tootle in Kathmandu, Nepal**

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List of Acronyms

APP	Application
iOS	iPhone Operating System
USA	United States of America

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Abstract

The emergence of the online platform economy has been a global phenomenon that has caught attention across the world. In Nepal too, platform-based economy, including ride-sharing platforms such as *Pathao* and *Tootle*, has rapidly gained popularity among riders and customers. These ride-sharing platforms claimed to have emerged as a solution to the poor public transportation structure in the valley. While similar ride-sharing platforms at the global level, however, have also generated serious concerns, there are no studies so far in Nepal on such platforms, and therefore, such issues have also not been studied yet. This study, thus, aims to understand the two ride-sharing platforms of the Kathmandu valley – *Pathao* and *Tootle*, and explore their emergence, the local, global and social dynamics associated with them and how they (re)shape the dynamics of class and gender.

This study used a mobile ethnographic approach by employing participant observation in covert and overt way to collect data from an account of digital and actual dimension of the platform. In-depth interviews were conducted with 8 riders and 9 customers, informal interview conducted with 12 riders and 9 customers. Additionally, data from various secondary sources (such as vlog, social media, news article, blogs) were triangulated. An autoethnography was, then, used to analyse and write the report. This research followed the ethics of ‘do no harm’ and ‘confidentiality’.

Even though the emergence of *Pathao* and *Tootle* is due to the poor public transportation that was even more penetrated by the economic blockade in the post-earthquake period, their sole motive was to make profit. These platforms seem to have adopted the global features of platforms, i.e. immunity, control and superfluity, through strategies such as algorithmic management, they failed to acknowledge the socio-economic contexts of the riders. These local-global dynamics, therefore, seem to have created a resistance mechanism among riders resulting them now using these platforms to build and expand their own informal network of customers to sustain their mobile livelihood.

These platforms were found to inherit, in their digital dimension, the societal perceptions of gender by for example, letting the rider to choose customer based on their gender through the application and class by for example perceiving riders are only from lower-middle class and hence, designing mobile application on Android only and while, for customers designing application on iOS also, considering they are also from upper-middle class. The platforms were also found to be doing gender and class in actual practice of ride-sharing by for example, concerning gender, female customers still conscious about being stigmatized for seen with different male riders manifesting traditional gender norms. Regarding class customers treated riders rudely assuming that they belong to lower class.

This study overall, sheds light on the unique aspect of platforms economy by studying the social identities (gender and class) and its influence on the relationship between rider and customers. And these aspects were studied in a mobile fashion participating covertly and overtly. Which brings the interesting findings such as class comes out stronger than the gender when the monetary transaction takes place. However, gender still comes strongly when it comes to dichotomizing the spheres for male and female.

Relevance to Development Studies

This study produces knowledge about platform-based ride-sharing in the Kathmandu context, where no other study has been conducted on this specific area so far. This study highlights the emergence of the platform-based ride-sharing is rooted in the locally recognized transportation problem in Nepal. However, the global features such as, immunity, control, and superfluity are unavoidable even in the locally rooted platform-based economy. Further, it sheds light on the claim that, due to its digital functioning platform-based economy is ‘neutral’, is untrue. Rather, it is imbedded in the everyday practice of doing gender and class. Finally, this study goes beyond the digital dimension and explores the social identities negotiation through the shared ride. Hence, it adds a dimension of platform-mediated works are away from being ‘neutral’, and, thus, are interwoven in the normative social norms along with its global features of platformisation of work.

Keywords

Platform-based ride-sharing, Pathao, Tootle, mobile ethnography, social identities, gender, class, Nepal

Chapter 1

Introduction

Platform-based ride-sharing, such as *Pathao* and *Tootle*, since their advent recently has rapidly become popular and a new face of the Kathmandu valley – also the capital of Nepal. These platforms claimed to have emerged as a solution to the poor public transportation system in the valley. Their presence has been increasingly highlighted as somehow solved the commuting woes of the valley. Similar ride-sharing platforms at the global level, however, have also generated serious concerns. For instance, Van Doorn (2017) emphasizes that platform-based economy, including ride-sharing platforms, has characteristics of being gendered and classist. Such platforms, despite of their locally-rooted emergence, are inevitable of the global features of platform-based economy such as immunity, control and superfluity, which often lead to conflict of interest. For example, platform wanting to benefit from commission for matching the demand of customer by finding the riders and rider wanting to benefit from entire earning. There are no studies so far in Nepal on such ride-sharing platforms, and therefore, such issues have also not been studied yet. This study, thus, aims to understand the two ride-sharing platforms of the Kathmandu valley – *Pathao* and *Tootle* – their emergence and the local, global and social dynamics associated with them.

1.1 Online Platform in the global context

There is no precise definition of online platform yet, ‘online platform simply points to a set of digital arrangements whose algorithms serve to organize and structure economic and social activity’ (Kenny and Zysman 2016: 65).

Online platforms are on the rise and have been mediating labour markets globally. They are multiplying throughout the United States of America (USA), Europe, Middle-east, Latin America, Asia and the Africa (ibid.). Key examples include Amazon, Eatsy, Uber. The algorithmic underpinning of online activity is most evident among all of these examples (Kenny Zysman 2016: 66). The mediation of labour through such platforms has been a key feature of the global phenomenon, and has caught attention across the world (Schor 2014: 1). This rise of online platform, which also refers to the ‘platformisation’ of work has been a dominant infrastructural and economic model (Helmond 2015: 5), and has been having a considerable concern online globally, including Nepal.

A frequent critique is that, the platformisation of work puts its workforce in a disadvantageous position. According to Van Doorn (2017: 902-904), first, it uses the strategy of **immunity** – where these workforces are mobilized as a freelancer and hence have no legal and social protection; second, **control** – the workforce is being monitored and analysed via algorithmic management systems; and third, **superfluity** – such online platform often recruit new staff in excess or surplus to ensure that the platform don’t run out of workers. These enrolment takes place as a self-employed or freelancer with flexible working hours, different from regular or traditional form of employment.

Furthermore, the discourse of self-employment and freedom with which such companies recruit labour also has another side. “Online platform labour” is often

characterised by inequality that is linked with gendered and racialized subordination of low-income workers (Doorn 2017: 908 and Barzilay & Ben-David 2017: 393).

All of these platform services are online thus, can be accessed using internet mediated application on electronic devices such as mobile phones and laptops. Creating such online platform enables varied human activities, such as working with “independent contract” (Berg 2016: 543), or no contract for that platform worker, who works as a freelancer and gets paid when they complete the task. Additionally, the flexible working time that opens up an approach for fundamental change in the traditional regular form of employment (Kenny and Zysman 2016: 61). In this process the platform resists being seen as an employer of a traditional working environment, hence, the obligation of employment security, insurance that comes with it as well – such working condition puts platform worker into vulnerable situation despite of their work (Berg 2016:544). This has attracted considerable research in the Global North, focusing on online platform and their respective workforce (Van Doorn 2017: 909). However, in the Global South, it has yet to receive serious research attention.

1.2 Attention to online platform in the Global North and South

The vast majority of studies on the platformisation of work have been conducted in the Global North (Manyika et al. 2016). However, the phenomenon is also widespread and quickly expanding in the Global South. Key examples include *Careem*¹ (fleet service) in Middle East, *Zazcar*² (car service) in Africa, *Rappi*³ (on-demand delivery) in Latin America, *Ola Cabs*⁴ (cab service) in South Asia and *GO-JEK*⁵ (ride-hailing) in South-east Asia. These platforms provide services from car rental to ordering food from restaurants to sharing a ride on two-wheeler (motorcycle). In the Global North, studies give emphasis on how such platforms amount to deregulating labour (unlike in regular employment: making workers more vulnerable to (self)exploitation). This argument does not necessarily apply to the Global South. Because, in the Global South, informal economy is widespread, there isn't much of a formal structure to deregulate. Especially in the developing countries such as Nepal, 'labor markets, transportation and service provision sectors generally operate in disaggregated, decentralized and informal ways' (Randolph and Dewan 2018: 2,3). And the studies concerning the platform economy is yet to gain enough academic attention.

¹ <https://www.careem.com/en-ae/>

² <https://www.zazcar.com.br/>

³ <https://www.rappi.com/>

⁴ <https://www.olacabs.com/>

⁵ <https://www.go-jek.com/>

1.3 Online platforms in the Nepali context

In Nepal's context, platform-based economy is relatively a new form of organizing work. Some key platforms include *Foodmandu*⁶ (food-delivery), *Tootle*⁷ (ride-sharing), *Pathao*⁸ (ride-sharing), *Khalti*, *iPay* and *Esewa* (online-payment), *Aayoexpress* (on-demand delivery), *Chamkilo* (laundry service). These platforms are at the most a decade old. With the launch of *Foodmandu* in 2010⁹ – an app that allows one to choose food from over 150 restaurants in Kathmandu and delivers them at the doorstep within 30 minutes to one hour, has changed the way doing business only in a conventional manner in Nepal.

Ride-sharing platforms: *Pathao* and *Tootle* emerged as a new form of platform-based ride-sharing (transportation) service in Kathmandu in 2018 and 2016, respectively. Both of these platforms aim to provide service via motorcycle and is limited within the Kathmandu valley. *Tootle* and *Pathao* as a 'new dynamic of social order' (IT for Change 2018:3) have become an integral part of the society that they now disrupt the traditional mode of business (Muñoz & Cohen, 2017).

When the ride-sharing has become important aspect of a society that influence the new business practice – it has been defined in various ways over the last decade. Some describe it as a smart means of transportation that travellers with similar destination share the journey and split the travel expenses (Furuhata et al. 2013). Other describe that “drivers earn extra money while intermediaries earn up to 20% of each transaction” (Cohen & Kietzmann 2014: 285). The second description reflects the current practice of the ride-sharing platforms in Kathmandu.

Tootle and *Pathao* both are like any other ride-sharing platforms mediated through the internet. A customer of these platforms can request a ride through the mobile application. Once the rider of these ride-sharing platforms accepts the request – the journey begins. At the end of the journey customer pays money to the rider and the journey ends. On *Tootle* customer can pay either in cash or through the *Tootle* balance but on *Pathao* customer must pay in cash directly to the rider. Here, the customer and rider are sharing a space on the motorcycle along with the expense of running the motorcycle.

While sharing ride, not only travel expense and space is shared by the rider and the customer on the back of a motorcycle but it also gives them an opportunity for interactions. These interactions provide room for various social identities such as class and gender to be negotiated on the back of a motorcycle. Agatz et al. (2012) say that sharing ride fosters social interaction. However, when the motive is to make profit by sharing ride, it may not always be applicable, because it is the platform that makes profit through facilitating sharing, not the sharing itself that makes the profit (Srnicek, 2017, Frenken and Schor, 2019). In this regard, it is important to look at such interactions, which take place on the back of a motorcycle during the ride-sharing, where monetary transactions take place and are mediated by some internet-mediated platforms – in this study's scenario, *Tootle* and *Pathao*.

⁶ <https://foodmandu.com/>

⁷ <https://www.linkedin.com/company/tootle.today/>

⁸ <https://nepal.pathao.com/>

⁹ <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/being-your-own-boss/>

1.4 Social concerns on the platform

Much of these digital developments can be seen as a radical break with the past. It has been only two decades, since the start of 1990s, for Nepal, there has been a fundamental structural shift from agriculture to mixed economy, as a part of the country's urban and spatial economic transformation (Muzzini and Aparacio 2013: 20,21). The platform-based economy can be seen as a part of this urban and spatial economic change.

Globally, debate on the 'impact of this spatial economic change began since the early days of information technology revolution' (Baltimore et al. 2016: 62). The major debate was on creating value of digitalized platform work to make profit (ibid.). In this profit-making, platform workers become a tool for online platform to profit from their labor (ibid.). Similarly, customers of such platforms too try to benefit from the service provided by the platform workers – only difference here is customers pay these workers to benefit from their work. Thus, here the exchange of service and money takes place. It is, therefore, interesting to explore if the monetary transaction influences the negotiation of social identities through online platform – in this case: *Tootle* and *Pathao*.

Additionally, such digital technologies often come to intervene in existing sets of social relations (Van Doorn 2017: 905). For instance, in the context of Kathmandu, those who enter these platforms as a consumer and as a service provider often hold different class positions, yet through this new way of organizing work they come to interact intimately (Ojha 2019). This raises question how class is navigated through the very practice of such platforms?

Gender is another aspect, which interacts deeply through online platform mediated works. Recently reported news on a national daily depicts that, "ride-sharing services are fast and reliable, which is why most people like using them. But increasingly, uncomfortable situations and incidents of harassment have tainted the experience for many women" (Gurung 2019). These platforms promise flexibility of working hours, equal pay for equal work. Because, these platforms are online and are horizontal not hierarchical, it all seems attractive for women to get involved quite easily (Barzilay and ben-David 2017: 400,401). In contrast, Kathmandu's case – less involvement of female as a rider in comparison to men on these ride-sharing platforms speaks different story than in the western context. In Nepal, female belonging to specific class group are stigmatized to enter into specific job market, especially if it is largely dominated by male, such as transportation (K.C. et al. 2017: 178). There may be less involvement of female on the service providing end but at the service using end females are the majority and are the frequent users (K.C. 2017). Thus, it raises a question - how are gender relations negotiated through these platforms – *Tootle* and *Pathao*.

