
The Death of Basecamps?*

Hana Prada Juwita

Independent Researcher
Email: hana15.saragih@gmail.com

Elan Lazuardi

Staf Pengajar Departemen Antropologi, Universitas Gadjah Mada
Email: e.lazuardi@ugm.ac.id

The figure of the motorbike drivers with green (or orange or yellow) helmets and jackets has been a staple view in many Indonesian cities since 2015. The emergence of Gojek and other tech companies which act as intermediaries between urban residents and the so-called partners (*mitra*) is another example of ‘platform capitalism’ (Snircek 2017). According to a 2017 survey by Lembaga Demografi, Universitas Indonesia (2018), Gojek itself—the pioneer platform intermediary in Indonesia that evolved from a ride-hailing app inspired by traditional motorcycle taxis (*ojek pangkalan*, or *opang*) into a ‘super app’ offering diverse services—contributed 8.2 trillion for Indonesian economy by providing a source of income for drivers. Based on the same survey, in 2017 Gojek has also contributed to a monthly increase of 138.6 billion rupiahs for the national economy from the small-medium enterprises (UMKM) income.

Frey (2020) aptly points out that instead of becoming atomized workers, *ojol* drivers employ incrementalist strategies—many of which share similar characteristics with *opang*. One such strategy, which is more visible, involves the establishment of small bases commonly referred to as basecamps or BCs. Similar to *opang*, *ojol*’s use of basecamps primarily serve

* This photo essay is based on a collaborative research project funded by Social Science and Humanities Research Council Canada titled “‘Ubering the City’: Understanding Transportation and Ride-hailing Applications in Urban Indonesia”. The fieldwork was conducted in Bandung, Surabaya, and Yogyakarta between 2021 and 2023. We are thankful for everyone in the team, particularly Dr. Sheri Gibbings, the principal investigator, for letting us use the data for this publication. We are also grateful for Muh. Thohir Yudha who along with Hana in August-October 2023 observed a number of basecamps in Yogyakarta and talked to drivers in those basecamps - Hana’s photos from that period of fieldwork are used for this photo essay. The photos in this essay are also taken by Maria Michelle Angelica, Dhimas Langgeng, Harits Arrazie, and Fahmi Rizki Fahroji who were also involved in the field research in 2021 and 2022. We thank them for allowing us to use their photos for this essay.

as a 'structured territorial tactic' to establish boundaries among themselves, determining which drivers can operate in specific areas (Frey 2020, 10). However, basecamps also serve other purposes. They become essential spaces for socialising, sharing tips and tricks, and even for mobilising drivers to express grievances against platform intermediaries and the government. Thus, basecamps also represent a spatial tactic (De Certeau 1984); allowing ordinary workers to claim urban spaces such as sidewalks or food stalls.

Photo 1: Some of these basecamps are typically modest and self-constructed. Drivers convene at a food stall or *warkop*, utilising their close rapport with warung proprietors to establish these establishments as their operational bases (typically identifiable by their signage). The conspicuousness of these basecamps also serves as a manifestation of ojol's burgeoning prominence within Indonesian urban areas (Bandung, July 2022, Fahmi R. Fahroji).



Photo 2: In Surabaya, while basecamps might not be as visible as in Bandung and Yogyakarta, drivers use (coffee shop) as their basecamp. Whilst waiting for an order, it is common for drivers to wait in inexpensive warung. As the network between drivers waiting in the same warung becomes established and their relation with warung owners grows stronger, drivers create a community and use these warung as their base. In this way, *ojol* drivers maintain a reciprocal relationship with the warung as they spend money there, and keep the warung (appear to be) busy. (Surabaya, April 2023, Harits Arrazie)





Photo 3: In Yogyakarta, some *angkrikan* owners even open *angkrikan* specifically for drivers. He would be surprised if there were non-*ojol* customers. (Yogyakarta, July 2023, Sheri Gibbings).



Photo 4 (Yogyakarta, July 2021, Dhimas Langgeng).

