



Digital Mobility, Real Risks: Female students experiences of safety in E-hailing use in urban universities in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.

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Abstract

E-hailing services have become an integral part of student mobility in South African cities, offering convenience and flexibility within transport systems that are often fragmented and unreliable. However, for female university students, the use of these services extends beyond issues of accessibility and cost, intersecting with persistent concerns about personal safety, vulnerability and exposure to gender-based violence. This study examines female students' perceptions of safety and risk when using e-hailing services within an urban university context in the Eastern Cape province. Adopting a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, the study draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with female students who regularly use e-hailing platforms for academic, social, and personal travel. The findings reveal that while e-hailing services are often perceived as safer alternatives to walking or traditional public transport, they simultaneously generate new forms of anxiety linked to driver behaviour, route deviations, inadequate platform accountability and broader societal violence against women. Participants described engaging in continuous risk assessment and adopting self-protective strategies such as monitoring routes, restricting travel times, and relying on peer-based safety networks to navigate perceived threats. The study further highlights the limitations of existing platform safety features, which are frequently experienced as symbolic rather than substantively protective. These findings underscore the need for a more coordinated response involving e-hailing companies, universities, and policymakers to strengthen passenger safety beyond individual vigilance. By centring female students' lived experiences, this study contributes to ongoing debates on gendered mobility, digital transport governance, and safety within higher education environments in the Global South.

Keywords: E-hailing Services, Female Students, Safety Perceptions, Urban Mobility, South Africa.

Introduction

Digital transport platforms have significantly reshaped urban mobility worldwide, with e-hailing services such as Uber, Bolt, and similar apps becoming central to everyday travel in many cities. In South Africa, these platforms have gained rapid traction among university students, who often face limited access to reliable public transport and constrained financial resources. For many students, e-hailing services provide a practical solution for navigating long distances between campuses, residences

and social spaces. However, for female students, the decision to use these services is rarely neutral. It is frequently accompanied by concerns related to personal safety, trust and vulnerability within a broader social context marked by high levels of gender-based violence.

South Africa continues to experience alarming rates of violence against women, shaping how female students perceive and navigate public and semi-private spaces, including transport environments. Within this context, e-hailing services occupy an ambiguous position. On the one hand, they are often viewed as safer alternatives to walking or using overcrowded public transport, particularly at night. On the other hand, the intimate nature of e-hailing travel, which involves being alone in a private vehicle with an unfamiliar driver, introduces new perceived risks. These concerns are intensified by widely publicised incidents of harassment, assault and criminal activity associated with ride-hailing services, as well as by informal narratives shared amongst students.

Existing scholarship on e-hailing in South Africa has largely focused on issues of regulation, labour relations and economic disruption within the transport sector (Maziriri et al., 2020). While more recent studies have begun to acknowledge safety concerns, particularly among women, there remains limited qualitative research that foregrounds the lived experiences of female university students, especially within urban centres. Moreover, much of the available literature treats safety as an individual responsibility, overlooking the structural and institutional dimensions that shape risk perception and mobility choices. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how female students at an urban university in the Eastern Cape perceive safety and risk when using e-hailing services. It seeks to understand the specific concerns that influence their transport decisions, the coping strategies they employed to manage perceived threats, and how broader social and institutional contexts shape these experiences.

Using qualitative methods, the study prioritises participants' voices to capture the complexity of their everyday negotiations in digital transport environments. Arising from the problem identified above, the central research question guiding this study is: *How do female university students in the Eastern Cape perceive and negotiate safety and risk when using e-hailing services within a context of gendered vulnerability, institutional limitations, and socio-economic constraints?* To address this question in depth, the study is guided by the following sub-questions:

- *What types of safety concerns and perceived risks do female students experience when using e-hailing services?*
- *How do female students manage and respond to perceived risks during e-hailing use?*
- *How do platform features, institutional support, and socio-economic factors shape female students' perceptions of safety in e-hailing services?*

This study seeks to make a meaningful contribution at the intersection of gendered mobility, urban safety, and digital transport systems. By foregrounding female university students lived experiences of using e-hailing services, the research provides empirical insights that are directly relevant to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study highlights the persistent safety risks and gendered vulnerabilities that shape women's everyday mobility within urban environments, particularly in contexts characterised by high levels of gender-based violence and socio-economic inequality.