Here, it is important to look at the motive of these platform users to see how they negotiate. Both, *Tootle* and *Pathao* riders use their own motorcycles – here the motives of riders to participate in this ride-sharing differ. Similarly, the motives of customers also differ to participate in the ride-sharing. It is not uncommon to have diverse motivation for participating in the online platform (Schor 2014). Some riders and customers are drawn by the innovation of the platforms. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that the innovation of such platforms' expression may occur with gender discrimination and classism (Schor 2014).

Since, *Tootle* and *Pathao* started functioning, there has been much noise in the capital city - Kathmandu. For example, there is ‘vlog’ (Biel et. al. 2011) about these platforms on YouTube, media coverage of these services on a regular interval by comparing these two similar natured platforms on the basis of their service and usage of their digital application. These media coverage is highlighting the positive side of ride-sharing platform in the Kathmandu valley, such as ride-sharing is solving everyday commuting and hassle free (Sapkota 2017, Prasain 2018 and Adhikari 2018). However, the recent news coverage suggests the other side of these platforms. For example, these platforms have not been able to discourage harassment of women despite of their claim to have a mechanism in place to do so (Gurung 2019 and NepaliTelecom 2019). This raises the social concern of class and gender within this new form of economic practice through online platform. This study, therefore, aims to answer class and gender concern raised by the two ride-sharing platforms – *Pathao* and *Tootle* – as listed in the following section.

1.5 Central research question

How are the dynamics of social identities – class and gender - (re)shaped by the ride-sharing platforms *Pathao* and *Tootle* in the Kathmandu valley of Nepal?

1.5.1 Sub question

1. How did ride-sharing platforms – *Pathao* and *Tootle* – emerge in the Kathmandu valley of Nepal?
2. How are *Pathao* and *Tootle* influenced by the local-global dynamics in terms of immunity, control and superfluity?
3. How do the riders and customers of *Pathao* and *Tootle* negotiate their social identities in terms of class and gender on and off their rides?

1.6 Structure

In *Chapter 1*, I lay the foundation of the study by describing the platforms in the global context and in the Nepali context and the concerns raised about these platforms, and finally list the questions this study aims to answer. *Chapter 2* provides a detail account of a platform-based economy and a conceptual framework to navigate social identities, class position and gender in particular, with specific focus on ride-sharing platforms. *Chapter 3* outlines the overall methodology and methods employed in the research. In *Chapter 4* we present and discuss the findings of our study concerning the emergence of the two ride-sharing platforms – *Pathao* and *Tootle* – in Kathmandu and the influence of the local-global dynamics on these platforms. *Chapter 5* presents and discusses the digital aspects and the actual everyday experiences of the riders and the customers of *Pathao* and *Tootle* in navigating social identities. Finally, *Chapter 6* concludes with the summary of study findings, and the reflection on the findings.

Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework

In the previous chapter I briefly explained the scenario of labour-mediating platforms and its concern in global, regional and local context. In this section, I will introduce the analytical framework that has guided the analysis presented in this Research Paper. This section starts with explaining how the ride-sharing platform is defined in this thesis. Then, analytical framework draws on relevant research literature from across the globe, but is also informed by research specific to the context of Kathmandu, Nepal. This has relevance to the first and second research question that aims to look at the emergence of ride-sharing platform in Kathmandu and its local-global dynamics. After that the section looks at the social identities – class and gender, that strive to understand negotiation of class position and gender through the ride-sharing platform. Following this, the concept of intersectionality and agency is explored. This has relevance to the third research question which aims to understand digital and actual dimension of doing gender.

2.1 Understanding the platform-based economy

Platform-based economy is the creation of internet-mediated platforms that work as the mediators of exchange of goods and services between customers (goods and service seekers) and riders (goods and service provider - rider, driver, host etc.). Such platforms use software to connect the riders and customers, and it is the riders who own the means of transportation (motorcycle in the case of this study) not the platform itself (MacMillan, 2015). This is one of the key features of the platform economy; they mediate – bring the supply and demand for a specific service together. In this study, in the case of ride-sharing, software is used through the smartphone application that makes easy to connect supply (riders) and demand (customers). When the riders and customers meet at the agreed upon location and end the sharing with payment completion, the ride successfully completes on the platform (Hall and Qureshi 1997). However, from the perspective of riders and customers the shared ride also includes the qualitative dimension of the experience such as prior knowledge of the customer (for riders) and rider (for customers), safety and social compatibility (Dueker & Bair 1977).

Platform-based companies are often floating on venture capital. As start-ups, they attract investments. Uber can be a prominent example, since its starting in 2009, the application came into effect from 5th July 2010¹⁰. The company got its first major funding of \$1.25 million, then it expanded internationally, the same year and also, raised its fund (Blystone 2019). But, when Uber had global loss of \$3.8 billion by the year 2016, the very next year (2017), it shared its finances through a media house (ibid.). Uber shared its experience, more the company shifts to other services such as UberPool (a carpooling service) it's easier for them to collect revenue to recover from the loss. It shows the ever-evolving nature of such platforms (ibid.).

Platform-based economy seeks to deregulate existing service economies (e.g. transport/cleaning/delivery, etc). These platforms are multi-dimensional in their functions and frameworks (Kenney and Zysman 2016). Together these diverse platforms provoke the

¹⁰ <https://www.uber.com/en-NL/newsroom/history/>

organization of wide variety of markets, work arrangements, and ultimately value creation and capture (ibid.). Platform-based economy has a more than brief similarity to the putting-out economy that existed before traditional companies, where the regular employer and employee relationships existed (ibid.). Since, they don't work with the traditional employer/employee structure many regulations do not apply to them - immunity.

The creation of deregulation in market place leads to incoherent field of innovation (Martin 2016: 158). This innovation is apparent in the way platforms and workers carries their roles. They often work in a 'partnership model'. This open-ended relation constitutes a legal dispute. Because, often in regulated economic practice, labour rights are built on the employer – employee relationship. Whereas, in 'partnership model' there is no employer and employee. This often means that 'workers' carry all the cost of social reproduction (company takes little to no responsibility to carry that cost). For example, riders do not have social protection rights, and are responsible for their own motorcycle/phones/cars. These innovations have also created ambiguities in absence of government regulation on how these should be functioning in terms of platform and worker relationship (Schor 2014, Srnicek 2017).

Despite the gloss freedom with which labour-mediating platforms seek to mobilise supply, the platform workers are subject to algorithmic management, little job security and lack of legal protection, as they are legally partnering with the platforms (Carboni, 2016, Scholtz, 2016). Van Doorn (2017) has categorized these ambiguities in three ways: immunity, control and superfluity.

Economy of scale is essential for these platforms. The company that becomes biggest first, usually gets to stay there. This is why in the beginning they often have lots of promotions in order to rapidly expand their demand and supply. Once these platforms are established, the architectures are designed as such the fees will go up for customers and profit margin from the workers will also go up for the platforms. In the western context where regular employment is the norm, 'this sociotechnical complication is key to the orchestration of a superfluous workforce, to the extent that it degrades service work as an abundant, calculable, and easily substitutable commodity whose value is depreciated beyond the market sphere' (Van Doorn 2017: 904).

Such platforms have become one of the key phenomena in contemporary economic practice, and their uncertain nature often leads to inequality. As stated by Van Doorn (2017: 907) stated, "In the world of platform labor, inequality is a feature rather than a bug". These inequalities concerns gendered and historical class domination of its workforce.

2.2 Class: in the ride-sharing

Liechty (2008) argues about class as a cultural practice in Kathmandu on the basis of Marxian and Weberian theories of class. He argues that class can be understood through the spatial dynamics of cultural practice and emphasizes the Weberian concern for the "role of culture in social life" and the Marxian claim of cultural practice is located in the unequal power and resource distribution between the bourgeoisie and proletariat (Liechty 2008: 253).

Liechty (2008) suggested that, in the last decade, people of Kathmandu came to live their lives more in setting leaning around the social logic of class. In the context of this study, it is the practice of platform work that makes easy to understand class within it.

Van Doorn (2017) elaborates this with the example of “Hello Alfred”¹¹ – a platform-mediated butler service in the United States of America (USA). This platform encourages prospect customers with the promise of alleviating their time pressure by letting them “experience life without chores” (Van Doorn 2017: 905). It is conducted by the meta-service to match customer’s home to do all the chores along with the any other on-demand services that customer may use. This puts the platform-mediated service at the top layer stack on customers choice (ibid.). “Hello Alfred” works as a buffer here, because the customer who has subscribed Alfred only have to deal with these on-demand Alfred worker virtually – to check their background, picture. Citing Atanasoski and Vora’s (2015) work, Van Doorn (2017) emphasizes that no matter how the structure of such on-demand platforms tries to cover the degraded work, they are still based on distinctly gendered and racialized history of class domination. Because the domestic service work in the USA has a longstanding history of being performed by the people with color, migrant status and relatively low-income population in the ‘white upper/middle-class’ homes (Van Doorn 2017). Service provisioning, especially domestic service, is an area which is not only in the USA, but also in the other parts of the worlds, where too class and gender greatly intersects. In Nepal, since such domestic service lies in the category of informal sector work, thus these workers do not have standardized working hour or wage (Gotame and Kiorala 2009). Further, such platform mediated works are deprived of value that only focuses on promoting their services as an inclusive and equal opportunity enterprise (Atanasoski & Vora, 2015, p. 23 and Van Doorn 2017: 905).

Looking at the type of platform-based work; often it is seen as the kind of work that requires ‘less instruction’ and are ‘quick to do’ (Berg 2016: 545). Thus, these works are understood as the low-skill work. The very nature of platform-based work also matches with other temporary work with temporary agency and a part-time work that is not a real work, but gives additional earning (Berg 2016). On the contrary, not all the workers working on the platform-based economy are part-time worker. Rather they depend on the earning from the platform (Berg 2016). This showcases the argument by Van Doorn (2017) that platform-based economy workers are those who have been reinforcing the class position even through this new form of economic practice. The argument by Berg (2016) also emphasizes that such worker’s income security and right is at risk due to its deregulated nature of employment.

To understand class within the platform-based ride-sharing, it is important to explore how people involved in it are practicing it in a specific socio-cultural context. Liechty (2008) elaborates in the context of Kathmandu; where the changing power relation due to complex social life influenced by the rapid urbanization integrated in the capitalist economy (Harvey 1996: 403). This poses that class now has become an integral practice on a daily life through the capitalist economic practice such as sharing ride through the platform.

As Liechty (2008) suggests that commercialized economy in Kathmandu that has boosted the consumerism; acts for the social production of class culture. He gives an example

¹¹ <https://helloalfred.com/alfreds/>

of mass media and its effect in modern middle-class Kathmandu people, how the fashion has changed over the period of time, how the usage of language has evolved from speaking in mother tongue to mixing up English vocabulary. The media and technology have really shaped the middle-class culture in Kathmandu (Liechty 2008).

It can be said that the global practice of consumerism took place regionally, nationally and locally. Recent example includes the new consumerism practice of ride-sharing platform (*Tootle* and *Pathao*) in Kathmandu, which has become an essential due to everyday necessity of commuting. Like Liechty (2008: 265) concludes, “it is through the everyday practice – in the deployment of language, goods, ideas, values, and embodies culture – that people produce the cultural space of class”. The everyday practice of *Tootle* and *Pathao* by the middle-class of Kathmandu manifest that it is making its space through the class culture. Looking at it from Van Doorn (2017) perspective, the very nature of such platform-mediated work is discriminatory on the basis of social class, race and gender.

2.3 Gender: in the ride-sharing

“Gender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort.” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 129)

Gender is “constructed through psychological, cultural, and social means” in everyday activities of some sort (West and Zimmerman 1987: 125). For example, the expectation from society of an appropriate action and behaviour just for being female, such as letting men to help with masculine act, and not offering opinion to have things ‘her’ way. All of these everyday activities must be done in such a manner that must be seen in a socially normative gender behaviour (West and Zimmerman 1987). Thus, gender can be defined on the basis of “socially constructed relationship between women and men, among women, and among men in social groups” (Gerson and Peiss 1985: 317).

Gerson and Peiss (1985) say that conceptualizing gender is not easy. Rather it is problematic to conceptualize it with one dimension. It is often due to gender operating in a contextual cultural setting, interacting in a specific social context and looking implicitly through the women’s experience (ibid.). Scott (1999), from the social constructionist standpoint, also explains that gender is a system of distinctions that classifies a phenomenon which is socially agreed, and hence, it must be examined thoroughly how it was produced and reproduced historically with time and space or context.

Gerson and Peiss (1985) have used three analytical frameworks of gender: “separate spheres” – where men and women are dichotomized historically to private (women) and public (men) sphere, “domination of women” – where women are understood as subordinate of men, and “sex-related consciousness” – where women and men as two distinct sex have distinctive experiences as a social category. All of this emphasizes on the sphere where men and women work, live and think where different forms of physical, economic and ideological control pose on women that leads to women’s unique experience as a social group (Gerson and Peiss 1985: 318).

All of these understanding on gender as a construct from the past till present is applicable, and it addresses gender as a fluid and contextual practice in a specific society that all the traits are not necessarily applicable everywhere, rather it varies depending on the social

arrangements. In a contemporary society, where the lobbying of other genders - such as gay, lesbian, transgender - are on rise, these limited gender understandings somehow lack behind in incorporating all genders. It is also understood as they explained that gender is not a static concept, but is dynamic.