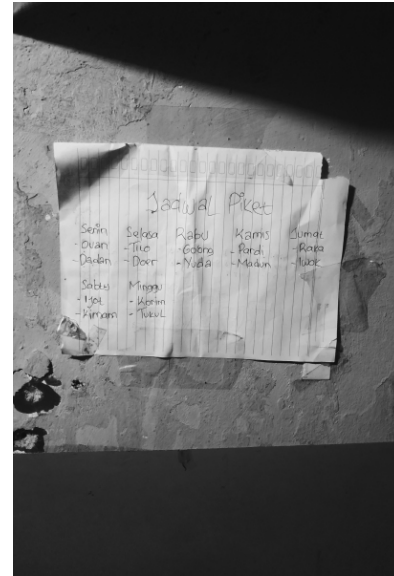


Photo 5: Meanwhile, in Bandung, it is also common to see *ojol* drivers gathering in a small *burjo* warung. However, some driver communities have even constructed modest temporary shelters as their basecamps. These can often be found in the parking lots of popular shops or restaurants. These basecamps are usually more structured, with membership being more exclusive. A handwritten note is posted at each basecamp to schedule drivers for cleaning the area. (Bandung, December 2022, Harits Arrazie).

From 2021 to 2023, our team conducted fieldwork in three cities in Java to investigate the impacts of new digital infrastructures exemplified by platform firms such as Gojek and Grab on the working lives of online *ojek* (*ojol*) drivers. However, during the three years we conducted this field research, we have noticed how basecamps are becoming less common in the city. We wonder then if this signals the “death of basecamp”. If basecamps are an important place of sociality for drivers, the declining number of basecamp also suggests the declining solidarity between drivers. In this photo essay, based on our 3-year fieldwork, we want to illustrate how drivers use and not use basecamp and what it tells us about the dynamics of the relationship that exists between platform intermediary firms (known as ‘*aplikator*’ in Indonesian) and their drivers-partners.

Algorithm-Induced Change

While initially appearing to offer drivers the promise of high earnings, working as *ojol* drivers has undergone significant changes during the pandemic. Gojek and Grab, the two major ride-hailing platforms, have ceased providing bonuses to their drivers. The drivers have reported that the increased number of drivers and platform intermediaries has

resulted in intensified competition, leading to a decrease in the number of orders available. For instance, instead of receiving bonuses, Gojek has implemented a new system called “*sistem berkat*,” where each driver is only allocated seven orders per day (equivalent to 10 points), resulting in a total income of 100,000 rupiahs (gross income). Consequently, their income has significantly decreased during this period. Additionally, a new platform intermediary, Shopee, has emerged and begun operating in most Indonesian cities. Many drivers have attempted to adapt by transitioning to Shopee, which, according to one driver we spoke with, yields earnings between 20,000 and 30,000 rupiahs per day. However, drivers like Rohim believe that the number of orders and income did not experience a significant increase after the pandemic, primarily due to changes in customer behaviour, particularly among college students who were previously the most frequent users of online services in Yogyakarta, according to numerous drivers. Following the pandemic, many of these students have opted to purchase their own vehicles or engage in walking as a means of frugal living, similar to the older Gojek algorithm. This allowed drivers to remain at the basecamp, as their focus was not solely on acquiring orders but also on gathering and fostering a sense of solidarity. Consequently, some drivers attempted to circumvent the system by using another application—a ‘microhack’ according to Frey (2020) (commonly referred to as “*tuyul*”)—that enabled them to remain at the basecamp instead of constantly moving (see also: Mustika and Savirani 2021).

