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Headline: The Big Read: The big stick approach is no panacea to errant bike parking

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A bike abandoned in Pelton Canal, near Aljunied Road. (Photo: Guy Hoh)

SINGAPORE: Over the past year or so, the sight of shared bicycles strewn everywhere, sometimes in the most unlikely of places, has become an eyesore.

These two-wheelers can be seen on pavements, beside expressways and under flyovers, for example, with some places resembling mini bicycle graveyards.

The problem has persisted, despite the authorities' warnings and measures by bike-sharing operators, as well as the public attention given to the situation – with the issue making headlines and being aired in Parliament on several occasions.

In the most drastic move yet, a new law was passed to place operators offering dockless shared bikes, personal mobility devices (PMDs), and power-assisted bicycles under a licensing regime which is set to kick in in the fourth quarter of this year.

While the looming regulations are the authorities' biggest attempt at addressing public frustrations over the problem, which has arisen because of the growing bike-sharing market, it seems that the message has still not sunk in.

Over the past week, TODAY visited several hot spots where dozens of bicycles are dumped and observed that the problem remains rampant, as more and more people come to depend on bike-sharing services for their first- and last-mile commute, saving them time and providing greater convenience.

Many riders were also seen leaving the shared bicycles indiscriminately. When approached, the common refrains were "it is okay because everyone is doing it", and there were insufficient parking spaces.

Under the regime, the authority can also direct all operators to impose a collective time-limited ban on users caught for parking their shared vehicles indiscriminately more than three times in a year. Those who park their shared bicycles indiscriminately could also be billed continuously.

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A heap of shared bicycles dumped on a grass area in Kampong Bahru. (Photo: Raj Mohamed)

Two users, who only gave their names as Amat and Khairul, both 16, said: “We know we should be parking at proper zones, but when I am in a rush or can’t see any yellow boxes nearby, I will just find a place where many bikes are huddled together and leave the bike there. Even if I know that is not a legal parking zone, if others can park there, why can’t I?”

Workshop assistant Christopherson Ho, 30, said he has “no choice” but to park the shared bicycle he uses outside his office’s back door in Robertson Quay. He said:

There are no parking zones near my working place, but I still want to use the bike to get from the MRT station to my office.

Cycling to work halves his journey time compared to walking and gives him “time to grab breakfast”. Another office worker, who only wanted to be known as Ms Zhang, 30, said:

You can’t expect users to not use the bicycles just because there are no proper parking places nearby. Likewise, Mr Saravanan, a construction worker, uses a shared bicycle every weekday morning to get from Yew Tee to the Sungei Kadut industrial estate.

He usually does not have to pay for the 10-minute ride. When he reaches his workplace, he leaves the bicycle on the grass patch. “It’s very convenient and I can park it anywhere,” said the 38-year-old, who adds:

If I use my own bicycle, I have to bring a lock, find a place to park it and take it back home.

Mr Savaran is not alone. From as early as 7am to about 10am each day, workers stream into the industrial estate on shared bicycles. As a result, a 400m stretch there alone, for example, is littered with hundreds of indiscriminately parked bicycles.



A stack of shared bicycles in a garbage dump area at Ubi Avenue 4. (Photo: Kyaw Mar Lar)

LITTLE INCENTIVE FOR OPERATORS TO GO AFTER ERRANT USERS

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Recognising the problem, bike-sharing operators have tried to address it via measures such as penalties and fines, as well as incentives to encourage good behaviour.

oBike, for example, is completing a six-month trial for a credit scoring system. Under the trial which was rolled out last October, the company would issue notifications to users when they indiscriminately parked their bicycles.

Going forward, credits will be deducted from users' accounts for errant behaviour such as parking outside the designated parking zones, illegally moving bicycles and vandalism.

All users are given 100 credits upon registration and they will not be allowed to use the service when they have depleted their credits.

A similar system is being used by other operators such as Mobike and Ofo.

At Mobike, the exact number of penalty points that will be deducted from a user's account for indiscriminate parking and other offences have not been determined.

The lack of concrete enforcement of such penalty systems have allowed users to continue to flout the rules.

Construction worker, Mr Rana Masud, 24, said he has not had any issues using the shared bike services even though he does not park the bicycle at the parking zones after use. Speaking to TODAY near the Yishun MRT station, he said: "I don't have any problems ... I can still use the bikes."

He added that should he be booted off an operator's app, he would simply turn to another one.



Transport experts whom TODAY spoke to pointed out that before the licensing regime takes effect, there is little incentive for bike-sharing operators to clamp down on errant users.

"Their goal is to get users on their platforms and users will gravitate to the operator who is the most lenient," said Dr Walter Theseira, transport economist at the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

Under the new regulations, users caught for parking their shared bicycles indiscriminately more than three times in a year will be banned temporarily from renting from all bike-sharing operators.

