

## Analysis

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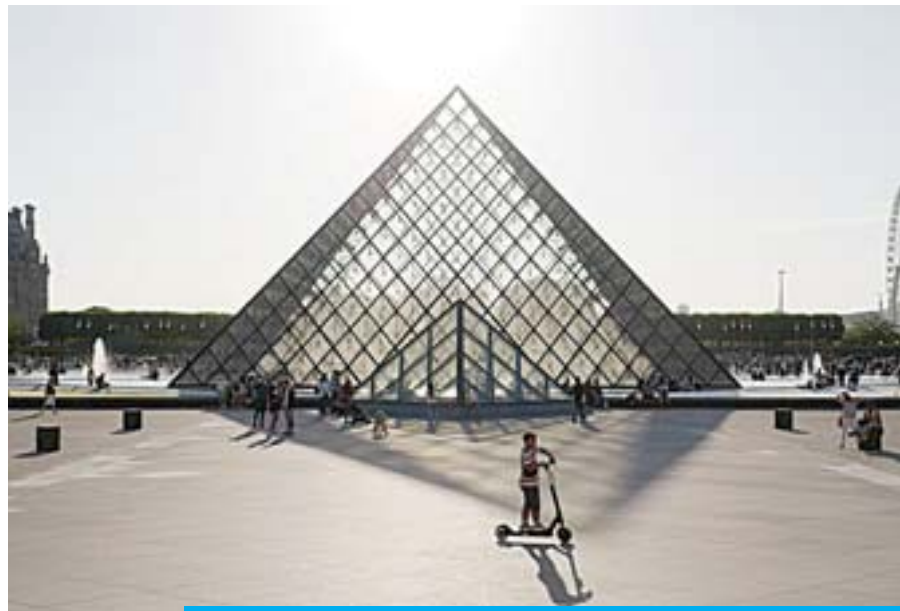
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(Left) A boy rides an electric scooter in front of the Pyramid of The Louvre Museum as the sun sets in Paris on July 3, 2019. (Right) A man rides an electric scooter in Medellin, Colombia, on July 2, 2019. —AFP



## E-scooters: Not so eco-friendly after all?

E-scooters touted as zero-carbon urban transport are flooding city streets worldwide, but just how green they are remains an open question. The companies - from multinationals to local startups - distributing them insist the omnipresent two-wheel vehicles are a boon for the environment and a curb on global warming. "Bird was founded to help create a cleaner and more hospitable world that prioritizes people over cars," the American firm, one of the global leaders in e-scooters, says on its website. "Scooters cut the use of vehicles and reduce the volume of traffic on the road," it said. "They also help reduce pollution and improve air quality."

Shared scooters that do not require docking ports can be driven door-to-door, avoid stressful searches for parking spaces, and have zero-emission motors. On paper, they have the potential to radically reduce urban car traffic: 70 percent of car trips between home and work in France, for example, are five kilometres or less, according to the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Research (INSEE).

"Micromobility could theoretically encompass all passenger trips of less than eight kilometres, which account for as much as 50 to 60 percent of today's total passenger miles travelled in China, the European Union, and the United States," consulting firm McKinsey said in a report. In the US, riders made nearly 40 million trips on shared scooters last year, according to the National Association of City Transportation Officials. Lime, a major player financed by Uber and Google-parent Alphabet, found that roughly one in every three Lime rides in 26 cities around the world replaces a trip by car. "From this shift, we estimate that our riders have avoided 15 million miles (24 km) of car travel and prevented 6,220 metric tons of carbon emissions" over a two-year period, the company noted.

### No long-term data

But do e-scooters live up to all the hype? With regard to Lime's claims, a survey by research group 6t of 4,500 commuters in Paris, Lyon and Marseilles revealed that only 19 percent used scooters to go to work or school - more than 40 percent of usage was by out-of-town visitors. Without access to e-scooters, 44 percent of respondents said they would have walked, 12 percent said they would have biked, and 30 percent would have used public transport.