The study contributes to **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)** by highlighting the structural and social conditions that limit women's ability to move freely and safely in public and semi-private spaces. It further aligns with **SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)**, specifically the goal of ensuring safe, inclusive, and accessible transport systems for all, with particular attention to the needs of women and vulnerable populations. Additionally, the study speaks to **SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)** by highlighting the importance of accountability, safety governance, and institutional responsiveness within digital transport platforms and broader urban safety systems.

By examining how female students perceive, interpret, and negotiate safety risks in e-hailing contexts, the study provides evidence that can inform more responsive safety interventions, including improved platform accountability, strengthened university safety frameworks, and policy reforms aimed at enhancing transport safety. Ultimately, this research advances critical discussions on gender-responsive urban mobility, digital platform governance, and the creation of safer, more inclusive transport environments within the Global South.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. The next section presents a review of relevant theoretical and empirical literature on e-hailing, gendered mobility, and transport safety. This is followed by a discussion of the research methodology employed in the study. The findings section outlines the key themes that emerged from the data, which are then examined in relation to existing scholarship in the discussion section. The article concludes by highlighting the study's contributions, limitations and implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Literature Review

This literature review situates the study within existing scholarly debates on e-hailing services, gendered mobility, and safety in urban transport contexts. It draws on interdisciplinary literature from transport studies, gender studies, criminology, and urban sociology to examine how digital mobility platforms reshape everyday travel while reproducing and, in some cases, intensifying gendered vulnerabilities. The review adopts a critical approach that moves beyond technological determinism to examine how broader social structures, institutional arrangements, and cultural contexts shape female students' perceptions of safety. Attention is given to research conducted in South Africa and comparable Global South contexts, where high levels of inequality, crime, and gender-based violence shape experiences of mobility.

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

This study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how individual experiences are shaped by multiple, interconnected environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The theory is particularly useful for examining safety perceptions among female university students, as it recognises that experiences of risk are not produced in isolation but emerge through interactions between personal, social, institutional, and societal factors (Tudge et al., 2009). In the context of e-hailing services, safety perceptions are influenced by both immediate interpersonal encounters and broader structural conditions. Bronfenbrenner's model allows for an integrated analysis of these dynamics, moving beyond individualised explanations of fear to consider how environments enable or constrain feelings of safety (Duri, 2025; Mile, 2020).

This approach aligns with feminist scholarship that critiques the tendency to place responsibility for safety solely on women's behaviour rather than on systemic conditions (Uteng & Cresswell, 2016). At the microsystem level, the theory emphasises direct interactions between individuals and their immediate environment. For female students using e-hailing services, this includes interactions with drivers, the vehicle's physical space, and the situational context of the journey (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Research indicates that driver behaviour, communication style, and perceived professionalism play a critical role in shaping women's sense of safety during transport encounters (Duri, 2023). These micro-level interactions are particularly significant in enclosed transport settings, where power and control over movement are unevenly distributed (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014).

The mesosystem refers to the interconnections between different microsystems, such as family, peer networks, and institutional environments (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In this study, safety perceptions are shaped through advice from friends, warnings from family members, and the broader university environment. Previous studies show that female students often rely on informal social networks to navigate safety risks, particularly where institutional guidance is limited (Flynn & Mathias, 2023). These interconnected relationships reinforce safety norms and influence how students interpret and respond to perceived threats.

At the exosystem level, individuals are affected by systems in which they are not directly involved, but which nonetheless shape their experiences. In the case of e-hailing, this includes platform governance structures, driver vetting processes, reporting mechanisms, and transport regulation (Kenny & Zysman, 2016). Studies suggest that weaknesses in platform accountability and inconsistent regulatory oversight contribute to users' scepticism regarding safety features, particularly in Global South contexts where enforcement is uneven (Maziriri et al., 2020; Srnieck, 2017).

