

Traffic Congestion in Lagos Metropolis: A Ritual or Tradition

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Abstract

Traffic congestion in the Lagos metropolis has become a persistent urban challenge, often discussed in terms of infrastructure deficits and rapid urbanisation. However, beyond these conventional explanations, congestion has also become deeply embedded in the daily experiences of commuters. This study examines traffic congestion in Lagos metropolis to determine whether it can be understood as a ritual or a tradition within urban life. The study adopts a systematic and conceptual approach, drawing on existing literature, policy reports, and stylised facts relating to urban transport, commuter behaviour, and city planning in Lagos. The method of synthesis of these sources reveals recurring patterns (Thematic Synthesis) such as prolonged travel times, heavy dependence on road transport, weak infrastructure, and predictable congestion during peak hours. The findings further show that commuters have developed adaptive behaviours that restructure daily routines around expected traffic conditions, while congestion itself has become a normalised feature of urban mobility. The study argues that traffic congestion in Lagos is not only a physical transport problem but also a socially embedded phenomenon shaped by repeated experiences and long-term acceptance. It concludes that congestion can be interpreted both as a daily ritual of adaptation and as a tradition that reflects the normalization of traffic delays within the urban system. This dual perspective provides a broader understanding of congestion and highlights the need to reconsider how it is conceptualized in urban transport discourse.

Keywords: Commuter Behaviour, Lagos Metropolis, Ritual, Stylised Facts, Tradition.

Introduction

Lagos state is characterized by its population increase from time to time. This is due to the dynamics of population, especially as it relates to migration – movement of people into Lagos, especially for survival, and the rate of fertility. Lagos is recognised as one of the world’s fastest-growing cities (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). The growth of the population has led to urbanisation, which is desirable for human development; however, uncontrolled urbanisation has been responsible for many of the problems cities experience today, resulting in substandard living environments, acute water shortages, noise and air pollution, waste disposal problems, and traffic congestion. The Lagos metropolis experiences traffic congestion, a complex phenomenon. Lagos metropolis is noted for traffic congestion, which is a problem that can be encountered anywhere and at any time, and can be caused by man due to poor infrastructure,

poor traffic management, and unplanned roads. Traffic congestion, which may result in stop-start driving, as well as policies affecting route restrictions and traffic flow (such as maximum weights, lengths, speeds, and constructions), and road characteristics (including pavement quality and width), are among the uncontrollable factors that influence fuel consumption (Levinson, 2005), which has become a way of life for road users and commuters in the metropolis. Frequency and predictability of congestion are based on the following types, as outlined by Brownfield (2003) and can be seen in the table below;

S/N	Types of Congestion	Meaning
1	Recurrent Congestion	Occurs at regular times at a site. It can be anticipated by road users who normally use the route during those times. Examples of recurrent congestion are morning or evening peak hour congestion, or congestion due to a regular event such as a street market on a particular day each week.
2	Non-Recurrent Congestion	Occurs at non-regular times at a site. It is unexpected and unpredictable by the driver and is normally due to incidents such as accidents, vehicle breakdown or other unforeseen loss of carriageway capacity.
3	Pre-Congestion (Borderline Congestion)	Occurs where free-flow conditions break down but full congestion has not yet occurred. This may occur either side of the time period when congestion occurs or upstream or downstream of congestion that is already occurring.

Source: Adapted from Brownfield *et al.* (2003)

This paper seeks to examine the traffic congestion in the metropolis by ascertaining whether the traffic congestion in Lagos Metropolis is a ritual or tradition, and this will be done by synthesising several strands of literature in relation to the study.