However, many drivers believed that the Gojek algorithm had changed prior to the



Photo 6: Apart from the basecamp that they built by themselves, drivers also use various spots and public places to wait for orders. During social distance policy in Yogyakarta, these five Shopee drivers were waiting to get an order at the verandah of a franchise shop. (Yogyakarta, July 2021, Maria Michelle Angelica).

onset of the pandemic. One of the drivers we interviewed, Mas Wowok^{*}, mentioned that Gojek had modified its algorithm four times since its inception. The first two changes were related to (1) the driver's mobile phone signal and (2) the era of the Wi-Fi epicentre. As a result, drivers began establishing basecamps. The number of basecamps subsequently grew due to a change in the Gojek algorithm (3) based on proximity - basecamps were typically located near popular restaurants or other “hotspots” such as schools and commercial areas. The most recent and final change (4) was an algorithm based on the performance system. Under this system, drivers were classified into four account levels: (1) platinum, (2) gold, (3) silver, and (4) basic. In order to receive more orders and maintain a positive account status, drivers were increasingly compelled to leave basecamps and work longer hours to uphold their ratings and performance. However, other competing platform intermediaries employed a different algorithm system. For example, Shopee's algorithm was said to be similar to the older Gojek algorithm. This allowed drivers to remain at the basecamp, as their focus was not solely on acquiring orders but also on gathering and fostering a sense of solidarity. Consequently, some drivers attempted to circumvent the system by using another application—a ‘microhack’ according to Frey (2020) (commonly referred to as “*tuyul*”)—that enabled them to remain at the basecamp instead of constantly moving (see also: Mustika and Savirani 2021).



Photo 7: In popular areas like train and bus stations, as well as malls, platform intermediaries such as Gojek and Grab provide shelters for drivers. For instance, here in Bandung, drivers can also wait in the designated waiting area near a bus station. However, based on our observation, we have noticed that not many drivers utilise these shelters for anything beyond waiting. Thus, shelters like this are rarely also used as base camps. (Bandung, July 2022, Fahmi Rizki Fahroji)

2 All names mentioned are pseudonyms.

‘Our basecamp is not as it used to be’

Pak Toni led us to the remnants of his group's basecamp, and he appeared visibly saddened. The group was established in 2018 as a community of Grab drivers who frequently received orders from the same vicinity. By 2019, their membership had surged to around 145 individuals, a significant rise from the initial 15 members. Despite their association with Grab indicated by the group's name, some drivers started to operate other accounts with different (usually newer) ride-hailing platforms like Shopee and Maxim. The shift from relying on one account in one platform to owning two (or even multiple) accounts was primarily caused due to the mounting challenges in earning a livelihood—a fact that many drivers we talked to agreed. The substantial influx of drivers joining the community mirrored Grab's nascent presence in Yogyakarta. During this period, Grab, akin to Gojek, rolled out numerous bonuses for its drivers and promotional offers for customers. This era was popularly recognized as the *'bakar duit'* period, a term highlighting the spending spree aimed at attracting more drivers and users into the platform.

The group leaders, such as Pak Toni, acknowledged their close and dynamic relationship with the “office”—the local branch of Grab. They recognized the importance of maintaining a good rapport with the office staff in order to seek assistance when necessary, such as addressing issues with members' accounts. However, they also understood the need to assert their rights as *'mitra'* (partner) firmly. Similar to numerous ojol drivers throughout Indonesia, the basecamp members held little hope regarding the Ministry of Transportation's new regulation in 2022. Additionally, within this 20% deduction, 5% was intended to be allocated back to the drivers in the form of facilities, including shelters, reduced prices for vehicle maintenance, and other related benefits. Nevertheless, according to the drivers' testimonies, the actual deduction surpassed the stipulated percentage.

When the group decided to establish a basecamp, Pak Toni, later appointed as the group leader, suggested opening an *angkringan* to add vibrancy to the space. Using funds pooled from members' contributions, the group purchased necessary items for the basecamp, including tents, cement, and other materials. Additionally, they acquired a green Grab tent through a competition. From 2018 to 2020, the group members frequented the basecamp, not only as a waiting area for orders but also as a social hub. Often, they spent 2 to 3 hours engaging in activities like playing cards and chess. For members, being part of a driver's network like this basecamp provided various benefits.