These exosystem factors indirectly influence female students' trust in e-hailing services and their reliance on self-protective strategies. By integrating Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

Theory, this study conceptualises safety as a multi-level and socially embedded phenomenon. Female students' experiences of these services are thus understood as products of interacting systems rather than individual choices or isolated events. This integrated theoretical approach provides a robust foundation for analysing the findings and identifying points of intervention at the individual, institutional, and societal levels.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies on e-hailing services consistently highlight gendered differences in safety perceptions and travel behaviour. International research indicates that women are more likely than men to report feelings of vulnerability when using ride-hailing platforms, particularly during evening or nighttime travel (Rahman et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Reported concerns include sexual harassment, inappropriate driver behaviour, route deviations and fear of physical harm. While e-hailing services are often promoted as safer alternatives to traditional public transport, empirical evidence suggests that this sense of safety is conditional and context-dependent.

In South Africa, emerging research points to similar patterns. Studies conducted in major metropolitan areas show that female passengers frequently engage in heightened vigilance when using e-hailing services, closely monitoring routes and driver behaviour while relying on digital safety features such as live tracking and trip sharing (Hoque et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2024). These practices reflect broader strategies of self-protection that women employ across different transport modes in response to pervasive insecurity. Importantly, several studies note that awareness of incidents involving other women, even in the absence of personal victimisation, significantly shaped safety perceptions and mobility decisions.

Research focusing specifically on university students reveals additional layers of vulnerability. Students often rely on e-hailing services due to limited access to private vehicles and unreliable public transport, particularly in urban areas with fragmented infrastructure. Female students, in particular, report using e-hailing services strategically, reserving them for situations perceived as high risk, such as late-night travel journeys through unfamiliar areas (Fileborn, 2022). However, the financial cost of these services creates tension between safety and affordability, effectively placing a disproportionate “safety burden” on women with limited economic resources.

Empirical findings also highlight limitations in platform-based safety mechanisms. While features such as driver ratings, identity verification, and emergency buttons are widely used, many female users express scepticism about their effectiveness in preventing harm or ensuring meaningful accountability (Gorbea et al., 2022). Reporting systems are often perceived as slow or impersonal, reinforcing the perception that responsibility for safety rests primarily with passengers rather than with platforms and institutions. Within a university environment, institutional factors further shape safety experiences. Research indicates that inadequate lighting, limited campus security presence, and poorly coordinated transport policies contribute to heightened anxiety among female students (Cecato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020). In contexts where universities do not actively engage with e-hailing providers or provide alternative safe transport options, students are left to rely on informal peer networks and individual coping strategies to manage risk.

Synthesis and research gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates that while e-hailing services have expanded mobility options for women, they have not eliminated gendered safety concerns. Instead, they have reconfigured risk in ways that reflect broader social inequalities and institutional gaps. Although existing studies offer valuable insights into women's safety in digital transport environments, there remains a notable lack of qualitative research focusing on female university students in secondary urban centres, particularly within the Eastern Cape. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to how students actively interpret, negotiate and make meaning of safety in their everyday use of e-hailing services. This study addresses these gaps by foregrounding female students' lived experiences and situating them within the specific socio-economic and institutional context of an urban university in South Africa. By integrating theoretical perspectives on risk, gendered mobility and socio-ecological systems, the study seeks to contribute a nuanced understanding of safety that extends beyond individual behaviour to include structural and institutional dimensions.

Methods

Participants

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore female university students' perceptions of safety and risk when using e-hailing services within an urban university context in South Africa. A qualitative design was deemed most appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study and its focus on understanding lived experiences, meanings and subjective interpretations rather than measuring prevalence or testing causal relationships. Safety perceptions are socially constructed and contextually embedded, making them particularly suited to interpretive inquiry that privileges participants' voices and narratives.

Research Design and Paradigm

The study is guided by an interpretivist research paradigm, which recognises that reality is not fixed but is shaped through individuals' interactions with their social environments. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From this perspective, female students' experiences of e-hailing safety are understood as products of personal histories, social norms, institutional contexts and broader discourses around gender-based violence. An exploratory qualitative design was employed to allow for in-depth engagement with these complexities and to generate rich insights into how students make sense of risk in their everyday mobility.