Stylised Facts on Traffic Congestion in Lagos Metropolis

Congestion may be seen as an unavoidable result of insufficient transportation amenities such as road space, parking areas, road signals, and good traffic management (Newman, 2020). Traffic congestion in Lagos can be better understood through a set of recurring and widely observed patterns that appear consistently across studies, reports, and commuter experiences. These stylised facts help to simplify the complex nature of congestion by highlighting its most stable and

recognisable features. One key fact is the persistent occurrence of long travel times within the metropolis. Commuters often experience extended delays even over relatively short distances, particularly during peak periods. This suggests that congestion is not occasional but a regular feature of urban movement in Lagos. Another important observation is the dominance of road-based transport. The majority of daily trips within Lagos are made using road networks, placing continuous pressure on already overburdened infrastructure. The limited availability of efficient alternative transport systems further intensifies this dependence. A further stylised fact is the recurrence of congestion at predictable times and locations. Morning and evening peak hours consistently experience heavy traffic, while certain corridors and junctions are known congestion points. At the same time, unexpected disruptions such as accidents or vehicle breakdowns also contribute to sudden gridlocks, showing that congestion has both predictable and unpredictable dimensions. In addition, there is evidence of structural and institutional weaknesses that sustain congestion. Poor road conditions, inadequate transport planning, weak enforcement of traffic regulations, and uncoordinated urban development continue to shape traffic outcomes in the city. These factors are long-standing and have shown limited improvement over time. Finally, congestion in Lagos has become embedded in daily urban life and behavior. Commuters frequently adjust their schedules, departure times, and even work routines in response to expected delays. This adaptation indicates that congestion is not only a physical condition but also a lived social experience.

The Concept of Traffic Congestion as a Ritual or Tradition

In cities such as Lagos, congestion exhibits strong temporal and spatial regularity. Peak-hour congestion occurs predictably along major corridors and at key nodes, reflecting land-use patterns, employment concentration, and inadequate modal alternatives. Transport planners recognise that this regularity leads to behavioural adaptation among commuters, who adjust departure times, route choices, and mode selection in anticipation of delays (Ogunbodede, 2019). This repeated cycle creates a system where congestion is no longer an occasional disruption but a built-in feature of daily mobility. From a behavioural standpoint, describing congestion as a “ritual” that highlights the *traffic congestion as a chosen system that allows commuters or drivers to avoid, perform or belong*. When road networks are insufficient and public transport systems are underdeveloped, users develop coping mechanisms that inadvertently reinforce congestion patterns. For example, the widespread reliance on private vehicles due to unreliable mass transit contributes to recurring traffic build-up. Over time, these behaviours become normalised, giving congestion a ritual-like consistency (Oladele, 2020). Transport planners also observe that congestion influences and

sustains certain economic and spatial practices. Informal transport operators, roadside traders, and service providers often depend on slow-moving traffic for their livelihoods. This creates a micro-economy around congestion, making it socially embedded within the urban system (Adebayo & Opiako, 2020). While not a “tradition” in the cultural sense, this persistence reflects systemic inertia—where both formal and informal structures adapt to, and in some cases depend on congestion.

Additionally, in everyday life, certain actions become so repeated that people no longer question them. Concepts like ritual and tradition help explain this. A ritual can be understood as a phenomenon that people engage in regularly, often without much thought, simply because it has become part of their routine. Tradition, on the other hand, refers to practices widely accepted within a society and that continue over time. Looking at traffic congestion in Lagos through this lens offers a different way of thinking about the issue. Instead of seeing it only as a transport problem, it can also be viewed as part of daily life in the city. Nigeria’s traffic congestion in major cities has remained part of the operating transportation system, especially during the morning, afternoon and evening peak periods. As noted by Ogunbodede (2003). The problem of traffic congestion is no longer limited to traditional cities such as Ibadan, Benin City, Port Harcourt, Abuja, Kano and Lagos (Popoola, Abiola & Adeniji, 2013). For many residents, long hours in traffic are expected. People plan their day around it, deciding when to leave home, how to move, and what to do while on the road. If considered as a ritual, traffic congestion reflects repeated patterns of behavior. Commuters adjust by waking up earlier, finding alternative routes, or engaging in activities like listening to the radio or making calls while stuck in traffic. These actions show how people adapt to the situation rather than constantly reacting to it. At the same time, congestion can also be seen as a tradition. Over time, it becomes normal and unavoidable. People talk about it casually, share similar experiences, and develop common ways of coping. This shared understanding makes congestion appear like a regular part of life in Lagos rather than an unusual problem. This perspective allows the study to move beyond the usual explanations of congestion and focus on how it is experienced and accepted in everyday life. The key question, therefore, is whether traffic congestion remains just a recurring challenge or whether it has gradually become a normal part of living in Lagos.

