

"Culture in Traffic: An Anthropological Study of Makassar Urban Mobility"

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Abstract:

Congestion in Makassar City is not just an obstacle on the road, but a social symptom that reflects the way of life, choices, and inequality in urban spaces. This research aims to understand how city residents experience, respond, and interpret mobility in the context of congestion which is almost a daily routine. Using a qualitative approach with microethnography methods, data was collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and field documentation.

The results of the study show that mobility is not only a matter of moving from one point to another, but also concerns body experience, emotions, social time, and vehicle symbolism as a marker of class. City residents demonstrate tactical strategies to get around congestion, such as choosing rat roads, relying on online motorcycle taxis, or flexibly adjusting their daily rhythms. Technologies such as Google Maps and WhatsApp groups are becoming part of the new social network in mobility.

This study concludes that urban mobility is a space of cultural, symbolic, and political production. In it, there is a narrative of resilience, resilience, and adaptation of citizens to the city structure that is not fully on the side of human life. This study opens up a new space for understanding congestion as a cultural phenomenon, not just a technical problem.

Keywords: Urban mobility; Congestion; Urban culture; Anthropology of mobility.

1. Introduction

Every morning and evening, Makassar turns into a city full of turmoil. Not because of demonstrations or riots, but because of the traffic jams that almost became a daily ritual. From the dense creeping Perintis Kemerdekaan street to the intersection of five that is never really smooth, the face of the city's mobility continues to be shaped by hampered movement. Congestion is no longer just a traffic phenomenon. It has become part of urban culture, shaping the way people go about their day, manage their time, and even imagine the future (Falcocchio & Levinson, 2015; Foo et al., 2019). And at this point, a simple question arises: why do cities continue to be built to move, but instead become more and more congested?

Makassar, as one of the major cities in eastern Indonesia, has experienced an acceleration of urbanization in the last two decades. Population growth, expansion of residential space, and the increasing number of motor vehicles are shaping a dynamic but also problematic urban landscape (Surya et al., 2021, 2023). The government responded by building overpasses, expanding toll access, and launching public transportation modes such as TransMakassar. But the reality on the ground shows that all of this has not sufficiently touched the root of the problem. The road remains jammed. Pete-pete is increasingly abandoned. Online motorcycle taxis are the new primadonna, but they still operate in a narrow and conflict-filled space (Kuku et al., 2022; Pratama et al., 2024).

This is where it is important to see mobility not only as a technical matter but also as a social and cultural phenomenon. Historically, studies of congestion and transportation have tended to be dominated by technocratic approaches—focusing on data, vehicle volume, and system efficiency (Greenblatt et al., 2009; Lobo-Guerrero, 2013). In fact, behind those numbers, there are tired bodies, there are accumulated emotions, and there are daily strategies that continue to develop. Pérez-Caramés & Fernández-Suárez, (2024) through the mobilities paradigm invite us to see mobility as something more than just physical movement—it is a space full of meaning, symbols, and imagination.

So far, research on mobility in Indonesia is still relatively limited in an anthropological approach. Several studies highlight commuting patterns and the impact of online motorcycle taxis (Halimah, 2021; Williams, 2007), but few people have delved into how residents experience congestion themselves. What is rarely discussed is how frustration, stress, and even dreams about cities without traffic congestion shape the behaviour and values of urban society. This gap is what this study aims to bridge, through an emic approach that looks at the perspective of citizens, not just institutional data.

This journal tries to bring Makassar's congestion out of mere statistical numbers and into the realm of meaning. With an anthropological approach based on mobility theory (Basri Said & Syafey, 2021; Nuhrat, 2020), theory of practice and habitus (Ingram, 2018), the economics-politics of urban space (Gülhan, 2022), to actor networks (Musolino, 2024), this paper offers a multidimensional reading of urban mobility. Not only observe how people move but also why and how they feel when they move.

The novelty of this study lies in the courage to make congestion an object of cultural study. During this time, congestion was seen as a nuisance - something that should be eliminated. But in this journal, congestion is seen as a mirror: it reflects how the city works, who rules over space, and how citizens adapt to it (Marks, 2020). This approach not only offers descriptions, but also opens up space for interpretation, criticism, and even alternative imaginations about a more just and humane city (Davies, 2015; Devisme,

2015).