Research context

The research was conducted at an urban public university located in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The university serves a diverse student population, including students from urban, peri-urban and rural backgrounds, many of whom rely heavily on e-hailing services due to limited access to private vehicles and inconsistent public transport infrastructure. The surrounding urban environment is characterised by socioeconomic inequality, fragmented transport systems, and widely reported concerns about crime and safety. These factors provide an important backdrop for understanding students' transport choices and safety perceptions. To ensure ethical integrity and protect institutional anonymity, no identifying information about the university or its specific location is disclosed. The focus remains on the broader urban university setting rather than on institutional comparison.

Population and sampling

The study population comprised female students enrolled at the selected university who had used e-hailing services such as Uber, Bolt, or similar platforms within the previous six months. Female students were purposively selected due to their heightened vulnerability to safety risks in transport environments and the study's specific focus on gendered experiences of mobility. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who could provide rich, relevant information based on their lived experiences (Patton, 2015). This was complemented by snowball sampling, whereby participants referred peers who met the inclusion criteria. This approach was particularly effective given the sensitivity of the topic and the trust required for participants to discuss safety concerns openly. The final sample included students from different years of study, residential arrangements and socio-economic backgrounds, allowing for diverse perspectives.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to reflect on their personal experiences of using e-hailing services while allowing flexibility to probe emerging issues. Interviews focused on e-hailing patterns, perceived safety risks, experiences with drivers and platforms, coping strategies, and the influence of broader social narratives on safety perceptions. All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data, following the six-phase process outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). This method allowed the identification of recurring patterns of meaning across the dataset while remaining flexible and inductive. Analysis began with familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts, followed by initial coding of meaningful data segments. Codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured key aspects of participants' experiences, including safety concerns, trust in platforms, coping strategies and institutional. Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to both convergence and divergence in participants' accounts, ensuring that dominant patterns did not overshadow nuanced or contradictory experiences. The analysis was iterative, with themes refined through constant comparison across interviews.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study in line with qualitative research standards (Zia UI Haq et al., 2023). Credibility was supported through triangulation of data sources, prolonged engagement with the data, and reflexive memo writing during analysis. Transferability was addressed through thick description of the research context and participants' experiences, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened by maintaining a clear audit trail, documenting methodological decisions and analytic steps.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study's purpose, their rights as participants, and the voluntary nature of participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by removing identifying information from transcripts and reports. Given the sensitive nature of discussions around safety and violence, participants were informed of available support services should participation evoke emotional distress.

Findings

This section presents the empirical findings of the study based on female students' accounts of their experiences using e-hailing services. The findings are organised thematically and are supported by the baiting participant quotations to foreground students' lived experiences. The findings illuminate the intersection of gender, mobility, and perceived safety in digitally mediated transport environments, highlighting how everyday travel experiences are negotiated as risk-aware processes.

Theme 1: Perceived Vulnerability During E-hailing Trips

A central finding was that female students experienced a persistent sense of vulnerability when using e-hailing services, particularly when travelling alone or at night. Participants explained that the enclosed nature of the vehicle and reliance on an unfamiliar driver heightened feelings of unease even in the absence of direct threats. One participant stated:

“Once I am inside the car, I feel like I must be alert the whole time because I do not know the driver and I do not know what could happen.”

Another participant described how changes in driving behaviour triggered anxiety, explaining:

“If the driver suddenly takes another route without saying anything. I immediately start feeling uncomfortable and scared”

These experiences suggest that vulnerability was shaped more by uncertainty and loss of control than by personal experiences of harm. Importantly, participants expressed that fear was linked to situational cues and perceived power imbalances between passengers and drivers. This highlights how the lack of control over routes, decision-making, and immediate exit options contributed to heightened anxiety during trips. Such findings point to the emotional labour involved in female students' navigation of everyday transport spaces.

Theme 2: Conditional Trust in e-hailing Platforms

Participants generally viewed e-hailing services as safer than walking or using public transport, but this perception of safety was described as conditional and situational. Trust in the platform depended largely on individual drivers' behaviour and the trip's circumstances.

One participant explained,

"I trust e-hailing more than taxis, but I would not say I feel completely safe. It really depends on the driver and the time of day".

Another participant expressed doubt about platform safety features, stating.

"You can share your trip, but if something serious happens, I do not know if the app will help you in time.