Theoretical Review

The study relied on systems theory to explain the traditional and ritual nature that is embedded in traffic congestion in the Lagos metropolis

Systems Theory

An Austrian biologist, between the 1930s and 1950s, proposed the theory. He sought to create a transdisciplinary framework focusing on holistic, interconnected systems rather than just individual components. Hence, the theory views traffic congestion, especially in the Lagos metropolis, as the outcome of an interacting subsystem. The subsystems in the context of this study include the Land use patterns, factors relating to institutions like the traffic management agencies, the behavioral patterns of humans, which entail the drivers and the commuters, and the transport infrastructures in the Lagos metropolis. From a systems perspective, Lagos metropolis operates as an open system, meaning it continuously interacts with its environment. According to (Rodrigue, 2018), “Any change introduced in one part of the system will affect all others, i.e., the entire system through a change reaction” In the metropolis, inputs such as population growth, economic activities, and vehicle ownership place pressure on the transport system. When these inputs exceed the system’s capacity (e.g., limited road space or inefficient public transport), congestion arises as an output, and it becomes the norm, which is an undoubted threat to the quality of urban life where in recent years, there has been a considerable increase in the negative effects of traffic congestion on society, the economy, and the environment (Almatar & Almulhim, 2021). It emphasises recurrent patterns.

In Lagos metropolis, congestion is due to various factors, such as the underutilization of public transportation, resulting in a higher number of private vehicles; in addition, the existing street networks often prove insufficient in accommodating the escalating demand for urban traffic (Lu *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, it follows a stable pattern of daily cycles—morning rush, midday build-up, evening peak. Because these patterns are produced by consistent inputs (work schedules, school hours, land-use structure), they repeat over time. This repetition gives congestion a ritual-like character: people expect it, plan around it, and even structure their lives accordingly. This makes congestion ritualised because the system produces the same pattern every day. Loops in feedback also reinforce the behavioral patterns whereby people leave home to beat traffic, thereby shifting congestion to early hours, and creating a routine of sustenance, whereby adaptation of individuals doesn’t get rid of congestion, and making the system fit into the behaviors that seems traditional for commuters and drivers in the metropolis.

Empirical Review

Traffic congestion in Lagos metropolis has been widely studied, particularly in relation to its causes, effects, and broader social implications. While many of these studies focus on structural and policy-related issues, less attention has been given to the idea that congestion may have become a routine part of everyday life. This study, therefore, explores that overlooked dimension. Oni (2006) highlights the importance of socio-cultural factors in shaping urban environments. According to the study, the way cities are organised reflects underlying social and cultural realities, and how well these are incorporated into urban policies determines planning outcomes. This perspective suggests that traffic congestion in Lagos cannot be explained only by infrastructure deficits; it is also influenced by social patterns and behaviors that may contribute to its persistence. Looking at the issue from a psychological angle, Obasanjo (2021) examines how congestion affects commuters. The study reports that prolonged exposure to traffic conditions leads to physical discomfort such as fatigue and headaches, as well as emotional strain, including anxiety and frustration. In some cases, these conditions also influence behavior, resulting in aggression or social withdrawal. These repeated experiences show how deeply congestion is woven into the daily routine of Lagos residents. Muritala & Adeniji (2022) focus on travel time and traffic flow. Their findings show that movement within the city is often slow, especially during peak hours, largely due to limited road capacity. They also note that congestion leads to several economic and social challenges, such as unpredictable travel schedules, increased fuel consumption, and reduced productivity. These outcomes point to persistent structural problems within the transport system. In a related study, Alade *et al.* (2018) examine travel behaviour and transport systems in Lagos. They find that the vast majority of trips are made by road, with journeys taking a considerable amount of time even over short distances. The study also observes a sharp increase in the number of vehicles, many of which are relatively old, contributing to both congestion and environmental concerns. This heavy dependence on road transport highlights the systemic nature of the problem. Urban planning issues are further discussed by Olayiwola *et al.* (2014), who attribute congestion in areas such as Ikeja to uncoordinated land-use patterns. Their study shows that poor planning and weak enforcement of regulations often result in traffic bottlenecks and longer travel times. This reinforces the idea that institutional shortcomings play a key role in sustaining congestion. Ogunlade & Clotney (2023) approach the issue from a public health standpoint. They link traffic congestion to declining air quality, noting that prolonged exposure to vehicle emissions can lead to serious health problems.