Gender concern is a global phenomenon. In the Nepali context too, gender is largely debated. Especially, as a patriarchal society – in Nepal historically women there have been suffering from gender and class inequality (Acharya 2006 and Manchanda 2004). Women in the Nepali society have often been subject to their male counterparts either as a father, husband or brother, and are subject of domestic confinement (Acharya 2006). Additionally, the diversity in poverty in Nepalese society can be observed due to caste (Bahun and Chhetri), class (upper class) and gender (male) having greater access to resources and occupying superior positions than women (K.C. et al. 2017: 178). K.C et al. (2017) demonstrates this from the experience of Nepali women in a regular household.

Globally, in the platform-mediated work 'its workforce remains systematically inserted in a realm created by the capitalist value form, which centres on the gendered and racialized subordination of low-income workers, the unemployed, and the unemployable' (Van Doorn 2017: 907-908). This very gendered nature of platform-mediated work is applicable globally, including Nepal, where the gender normativity stigmatizes female from involving in the male-dominated public sphere. Transportation sector is a male-dominated sphere, and ride-sharing platform too, where riders meet customers who are complete strangers. This puts female in a risky position by, for example, possibility of harassment by the male rider.

2.4 Class and Gender identity intersecting: in the ride-sharing

“Intersectionality fit neatly into the postmodern project of conceptualizing multiple and shifting identities.” (Davis 2008: 71)

Like Davis (2008) mentioned social identities are not a binary opposition (e.g. one can have both class and gender, not only either one of them) and are fluid social construction in a specific socio-cultural context that may intersect each other largely on an individual's life. Davis (2008: 68) defines intersectionality as an ‘interaction between gender, economic class and other categories of difference in individual lives and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power’.

Crenshaw (1991) uses intersectionality to map the complex interconnection between gender and other structures of identity such as race and class. This approach is used in Van Doorn's (2017) study of internet-mediated platform labor to understand the gendered and racialized exploitation of low-skilled labour. Internet-mediated platform works are historically constituted by class and gender inequalities (Van Doorn 2017: 900). He argues that the workers on such works have little control when it comes to deciding prospect of labour, despite of mainstream appeal and effortless digital labour market (ibid.).

Looking at platform-based labours from the intersection approach, where gender and class largely intersects through the economic transaction, Van Doorn (2017) argues, that such platform thrives on low-skilled, economically deprived group of people. Such practice is not only limited to the west, but largely expanding to the east as a key feature of platform-based work. And such platform-based labour is not only influencing the working condition but

also the interaction of social identities such as gender and class position between customer and workers.

Davis (2008), while defining intersectionality, highlighted the crucial role of power. Power is also crucial to exercise 'agency'. Agency comes along with power, but power determines if an individual can exercise agency – if power enables or constrains him/her to act (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010). Every individual has an agency of some sort, but social relation for example, based on gender and social position for example, based on class are determined by power, which affects different individual differently. Thus, agency can be understood as relational. Often, an individual's agency is overlooked whereas collective agency is favoured (Lier 2007). Agency could be mixed with the concept of power because power is a mechanism to either empower or constraint individual from exercising it (Webster et al. 2008).

Therefore, power in a patriarchal society like Nepal – it is often observed in the hands of male. It is also observed, so far, the practice of ride-sharing platform as a masculine trait greatly intersects between gender and the class position of an individual identity. Automobile, especially two-wheeler motorcycle is defined as masculine due to its usage purpose of mobility in public sphere – thus, its ownership and ownership is culturally appropriated mainly for men (Gartman 2004: 174). It greatly speaks within the ride-sharing – the intersected identity of gender and class that is embedded in a cultural practice.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Methods

This chapter describes the overall methodology and specific research methods I have employed in conducting this research, and its respondents. In doing so, I elaborate on the experiences in conducting fieldwork, challenges that were encountered, choices I made, strategies I employed as a participant of the research and the dilemmas I have come across.

3.1 Overall methodology

I employed an ethnographic approach to conduct this research and employed a number of ethnographic and qualitative research methods. Ethnographic approach allows researcher to give voice to its research participants in their own local context, typically relying on precise quotation and a “thick” description to share the “credible, rigorous and authentic story” (Fetterman 2010:1). Since this study concerns exploring and understanding the dynamics of social identities as experienced by the riders and the customers of the ride-sharing platforms an ethnographic approach is believed to help understand such experiences and practices in a specific socio-cultural context by both relying on “saying” and “doing” (Hansen 2018:5). Since the ride-sharing practices have a specific way of functioning, i.e. mobile most of the time and such experiences and practices to have taken place during the ride while mobile, I particularly employed a ‘mobile ethnography’ approach.

3.1.1 Mobile Ethnography

As a student researcher, I used the strategy of knowing “know what they know” from first-hand information (Creswell and Poth 2016: 21). For this, mobility was crucial to meet the research objective, specifically, to demonstrate and interpret the actual context of riders and customer. I conducted informal interviews on the back of the motorcycle since it was an efficient and a natural way to build the rapport with participants in a mobile manner.

The interaction on the back of a motorcycle often started with “where to go?” The interaction became interesting as we understood each other’s language and a sense of belonging. We also shared the real mode of middle-class in the Kathmandu valley (Liechty 2008). This led to more intimate interaction, where I tried to find my ways to explore if various social components were being navigated through such ride-based platforms or not. This research paper is part of the process where I attempted to locate myself in a concoction of intersecting identities and adherences.

As soon as I started interaction in the form of informal interviews with the platform *riders* and platform *customer*, whom *Tootle* calls “*Tootle Partner*” and *Pathao* calls “*Rider*”, they automatically became my research participants (see section 3.5 for more details on ethics). Here, like Creswell and Poth (2016: 24) suggest that ‘often constructivist researcher focus on the specific context in which participants live and work to understand the socio-cultural setting of the participants. Researcher then “position themselves” in the research to acknowledge their interpretation flow from their socio-cultural knowledge’. I used my existing knowledge to understand, interpret and translate the socio-cultural context of my research participants.

However, this was not enough to explain the complex phenomena like how the existing social relations were affected by the ride-sharing platforms. Hence, I relied on the knowledge of my research participants.

I acknowledge this approach as a mobile ethnography since I was mobile throughout the research period (July-August 2019) in the field using the motorcycle – as a platform rider or platform customer. I recall some interactions didn't feel welcoming at all to further take the conversation and some were enticing to take it further. I realise this as one of the features of mobile ethnography.

3.2 Data collection method

3.2.1 Participant observation

Participant observation is one of the key characteristics of ethnographic approach (Atkinson et al. 2001: 4,5). Thus, participant observation is being used in covert and overt manner during the fieldwork. Overall, to answer the research question from an ethnographic perspective it was appropriate to gather information participating in the platform I was studying.

To explore the first-hand experience, there is better way to understand it by “doing” it rather than only relying on “sayings” of the people involved in it (Hansen, 2018: 5). In “doing” so I became the platform user (both rider and customer). It allowed me to “do” the platform work and to understand how riders and customers are being distinguished digitally through the design of the application – iOS preferred for customer and Android for riders. Participating as a rider and as a customer in a covert manner became one of the key methods for my research to explore the digital dimension – mobile application, analyse the terms of use/condition, access the Facebook Group page posts and comments (see section 4.1.1). The covert way of participant observation allowed me to take a look at the digital nature of the platform along with social inequalities in its actual setting. Despite of this, there is research ethical concerns (see section 3.5) in doing participant observation in a covert manner.

But the nature of my research also had to give voice to those using the platform as a rider and a customer. Thus, it was essential for me to interacted with riders and customers to understand the “saying”. Thus, to go beyond my sole understanding and interpretation, an overt way of participant observation was very important. Both way of participant observation gave me an opportunity to immerse information through digital interface analysis, informal interviews (covert) in a mobile manner and in-depth interview (overt).

An individual's identity is layered in multitude based on her/his various social component (class and gender), that plays a major role. Especially, based on those identities how the interaction takes place and how a person is being understood by the other that shapes the social relations. Hence, this is about how the individual's perspective that positions their knowledge in understanding the other person based on these social identities. Acknowledging this gap, Rose (1997: 318) suggests recognizing the varied knowledge from the research participants putting one self's positionality as a process to connect whether that comes as an extraordinary connection or lacking one. One cannot know everything nor power can fully be understood and be controlled therefore, as a researcher we can engrave

absences and imperfections that we encounter during the research practice acknowledging that knowledge producers have an influence on the result (Rose 1997: 319).

Therefore, to make the exploration easier, I employed participant observation in the covert form, putting myself at the same power position like pre-existing users of ride-based platforms. I did this by first interacting with participants and later based on the interaction if it was unwelcoming or welcoming I shared my business card¹² with them to have further deeper experience sharing. Like Vinten (1994) mentioned the covert participant observation gives fuller and accurate understanding of the situation that otherwise would not be possible to access. Hence, it gave me an opportunity to look at several unspoken information that depicted how the ride-based platform influenced social behaviour among young population.

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3.3 Research Location and Research Participant

Map 1 Nepal country map with area covered by the two platforms in Kathmandu valley



Source: Country map taken from google and edited¹³ to locate area coverage of both the ride-based platform on 14 September 2019, 06:50pm Nepali standard time

¹² Business cards provide a more tangible way to impart information about who you are and what you do, making them one of the most effective direct marketing tools. See <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/business-cards-2947923>.

¹³ A regular map was extracted from google map. Then to locate platform area coverage – through the android mobile, platform application was opened and from there the area covered is extracted through screenshot. This whole process was completed on my friend's android device as this is not possible on an iOS device.

My research was located in the Kathmandu valley, area that is covered by the two ride-based platform service (see the map 1). My analysis was informed by the participants who are temporarily living in Kathmandu either for study purpose, employment or other reasons. As well as informed by those who were born and raised in the city and are second or third generation migrants from other parts of Nepal and those who are local from Kathmandu valley. The data was collected over a period of two months – (provide duration in month and year). The location was chosen purposively to include area where ride-sharing platforms existed. When I designed my research proposal, there were no only two ride-sharing platforms in the valley - *Tootle* and *Pathao*. Thus, the users of these two platforms became my research participants. The accessibility of research participants was somehow easy because I participated in the two platform as a user in a covert manner. Otherwise, the visibility of platform users in the city was not possible due to no use of the platform-symbolled accessories (e.g. jackets, gloves, helmet with platform logo on the motorcycle) while ride-sharing through the platform.

I have lived in Kathmandu for more than two decades. Thus, I am familiar with the city, its culture, its surroundings and have own community. However, I do not understand Newari language, which is a local language spoken by a certain but a majority of community of the valley (Spodek 2002: 65). But, since the city is largely dwelled by the internal migrants, Nepali is the most commonly used language to communicate. I used either English or Nepali to conduct my field work as per the convenience of the research participants convenience or the language which they used. Most of the interviews with customers were in English and most of the interviews with riders were in Nepali. This made it easier for me to conduct the ethnographic research. Following two tables show the list of research participants along with their specific characteristics based on the role they played while living in the valley.

Table 1
List of Rider Participants – *Pathao* and *Tootle*

Group of Participants and Sample Size (Rider)						
	Rider (Gender)	Riding since	Rider type (Self-identified)	Working Hour/Day (Self-identified)	Location of Interaction	Type of Interaction
Tootle	10 (7 Males; 2 Females; 1 Unknown)	-One year or more: 2; -Less than a year: 14;	-Part-time: 13; -Full-time: 4; -Unknown: 3	1-5 Hrs: 5; 6-10 Hrs: 9; 10-15 Hrs: 2; Unknown: 4	-On the Back of a Motorcycle & Restaurant: 10; -Restaurant: 4;	-In-depth Interview: 4; -Informal and In-depth Interview: 4; -Informal Interview: 9;
<u>Pathao</u>	10 (8 Male; 2 Unknown)	-Less than a month: 1; -Unknown: 3			-Platform Application & Phone: 2; -Facebook: 1; -Phone: 1; -Platform Office & Restaurant: 2	-Informal Interaction: 3

Source: Field work, July-August 2019 – Kathmandu, Nepal.

Table 2 List of Rider Participants – *Pathao* and *Tootle*

Group of Participants and Sample Size (Customer)						
	Using Platform	Customer (Gender)	Customer Since (Self-identified)	Frequency of use	Location of Interaction	Type of Interaction
Tootle	9					
Pathao	2	F: 9; M: 9	-More than a year: 5 -Less than a year: 7 -Less than a month: 1 -Less than a week: 2 -Unknown: 3	-Twice a day or more: 4 M, 3F -3 to 5 Times a week: 2M, 4F - First time ever: 1M, 1F - Unknown: 2M, 1F	-On the back of a Motorcycle & Office & Restaurant: 9 -Office: 3 -Restaurant: 2 -Platform application & Phone: 4	-Informal and In-depth Interview: 9 -Informal Interview: 5 -Informal Interaction: 4
Both	7					

Source: Field work, July-August 2019 – Kathmandu, Nepal.