Cars barely entered into the picture. "But this doesn't mean that we should get rid of e-scooters - absolutely not!" said Jeremie Almosni, head of mobility at the Ademe, the French government agency for energy efficiency. "The fact that half of usage is recreational is striking," he acknowledged. "But at least this favors a more mixed use of transport. It's definitely a way to get people out-and-about more, and perhaps a way of encouraging them to give up cars."

There is also a lot of uncertainty as to the lifespan of shared e-scooters, which varies with hardware and intensity of usage. It's a key question, because how long they last is a major part of what determines environmental impact. "As of today, it is impossible to say whether e-scooters are good or bad for the environment because we lack long-term statistics on life cycles," said Denis Benita, a transportation engineer at Ademe. One study from Louisville, Kentucky put the average life span at 28 days. Another said it was closer to three months.

### 'We learned a lot'

Across what has already become a multi-billion dollar industry, companies are trying to make the machines more robust, and thus more profitable. "An electric scooter lasts twice as long today as when we first came to France in June 2018," a Lime France spokesman told AFP. The company also recycles the hardware - "every piece, down to the last screw, is reused," according to the spokesman. The learning curve has been equally sharp for Bird, said Kenneth Schlenker, head of Bird France. "We've only been operating in cities for about a year and a half," he told AFP. "We've learned a lot in that time."

By consolidating parts from engines, for example, the company plans to expand their life span two years, he noted. The company aims to make travel by Bird carbon neutral by reducing emissions and through carbon credits. Batteries are another issue. The electric scooter and motorcycle market - which could be worth \$14 billion by 2025, according to Markets & Research - has mostly shifted to lithium-ion (li-ion) batteries, which are lighter and last longer than other kinds. But lithium is not problem-free either: It poses an environmental risk related to both sourcing and waste. Lime has recently partnered with a French company that claims it can recycle 70 percent of spent batteries. —AFP

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## E-scooter 'tsunami' flooding cities worldwide

They appeared in June last year as Paris was waking up from its annual all-night Festival of Music: hundreds of green-and-black electric scooters dotting the pavements of the capital. The timing was perfect, with the city struggling with a botched revamp of its main bike-sharing service that left countless frustrated users looking for a new form of transport. Cheap, widely available and easily unlocked with a smartphone app, e-scooters checked all the boxes, becoming wildly popular overnight.

"It's happened very quickly and a bit of an anarchic way," admitted French Transport Minister Elisabeth Borne in May. "It's effectively been the law of the jungle." Over the course of a year, a total of 13 operators piled into the Paris market, putting 20,000 scooters on the streets in a chaotic free-for-all that left legislators at a loss in a country normally known for its rigorous rules and regulations.

The backlash wasn't long coming - pedestrians terrorized by silent riders speeding down pavements, randomly-parked scooters cluttering curbs and the city's historic squares, and a growing number of accidents. This practical and fun form of transport, seen from Boston to Bangkok, has posed major regulatory problems, with city officials worldwide taking different approaches, from laissez-faire in Paris to a virtual blanket ban in London.

### Transportation tsunami

Electric scooters were first launched in California in Sept 2017 by a startup called Bird, followed eight months later by competitor Lime. By half-way through 2018, they had both hit Europe, moving swiftly on into the Middle East, Asia and Latin America. Today, Bird and Lime are the largest shared-scooter operators in the world. "Any city in the world that has been working on its transportation policy, even 18 months ago, wasn't anticipating this tsunami," said Joel Hazan, a partner at the Boston Consulting Group. "It has been the fastest rollout in the history of mobility

services and the quickest wave to spread across the world. It's basically gone global over the past two years."

For cities, the main headache is safety, but experts say that can only be addressed with a rethink of urban planning. Elderly people knocked flying, pedestrians with broken bones, riders killed in a crash - though the horror stories exist, there is "no reliable data on collisions", a European Transport Safety Council (ETSC) says. Nippy and speedy, scooters zip along at up to 25 km an hour, making them too fast for the pavement but problematic on roads.