Their work broadens the discussion by showing that congestion is not only a mobility issue but also a public health concern. Beyond academic research, reports such as Taxaide (2019) describe traffic congestion commonly referred to as “go-slow” as a normal part of life in Lagos. Long commuting hours, financial losses, and daily stress are presented as experiences that resident have come to accept. This perception supports the argument that congestion has taken on a routine or habitual character. Sanni & Jimoh (2013) also draw attention to the role of the media. They argue that traffic congestion has not been given sufficient attention in news coverage and is often treated as an ordinary occurrence rather than a serious urban issue. This type of representation may further reinforce public acceptance of congestion. More recent work by Hassan & Fatile (2024) introduces another dimension by examining the activities of informal transport actors, commonly known as “agberos”. The study finds that their presence on roads contributes to congestion through practices such as road obstruction and unofficial fee collection, which disrupt traffic flow and increase delays. Finally, Aworemi *et al.* (2009) identify several key causes of congestion, including poor road conditions, inadequate infrastructure, weak transport planning, and driver behaviour. These factors, taken together, explain a large share of traffic problems in Lagos and highlight the complexity of the issue.

Methodology

This study adopts a systematic and conceptual approach that relies on the synthesis of existing literature, policy documents, and relevant empirical observations on urban transport in the Lagos metropolis. Rather than generating primary data, the study draws from established scholarly works, institutional reports, and documented commuter experiences to develop a clearer understanding of traffic congestion as both a transport and social phenomenon. Table 1 indicates the search strategy for this study.

Table1. Literature Collection Method

Criteria	Details
Sources	Elsevier, Google Scholar, MDPI, Research Gate, Sciendo, Springer, Taylor and Francis, & Wiley
Search Strings	Commuters' Behaviour, Congestion and Urban Experience, Traffic Congestion and Lagos Metropolis, Stylised Facts on Traffic Congestion, Systems Theory as a framework, Traffic Congestion (Ritual and Tradition Perspectives), Non-Recurrent Congestion & Recurrent Congestion

keywords	Commuters' Behaviour, Feedback Loop, Lagos Metropolis, Traffic Congestion as a Ritual and Tradition, Stylised Facts on Traffic Congestion, Social Phenomenon & Tradition
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Inclusion Criteria - The articles that were published between 2003 and 2024, Publications from scholarly and reputable journals and conference papers, works authored in the English language and Research addressing the scope of the study, that is, Traffic Congestion in Lagos Metropolis as a Ritual or Tradition.

Method of Synthesis - By bringing these strands together, the study identifies recurring patterns using *thematic synthesis* that explain not only the causes and effects of congestion but also how it is experienced, interpreted, and normalised by road users over time. Within this framework, traffic congestion is not viewed solely as a result of inadequate infrastructure or poor traffic management. Instead, it is also understood as a social reality shaped by human behaviors, institutional practices, and the rapid urban growth of Lagos.

Traffic Congestion as a Normalised Urban Experience

Traffic congestion in Lagos is commonly framed as a technical or infrastructural problem. However, everyday experiences in the city suggest that it goes beyond that. For many residents, congestion is not treated as an occasional disruption but as something expected. Over time, it has come to shape how people organise their daily activities and interact with the urban environment. A key issue here is adaptation. Many commuters plan their movements with traffic in mind. Leaving home very early, avoiding certain routes, or adjusting work schedules are now common practices. These patterns are not random; they reflect a consistent response to persistent congestion. As noted in earlier studies, travel delays and unpredictable journey times have become regular features of movement within Lagos (Muritala & Adeniji, 2022). In this sense, congestion begins to resemble a routine that people work around rather than resist. There is also the question of normalisation. Traffic congestion is widely discussed in everyday conversations and is often described using familiar terms such as “go-slow.” This kind of language suggests a level of acceptance. Reports indicate that many Lagos residents spend several hours in traffic daily, yet this experience is rarely treated as unusual (Taxaide, 2019). When a situation is repeatedly experienced and socially acknowledged in this way, it gradually becomes part of what people consider normal. Behavioral patterns further reinforce this condition. Activities such as informal transport operations and roadside trading contribute to congestion, even though they are also part of the city’s economic life. The persistence of these practices shows how deeply embedded they are in the system. Research has also shown that the