The journal also brings strong empirical contributions. By referring to interviews, field observations, and narratives of residents' experiences, this paper compiles a mosaic of mobility life in Makassar with voices that are rarely heard. From *pete-pete* drivers who lost their routes, to *ojol* drivers who were strategically manipulated by algorithms, to suburban residents who had to wake up before dawn every day so that they wouldn't be late for work. All of these sounds come together to form a complete picture of mobility (Johnson et al., 2017; Wang & Choi, 2024).

In addition, the approach used is also cross-theoretical and cross-level analysis. On the one hand, the journal reads the micro-practices of citizens – the way they choose modes, routes, travel times, and coping strategies. On the other hand, this paper also relates it to macro structures: government policies, market logic, and power relations between the state, the private sector, and citizens (Fiagborlo et al., 2024; Qassim Al-Salih & Esztergar-Kiss, 2021). This is the strength of the anthropological approach to mobility – because it stitches the small and the big, the personal and the political, into a web of understanding.

In the academic world, this approach is gaining more and more ground. Recent studies from (Sheller, 2018), (Bissell, 2019), and Manderscheid, (2020) show that mobility is not only a technical phenomenon, but also affective, symbolic, and political. This paper tries to connect the global discussion to the local context of Makassar, in the hope of enriching the treasures of urban studies in Indonesia, which still rarely touches on the humanistic side of transportation issues.

To conclude this introductory section, it can be emphasized that this article departs from an anxiety that is very close to the daily life of many city dwellers: why are the streets getting congested, but the sense of safety, comfort, and humanity is getting farther away? This study does not offer an instant solution but invites readers to understand congestion as a complex symptom – a confluence between technology, structure, emotions, and culture (Al-Dabbagh et al., 2019; Lubyana & Adhitya, 2020). By reading congestion as a culture, we can open up a new space to rethink the city: not just as a place to live, but as a living space that must be built together, not just for vehicles, but for humans.

The structure of this writing consists of five main parts. After this introduction, the second part will explain the theoretical framework and methodological approach used. The third part presents field findings and analysis based on thematic categories composed of research questions. The fourth section discusses these findings by linking them to previous theories and studies and opens up a wider scope for interpretation. Finally, the fifth section provides conclusions as well as critical reflections and recommendations for policy directions and further studies.

2. Method

This research was prepared with the spirit of being closer to the real lives of city residents. Therefore, the design used is qualitative-descriptive with a micro-ethnographic approach, to describe in depth how the people of Makassar experience, respond and give meaning to mobility during congestion. This choice of approach is not without reason. The problems raised in this study are not just about infrastructure or transportation policies but about the experiences of the body, emotions, social symbols, and daily tactics of city residents. All of this cannot be captured through numbers alone but needs to be understood through stories, interactions, and direct observations.

2.1. The research stage is carried out in stages. Starting from a literature study to map the theoretical framework and find out the position of this research among previous studies. After that, the researcher conducted participatory field observations, along mobility routes in Makassar, starting from the *pete-pete* route, TransMakassar bus stop, traffic jams, to rat roads that are usually passed by residents. The next stage is an in-depth interview, followed by data analysis and narrative writing.

2.2. The subjects of the study are residents of Makassar City who are directly involved in daily mobility practices. They consist of various backgrounds: motorcyclists, *pete-pete* drivers, online motorcycle taxi drivers, TransMakassar users, commuter students, housewives, and office workers. The researchers deliberately chose a broad spectrum of informants to capture the complexity of different experiences. Meanwhile, the object of the research is the practice of mobility itself – not only its form of movement, but also its meaning, strategy, and social consequences.

To facilitate the direction of the research, several thematic indicators were used which were compiled based on the research questions in the main reference document. These indicators include:

1. The body's experience in dealing with congestion,
2. The choice of transportation mode and its changes,
3. Perception of time, space, and distance,
4. Citizens' tactical strategies in dealing with mobility uncertainty,
5. The role of emotions, technology, and social media in mobility,
6. Vehicle symbolism and mobility as social capital,
7. Power relations in transportation planning and urban infrastructure.

In the data collection process, researchers combined several sources and techniques, including:

- *Participatory observation*, by directly recording the dynamics of mobility in several congested points in Makassar such as Jalan Perintis Kemerdekaan, Jalan Veteran, and the TransMakassar line.