The selection of the participants was primarily based on my participant observation. As a user of the platform myself, as both a rider and customer, I had first-hand access to possible research participants. But because the shared ride would be a short distance and often the voice would be unclear due to traffic, wind and the volume of the voice, in-depth interviews on the back of a motorcycle was, therefore, not possible. Consequently, the mobile ethnography was complemented with still methods such as in-depth interview by meeting participants in non-mobile manner at the restaurant, café, and their office. The still method faced issue of time and interest to further sharing personal experience from the platform user (rider and customer) side. To those who had migrated to Kathmandu, as I had foreseen, I was able to connect with my ‘authentic’ (Henry 2007: 75) migrant identity. However, to my surprise those who were second and third generation migrants also opened up while sharing their experiences on the ride-based platform. In fact, my encounter with such participants who were also overseas returnee (see section 3.1.2) after study made the interaction more intimate. This intimacy was in terms of how they felt after coming to the city from abroad, the cultural shock of un-openness regarding commuting on an intimate form of transportation.

Because my research involved multiple characters that incorporated virtual and actual spaces, my interactions took place on the back of the motorcycle, restaurant, and the office where participants invited me to meet them afterwards the shared ride. I communicated with them through the Facebook pages to share the experiences. Nonetheless, this was not very successful. But, having said that, it was the only medium I interacted with the female riders of the platform.

3.3.1 Specific Research Context

Often, I found that almost all the people I encountered were willing to give me their time, talk to me and share their experiences with me. Still, the accessibility while approaching riders specifically female riders was difficult. Due to my covert participant observation, none of the customers and riders initially knew I was interacting with them for the research purpose. It was only when I shared my business card at the end of the ride or when I felt right to share with them, they knew I was conducting a research and they were unknowingly part of it. This led to the in-depth interview with research participants. Some of these

participants shared a female rider and those rider's contact number with me, whom they had met during the shared ride. It was one new dimension in my methodology, I used snowball sampling, which I did not intend to before. It was the contextual need for my research, because I had not met any female riders while using the platform as a customer, and thus, I employed it. I found that the idea of sharing business card was blissful. It helped me position myself distinctly as a researcher. Having said this, the same blissful practice of sharing business card put me in the 'others' category where participants felt little odd to open up in the beginning of the conversation with me. I could feel it in their tone, their expression and also the way they shared their experience in the beginning and at the other half.

Picture 1 A rickshaw puller pulling over the road-s-de during the heavy rain



Source: Field work July-August 2019 – Kathmandu, Nepal.

Picture 2 One of the major roads in Kathmandu after the rain



Source: Field work July-August 2019 – Kathmandu, Nepal.

Picture above shows the road condition during the monsoon in Kathmandu. Another difficulty I faced was season – the mid-monsoon in Kathmandu. A heavy rain, bumpy road, and motorcycle – it was all a very good combination to make the field work extra difficult. Because riding on a bike as a female rider was already not an easy task to complete since I was breaking a traditional social norm. Further, I was being called a ‘driver’, I was bullied by a fellow rider while I visited the *Pathao* office for registration to start the rider’s journey. I was also highly discouraged to go out on a rainy day to ride and was instructed to ride only on a specific time of the day by my neighbours and closest relatives, for example, riding at night due to the possibility of being harassed or caught into an accident in unsafe monsoon roads in Kathmandu.

3.4 Data analysis

To start with, to answer the research question, data were collected using the mobile ethnography. Hence, I often worked with “headnote” (Emerson et al. 2011). These were turned into a descriptive field note. Additionally, a messy interview that was not structured, but rather was guided equally by the interviewee during the in-depth interview and informal-interview were undertaken. These in-depth interviews were later transcribed. In-formal interviews were noted down like field notes, but not like descriptive field notes. All of these data then were mapped out over and again. As a result, above mentioned Table 1 and 2 were developed to make it easier to analyse the data with distinct characteristic of the platform users (both rider and customer).

Specifically, looking for narratives in a sequence of conversations created through the interactions on the back of a motorcycle, jotting down my own experience that, at many

instances, intersected with those of platform riders and customers, I used autoethnography as a means to narrate them. 'Autoethnography is a qualitative method, which utilizes ethnographic approach to bring cultural interpretation to the autobiographical data of a researcher with the intent of understanding self and its connection to others' (Chang 2016).

As argued by Ellis et al. (2010) that an autoethnography must not only rely on the methodological tools, but also demonstrate a diverse cultural experience taking part in it as an insider and an outsider. Thus, triangulating source of information (social media, newspaper, YouTube video, and secondary literatures about platform mediated labor in Nepal) beyond my own experience is being practiced during the data analysis. Autoethnography magnifies and opens up a wider perspective to the research topic that ignores the rigid definitions of what forms a meaningful and useful research (Ellis et al. 2010).

Therefore, I tried to hear platform user's (rider and customer) voice from their experiences within the platform economy. To do so, messy data from the field were managed by creating the data set once they were transcribed. The familiarity with the locally spoken language gave me an upper hand to understand their expression of tone, and use of specific terms in specific situation. These data sets were then labelled following Chang's (2016) way of doing it by answering 4-W (when, who, what and where). Then these data were classified to understand the main issues. In my case, dynamics between different type of social identities (class and gender) through the shared ride via the platforms, between the platform riders and customers, and the interplay among these identities. The process of trying to map out the dynamics aided by an intersectional approach to the data was tough. Analysing the interplay of customer-rider relationship I was able to identify some the key themes. Gender was one of the earliest themes that emerged from the detailed narrative analysis as well as subjective analysis from the participant observation. Then, I started initial position of looking at class position as stable category to base my analysis on. However, as my analysis deepened, it revealed that continuous occurrence of monetary operation during the shared ride problematized such social identities.

While doing this, I situated myself within this research as a young, Nepali female student, who is temporarily living abroad, and both as a customer and a rider of a ride-based platform in Kathmandu. It is generally assumed that a migrant in a research location, belongs to a "middle-class" family. Like Liechty (2008) discusses, my family and I are suitably modern in terms of practicing global trends, but not letting go off traditional social norms. Principally, it was considered inappropriate for me to become a rider of the ride-sharing because of the combination of my class and gender. But, because I was conducting a research to fulfill my academic degree, I got away with it.

3.5 Ethical consideration

The aim of this research is to explore and share those exploration to a wider group of people such as researcher of the related field, personnel interested in the similar topic, those individuals involved in the platform economy and the academia as a whole. I was conducting participant observation in a covert manner. To go overt from cover form, I shared my business card with the research participants before I took verbal consent from them to be part of this research. It was part of my ethical consideration – to get their consent and fully acknowledge that I will use information shared with me while going covert manner. I respected their right to refusal. Hence, this research follows the following research ethics:

3.5.1 Do No Harm

Do no harm principle is strictly employed throughout this research period. During the participant observation, in-depth interview, mobile ethnography and also during the autoethnography period. To maintain the non-hierarchical position, I participated in a covert manner in the platform economy. No identical revelation is done thus, used pseudo name in the research document. I have tried no means to influence the participants in both times; while working as a rider or using the service as a customer.

There was time to step back for the safety matter due to climate, road condition. In such situation *do no harm* principle has also been applied for me as a researcher. Further, to ensure this ethical consideration I have kept my research supervisor updated on a regular interval (weekly) about my field research – by sharing fieldnotes, information that came up during the participant observation. These updates took place via social media such as *whatsapp*, *skype* and *emails*. The main purpose of this regular updates was due to the very nature of this study – ethnographic approach with participant observation in a covert manner.

3.5.2 Confidentiality

I employed participant observation in a covert manner. However, I fully understand the consent matters for any form of revelation of name or any other identical terms that may negatively affect the research participants. I took verbal consent from each one of my research participants as soon as I revealed my identity to them as a researcher and only after that I have used experiences shared by them. Thus, I fully respect individual's confidential right throughout the research period. Also, to make the interview context familiar I used business card specifically designed for this research purpose. It was to ensure that the participants have an access to complain in case of violation of *confidentiality*. As a student researcher I accept the *confidentiality* principle throughout this research period.

Here, I discussed my choice of ethnographic approach for this study. It is due to the need of exploring multi-layered social identities – gender and class position of riders and customers within the specific socio-cultural context. Further, I explained my choice of location and participants – *Tootle* and *Pathao* users within Kathmandu valley. Followed by the specific methods I employed – participant observation (covert and overt), autoethnography along with snowball sampling. Open-endedness and the weather were big challenge during the field work. Because of the nature of the participant observation in a cover manner I have specifically paid attention to ethical consideration to do no harm and maintain the confidentiality of all the research participants throughout the study.

Chapter 4

Emergence of *Pathao* and *Tootle*, and the influence of local-global dynamics

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of the first and second research question - first, the emergence of ride-sharing platform in Kathmandu, and second, the local-global dynamics of platform-based ridesharing in Kathmandu (how these ride sharing is rooted in local responses to the transportation issues yet shaped by the very characteristic of platform economy – immunity, control and superfluity, which are hardly particular to local context).

4.1 Emergence of ride-sharing platform in Kathmandu

A relatively recent, motorcycle-based ride-sharing platforms – *Tootle* and *Pathao* have rapidly taken their roots in Kathmandu. For instance, Table 3 shows that in less than two years *Pathao* has already served 350,000 registered customers with a pool of riders amounting to 25,000:

Table 3 Total registered riders and customers information

Platform	# of Registered Rider		# of Registered Customer	Starting Year
	Female	Male	All gender	
Tootle (as of July 26 2019)	1,115	30,688	266,519	2016
Pathao (as of August 2nd 2019)	150	24,850	350,000	2018

Source: *Tootle* and *Pathao* Official data accessed from their office, July & August 2019.

According to customers, a major reason for this rapid uptake of this newly introduced service is that platform-based ridesharing fills an important void in the poorly provided and poorly functioning public transport sector of Kathmandu.

"Me and my girlfriend were traveling, we booked a taxi. Told taxi driver the location and confirmed he knew the location; the price was fixed - not on the standard meter but we discussed with driver and we both, driver and us, agreed to give and take specific fare. The taxi took us the wrong way - as soon as I realized he was taking us through the wrong and quiet road my girlfriend asked him, "*Dai* (brother in Nepali language) why have you taken this road, we could have been through the main and regular road". The taxi driver started making up the stories that he got confused with the name of the place that's why. Further, the driver said we have come this far – 'now you add a few Ks (thousand) only then I will take you to your destination.' Driver made sure that he would take us to a quiet and public transportation not easily accessible area and bargain to increase the price. We were kind of stuck there. This was a bad decision to take taxi to travel." (32 years, male, customer, in-depth interview, 25 July 2019).

This statement represents the experience of taxi¹⁴ user's in the Kathmandu valley in general. Despite the existence of the standardized fares set by the government, taxi drivers in the Kathmandu valley rarely agree to ride using the taxi meter. As is common for taxis, also in Kathmandu the fares are more expensive than other means of public transportation. Public busses are not accessible to every corner of the valley. Thus, people living in Kathmandu are in constant search of the alternatives – that would be efficient in terms of cost, time and have control over reaching the destination. This is the necessity specially of the middle-class people living in Kathmandu valley who need to commute on a daily basis for work, and other purposes.

In their accounts about the emergence of *Tootle* and *Pathao* in Kathmandu, their owners not only relate this to addressing the transportation crisis, but also to the unannounced economic blockade by India on Nepal that lasted for five months (September 2015 to January 2016) (Kumar 2017), soon after the April-May 2015's mega earthquake that hit Nepal, when the availability of transportation (both public and private) had shrunk suddenly. To make the best use of available resources to meet the everyday commuting need, people used ride-sharing strategy during the blockade on a voluntary basis. A Facebook page for carpooling also began during this blockade. Some people taking it as an opportunity to earn money. About the emergence of ride-sharing platform in Kathmandu, the four founding members of *Tootle* shared that in their personal blog and during interviews with different media, that the earthquake and blockade both were suffering for them (Autolife 2017, Bhatta 2017, Koirala 2018 and Subedi 2017). These entrepreneurs were developing a school technology but the damage caused by the earthquake diverted the school funds in rebuilding it. The team had to re-strategize and mobilize their resources for a product that would help them make profit (ibid.). Later in 2017, with the intent of solving mobility problems inspired by the voluntary ride sharing during the blockade in post-earthquake period, *Tootle* officially started serving in Kathmandu.

A year later *Tootle* started giving ride-sharing service in Kathmandu valley, *Pathao* – a Bangladeshi ride-sharing service announced its launch in the valley. The Regional Director shared with a national daily that the 'the idea behind starting a ride-sharing app came to him during the Indian economic blockade of 2015/16' (Baral 2019).

It can be concluded that, be it Nepal's poor transportation infrastructure system or be it economic blockade, the ride-sharing emerged, at least in part, out of the necessity of the people to commute on a daily basis and the profit motive of these platform owners.

4.1.1 The idea of addressing commuting problem – became a problem

Both *Tootle* and *Pathao* discursively describe their services as transport solutions rooted in and responding to very localized problems. Yet, we should not fall into the trap of localism but recognize features of these platforms that are hardly unique to Kathmandu but characteristic of the global phenomenon of the gig economy.

¹⁴ Taxis are understood as public motor vehicle under Motor Vehicles and Transport Management Act, 1993 definition.