activities of transport touts can disrupt traffic flow and increase delays, yet these activities continue to operate within the urban space (Hassan & Fatile, 2024). This suggests that congestion is sustained not only by infrastructure but also by everyday practices. Institutional factors cannot be ignored. When traffic problems continue over long periods without effective solutions, public expectations begin to shift. Instead of anticipating improvement, many people focus on coping strategies. Weak enforcement of planning regulations and uncoordinated urban development have already been identified as contributing factors to congestion in Lagos (Olayiwola *et al.*, 2014). Over time, this lack of effective intervention may reinforce the perception that congestion is unavoidable. Taken together, these observations point to a broader reality. Traffic congestion in Lagos is not just a physical condition; social behaviour, shared experiences, and long-term adaptation also shape it. While it remains a challenge, it also shows characteristics of something that has been absorbed into everyday life. This raises an important issue for further reflection: whether congestion is still viewed primarily as a problem to be solved, or whether it has gradually become a defining feature of living in Lagos, with ritualised time structuring, normalised language and Institutional neglect

Ritualised Time Structuring - Daily life is organised around predictable congestion patterns, with early departures, route avoidance, and flexible work schedules, and persistent travel delays and unreliable journey times (Muritala & Adeniji, 2022). These repeated, time-bound adjustments resemble the ritual structuring of time, where activities are scheduled around an anticipated event. Congestion is no longer incidental; it functions as a temporal anchor that shapes everyday routines, much like ritual calendars.

Normalised Language - Congestion is embedded in everyday discourse and collective understanding, especially in terms of commuters' conversations. Use of familiar terms like “go-slow” and Widespread acceptance of spending long hours in traffic (Taxaide, 2019). Language plays a key role in sustaining traditions. The casual, repetitive use of such terms reflects cultural acceptance and transmission, indicating that congestion has moved from being a problem to a socially legitimised condition - a hallmark of tradition.

Institutional neglect/failure - Long-term governance patterns reinforce congestion's permanence due to neglect that leads to weak enforcement of planning regulations, poorly coordinated urban development (Olayiwola *et al.*, 2014), and Limited effective long-term solutions. When institutions repeatedly fail to disrupt a condition, it becomes institutionalised over time. This transforms

congestion into a tradition-like feature of the urban system, sustained not only by people but by governance structures.

Implications of Traffic Congestion as a Social Phenomenon

Viewing traffic congestion as more than a transport challenge changes how it is interpreted and addressed in urban studies. If congestion in Lagos is understood as something that has gradually become part of everyday life, it suggests a shift from active resistance to quiet acceptance among city residents. This shift carries important social implications that go beyond mobility issues alone. One key implication is behavioral adaptation. Many commuters now organise their daily routines around expected traffic delays. Over time, these coping strategies, such as leaving home earlier, changing travel routes, or adjusting work schedules, become routine practices. As these behaviors become normalised, the pressure for collective action or demand for structural reform may gradually reduce, with individuals focusing more on survival within the system rather than challenging it. Another implication concerns productivity and general well-being. When prolonged time in traffic is treated as normal, the wider consequences are often overlooked. These include loss of productive hours, increased stress levels, and reduced efficiency in both economic and social activities. Previous studies have shown that congestion negatively affects commuters' physical and mental health, influencing mood and behaviour (Obasanjo, 2021). It also contributes to economic losses through wasted time and higher transport-related costs (Muritala & Adeniji, 2021). In addition, congestion creates a shared social experience among residents. People from different social and economic backgrounds encounter similar daily challenges on the road, which creates a sense of collective understanding. However, this shared experience may also reinforce the perception that congestion is unavoidable and permanently embedded in city life. Finally, the normalisation of congestion can weaken institutional accountability. When a persistent problem becomes widely accepted as "normal," there is often less pressure on authorities to implement effective and lasting solutions. This may allow underlying structural issues, such as poor urban planning and inadequate infrastructure, to persist over time (Olayiwola *et al.*, 2014).