Most cities would like to allow e-scooters on bike lanes, but that space often doesn't exist. "Cities are designed for car usage and the new question we face is how do we split the space that we've been dedicating to cars to create more space for pedestrians, for bikes and e-scooters," says BCG's Hazan. "Security will only work if we can segregate the space," he said.

### 'Geofenced' parking

Space is also a problem with issues like parking, said Philippe Crist, an advisor to the International Transport Forum at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). "A tremendous amount of the city is devoted to on-street parking, and if there is clutter on the pavement, it's because there is very little space elsewhere," he said. Cities are now re-allocating on-street parking space to bikes and scooters, he said.

"It doesn't actually require much - some have just started painting lines on pavements" as designated parking bays, he said, while others are experimenting with GPS technology to keep parking to a designated area. Known as "geofencing", it can stop a user logging off and finishing a ride if left in the wrong place. "If not left in the right place, the operator can charge an extra fee or not allow the trip to finish, so it will keep (charging the user)

## E-scooters zip into traffic chaos in Latin America

Electric scooters promised to revolutionize transportation in Latin America's traffic-clogged, smog-choked cities, but critics say they have only added to the free-wheeling chaos. Like metallic mushrooms sprouting overnight, electric scooters from ride share companies appeared by the thousands last year on streets and sidewalks from Bogota and Lima to Sao Paulo and Mexico City. For around half a dollar, plus a per-minute charge of about 10 US cents, anyone with a smartphone and a bank card can unlock these scooters and zip silently through the pandemonium of Latin America's biggest cities - some of the world's most congested.

They then leave the mini-vehicles at their destination. As an added bonus, "monopatines" - as they are known in Spanish - help cut down on the notorious pollution plaguing the region's mega-cities by giving commuters an electric alternative, advocates say. But, as it did in Europe and

the United States, the scooters' arrival has also sparked controversy - amplified, in the case of Latin America, by the sheer size of its cities and the anarchy on its roads.

Riding down sidewalks, up one-way streets and into accidents - at speeds of up to 40 km per hour, typically with no helmets and little experience - scooter users have exacerbated the very chaos the new technology was supposed to alleviate, critics say. Protests have erupted over the fact that riders tend to leave the vehicles in the middle of the sidewalk or even the street when they are finished - sometimes blocking doors, driveways, ramps for the disabled or the streets themselves.

"Part of the problem in this city is that nobody respects anything," said Oscar Barrio, 44, a scooter user in the trendy Roma neighborhood of Mexico City, a sprawling capital of 20 million people. He himself makes an effort to exercise good scooter safety and etiquette, he hastened to add. But the same cannot always be said of his fellow riders. A Google search for "monopatines accidentes" - using the Spanish - returns ample video evidence.

In March, a scooter user in Mexico City riding the wrong way up a one-way street was sent flying through the air by a car making a left turn. A similar accident in February killed a 28-year-old rider in the Mexican capital's Zona Rosa neighborhood. In Lima, Peru, a 63-year-old

woman ended up with both arms broken when an electric scooter ran her over on the sidewalk last April. And in Sao Paulo, Brazil, authorities have registered 125 accidents involving electric scooters from January to May.

### Ban to plan

Not everyone has jumped on the bandwagon, with London the only major city in Europe where e-scooters are banned unless a rider has a driving license, insurance, road tax, a helmet and a number plate. Although new regulations are under consideration, for the moment the law is strictly enforced. Last year, a 15-year-old boy got six points on his future driving license after being caught on a scooter riding at high speed.

"The best policymakers in the world are banning e-scooters, not forever, just to launch it in an organized, controlled and efficient way that is synchronized with the rest of the transportation modes," said BCG's Hazan. Singapore is one such example, where new laws came into force on July 1 following a pilot involving three local startups. Now only the 85,000 registered e-scooters with a license plate are allowed on the city's bike paths, with offenders facing a fine of 1,500 US dollars or three months in jail.