These accounts indicate that platform features were viewed as supportive but not fully reassuring. While digital safety tools such as trip sharing and driver identification offered some reassurance, they were perceived as reactive rather than preventive measures. Participants expressed uncertainty about the effectiveness of these tools during emergencies, reinforcing cautious, conditional trust in the platforms. This suggests that technological safeguards alone were insufficient to address deeper concerns about personal safety.

Theme 3: Everyday Safety Practices and Coping Strategies

Participants described engaging in multiple safety practices that had become routine aspects of their daily travel. These strategies were framed as necessary precautions rather than optional behaviours. One participant noted: "I always send my location to someone when I am using an e-hailing service, especially at night. It is just something you do as a woman".

Another explained how she managed her behaviour during trips, saying:

"I sit at the back and try not to talk too much because it makes me feel a bit safer".

These practices reflect how safety management has become embedded in female students' everyday mobility. Participants normalised constant vigilance, behavioural modification, and self-monitoring as essential components of travel. This demonstrates how responsibility for safety was individualised, with female students actively adapting their conduct to minimise perceived risk. Such coping strategies reflect broader gendered expectations that women must manage their own safety within public and semi-private spaces.

Theme 4: Financial Constraints and Safety Trade-offs

Financial limitations emerged as a significant factor influencing students' transport decisions. While e-hailing services were perceived as safer, their cost meant that participants could not use them consistently. One participant explained:

"During the day, I would rather walk to save money, but at night I use e-hailing even though it is expensive because I do not feel safe".

Another participant expressed frustration, stating,

"It feels unfair that being safe costs money when you are already struggling as a student."

These accounts highlight the difficult trade-offs students made between safety and affordability. For many participants, safety was something they had to weigh against their

limited budgets daily. Decisions about how to travel were not only about convenience, but about choosing the option that felt least risky at the time, even if it meant financial strain. This made safety feel like a privilege rather than a guaranteed right. Particularly for students with limited financial support.

Theme 5: Perceived Absence of Institutional Support

Participants frequently expressed the view that responsibility for safety during e-hailing trips rested primarily with them as individuals. Institutional support was perceived as limited once students left campus spaces. One participant noted:

“The university talks a lot about safety on campus, but once you are off campus, you are basically on your own”.

Another added,

“Most of the safety tips I know come from friends, not from the university”.

This perceived absence of institutional involvement reinforced reliance on personal vigilance and informal safety networks. Participants spoke about the fusions of being protected only within campus boundaries. Once off campus, they felt they had to rely on themselves and their friends' advice to stay safe. This lack of visible institutional support contributed to feelings of isolation and the sense that navigating safety during. E-hailing trips were a personal responsibility rather than a shared concern. As a result, students leaned heavily on peer networks and personal judgment when making travel decisions.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical perspectives, situating the study within current debates on gendered mobility, safety, and digital transport systems.

Gendered Vulnerability and Risk Perception

The findings demonstrate that female students' perceptions of safety when using e-hailing services are shaped by broader social contexts rather than direct experiences of victimisation. This supports risk perception literature, which argues that fear is socially constructed and influenced by shared narratives, media reporting, and collective awareness of danger (Slovic, 1987; Mile, 2020). In the South African context, high levels of gender-based violence intensify these perceptions, even in seemingly controlled transport environments. Consistent with previous studies, the findings confirm that women experience transport spaces as gendered and emotionally demanding. Requiring continuous vigilance (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2016). However, this study extends existing research by showing how vulnerability persists within digitally mediated transport, where technological features co-exist with deeply embedded social fears.

Ecological Interpretation of Safety Experiences

Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Theory provides a useful lens for interpreting these findings. At the microsystem level, immediate driver-passenger interactions strongly shaped participant sense of safety, with behaviour, tone, and route decisions influencing comfort and anxiety (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Duri, 2025). These interactions reveal how power dynamics operate within everyday mobility encounters. At the mesosystem level, peer networks and family influences played a central role in shaping safety practices, compensating for limited institutional guidance (Flynn & Mathias, 2023).