The foregoing evidence shows that traffic congestion in Lagos has evolved beyond a technical transport issue into a structured social phenomenon characterised by repetition, shared meaning, and continuity, through Routine temporal adjustments, Normalised language and expectations, Recurrent behavioural practices, and Institutional reinforcement. Congestion takes on the defining features of both a ritual (repetitive patterned daily practice) and a tradition (socially accepted and

historically sustained condition). Thus, congestion is not only endured but performed, reproduced, and legitimised, becoming a defining element of everyday urban life in Lagos. Hence, the need for behavioural, institutional and systemic interventions.

Conclusion

This study examined traffic congestion in Lagos metropolis to understand whether it can be interpreted as a ritual or a tradition within everyday urban life. Rather than focusing only on the technical causes of congestion, the study engaged existing literature to explore how repeated experiences, behavioral adjustments, and social acceptance shape the way congestion is lived and understood by residents. The review of studies shows that traffic congestion in Lagos is persistent and deeply embedded in the structure of the city. It is driven by factors such as inadequate infrastructure, weak planning systems, high dependence on road transport, and informal practices that affect traffic flow. Beyond these structural issues, congestion also influences daily routines, social behaviour, and even psychological well-being, making it a constant feature of urban experience due to its impact from the micro level to the macro level (Tilak & Reddy, 2016). The analysis further suggests that congestion has gradually become normalised. Many commuters have adjusted their lifestyles around it, and in many cases, it is treated as an expected part of daily movement rather than an exception. This pattern of adaptation and acceptance supports the argument that congestion is not only a physical condition but also a social phenomenon that is continuously reproduced through everyday practices. However, describing congestion as a routine or normalised experience should not be interpreted as acceptance of its inevitability. Instead, it highlights the depth of the challenge and the extent to which it has become embedded in urban life. This understanding is important for rethinking how the problem is framed and addressed in both policy and research. Therefore, the study concludes that traffic congestion in Lagos can be better understood as a socially embedded condition shaped by both structural constraints and collective human behavior, rather than as a temporary or isolated urban problem. In addition, the study considers established classifications of congestion, including recurrent, non-recurrent, and borderline congestion, as a way of understanding its frequency and unpredictability within the metropolis. While recurrent congestion can be anticipated during peak periods, non-recurrent congestion arises from unexpected disruptions such as accidents and breakdowns. Borderline congestion, on the other hand, reflects conditions where traffic flow begins to deteriorate but has not fully broken down. Despite these variations, congestion remains a persistent and defining feature of mobility in Lagos.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Understanding traffic congestion in Lagos as a socially embedded and normalised phenomenon has important implications for policy formulation. It suggests that addressing congestion requires more than physical infrastructure expansion; it also demands behavioural, institutional, and systemic interventions. First, there is a need for behavioral and institutional reforms; driving in itself is a learned behavior, and such behavior like knowledge and attitude (not skill) can be learned through public awareness campaigns with a blend of flexible working arrangements and staggered work hours, which can help reduce peak-hour congestion. At the institutional level, consistent policy implementation and political commitment are necessary to ensure that interventions are sustained over time.

The need for multimodal transport development is crucial. Overdependence by commuters on road transport remains a behavior that drives and enhances congestion in the Lagos metropolis. This tends to pressurise the roadway with the increase in volume of pedestrian and vehicular movement, thereby causing traffic congestion. Hence, the need for strengthening multimodal transportation in order to reduce pressure on road networks and provide commuters with viable alternatives (Alade *et al.*, 2018). Weak monitoring and compliance by concerned institutions or agencies continue to create traffic bottlenecks in major corridors. Strengthening and tightening the institutional framework for adequate monitoring, compliance mechanisms, and ensuring better integration between residential, commercial, and industrial zones can reduce unnecessary travel demand (Olayiwola *et al.*, 2014). Effective regulation of road use, parking control, and the activities of informal transport operators can improve traffic flow. Special attention should be given to reducing disruptions caused by illegal road activities and improving coordination among traffic agencies (Hassan & Fatile, 2024).

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