First, immunity – both *Tootle* and *Pathao* uses the strategy of mobilizing their workforce (riders) as a freelancer not an employee which makes them liable for their own work. The terms and condition for riders, for example, on *Pathao* platform (all highlighted in upper case letters) depicts this fact:

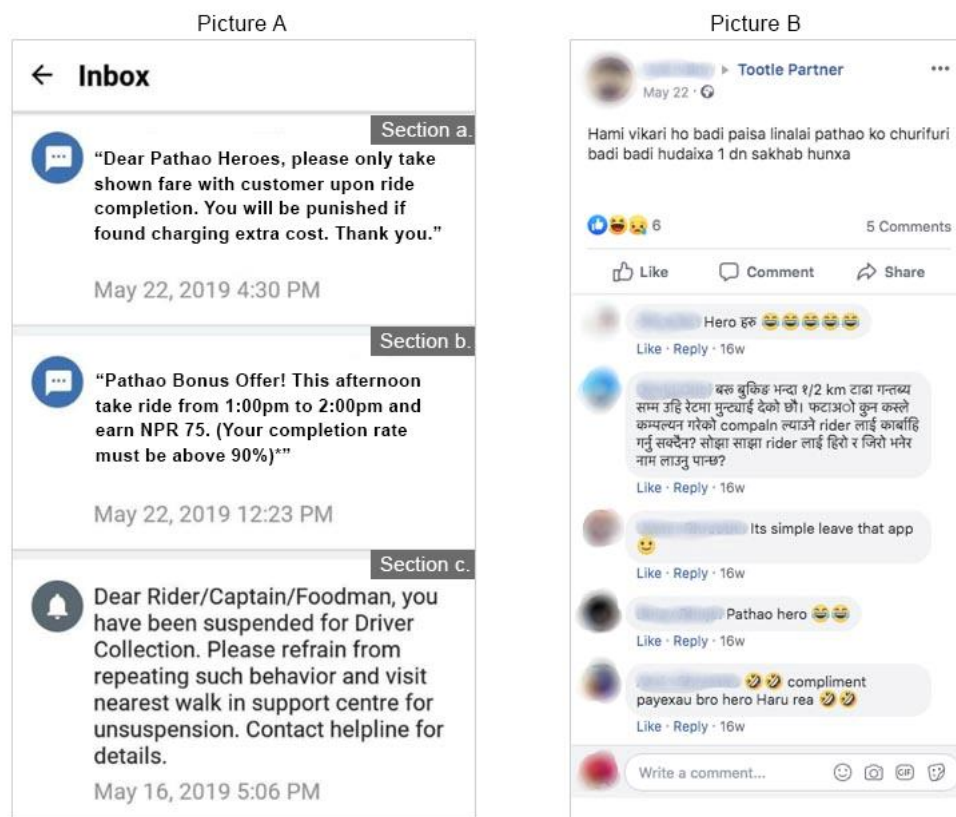
“THE COMPANY IS A TECHNOLOGY COMPANY THAT DOES NOT PROVIDE OR ENGAGE IN TRANSPORTATION SERVICES AND THE COMPANY IS NOT A TRANSPORTATION PROVIDER. THE SOFTWARE AND THE APPLICATION ARE INTENDED TO BE USED FOR FACILITATING YOU (AS A TRANSPORTATION PROVIDER) TO OFFER YOUR TRANSPORTATION SERVICES TO YOUR PASSENGER OR CUSTOMER. THE COMPANY IS NOT RESPONSIBLE OR LIABLE FOR THE ACTS AND/OR OMISSION WITH REGARD TO ANY SERVICES YOU PROVIDED TO YOUR PASSENGERS, AND FOR ANY ILLEGAL ACTIONS COMMITTED BY YOU. YOU SHALL, AT ALL TIME, NOT CLAIM OR CAUSE ANY PERSON TO MISUNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE AN AGENT, EMPLOYEE OR STAFF OF THE COMPANY, AND THE SERVICES YOU PROVIDED BY YOU IS NOT, IN ANYWAY, BE DEEMED AS SERVICE OF THE COMPANY.” (Terms and Condition, Section 3., *Pathao Rider’s Application*, Accessed 23 October 2019).

Here, “YOU” implies to the rider and “PASSENGER” implies to the service requesting customer. This terms and condition strongly put riders in an unimmunized situation by not taking any liability related to the rider even while providing service to the passenger. Also, riders are by no means platform’s responsibility. Riders are forbidden to understand themselves as an employee of the platform. Nor they are allowed to give such impression to other people but only they are transportation providing riders of *Pathao*. Similar is the scenario with *Tootle*:

“For the avoidance of doubt, we are a technology company, not a transportation company and we do not provide transportation services. We do not employ the drivers and we are not responsible for any acts and/or omissions of the requests made through the application.” (Terms of Use, General Matters: 5, *Tootle Application*, Accessed 23 October 2019).

Second, control – all the platform riders are under control through an algorithmic management. For example, riders and customers both must agree to all the terms and conditions of these two platforms while registering. It is platform’s algorithmic management that structures the work of a riders. Also, it is the algorithmic management to calculate who gets what based on the distance, time and duration of the day of ride request. Both the platform benefits from the earning made through the provided rides by the riders to customer through the platform. The rating system, complaint mechanism in the end of the ride completion helps platform to monitor its rider’s activity to either punish them or reward. And in the practice of disciplining riders – platform hears only the voice of customers without cross checking who is at the fault. This is from my experience while participating as a rider and a customer during the field work: once, I shared my ordeal of a wrong pick-up location to the customer care of the platform (*Tootle*; 19 July 2019), who suggested me “why did you go that far just to pick up the customer? I will resolve your ride from here this time, but from the next time don’t do this.” Here, as a rider I was put at fault. But isn’t it my right to choose, in the case of *Tootle*, either go far or near, based on my interest to share the ride with a customer (as they call it “work in your preferred time”)? Next time, as a customer in the same platform, I asked the customer care for a help to find a female rider for me. Their response this time was very polite and humble, “Sorry ma’am! At the moment, there are no female riders available nearby you. Would it be okay if we redirect you to one of our male riders nearby? Sorry for the inconvenience” (Telephone conversation, *Tootle* customer care, 28 July 2019). These were my different experiences, first as a rider and second, as a customer.

Picture 3 *Pathao* Rider's mobile screenshot of notification from the platform – translated version (see Appendix D below for the Nepali/original version)



Source: *Tootle* Facebook Group, Accessed September 2019.

The picture shown above are an example of platform controlling riders on *Pathao*, in picture A – a. by warning; b. by motivating and controlling; c. suspending the rider for charging more money than the actual fare. In the picture B – fellow riders (either they are from *Pathao* or *Tootle* is not clear on the picture as it is a Facebook group post comments) are suggesting the one who posted to leave the *Pathao* app and making fun of him being called *Pathao hero* sarcastically. The control here from platform is used to improve the service of ride-sharing.

On the other hand, the *Pathao*'s rider instead of posting on *Paathao*'s Facebook page, posted dissatisfaction and complain on *Tootle* Facebook group page. Because the *Pathao* Facebook group page is controlled by *Pathao* management, thus, rider or customer or public cannot post anything without prior approval of the group admin. During my interaction with a *Pathao* rider, he said –

"I once posted my dissatisfaction about one customer who paid me less than the fare mentioned in the app. *Pathao* immediately asked me to remove that post from the page. Since, then I have never posted anything on that page." (27years, Male, rider, in-depth interview, 28 July 2019).

Riders are now practicing a trend of offering ride cancellation and sharing the ride off-the platform. While commuting as a platform customer, I never experienced discomfort or riders charging me with more ride fares than the actual fares appeared while requesting the ride. But riders resisting platform – I have experienced few times. One time – I was not even aware until I reached my destination. I only realized the rider had cancelled my request after

calling and confirming it with me. And the other time, I was asked to cancel the request when I met the rider. It was not because the rider didn't want to share the ride with me or to overcharge me but to prevent 20% of his earning to go to the platform.

“If you want ride next time, call me directly – I remember you, don't use *Pathao* application, why should we pay platform a 20% of commission for no reason. The bike ride is always risky, *Pathao* doesn't cover us with insurance if anything happens, medical expenses are our own, fuel is our own, bike is our own, we are working hard why pay *Pathao* just like that, that's why *didi* (elder sister in Nepali) I think instead of making this foreign company fat we use it to meet new people and do our own work.” (21years, male, rider, informal interview, 31 July 2019).

Both interactions took place differently: in an overt and a covert manner. I often noticed that while interacting in a covert participant often gave me more full and accurate insight of a situation (Vinten 1994: 34). Whereas, I revealed my researcher's identity (overt), participants often gave more ideal responses.

However, these interactions during the short-shared ride compelled me to think – why riders are refusing to pay the platform? In this regard Turner and Hanh (2018) has mentioned: it is the control factor that pushes them to develop the resistance mechanism for their mobile livelihoods. When the rider gets contact details of a customer through the platform, now he/she can independently contact the customers for future ride enabling him/her to enact his/her agency. Lier (2007) suggested that individual's agency is often overlooked, but looking at Picture 3, platform do not overlook rider's individual agency but tries to suppress by suspending them.

Third, superfluity – *Tootle* and *Pathao* both platforms register anyone who wants to work as a platform rider which gives them opportunity to join and leave the work at any time they want. The strategy they use to attract more and more riders are through various advertisements. It is because platforms are aware with the practice of riders taking this work as a transition job only. Thus, platform keeps targeting specific groups of people. Two pictures below demonstrate how these platforms are attracting more and more rider to never run out of the riders on the platform as one of the strategies:

Picture 4 Pathao promotion



Picture 5 Tootle advertisement



“Earn up to Rs. 30,000 a month with *Pathao*, a platform where you can share spare seat of your bike/scooter and make Kathmandu accessible for people. Utilize your two-wheeler and your extra time to earn extra money. Be your own boss and work according to your routine and as per your convenience.”

Source: *Tapai Hamro Pasal*, Facebook Page, Accessed 22 September 2019.

“Get an easy ride anywhere inside valley. *Tootle* matches you with bikes that are on your way. HAPPY TOOTLING
BECOME A PARTNER”

Source: *ICT FRAME*, Accessed 22 September 2019.

Shown pictures are representatives of how these platforms attract riders, advertising that there will be no control of boss, how one can give easy ride on your way while sharing the spare seat of your motorcycle. In reality, these are gloss of freedom and extra earning to ensure that platform don't run out of riders and always have more than ever before since its starting.

For many, working as a platform rider is just a transitional job. A 31-year-old male, works for 7-8 hours a day still identifies himself as a part-time rider. And is working on platform to utilize his transition from home to abroad for work. He is only a representative of many riders who work for longer hour and still identify themselves as part-timers (see section 5.2 for more details) and are not opting platform rider as a long-term work goal. Because, people are registering as a rider and after sometime they leave the platform. Picture 3 above shows in the comments section – after being suspended the rider is being suggested by fellow riders to leave the platform. Thus, riders joining and leaving the ride-sharing work is key feature known as superfluity in the platform work.

The necessity of addressing the local problems certainly gave rise to the ride-sharing platform. However, these platforms aren't away from the key features of global phenomenon of the platform economy. Immunity, control and superfluity are evidently there in these two ride-sharing platforms. Having said this, the practice of partnership is not really deregulating the existing formal labour market.

4.1.2 The gloss of freedom: starting with partnership leading to conflict

The global features (i.e. immunity, control, and superfluity) are developing a specific way of engaging the workforce in the ride-sharing platform, including in Kathmandu. But these global feature needs an understanding from the local context, especially, the partnership model. The model does not really deregulate an existing formal labour market as is the commonly heard critique of the gig economy in the global North (Graham et al. 2018). Because most of the informal work in Nepal comes with the precarity of insecure employment such as insurance, employment savings. So, this is not a break with the norm also must be understood in a locally practiced manner.

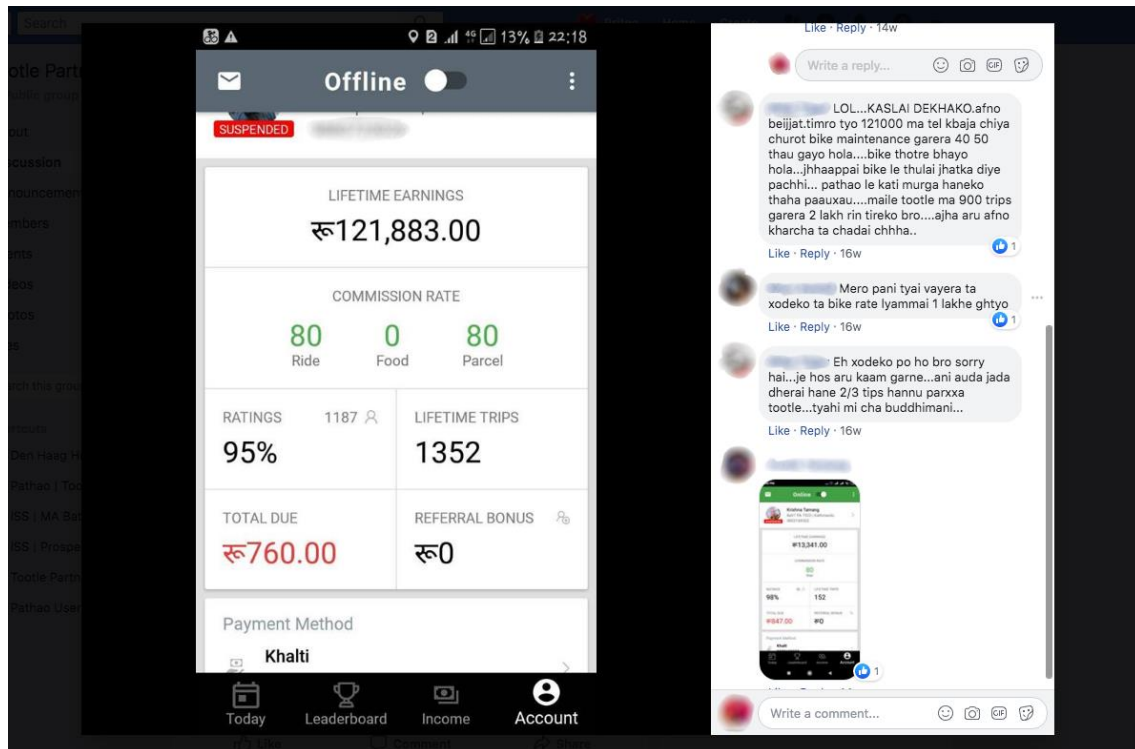
Tootle and *Pathao* both stress partnership between the rider and company at a discursive level. An experience shared by a *Pathao* rider during the in-depth interview reflects this very well.