The exosystem was reflected in participants' scepticism toward platform governance and reporting mechanisms, echoing critiques of weak accountability within the platform

economy (Kenny & Zysman, 2016). At the macrosystem level, pervasive gender norms and societal violence framed safety as an individual responsibility, reinforcing gendered expectations around mobility (Mile, 2020; Uteng & Cresswell, 2016).

Normalisation of Self-Protective Behaviour

The study highlights how self-protective behaviours have become normalised among female students. Practises such as trip sharing, route monitoring, and time-based travel restrictions were described as routine, aligning with research that frames women's mobility as characterised by continuous risk management (Hu et al., 2024). While these strategies demonstrate agency, they also reveal structural shortcomings within transport and institutional systems. The findings therefore support feminist critiques that argue women's adaptive behaviours often mask deeper systemic failures rather than resolving them (Uteng & Cresswell, 2016; Williams & Brown, 2024).

Economic Constraints and the Cost of Safety

The findings further underscore the economic dimensions of safety. E-hailing services were perceived as safer but financially burdensome, forcing students to weigh personal security against affordability. This supports literature identifying a disproportionate safety cost borne by women, particularly students with limited financial resources (Maziririe et al., 2020). By illustrating how financial constraints directly shape mobility decisions, the study advances debates on mobility justice, highlighting that access to safe transport remains unevenly distributed (Shaheen, 2018).

Institutional Gaps and Future Research Directions

Participants' perceptions of limited institutional support reflect broader gaps in how universities address off-campus safety. While campus security is often prioritised, students' everyday mobility extends beyond institutional boundaries, exposing them to unmanaged risks (Pain, 2001; Ceccasto & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020). Future research should explore how universities, hailing platforms and policymakers can collaborate to reduce safety and financial burdens on students. Comparative and longitudinal studies could further examine how safety perceptions evolve over time and across different institutional and urban contexts (Jeghers et al., 2024; McKenna et al., 2025).

Conclusions and recommendations

This study set out to explore female university students' perceptions of safety and risk when using e-hailing services within an urban university context in South Africa. The findings demonstrate that while e-hailing platforms have become essential to students' everyday immobility, they do not eliminate feelings of vulnerability among female users. Instead, safety is experienced as conditional and continuously negotiated through individual vigilance, peer support, and strategic decision making. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study shows that safety perceptions are shaped across interconnected systems. At the microlevel, immediate interactions with drivers strongly influence feelings of comfort or anxiety. At the "Exo" levels, platform governance structures, economic constraints, and broader societal norms surrounding gender-based violence further shape how female students understand and manage risk.

The findings therefore support the working assumption that safety e-hailing contexts cannot be reduced to individual behaviour or technological design alone but must be understood as a product of interacting social, institutional, and structural forces.

One of the key contributions of this study lies in highlighting the normalisation of self-protective behaviour among female students. Coping strategies such as route monitoring, trip sharing and time-based travel restrictions are not viewed as exceptional responses, but as routine aspects of everyday mobility. While these practices demonstrate agency and resilience, they also reflect a broader shifting of responsibility for safety onto women themselves.

These findings challenge narratives that position digital transport platforms as inherently empowering, suggesting instead that they may reproduce existing gendered inequalities in new forms. The study also highlights the economic dimensions of safety, showing how financial constraints limit students' mobility choices and force trade-offs between affordability and perceived security. This underscores the importance of approaching transport safety as a matter of mobility and justice rather than individual preference, without institutional bias. At the policy level, interventions, female students are likely to continue bearing disproportionate financial and emotional costs in their efforts to remain safe.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focused on two urban university contexts and employed a qualitative design, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Future research could build on this work by incorporating comparative studies across multiple institutions or by employing mixed-method approaches to examine the prevalence of identified patterns. Further research is also needed to explore the perspectives of e-hailing drivers and platform providers to better understand the systemic dynamics shaping safety outcomes. In terms of practical implications, the findings point to the need for stronger collaboration between universities, e-hailing companies and policymakers. Universities should consider extending students' safety strategies beyond campus boundaries, while e-hailing platforms must move beyond symbolic safety features towards more transparent and accountable mechanisms. Addressing female students' transport safety requires coordinated, multi-level interventions that recognise safety as a shared responsibility rather than an individual burden.

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