SG Bikes chief operating officer Sean Tay said:

For the collective ban to be effective, it must be practised by all operators, and either the Land Transport Authority (LTA) or a third party has to come in to make sure that the operators comply to the enforcement actions.

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Other impending measures, such as the LTA's requirement for operators to use geo-fencing technology, may prove more effective. However, some operators felt the move may create confusion among users when it comes on top of the technology the firms are already using.

The geo-fencing technology requires shared bike users to scan the unique QR code at designated parking locations as proof of proper parking before ending their trips.

Mr Tay said: "The cost to smaller players like us is more an intangible one. We already have our geo-station technology (which uses radio-frequency identification), which tells users to park within a certain range of our parking zones."

He added:

Having to adopt the QR scanning might result in potential confusion for users. We are worried that we might potentially lose customers, because they might be confused by the two methods to park. Measures like the collective ban and geo-fencing technology were announced by the Government together with the new licensing framework.

Under the framework, the maximum fleet size of each operator will be controlled by the LTA and reviewed every six months, depending on how well they manage the problem of illegal parking and how efficiently their fleet is used.



FILE PHOTO: A Mobike bike-sharing bicycle is pictured in Singapore August 29, 2017. REUTERS/Edgar Su/File Photo

BUSINESS STRATEGY 'CONTRIBUTING TO PROBLEM'

Earlier this month, scientists from the Singapore-MIT Alliance for Research and Technology released the findings of a study which found that shared bicycles are only used for 30 minutes a day on average. The team had analysed the global positioning system data of about 10,000 shared bikes from one of the largest operators here over nine days in April and May last year.

The company was not named in the study, which also found that each shared bike was used to make between 0.62 and 1.64 trips a day, on average.

However, bike-sharing operators flagged out concerns about the time at which the study was conducted.

Ofo head of policy and communications for South-east Asia Christopher Hilton pointed out that the study was conducted when the bike-sharing industry was in its nascent stage in Singapore.

"The environment and habits of commuters might have changed since then," he said.

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Based on the company's own data, Ofo bikes are currently used four times a day on average, and users ride them anywhere between 300m and 1.2km, with trips often taken to public transport stations, Mr Hilton said.

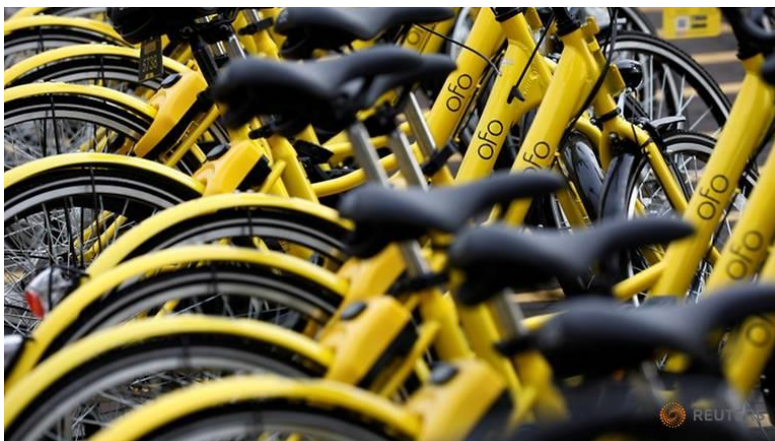
While other operators declined to reveal their utilisation rates, operator Mobike said it uses an artificial intelligence platform Magic Cube and a data-monitoring programme to track, assess and manage the use of its bicycles.

The Magic Cube platform charts ridership patterns based on user data on parking and riding behaviour. These include times of the day when the bikes are most used, locations that generate the highest demand, the most-travelled routes and where the bicycles are parked.

On the licensing framework, Mr Hilton said Ofo is concerned that a "definite cap" on the number of bikes that each operator will be allowed to have might crimp the industry's growth.

"The industry still has much potential to grow. We also don't want to limit bike-sharing as a transportation option for commuters," said Mr Hilton.

However, it is precisely this strategy of flooding the market with shared bikes in a bid to grabbing market share that has contributed to the problem of indiscriminate parking, experts say.



Ofo bike-sharing bicycles are pictured in Singapore, Aug 29, 2017. (Photo: Reuters/Edgar Su)

"Gaining market share is always going to be (the operators') number one priority ... Utilisation rates and managing their fleet size are secondary," said SUSE transport economist Park Byung Joon, who noted that the operators are bleeding cash in order to enlarge their share of the market.

Associate Professor Pradeep Varakantham from the Singapore Management University said it "makes sense for the bike companies to try and gain as much market share as possible before the licensing application begins".