There is a 10 km-per-hour speed limit, which is carefully monitored by officers with speed guns, and members of the public are urged to report any speeding or reckless riding. Using GPS tracking, riders are fined for parking illegally and the city offers a Safe Riding program. "Cities are trying to impose much more rigorous standards on how they are deployed and what information is required from them," said Crist, pointing to the rapid turnaround in Paris. In recent months, the city banned riding and parking on pavements, and has imposed a code of conduct under which operators will eventually have to geofence parking spots and enforce automatic speed curbs. Five or six of the city's 13 fleet operators have pulled out in the past week, Crist said. —AFP

### 'Attack vehicle neutralized'

With politicians slow to impose regulations, locals have started taking matters into their own hands. In Mexico City, angry residents scraped off the QR codes that enable users to unlock the scooters, and immobilized others with strips of tape reading "attack vehicle neutralized". Still, the scooter companies see Latin America as a natural place to expand. The region is home to three of the five most gridlocked cities in the world, according to consulting firm Inrix - Bogota, Mexico City and Sao Paulo - and the resulting air pollution is an increasingly urgent concern.

Meanwhile, an enlarged middle class has growing access to cell phones and debit cards. San Francisco-based startup Lime is set to launch service in Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires and Lima this month. Mexico City-based Grin is currently hiring nearly 70 people around the region, and has just teamed up with Brazilian company Yellow to expand their footprint. The companies tend to respond with a common strategy when they face accusations of exacerbating traffic chaos: Blame the cars. —AFP

## Tel Aviv takes a ride to scooter 'paradise'

Matan Ben Ari was among the many taking to one of Tel Aviv's main streets on a recent day - not with a car or public transport, but with an electric scooter. He uses them all week, including on Saturdays, the weekly Sabbath or Jewish day of rest, when no public transport is allowed. "There is no public transport and taxis are expensive," said the 28-year-old. "That leaves this solution. Also it's fun to travel with it." Israel is in the country's economic capital Tel Aviv have embraced electric scooters and their smart-phone rental systems, using them to zip along Mediterranean beaches and avoid heavy traffic. They provide the added benefit of serving as a transport option on the Sabbath as well.

But, like in other cities, the growing popularity of electric scooters has not come without complaints from those who say they are a dangerous nuisance. Wind at their backs and phones in their hands, Ben Ari and others were riding along Ibn Gavirol street, stretching north-to-south across the city and where they compete for space with bicycles. "It's convenient, accessible," said 20-year-old Inbal as she leaned on the handlebars of her scooter. An app on her phone tells her where the nearest available scooter is located. "It's easy," she said. "I go to the beach, I stop there, I use the app and that's all."

Tel Aviv, with its reputation for modernity, openness and list of high-tech firms, seems especially likely to embrace the trend. Its sunny weather, flat landscape and traffic jams also make the scooters an appealing option. Bird, a US-based firm, was the first to deploy in August last year with 2,500 electric scooters, followed by Wind, Lime and Leo. There are now around 7,500 available, in addition to the thousands of

bicycles and electric bikes already on the streets. "Micromobility was already big (in Tel Aviv) and Bird has accelerated the process," said Yaniv Rivlin, head of Bird in Israel, using the word to describe lightweight vehicles like electric scooters and bikes. With 60 percent of its residents under 40, Tel Aviv is "scooter paradise," he said. But the trend has not only drawn in young people. Electric scooters have been a life-changer in the congested city for Adi Krispin, 43. He uses them at least an hour and a half per day to bring his daughter to the playground, go to work and grocery shopping, he said. "It's difficult to maneuver a bike to bring it into the house or the office," he said. "It's simple with a scooter."