“...I read in a magazine called “NAARI” (women in Nepali), that a woman was earning 50-60 thousand Nepali rupee a month just by sharing ride through the platform (he was unsure of which platform this woman was sharing ride). I was influenced by this article of a female rider to join platform. I then joined *Pathao*. Not long after, all my expectations were shattered. I could hardly make 40,000 (Nepali Rupees) a month and this earning includes my everyday expenses – phone cost, internet package cost, fuel cost, motorcycle maintenance cost and lunch cost. They say we can work in our preferred time and there are no bosses. But in my experience the app is our boss, and staff working in *Pathao* office are our supervisors. If I want to earn from the platform there is no freedom as such.” (28 years, male, rider, in-depth interview, 30 July 2019).

I could see a frustration in his eyes. The hope given by the platform to earn more with flexible working hours without anyone’s control became a myth for him. It is the very structure of the platformisation of work that puts its workforce into the conflict situation. It is not only in Kathmandu, but also shown very well in the study of motorbike taxi drivers in Hanoi through exploring experience of mobility (Turner and Hanh 2019). This study mentions from the motorbike driver’s perspective in the street of Hanoi, these drivers experience friction (not part of the formal economy, often silenced by the municipal policies) on a daily basis while trying to sustain their mobile livelihood (ibid.).

As mentioned in the previous section (see section 4.1.1) – even platform’s terms of use/condition also reflect that they do not take any liability of riders who are registered to work as a platform rider. When an individual is serving through a platform, seeking some sort of employment security is natural. But these two ride-sharing platforms, like any other online platforms, do not take any liability of its workforce. But, only tries to discipline its workforce agitating the riders. The following pictures are evidences of such agitation:

Picture 6 A rider's post on social media page upon being suspended by the *Pathao*



Source: *Pathao* Facebook Group, Accessed September 2019.

The rider posted on social media page after being suspended by the platform without any prior notification. The thread of comments shows how riders are being used to benefit the platform – all costs (fuel, motorcycle servicing) are cost paid by the rider but the platforms takes commission from rider for mediating. The motorcycles also become ‘junk’ (exchange value highly decreased) due to excessive ride sharing.

The emergence of these platforms is constructed as rooted locally and responding to very specific Kathmandu problems. But, the very nature of platform work couldn’t escape in the Nepali context. And at the same time, even such universal features play out in a local labour market and context. Thus, it took a new shape of resistance with these platforms becoming mere mediators to connect rider and customer. Illustrated by the example of riders (see section 4.1.1) trying to convince their customer to cancel the ride and go with them off the platform. All they are doing here is using the platform to build and expand their own informal network of customers to sustain their mobile livelihood. But, the controlling mechanism from platform and resisting pattern of riders gave rise to the conflict situation. This local - global dynamics of ride-sharing platform in Kathmandu gives an idea of solving the travel woes in Kathmandu valley through the ride-sharing platform. But, this very dynamic seems like have created a problem by adopting the key feature of platform economy rather than understanding and adopting the contextual socio-economic practice within the Kathmandu.

Chapter 5

Negotiation of class and gender during ride-sharing

In this chapter we present and discuss the findings on gender and class as practiced in the ride-sharing platforms – attending to its digital and actual dimension. Here, we explore how interactions take place on and off the motorcycle between the rider and customer, which influence gender and class. We, further, explore and analyse factors (such as money) that influence such interactions.

5.1 Digital dimension of ‘doing¹⁵ gender and class’

It is often thought that internet-mediated platforms are ‘neutral’ in terms of social relations because of its nature of functioning on the digital dimension, and thus, being out of everyday social practices. Yet, in this chapter I argue that the digital dimension is not out of social practices. It is embedded in the everyday practices, including gender and class, since these platforms emerged out of the everyday necessities (e.g. mobility, livelihood) of the people. Doing gender and class involves a multifaceted perception, interaction, and micropolitical activities within the society where the platform is embedded.

Ride-sharing platform as an everyday practice on a digital dimension is gendered and classist.

5.1.1 Gender

While conducting fieldwork I participated both as a rider and a customer of *Tootle* and *Pathao*. I noticed, since my registration, that gender comes through in a number of occasions.

One: while requesting a ride the application allows customers to choose a rider based on their gender - either choose *ANY*¹⁶ or *FEMALE* rider – while requesting the ride, specifically on *Tootle*. The platforms have also put effort to increase more female riders in the platform through their adverts (see picture 4 & 5 above). This specific priority is given to the gender attention in the practice of platform service in Kathmandu due to the rising number of female customers and fewer female riders on the platform compared to the male riders. “The whole idea rotates around encouraging “freedom of movement” (*Tootle* slogan), which is why ride-sharing platforms have specifically design to accommodate female’ (Prasain 2018). Female faces more chances of being sexually, verbally abused while commuting through the public transportation. Thus, these platforms have taken this in their advancement to address the social concern but in reality, they work to increase their popularity among users (both riders and customers) and thereby their revenues.

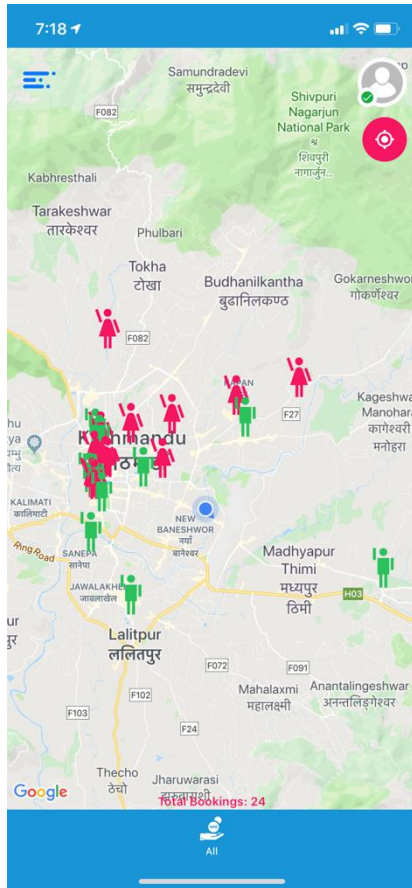
Two: it is not only customer who can select the rider on *Tootle* but also the rider can select the customer based on the gender. It is more explicit on *Tootle* than on *Pathao*. On *Tootle*, rider can see on their application interface and select either male or female’s ride

¹⁵ Doing here is used to reflect the gender and class as a practice through the digital dimension of the platform.

¹⁶ Male, female, any gender.

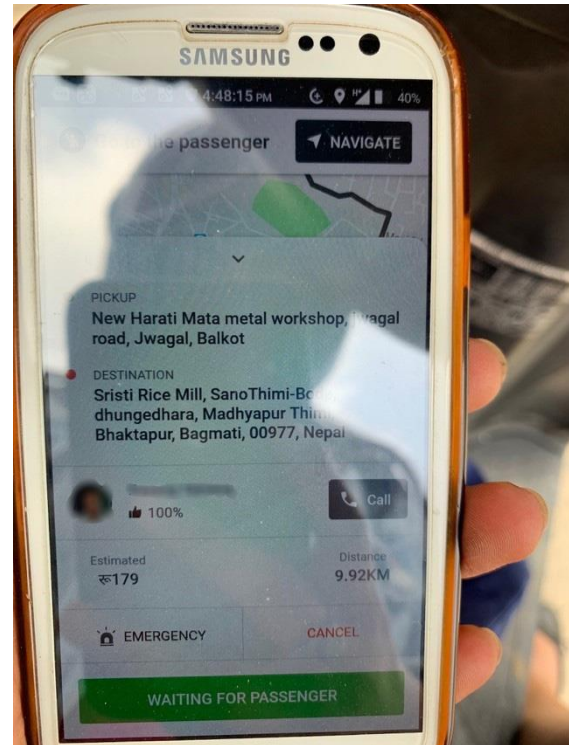
request. On *Pathao* too – it is up to rider whether to accept or reject ride request once they get notification from the platform. But unlike on *Tootle*, *Pathao* riders cannot choose from who to get the request from in the first place.

Picture 7 Ride request on rider's interface of *Tootle* app.



Source: Fieldwork, Mobile screenshot, Taken July, 2019.

Picture 8 Ride request on the rider's interface of *Pathao* app



Source: Fieldwork, Mobile screenshot, Taken July, 2019

Here, on the rider's digital interface, everything looks simple and clear. But actual confirmation is done based on socially understood gender binary.

"I never had to wait more than 10 minutes of ride request sent" (29 years, female, customer, in-depth interview, 28 July 2019).

I have also similar experience while requesting a ride through these platforms. But a male customer has a different story to share. A 28-years-old, male customer shared that;

"It will be a pleasant surprise if I ever get a ride without waiting for more than 30 minutes."

He further adds his experience with a young rider once proudly shared with him during the ride:

"You should feel lucky, because you are my first male customer. I never give ride to male but only to female, why would I become driver otherwise – it's fun having a female on the back of my motorcycle." (in-depth interview, 31 July 2019).

Perhaps, specific male riders give ride to female customer only. An international student visiting Nepal for her field work shares her experience:

“The rider kept asking me to sit closer. His claim was that, the bike was imbalance due to the gap I had maintained between two of us. What surprised me was, how could a bike be imbalanced middle of the traffic jam when bike was not running? Then I realised this rider was taking his chance with me to be physically close” (30 years, female, customer, in-depth interview, 27 July 2019).

What I expected and was confirmed by the participants’ experience proved my thoughts correct. Above shared experiences by the customers are just representative of other participants I have interacted with during the field work. These are very simple statement with strong message. A male customer often has to wait for longer than the female customer. It maybe because, female customer’s request is given priority by the riders. Looking at it from the gender analysis where gender binary practice is prevalent (see 5.2) this raises the social concern of such intention leading to gender-based violence.

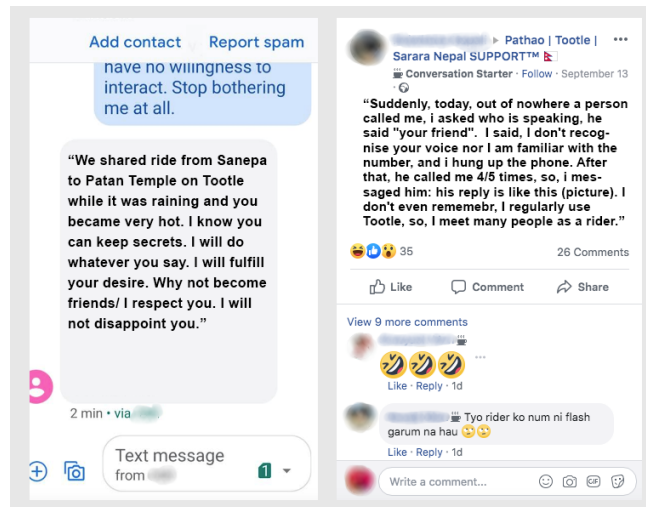
The platform is also struggling with their own notion of freedom. They are aware of such gender-preference practices, and they recognize that this may lead to problems. Yet because of the nature of the partnership model they can hardly intervene. The following statement is an example of an attempt of platform to intervene:

“We strictly monitor our rider’s activity for the purpose of smooth service operation. We have found that certain male riders have tendency of only giving ride to female customer. We as a platform cannot tell them you have done wrong or right, because ultimately it is the whole point of platform – freedom of work. Thus, we intentionally assign them to pick nearby male customer’s request by calling them. Even after this they frequently reject to share ride with male customer we then enquire them what is going on by again calling and enquiring them why did they refused male customer’s request? And if found mischievous intention then we flag them first as a warning and if needed terminate their registration as a rider for lifetime” (30 years, female, former platform employee and rider, in-depth interview, 23 July 2019).

The ratio of male riders is more on both the ride-sharing platform (see table 3). And these ride-sharing platforms claim that there are more female customers than male. What is the coincidence that majority of riders are male and majority of customers are female? And these platform applications are also designed in such a manner that they reflect the gender binary by letting customer and rider both letting them choose either male or female. They do not allow to choose other genders for example, the third gender, which is recognized by the constitution of Nepal. It is clearly the reflection of social normative practice on the digital dimension of the platform where the recognition to other genders are kept silent and given focus to either male or female to maintain the stereotypical gender binary on the basis of sex.