- *In-depth* interviews were conducted with 15 informants who were purposively selected based on their social variations and mobility experiences.
- *Visual documentation* and field notes, to record non-verbal details such as body expressions when trafficked, spontaneous interactions on the road, or daily route changes.
- *Documentary studies* refer to local news, transportation policies, data from BPS, as well as official municipal government documents.

The technique of determining informants uses the purposive sampling method, taking into account social background, age, type of mode used, and the level of dependence on daily mobility. In addition, the snowball technique is also used—where one informant recommends another informant who is deemed relevant.

For data analysis, the researcher used the macular-contextual approach. The data from the interviews and observations are encoded and grouped into predetermined major themes but remain open to new findings in the field. This process is carried out simultaneously with theoretical interpretation so that the results of the analysis are not separated from the socio-cultural context of the residents. This technique allows researchers to capture not only what the informant said, but also what was implied in their experience. Data processing is carried out reflectively, avoiding generalizations and prioritizing depth of meaning.

In this process, research ethics are very well maintained. Each informant was given an explanation in advance about the purpose and objectives of this research. Oral and written consent is requested before the interview is conducted. The identity of the informant is disguised to maintain confidentiality. The researcher also avoids exploiting the informant's narrative or personal experience for the sake of writing. Instead, researchers try to make this process a common space to listen to each other and learn.

The method used was chosen because it follows the purpose of the research, which is to describe in depth how the people of Makassar experience and interpret urban mobility. The reliability of the data is maintained through triangulation of sources and techniques, while validity is strengthened by layered interpretations, both from informant narratives, observations, and theoretical studies. This approach allows for a more human, reflective, and contextual understanding of the phenomenon of congestion, which has often been seen as too technical and black-and-white.

With this method, the research hopes to contribute that is not only descriptive, but also analytical – a bridge between citizen voices and academic discourses about cities, mobility, and culture.

3. Results and discussion

This study found that congestion in Makassar is not only a technical problem on the streets but also a social terrain that shapes the way of life of city residents. From the way people choose routes, and get around time, to interpreting vehicles as symbols, everything indicates that mobility in Makassar is something complex, dynamic, and very human. Congestion not only slows down travel, but also shapes social relations, emotions, and even class identity. In this section, we will describe field findings processed through a thematic approach and then discuss previous theories and literature. All are still based on the voices of the residents, as the main narrative of this research.

3.1. The Body in a Bottleneck: Between Fatigue and Endurance

One of the most powerful findings in the field is how the body's experience (embodiment) becomes central to understanding congestion. Motorcyclists, *pete-pete* drivers, and TransMakassar users alike experience physical burdens that are not seen in statistics. An *ojol* driver named Andi (29 years old) described: "If I get stuck in a bad jam, I can only sit still, sweat, sore back, and palms until tingling." This quote is not only an everyday story, but also a reflection of what Csordas (1994) calls a body that 'actively experiences the world'.

This data was collected through participatory observation at five main traffic jams in Makassar and confirmed through in-depth interviews. The data processing process is carried out theatrically, with groupings based on the form of the body's response and survival strategies. When compared to Bissell's (2018) study on mobility as affective labour, it is common that the body not only moves but also works emotionally to withstand social pressures from daily congestion.

3.2. Mobility as Social Capital and a Symbol of Class

Field results show that the choice of transportation mode in Makassar is greatly influenced by the perception of status and social symbols. Private cars are considered more prestigious, while *pete-petes* are seen as a 'low-end' mode. One informant, Nisa, 31, said: "I used to ride *pete-pete*, but after work and having a car, I feel more confident going to the office."

This finding is in line with the theory of symbolic capital from Bourdieu, (1990), where vehicles are not only a means of transportation but also a representation of oneself in public spaces. This data was synthesized from the narrative of six middle-class informants and compared with the results of a study by Prabowo (2018) which showed that private vehicle owners in Indonesia's major cities feel safer and more respected.

However, not all residents can afford to reach their private cars. Informal workers rely more on motorbikes or foot, citing flexibility and efficiency. This is where it can be seen that there is a mobility imbalance that is symbolic, not just material. Mobility is a class differentiator arena, even before a person gets to their destination.