Starting from the end of 2020, less group members participate in the group activity. Less spent time in the basecamp. In addition, certain drivers within this particular group have chosen to endorse *'Grab Car Hemat'* by installing an advertisement on their motorcycles. These individuals are able to earn an extra 300,000 rupiahs, but this decision potentially diminishes the opportunities for both themselves and their fellow drivers to receive orders, as they are essentially promoting a competing service. Pak Toni, much like other *ojol* drivers we interviewed, echoed the sentiments that “the network is not what it used to be”.



Photo 8: The basecamp now lacked maintenance, with the electricity cut off due to the closure of the angkringan. The person managing it had found a more stable job, leaving the *angkringan* cart abandoned (Yogyakarta, September 1 2023, Hana).



Photo 9: A few chairs and dusty mats were left atop the food cart (Yogyakarta, September 1 2023, Hana).



Photo 10: Both the angkringan and Grab tent that they earned from a competition were torn in multiple places, and although a flag bearing the group's name still hung at the back, the basecamp was no longer in use. The group had undergone significant changes. (Yogyakarta, September 1 2023, Hana).



Photo 11: This occurred because the ojol industry is being seen as less profitable (leading some members to stop working as drivers) and there is a lack of unity among the members (both within the group and the larger ojol community). The increasing use of GPS-spoofing apps ('tuyul' or 'fake GPS') has created a division within the group, with some using these apps to increase their earnings, while others have expressed concerns about their use. (Yogyakarta, September 1 2023, Hana).

When we visited Pak Toni in 2023, the once thriving basecamp had deteriorated over time, transforming into a feeble and almost non-existent link within the wider network of drivers across the city. When FOYB, a forum consisting of drivers from various platforms in Yogyakarta, organised a demonstration only a few days before we met, Pak Toni and his fellow group member, Jojon, were not confident that the protest would yield any significant results.

The end of basecamp, the end of the ojol community?



Photo 12: In 2021, we started seeing more drivers waiting on the side of the road or on the sidewalk ("trotoar") as an impact of the pandemic, where they are not allowed to crowd because of activity restriction regulations imposed by the government (also known as PPKM "Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat"). (Yogyakarta, July 2021, Dhimas Langgeng)



Photo 13: However, many drivers told us that the changes in the Gojek algorithm's operation actually occurred a little before the pandemic and activity restrictions. With these changing algorithms and bonuses, more and more drivers are attempting to keep moving. Instead of waiting together with other drivers at a basecamp, this particular driver chose to wait for an order individually on the side of a usually congested road. (Yogyakarta, November 2021, Dhimas Langgeng).

As drivers are encouraged by the platform application to keep moving to stay ahead of the competition, we are noticing an increasing number of drivers waiting for orders individually on the side of the road, even after the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic is over. Will this truly be the end of basecamp, which signifies the growing fragmentation of unity among *ojol* drivers as a community? Or have drivers relocated their community somewhere else—on the outskirts of the city or even in virtual spaces? Have drivers found alternative ways to organise themselves? The empty basecamps, once spots in the city where *ojol* drivers used to gather - now leave unanswered questions.

References

- De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Frey, Bronwyn. 2020. "Platform Labor and In/Formality: Organization among Motorcycle Taxi Drivers in Bandung, Indonesia." *Anthropology of Work Review* 41 (1): 36–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/awr.12187>.
- Lembaga Demografi. 2018. *Ringkasan Hasil Survei Dampak Gojek Terhadap Perekonomian Indonesia*. Jakarta: Fakultas Ekonomi dan Bisnis Universitas Indonesia.
- Mustika, Wening, and Amalinda Savirani. 2021. "'Ghost Accounts', 'Joki Acconts' and 'Account Therapy': Everyday Resistance among Ride-Hailing Motorcycle Drivers in Yogyakarta, Indonesia." *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 39 (1): 48–68.
- Srnicek, N., 2017. *Platform capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.