

Can South Africa embrace electric delivery bikes for a greener scooter economy?

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Purchasing groceries or a hot meal through a preferred delivery smartphone application has rapidly become a typical aspect of daily life in Mzansi.



Bongani Mthombeni-Möller, Director: Smart Mobility Royal HaskoningDHV | image supplied

But how many of us take a moment to think about the delivery men and women, often on their small 150cc motorbikes, weaving in and out of traffic to get us that latest online order of ours in 60 minutes or less?

Increasingly, this army of delivery agents is becoming a crucial part of the supply chain of a booming local e-commerce market.

Research published by FNB Merchant Services last year highlighted how the size of the South African e-commerce market is expected to double in size from just under R200bn per annum in 2022 to over R400bn in 2025. In 2019, the size of the e-commerce market in South Africa was just R90bn.

In turn, the motorbike delivery economy is creating much-needed jobs in a country where unemployment is at record highs, with a driver being able to earn around R2,500 per week according to some reports.

It's been estimated that there are up to 50,000 delivery bikes on our roads in South Africa right now. However, this figure is still small when considering that there are over 11 million registered vehicles on our roads.

Nevertheless, we must start to think now about how we can adopt a smart mobility approach with our scooter economy. And doing so requires that we need to get our roads, regulatory environment and law enforcement services ready to deal with a growing number of e-commerce orders.

Smarter use of lanes

Driving along South African roads today presents growing risks with potholes, traffic light outages and increased load shedding. Throw into the mix delivery scooters weaving in and out of traffic and you have a recipe for chaos.

A key question is how do we make our roads better fit for two-wheel motorbike deliveries? The answer may lie in Exclusive MotorCycle Lanes or EMCLs, which have been successfully implemented in countries such as Malaysia, Taiwan and Indonesia.

According to research published by Science Direct, Malaysia managed to reduce motorcycle accidents by 39% after implementing EMCL along Federal Highway-2 in Malaysia. Science Direct has reported that EMCLs ranging from 3.3m to 5.2m in width further resulted in three times the benefits of reducing accident costs.

A key question here is whether traffic volumes of delivery motorcycles on our roads right now justify the need for exclusive lanes. Already, dedicated bus lanes have become a regular feature across Johannesburg, Tshwane and Cape Town.

It may take time for scooters to replicate the same kind of priority as buses. However, with a growing e-commerce economy, we may need to start thinking now about how to make the most of existing lanes so as to prevent further problems in the future.

Smarter regulation and sustainability

The saying that regulation lags innovation has never been more relevant than right now, with tech taking over every aspect of our lives.

In this environment, it's important that regulation helps keep our society safe as well as creating a more sustainable future.

Whatever regulation we implement, we must ensure that delivery motorbikes are road-worthy and safe. Large supermarket retailers and others may own their own fleet of bikes and even check them for roadworthiness. But it is essential that all companies and drivers take on the responsibility of regularly conducting road-worthiness checks. Traffic officials, such as the JMPD, can partner with the private sector to ensure the safety of everyone on the road.

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Moreover, with the move towards a green economy, there is a massive need for electric bikes, electric vehicles and charging stations. This creates an opportunity to tap into the e-mobility sector and phase out petrol bikes as much as possible. Legislation can help regulate the entire EV electric micro-mobility sector and the private sector can provide input into policy and legislation to help support the industry.

We're still in the early stages of our e-commerce revolution, but there's no doubt that the scooter economy is going to become a bigger part of our daily lives. The motorcycle delivery economy is agile and versatile. These bikes cut through traffic quickly and deliver goods and services in a short period of time. Gone are the days when customers would have had to wait more than 24 hours for deliveries to arrive via a minivan.

The men and women on these bikes play a huge role in revolutionising the e-commerce space in South Africa. And the more that we can do to enable them and ensure their safety and sustainability, the better this industry will become over the long term.

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