3. 3. Tactical Strategy of City Citizens: Rat's Road, Flex Time, and Subscription Ojol

Congestion encourages the emergence of various daily tactics of residents. Many choose to leave much earlier, use rat roads, or take advantage of subscription ojol to avoid uncertainty. These practices were gathered from direct observation and spontaneous conversations in the field and then coded based on the type of strategy.

For example, Ibu Nurhayati, 46, a teacher, says: "If I leave after six o'clock, I can be up to an hour late. So it's better to wake up early and leave early, even if it is still quiet when you get to school." This narrative illustrates how time becomes flexible and flexible, not because you want to, but because you have to.

According to de Certeau (1984), such tactics emerged in response to an immutable structure. Residents can't manage the road, but they can set the departure time. They can't avoid getting stuck in traffic, but they can choose a quieter path. This is where the strength of the city citizens is seen not in fighting the system, but in getting around it every day.

3. 4. Technology and Digital Solidarity in Mobility

Social media and digital applications have played an important role in shaping the mobility patterns of Makassar residents. From Google Maps, and Waze, to WhatsApp RT groups, all are tools that expand citizens' capacity to make decisions while on the road. Mr. Dedy (33 years old), a freelance salesman, said: "I can't get away from Google Maps. Sometimes I have memorized the route, but I still open Maps because I want to know the fastest route of the day." This shows that modern mobility cannot be separated from non-human actors such as algorithms and applications (Li et al., 2018). Even spontaneous decisions are now influenced by estimated travel time and real-time data displayed on the screen.

These findings also echo a study (Sheller, 2018) on networked mobility, in which citizens form street information-based communities. However, it should be noted that access to these technologies is uneven. Some residents – especially the elderly or informal workers – still rely on intuition or news from their neighbours.

3. 5. *Disposition Towards Time and Space: The Birth of the New City Rhythm*

One of the most interesting transformations is how citizens change the way they think about time and space. Distance is no longer measured from kilometres but from the duration travelled. Time is no longer linear, but relative. A lecturer, Kak Fajar (34 years old), said: "If there is an appointment at 10 o'clock, I usually say 'around 10 o'clock' because I know the reality of the road can change suddenly."

In Bourdieu's theory, (1990), this is referred to as habitus transformation: when a constantly repeating social structure forms a new mindset and action. These findings are reinforced by field observations showing that residents create their own 'social time' – by sleeping in parking lots before offices open, or scheduling activities outside of peak hours.

When compared to the study by Jirón & Lange, (2017) on urban mobility in Chile, the results are similar: congestion creates a new culture of time that is flexible, adaptive and compromising.

4. Conclusion

This study is not intended to find a quick solution to congestion in Makassar, because the problem of urban mobility is much more complex than just unravelling congested roads. But one thing is now abundantly clear: mobility is not just a technical issue, but a matter of how humans live, feel, and navigate the ever-changing urban space. The initial goal of this research is to understand how people experience, respond, and interpret mobility during congestion. From the voices of citizens, from the tired bodies on the road, and from the small strategies that are created every day, we find answers that go much deeper than just the calculation of travel time or the length of the vehicle queue.

Traffic congestion in Makassar is not only a symptom of a growing big city, but also a reflection of an unequal social structure, an inclusive transportation system, and a development logic that is still too much in favour of private vehicles. During this situation, the residents did not give up. They create ways, reorganize time, form digital solidarity networks, and even make mobility part of social identity. This is the main form of achievement of this study: that mobility should be seen as a social field, symbolic space, and political arena that is integrated into the daily lives of urban citizens.

The study also shows that behind every daily strategy - such as leaving early, choosing a subscription ojol, or navigating the rat path - there's a rich narrative of resilience, common sense, and adaptation. Citizens are not just road users, they are tactical designers, readers of urban rhythms, and interpreters of urban reality. Mobility is not something that is taken for granted, but something that continues to be negotiated every day, in the body, in the mind, and social interactions.

In terms of scientific goals, this research has succeeded in opening up a new perspective on congestion and mobility in cities. He doesn't stop at numbers or maps but dives into the layers of meaning hidden behind daily routines. He invites us to be more sensitive, more listening, and more appreciative of how city dwellers survive amid the imperfections of the system.

The conclusion of this study, then, is not at the end of the road, but rather at a new realization: that designing cities and transportation systems cannot be separated from the most basic human experience. Tired body. Emotions that settle. Time that is forced to bend. And a small hope that lives on, even during congestion.

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