

French ride-hailing app aims to reinvent taxis experience in Senegal

By Nellie Peyton and Elodie Toto

15 Mar 2022

Maguette Mbaye had always taken taxis to her banking job in Senegal's capital Dakar, but haggling over prices and inhaling fumes through the open windows every day wore her down.



A taxi with the Yango app logo is seen in Dakar, Senegal March 3, 2022. REUTERS/Ngouda Dione

She left all that behind when French ride-hailing app Heetch launched in January. The ride costs a little more, but she considers it a small price to pay for the peace of mind of a better car and fixed price.

"Sometimes we have dusty taxis where the windows don't close, the door only opens from the outside. Since I've been using Heetch I've been getting decent cars," said Mbaye, 33.

Heetch is the second ride-hailing app to be launched in Senegal after Yango, which is owned by Russian tech giant Yandex, started operations in December.

Both are testing a largely untapped market for ride-hailing services in Francophone West Africa, where the industry has been slower to take hold than in Anglophone countries, such as Nigeria and Ghana.

A growing middle class and widespread smartphone use have created an attractive market in Senegal, but there are challenges. Many drivers are illiterate, have never used a GPS and are used to negotiating prices.

Yango, active in 21 countries worldwide, launched in Ivory Coast in 2018, where it competes with industry giant Uber.

Heetch, one of the top three ride-hailing apps in France, also plans to launch in Ivory Coast this month. It said about 3,000 people have downloaded the application so far in Senegal. Yango declined to provide figures.

Any taxi driver can sign up for either app if they undergo training and their vehicle meets safety standards. While a few hundred have signed up for Heetch and Yango, some are unimpressed.

"What I earn from driving around the city is more than those who use Yango," said Modou Gning. "Where the customer is supposed to pay 2,000 CFA francs (\$3.37), Yango charges 1,300. It's good for Yango, but not the taxi driver."

The app companies are mindful not to antagonise taxi drivers, who in other countries have staged protests against ride-hailing apps.

"We are not a taxi killer application," said Patrick Pedersen, Heetch's general manager for expansion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Additional reporting by Ngouda Dione in Dakar and Ange Aboa in Abidjan; Writing by Nellie Peyton; Editing by Aaron Ross and Mke Harrison.

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