Third: the contact details are made visible both for the riders and customers. The visibility of social identity based on gender made accessible whoever uses the platform as registered rider and customer. This has created a concern of privacy between riders and customers. Because, making such details (name, gender and contact) visible allows for stalking. The picture below depicts that this visibility has given the room for relationship of rider and customer go beyond the platform. Where a male rider showed interest on female customer and texted her showing interest to build the relationship of friendship.

Picture 9 A male rider trying to establish relationship with female customer beyond platform.



Source: Pathao/Tootle Sarara Nepal Support Facebook page group post, Accessed 13 September, 2019.

These occurring on ride-sharing platforms show digital platforms by its design are part of a social dimension, and doing gender as a practice through their application. It is worrisome from the perspective of gender lens. Because, just by using the platforms to share rides one has to reveal this/her contact details with a complete stranger. In a patriarchal society like Nepal, it is often female who suffers the most from such situations, as evident in the above picture.

5.1.2 Class

Class distinction is made from the very practice of application on both the ride-sharing platforms on the basis of economic status of the riders and customers (middle and lower-middle class).

Table 4 Availability of application on different operating system for rider and customer

Platform	Starting Year	App available	Type of platform
Tootle	2016	Android & iOS device (both rider and customer)	Nepali start-up
Pathao	2018	Android & iOS device (customer) Only on Android for riders	Bangladeshi start-up

Source: Tootle and Pathao Official data accessed form their office, July & August 2019.

Table 4 shows that, these platforms in their design itself assumed and distinguished application (availability of application for *Android* and/or *iOS* users) for riders and customers from a class perspective that riders are from a bit lower class position than the customers. It is because these platforms are not away from the social dimension. For instance, in a Nepali context, it is often understood that people involved in transportation sector as a driver/rider relatively belong to lower economic class. I see this distinction as a class statement because *iOS* operating phone is much more expensive than the *Android* operating phones. Thus, these

platforms too, as part of the society, are doing class on the normative understanding of class distinction by separating the accessibility for rider and customer. Hence, both the platforms have customer's application on both operating system supported devices – *iOS* and *Android*. Whereas, *Pathao* have application for riders only on *Android* supported device. *Tootle* also began its service with application on *Android* operating system devices for the riders. Later added application on *iOS* operating devices for riders. But it is still not on a fully functioning mode like on *Android* supported device for the riders.

The belief that digital platforms are away from the socially understood norms does not seem true. They are the part of the social dimension, and hence, mirror the society through its design on the digital dimension whether be in its gendered practice or the separation of class between those who pay and those who are being paid for providing the service.

5.2 Actual dimension of 'doing gender and class'

Actual dimension of doing gender and class begins from the moment rider and customer meet to share the ride through the ride-sharing platform. Here, gender and class come intersecting one another. Kathmandu is ever evolving with adopting global trends and becoming "modern", but not leaving the roots of their traditional socio-cultural norms (Liechty 2008: 37). This very essence of becoming "suitably modern" (Liechty 2008), can be observed through the actual dimension of doing gender and class through the ride-sharing platforms in Kathmandu.

When a person is registered on the platforms, first thing stressed by the platforms to their rider is to respect their customer. *Pathao* specifically orients its newly registered riders not to get involved in any kinds of sexual harassment activities during the shared ride. *Pathao* staff was pushing everyone in the orientation class (all of them were male except me) not to tease female customer, or even give them feedback that may reflect as sexual comment. The way we (riders) were being oriented, seemed *Pathao* is following what is expected to be a good practice and a bad practice based on the traditional long practiced norm where still females are seen as a sexual object. "Do not ask female customers to sit closer, don't touch them, don't use the brakes unnecessarily while sharing ride with female customer which forces their frontal body part to touch you" (*Pathao* staff, Orientation class, 11 July 2019). I felt it gendered orientation based on the "sex-related consciousness" (Gerson and Peiss 1985), where riders were oriented on the social normative practice that it is only male who gets attracted to women sexually and is able to express it openly even in the form of harassment not the vice-versa.

Then, the first ride I shared with a woman with was shocked to meet a female rider (and I was surprised see two people with one ride request). This female customer asked me several questions – maybe out of curiosity and surprise;

"How old are you, where do you live, do you have own house in Kathmandu, who do you live with, what do you do?" (26 years, female, customer, informal interview, 19 July 2019).

I kept answering her question. I felt as the conversation kept running that I was being judged by her. When I replied to age question, her tone changed from being friendly to bit closed. Her tone became even more closed when I answered I am a migrant in Kathmandu. Suddenly, she started talking to me as if she knew me for a long time, when I revealed my

student identity to her and studying abroad at the moment. Among all of these questions – ‘what do you do’ strike me? The idea that ride-sharing is still not considered a full-time work despite of the longer hours per day, I was asked about my work. Questions were very simple. But, the change in tone, voice expression reflected to me that each answer I gave were being used to categorize me on the basis of my class. All of these are her own idea deep rooted in the traditional social norms – working in the transportation sector is for only male – from surrounding district, belonging to relatively lower economic class, and is uneducated.

In Nepal transportation is largely dominated by male (K.C. et al. 2017: 178). The work is normatively masculine. The data (see table 3) shared by the platforms also show that the number of female riders is way too low than the male riders on the ride-sharing. The practice of “separate sphere” for men and women is still prevalent in the ride-sharing – male is expected socially to go out work and live in a public sphere whereas, female still struggle to break the domestic confinement (Gerson and Peiss 1985 and K.C. et al. 2017). My experience in the two-month long field work also demonstrated that finding a female rider is rare. Not surprised, why above-mentioned customer was stunned to meet the female rider for the first time in her several months of ride-sharing experience.

Not only customer but even the security guard at *Pathao* office was surprised to see a female coming for registering as a rider. But here the guard was trying encourage me to continue working as a rider not questioning my class and family background:

“You come to the office next time, I will introduce you to another female rider.” (Security guard, *Pathao* office, personal conversation, 11 July 2019).

It was an attempt from him to lure, at the same time appreciate, me to work as a rider on *Pathao* because evidently there are very fewer female riders on ride-sharing platform. A picture was posted on Facebook group page shares the similar experience:

Picture 10 Female rider sharing a photo after being appreciated by female customer



Source: *Pathao* Facebook group page post, Accessed 13 September, 2019.

Often, during the interaction with female customers during the ride-share, they shared that the concept of gender stereotypes and gender norms has been changing. Generally, in

the existing social scenario, if a male friend drops a female friend home, he would stereotypically be considered a 'boyfriend' or that there is some intimate relationship between the two. Considering the fact that the access to resources - transportation in particular – in any house would be preferred to males until today, they are expected to ride, and generally considered responsible of the safety of their female counterparts. These gender norms in practices have been shaken currently. But still, female struggles to prove that she is simply commuting.

“When I started using the ride-based platform, I was very cautious that nobody sees me. Thus, I would ask the rider to drop me off nearby my home. Later, I realized I am paying the person so, I must be dropped off at my destination. Hence, I started taking them until the main gate of my house. But somehow, I would make sure that *every* time I take ride through the platform, my nosy neighbor sees me paying the rider. So, he knows that there is some kind of transaction happening – not personal relationship.” (26 years, female, customer, in-depth interview, 31 July 2019).

These interactions have initiated in building relations and the social structure in future where some of the stereotypical norms and ideology have signalled to be twisted onto the platform. However, they are still seeking validation from the society to be approved as non-intimate relationship took place through the ride-sharing. These also give an impression of power relation, particularly the one paying and the one being paid, which speaks to me as a class distinction.

Doing class on the actual dimension of platform happens in such a manner that, often, neither rider nor customer realizes it's taking place. Like, Liechty (2008) largely tried to define the “middle class” in the Kathmandu, it happens in the practice of global trend in a local practice – of becoming “modern” yet not leaving the root of “traditional” social norms. The understanding that the platform riders are ‘less educated, migrants, and poor people’ reflects the class dichotomy for riders to be middle-class and lower middle-class people.

Experiencing the ride-sharing on and off of the back of a motorcycle – it is not wrong to say that often riders identify themselves to those belonging to lower-middle class. For example, four male riders aged 27-32 years identified themselves as a part-time rider. In reality all of these riders work 7-10 hours a day. The fashion of doing part-time job on the ride-sharing has become a trend. Thus, these riders too, identify themselves as a part-time rider. They have experience of waiting for the customer more than 30 minutes. Some customers treat them at times rudely, and with disrespect.

“I shared ride with a female customer going to airport right after I dropped you at the Coffee shop, she said she was in rush and literally pushed me to ride fast. I was not comfortable riding very fast – she verbally abused me and didn't even pay me the exact fare” (27year, male, rider, in-depth interview, 28 July 2019).

He did not complain to the platform due to his bitter experience of complaining about similar incident at the customer service in the past. *Pathao* shut him saying sometime such incidents takes place, we have to consider customers. Here, it is the need of these riders to earn money to sustain them and their dependent's livelihood. Thus, they bear all of these and still continue working in such ride-sharing platform. Gerson and Peiss (1985) mentioned historically women are often being dominated, but the experience shared by this rider shows contrasting notion. The class position maintained by the economic status seems to be overruling the gender notion that only women are dominated (Liechty 2008).

Ride-sharing platforms in Kathmandu are functioning with the key feature of platformisation of work – their working model imbeds on the gendered and classist nature (Van Doorn 2017). It is commonly understood that to work in the platform work – requires less skills, and education. Hence, often cater the large group of low-skilled, low-income workers. Similarly, these riders of the ride-sharing are too treated accordingly by the platforms directly or indirectly: directly – with its terms of use, and indirectly – by not hearing the voice of these workforce. Thus, above mentioned statement is just a representative of other riders, who are also forced to tolerate unequal treatment due to their lower middle-class position on the platform as well as in the society at large.

Money is more crucial than the time for riders to work as a rider on the platforms. Riders and customers both can choose between *Tootle* and *Pathao* due to their availability at different hours of a day – While *Pathao* is available for 24 hours *Tootle* is only available from 06:00 am to 09:00 pm. But most importantly, earning affects their choice of platform. *Tootle* takes only 4% commission from the riders if they manage to share more than five ride a day. Whereas, *Pathao* takes 20% commission from riders.

But, for riders it is not that simple to choose between these two platforms because of the design of the application. For example, to be able to share ride on *Pathao*, rider must be online and accept the ride request upon the notification buzz within 25 seconds. But on the other hand, on *Tootle*, rider doesn't need to respond to the ride request immediately but can see the from multiple customers requesting the ride at that moment and choose one among them. Thus, *Tootle* rider must keep looking at the screen of mobile to be able to find a match.

“The time spent on shuffling the platform, I can give one extra ride and earn money” (31 years, male, rider, in-depth interview, 31 July 2019).

A story, but sums up most of my encounters with customers of ride-based platform in Kathmandu. Not a single customer has ever placed a complaint against rider despite of their discomfort. A 28 years old second-generation migrant who identifies himself as non-migrant as he was born and raised in Kathmandu and holds citizenship from Kathmandu valley very casually said:

“My relations with the rider despite of their gender and caste is just to commute from point A to the point B. After that, rider is stranger to me. I don't feel like talking to them at all. I don't even bother to rate them” (28 years, male, customer, in-depth interview, 31 July 2019).

His tone and facial expression showed as if he has an upper hand here because he pays. He is taking ride from just a rider through platform, why should there be any form of interaction.

Riders' opinion about the customers is also the same. Riders think the customers are those “who can pay” the platform rate. If a person can pay a ‘middle cost’ (not as cheap as public transportation nor as expensive as taxi fare) they belong to middle-class group.

Both riders and customers of the platform belong to middle-class – customers: middle to upper-middle class who can afford the shared ride; riders: lower middle-class who are being paid by the customers. Both riders and customers through the shared ride are enacting what it means to be “modern Nepali” (Liechty 2008:61) by taking part in global trend but local practice. These participants including myself are living on the “middleness” (ibid.) where it is not only about financial categories but also the category of traditional and modern societies. In this

traditional and modern categorization, these platforms are doing gender and class through the digital and actual dimension on an everyday practice.

Ride-sharing platforms are embedded in the everyday practice of doing gender and class. Because the emergence of such platforms is rooted in the everyday necessities of people – who forms the society. Thus, despite of its claim that it is neutral because of its digital functioning – it is not away from the socially understood norms. From its digital design to actual encounter of riders and customer manifest the gender and class through their shared ride. All of it is done by reproducing traditional social norm of gender binary practice and determining class based on the individual's economic transaction – who pays (customer); who is being paid (rider).

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This study concerns *Pathao* and *Tootle*, the two recently emerged ride-sharing platforms in the Kathmandu valley of Nepal. The study explored the emergence of these platforms as well as how are they rooted in local responses to transportation issues and shaped by the characteristics of global platform economy – immunity, control and superfluity. It also explored, by using digital and actual dimension lens, how social identities of the riders and customers of these platforms in terms of class and gender are negotiated due course of the ride sharing.

Regarding the first research question, *Pathao* and *Tootle* both emerged as responses to the poor mechanized transportation service in the valley, which were further penetrated by the economic blockade in the post-earthquake period. A new way of doing work particularly attracted many riders into the ride-sharing platform. The sole motive of these platforms, however, is to make profit.