"From my observation, some operators like Ofo are introducing a monthly subscription pass at low costs (in Ofo's case, 60 days for S\$1.50) to try and attract and hopefully retain users on its platforms," said Assoc Prof Varakantham, who does research in urban mobility and smart commuting.

Applications for licences begin in the middle of this year and they will be awarded by year-end.

While the LTA put the number of shared bicycles in Singapore at over 100,000, operators estimated that the actual figure could be twice that, given how quickly fleet sizes are expanding.

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Mr Hilton said Ofo has about 70,000 bikes in the republic now, double their fleet size just five months ago.



Dai Wei thinks ofo can provide other bike-sharing firms with the management system ability and experience that no other has.

An oBike spokesperson said the company has about 14,000 bicycles while smaller players such as SG Bikes have deployed almost 1,600 bikes in the north and eastern regions of the island.

Declining to reveal exact figures, Mobike said its fleet numbers are “in the thousands”.

Dr Theseira noted the “no holds barred” mentality of the operators particularly when they first set up shop here.

“There is little incentive for operators to act with restraint, even if there is a certain number of bicycles needed to meet overall demand, the operators don’t have the incentive to meet this demand collectively. Each of them wants their own bicycles to be used,” he said.

In addition, the bike-sharing operators, some of whom are Chinese-backed, have little to worry about meeting profit margins.

For example, Ofo raised US\$700 million (S\$966 million) in its latest funding round last July. The funding round, led by Chinese tech giant Alibaba, also saw other investors such as China’s ride-hailing giant Didi Chuxing and DST Global participating.

The US\$700 million topped the US\$600 million funding which its rival Mobike had raised just a month before.

Meanwhile, homegrown bike-sharing firm oBike also secured US\$45 million in early-stage venture funding last year. Their investors included an unnamed global transportation platform and venture capital firm Grishin Robotics.

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File photo of oBikes parked at a bike rack in a HDB block. (Photo: Elizabeth Khor)

EFFORTS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE

During his speech on the amendments to the Parking Places Act, Senior Minister of State for Transport Lam Pin Min said that there are over 170,000 public bicycle parking lots at MRT stations, bus stops, Housing and Development Board estates and parks.

He said that the LTA and other public agencies plan to provide another 50,000 lots by 2020.

Bike operators reiterated that public education is key to address the problem.

oBike's general manager Tim Phang said:

More work needs to be done to regulate users, and not simply impose fines on operators. Such behaviour needs to be addressed and it is only through constant education that the community can learn that being considerate can lead to greater benefits of a sharing economy.

In the meantime, some operators have ramped up manpower in recent months to go around the island picking up indiscriminately parked bicycles and redistributing them to areas of greater demand.

For example, Ofo has doubled the size of its "marshal team" – which was set up in February last year – to 200.

Other than using GPS or Bluetooth beacon technologies, Mr Hilton said Ofo is also looking at the idea of using augmented reality to help users identify whether an area is a designated parking spot. While the efforts should help inculcate proper behaviour in users, Mr Hilton stressed that operators have their work cut out.

Ofo, for example, see about 4,000 new sign-ups every week on average. "These are 4,000 new people that you have to teach to use a bike properly," he said.

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A staff member from the bike-sharing company Ofo gathers its shared bikes for use during the evening rush hour, in Beijing, China, on Apr 12, 2017. (Photo: REUTERS/Jason Lee)

BAD HABITS DIE HARD?

Mr Zhivko Girginov, 42, a Bulgarian who has been living in Singapore for more than nine years, has been going around the island on a rented lorry, moving indiscriminately parked bicycles to public spaces where the operators can pick them up subsequently.

Reiterating that it takes time to instil the right habits in shared bicycle users, he said:

Wherever we have been going to help with tidying up indiscriminately parked shared bicycles, the situation went back to its previous state almost immediately, within a day or two ... But we all know that the community has to be educated in proper behaviour and it doesn't happen overnight.

Mr Lim How Kiat, 28, who is part of Ofo's marshal team, added:

There are times when we catch users parking indiscriminately, but when we go up to inform them, they are nonchalant and frequently ignore us.

Both Mr Zhivko and Mr Lim hope that the new regulations will give operators more teeth to clamp down on errant users.

When that happens, some users said they would simply stop using the service, especially if the big stick approach defeats the purpose of bike-sharing services. After all, the point of such services is to offer users the convenience of picking up and dropping off a bicycle as near to their homes and destinations as possible.

"If I am indeed banned from renting the bicycle, I will probably (revert back to) using my own to get to work. More troublesome, but it's okay," said Mr Savaran.

The story first appeared in TODAY. Read the original [here](#).

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