City officials note positive benefits from the trend. Meital Lehavi, deputy mayor in charge of transport, said scooters have helped fill a void in public transport, which "does not meet the real needs" of residents in a city that tends to be more progressive than the rest of the country. She notes the influence of ultra-Orthodox Jews on Israel's right-wing government and the Sabbath ban on public transport. The scooters also have a positive environmental effect when they are used in place of cars, she added. However, Tel Aviv is like other cities across the world in struggling with the downsides. Lehavi says separate lanes for bicycles and scooters are lacking as well as racks where they can be stored. Riders often ride freely on sidewalks and leave scooters wherever they feel, creating obstacles that can pose a danger. "It's a new trend that no one really knows what to make of," she said.

Taking a cue from other cities worldwide, Tel Aviv has decided to regulate their usage. It has given operators until mid-September to put in place dedicated racks and to share their data with city officials. Bird's Rivlin said those requirements were "reasonable". "Thanks to the scooters, there are fewer cars and we will continue to cooperate with the city to further this revolution in the months and years to come," he said. —AFP

## E-scooter market charges ahead but faces bumpy road

The E-scooter market has exploded over the past two years but operators are by no means assured of finding a long-term niche in the urban transport sector. Participants, jumping on a bandwagon which saw US firm Bird first out of the blocks in 2017, must now ensure their own survival as they confront the thorny issue of longevity of gear mostly made in China.

Among the best known companies having joined the two-wheeled party are US firm Lime, Mexico's Grow Mobility and Germany's Flash, who have between them raised \$1.5 billion in funding according to The Boston Consulting Group (BCG). Last year alone saw global growth in the market of 76 percent according to a report by France's Federation of Micro Mobility Professionals (FP2M) and the Smart Mobility Lab. Bird and Lime have both muscled in on more than 120 cities worldwide and claim a combined 10 million users to date. The BCG calculates that by 2025, the global market will be worth \$40 to \$50 billion.

Self-service E-scooter providers do not publish financial data but it is widely accepted that they are still a long way off turning a profit. The BCG study calculates that four months of use covers the cost of making a scooter but rented ones tend to last for only three. "As of today, the economy of the E-scooter does not work," says Tyler Barrack, one of the authors of the BCG report. "We are above the four months put forward by the BCG," insists, however, Arthur-Louis Jacquier, director general of Lime France.

He highlights efforts by Lime to extend the life of their machines, a crucial issue given the

environmental footprint of the scooters. "We are capable of repairing an E-scooter in 25-30 minutes and we are going to throw almost nothing away," says Jacquier. The Quartz website carried out an enquiry last year into the use of scooters in Louisville, Kentucky, which showed that they last - on average - 28.8 days.

Bird, whose scooters are used there, contests the figures. So far, the only clear winner from the explosion of scooter use looks to be Chinese manufacturer Ninebot, which notably is the main supplier in US rental markets. According to Bloomberg, Ninebot estimated late last year that four of every five scooters in circulation globally came from its factories.

### Consolidation ahead

The spectacular growth in E-scooter use is down to a swift evolution in modes of transport. "There has been a real move towards the electrical and towards urban mobility which is having overtaking leisure mobility," Jean Ambert, director general of Smart Mobility Lab, told AFP recently. Yet uncertainty persists over the market's long-term prospects. "How many problems are remaining, especially with regulators? Where do we park? How do we protect customers?" asks Barrack, as city and state authorities roll out legislation to cover existing legal loopholes surrounding use of such machines.

There is also the issue of how many E-scooter startups will manage to survive cut-throat competition which is a hallmark of the market. "Consolidation is inevitable," says Barrack. Even so, Patrick Studener, Bird vice-president observes: "We've seen many companies pivoting to get into the E-scooter business. It proves the market's right." Bird recently bought out rival and compatriot Scoot for, the Wall Street Journal reported citing people familiar with the matter, \$25 million. There has furthermore been media speculation of a Lime buyout by Uber, which has already invested in the firm to add E-scooters to its car app. —AFP