Further moving to the second research question, even though these platforms claimed responding to localized transportation issues of the Kathmandu valley and they rapidly gained popularity attracting many customers to register and use them in a very short period of time, but they were not able to move away from the global key characteristics of a platform-based economy – immunity, control and superfluity. These characteristics puts riders at an algorithmic control. They failed to acknowledge the contextual socio-economic practices, for example, transportation sector in Nepal is informal, thus its workforce prefers to perform in a less regulated manner. These local-global dynamics, therefore, created a resistance mechanism among riders resulting them now using these platforms to build and expand their own informal network of customers to sustain their mobile livelihood.

Finally, answering the third research question, this study showed that the ride-sharing platforms were found to inherit the societal perceptions of gender and class in their design as well as have influence on them during the actual practice of ride-sharing. The digital dimension of these platforms shows that the belief concerning the digital or internet-mediated functional features are ‘neutral’ in terms of social relations does not seem to be true. They inherit the societal perceptions of class and gender into their design and operations – for instance, in their application design they follow the gender binary selection option for both customers and riders. This resulted in the practice of choosing customers based on their gender, mostly favouring females for the shared ride. Similarly, the availability of platforms’ application on the *Android* (the only option for riders) and *iOS* operating device seem to have inherited the societal belief that riders belong to lower-middle class who cannot afford the expensive *iOS* operating phones.

The actual dimension or the practice of ride-sharing were found doing gender and class particularly manifesting traditional gender norms, while at the same time trying to becoming modern. These were observed, for example, in female customers still requiring societal approval that she is not an intimate relationship with the rider, but just using their service (ride-sharing) against a payment. Class distinctions were observed between the riders and

customers, particularly on how customers judged or treated the riders based on their migrant status, economic status.

Additionally, the platforms were found to incite the risk of sexual harassment by the male riders to the female customers. But, platforms make gender visible in the application to make more profit that foster gendered risk, for example, a male rider accepting only female customer's request with the intention of sexually harassing her beyond platform.

The platforms on the other hand were also found putting effort to ensure safety of the female customers through policy interventions and orientations of riders. They were also striving to engage more female riders given that their current engagement is far less than their male counterparts and voicing for female customers' safety and freedom for movement.

Generally, it is perceived that digitalization is a remedy to development problems in developing countries. This study has also shown that digital platforms, to some extent, solved the everyday commute problem in the Kathmandu valley as well as given employment opportunities for low- to middle-class riders in the valley. But, at the same time, social problems also seem to emerge with their advent. This is particularly seen when such digital platforms ignore the local socio-economic context and practices of its workforce, and only imply measures of immunity, control and superfluity. This has resulted in the resistance that may lead to more vulnerable situation by, for example, riders influencing customers to share ride outside the platform that cannot be traced through the platforms, which may further lead to incidents of gender-based violence. Risk of sexual harassment of female customers by male customers have also emerged when such platforms do not fully consider the local socio-cultural contexts, e.g. gendered risks to female, into their design and operation. Such situations (ignoring local socio-cultural contexts in design and operation) have also led to circumstances where riders are being exploited, owing to their low- to middle-class position, by both the platforms and customers owning.

The 'mobile' ethnographic approach was critical to understand the socio-cultural dynamics that played out during the ridesharing, especially between the riders and the customers. The 'mobile' aspect, in particular, enabled me to conduct participant observation in a covert and an overt manner. This gave me a space to explore the deeply spoken and unspoken expressions of both the riders and customers. First, if I was not employed as a rider and customer on the platform, I might have only got the ideal responses from the respondents than more full and actual response. Second, I could observe the class distinction through my experience as a rider and a customer of the ride-sharing platforms, which the riders and customers did not openly share during our interactions. This particularly helped to clarify some of the assumptions of the ride-sharing platforms. For instance, riders were perceived to make excuses, such as asking female customers to sit close, during the ride to sexually abuse the female customers. However, from my experience as a rider, I felt difficulty balancing the bike when customers did not sit close. Similarly, as generally presumed that customers are the victims of the riders (but not the riders), I found that riders are also the victims in the ride-sharing platform of both the platforms and the customers; their voices are often silenced even when they are victimized by misbehavior due to their assumed lower-class position in the platform mediated ride-sharing.

Appendices

Appendix A Detailed list of ride-sharing platform's customer interacted for the research

List of Participants - Riders									
Name	Gender	Age	Riding Platform	Riding Since	Riding Hour/Day (Self-identified)	Type of Rider (Self-identified)	Notes	Location of Interaction	Type of Interaction
Pravat	M	24	Pathao	8 months	6-7 hours	Part time	Rider next to being a full-time university student	On-the back of a Motorcycle	Informal Interview
Ankit	M	21	Pathao	2 weeks	6-7 hours	Part time	Rider next to being a full-time university student	On-the back of a Motorcycle	Informal Interview
Navin	M	28	Pathao	1 month	10-11 hours	Full Time	Rides full time on Pathao	On-the back of a Motorcycle, Restaurant	Informal and In-depth Interview
Narayan	M	29	Pathao	1 month	7-8 hours	Part time	Rider next to being a full-time university student	Platform Office, Restaurant	Informal and In-depth Interview
Harihar	M	44	Pathao	1 month	7-8 hours	Part time	Rider next to being a Marketing Agent of Organic Product	On-the back of a Motorcycle	Informal Interview
Saugat	M	27	Pathao	10 months	9-10 hours	Part time	Rider next to being a Magician	On-the back of a Motorcycle, Restaurant	Informal and In-depth Interview
Bishow	M	34	Pathao	3 months	3-4 hours	Part time	Left IT Job and currently only a Pathao Rider	Platform Office	Informal Interview
Harish	M	29	Pathao	4 months	4-5 hours	Part time	Rider next to trying to go abroad for work	On-the back of a Motorcycle	Informal Interview
Aakash	Unknown	Unknown	Pathao	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Via Platform Application and Phone	Informal interaction
Ram Kumar	Unknown	Unknown	Pathao	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Via Platform Application	Informal interaction
Naval	M	28	Tootle	8 months	7-8 hours	Full Time	Rider next to being a Japanese Language instructor	On-the back of a Motorcycle, Restaurant	Informal and In-depth Interview
Kalu	M	31	Tootle	6 months	7-8 hours	Part time	Rider next to Trying to go Japan for work	On-the back of a Motorcycle	Informal Interview
Sunil	M	43	Tootle	6 months	2-3 hours	Part time	Rider next to being a Travel & tours professional	On-the back of a Motorcycle	Informal Interview
Sarik	M	31	Tootle	3 months	4-5 hours	Part time	Rider next to being Journalist for 3 months	Restaurant	In-depth Interview
Bishal	M	29	Tootle	2 years 7 months	11-12 hours	Full Time	Tootle rider since the beginning	On-the back of a Motorcycle and Phone	Informal Interview
Pukar	M	34	Tootle	4 months	1-2 hours	Part time	Rider next to being IT Professional	Restaurant	In-depth Interview
Reshma	F	30	Tootle	1 year	Unknown	Part time	Rider for 1 year next to IT Professional	Restaurant	In-depth Interview
David	M	32	Tootle	10 months	9-10 hours	Full Time	Became rider leaving his painting job	Restaurant	In-depth Interview
Futung Maya	Unknown	Unknown	Tootle	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Phone	Informal interaction
Namrata	F	Unknown	Tootle	2 months	7-8 hours	Part time	Rider on platform only	Facebook	Informal Interview

Note: All the used name are pseudoname to protect the Participant's Identity.

Appendix B Detailed list of ride-sharing platform's riders interacted for the research

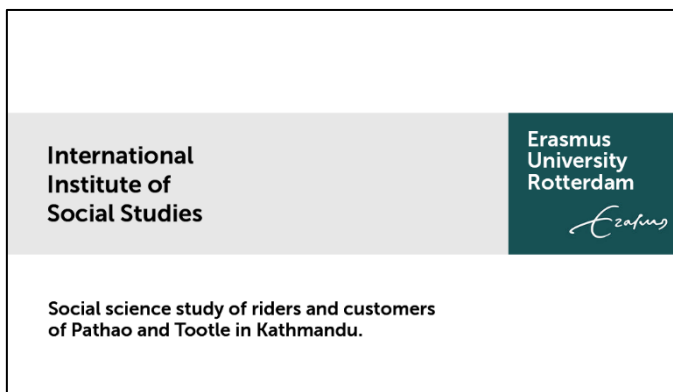
List of Participants - Customers									
Name	Gender	Age	Used Platform	User Since	Frequency of Platform Usage	Frequency of Interaction	Profession	Location of Interaction	Type of Interaction
Suruchi	F	30	Both	2 years	Twice a day	Thrice	Works in Start-up	On the back of a Motorcycle and Restaurant	Informal and In-depth Interview
Rabina	F	26	Both	7-8 months	Thrice a week	Once	Works in Start-up	Office	In-depth Interview
Sampurna	M	28	Both	1 year	4-5 times a week	Once	works in Start-up	Office	In-depth Interview
Niraj	M	28	Both	6 months	Twice a day	Once	works in Start-up	Office	In-depth Interview
Phurba	M	33	Both	1 year	Twice a day	Twice	Works in IT company	On the Back of a Motorcycle and Office	Informal and In-depth Interview
Suman	M	34	Both	1 year	4-5 times a week	Once	Works in IT company	On the Back of a Motorcycle and Restaurant	Informal and In-depth Interview
Sushant	M	32	Both	1 year	Twice a day	Once	Works in a Lounge Bar	Restaurant	In-depth Interview
Sanish	M	33	Pathao	1 day	First time	Once	Works in INGO	On the Back of a Motorcycle	Informal Interview
Bimala	F	62	Pathao	1 day	First time	Twice	Retired from Government Service	On the Back of a Motorcycle	Informal Interview
Srijana	F	29	Tootle	7-8 months	Twice a day	Once	Works in Education Consultancy	Restaurant	In-depth Interview
Doma	F	Unknown	Tootle	4-5 months	Twice a day	Once	Unknown	Platform Application and Phone	Informal Interaction
Abha	F	26	Tootle	10 months	2-3 times a week	Once	Housemaker	On the Back of a Motorcycle and Phone	Informal Interview
Abhi	M	Unknown	Tootle	Unknown	Unknown	Once	Unknown	Platform Application and Phone	Informal Interaction
Jeena	F	unknown	Tootle	Unknown	Unknown	Once	Unknown	Platform Application and Phone	Informal Interaction
Nirmala	F	30	Tootle	3 weeks	4-5 times a week	Twice	Student	On the Back of a Motorcycle and Restaurant	Informal and In-depth Interview
Raman	M	Unknown	Tootle	Unknown	Unknown	Once	Unknown	Platform Application and Phone	Informal Interaction
Ganga	F	24	Tootle	6 months	3-4 times a week	Once	Student	On the Back of a Motorcycle	Informal Interview
Bikash	M	30	Tootle	7-8 months	4-5 times a day	Once	Works in Hydro power plant	On the Back of a Motorcycle	Informal Interview

Note: All the used name are pseudoname to protect the Participant's Identity.

Appendix C Business Card shared with research participants



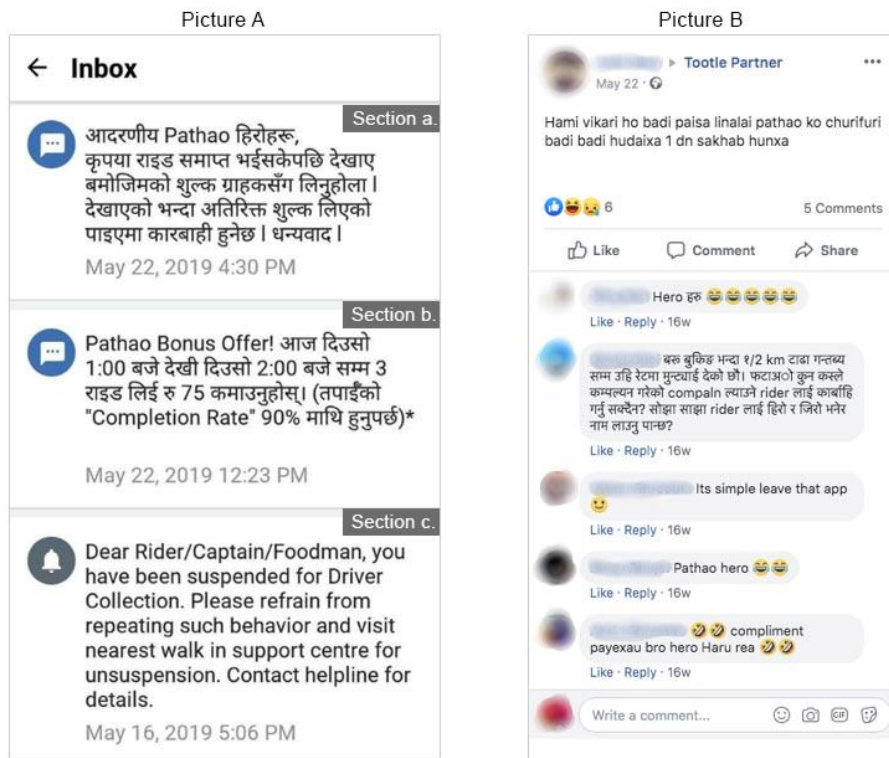
Front side of business card



Back side of business card

Appendix D Screenshot in Nepali language (see **Error! Reference source not found.** picture 3 in section

4.1.1, translation in English)



Appendix E Original picture of picture 9 (see **Error! Reference source not found.** in section 5.1.1, translation in English)



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