Balancing Memory, Load, and Emotion: Cognitive Demands in Ride Scheduling Interfaces

Alex Chea, MSCS

Department of Human Factors in Information Design, Bentley University, McCallum Graduate School of Business

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Dr. Bill Gribbson

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Introduction

In today's digital landscape, ride-sharing applications such as Lyft and Uber in the United States and Grab in Southeast Asia have become essential tools for navigating urban life. While these platforms promise speed and convenience, they often place substantial yet invisible cognitive demands on users. Tasks like selecting a destination, comparing ride types, and confirming trip details engage working memory, require real-time decisions, and often heighten emotional strain, especially under time pressure, when users face sudden interface changes or unclear feedback (Norman, 1988; Wickens, 2002). While these interactions might appear routine at first glance, they often require users to manage more complexity than the interface makes visible.

Even with decades of research in usability and human-centered design, ride-scheduling platforms like Lyft often overlook users' cognitive and emotional demands during fast-paced, real-time decision-making. This review draws on established frameworks from cognitive psychology and human-computer interaction (HCI)—including models of working memory (Baddeley, 2000; Cowan, 2001), cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988), and emotional-cognitive interaction (Pessoa, 2009)—to evaluate how the Lyft booking experience aligns—or fails to align—with human behavioral constraints.

This paper argues that interfaces that overlook limitations in working memory, cognitive load, and emotional regulation increase the risk of user error, anxiety, and mistrust. By examining these behavioral demands in the context of Lyft's interface design, the review identifies key areas where improvements can reduce friction, support decision-making, and improve overall usability in high-pressure, real-time environments.

Literature Review

This section examines four interrelated domains—working memory limitations, cognitive load theory, emotional regulation, and trust in automation—to evaluate how ride-scheduling applications affect users' mental and emotional capacities. These frameworks offer a structured lens for analyzing how design choices shape usability, attention, confidence, and task performance in time-sensitive environments. Each domain builds on the last to reveal how fragmented feedback, ambiguous cues, or overcomplex visuals can accumulate into serious behavioral barriers during ride-booking.

Working Memory: Structure and Stain in Real-Time Decision Making

Working memory allows individuals to retain and manipulate key information while engaging in ongoing tasks. In the context of digital interfaces, it is essential for tracking selections, such as drop-off points, ride types, or arrival estimates, while simultaneously navigating screens and interpreting system feedback. According to Baddeley's (2000) influential model, working memory consists of three components: the phonological loop, which processes auditory and verbal input; the visuospatial sketchpad, which manages visual and spatial representations; and the central executive, which governs attention allocation and coordination across systems. Baddeley later introduced a fourth component—the episodic buffer—which integrates information across modalities into a coherent mental representation. This is especially relevant in interface design, where users combine spatial cues (e.g., maps) and verbal content (e.g., ride names) to form navigable mental models. When all three systems are taxed simultaneously, the potential for cognitive breakdown increases significantly.

Cowan (2001) refined earlier models by demonstrating that working memory is limited to approximately four meaningful chunks of information. These chunks can be visual items, concepts, or task-relevant cues. When more than four discrete elements are presented simultaneously, especially without external organization, users will likely experience overload, leading to slowed reaction times or reduced task accuracy. When more than four elements are presented without visual hierarchy or grouping, the risk of overload rises, especially in high-pressure or mobile-use conditions. Chunking mechanisms, such as visual grouping or progressive disclosure, can help users retain and compare multiple items, but raw memory capacity becomes a limiting factor in their absence.

Barrouillet et al.'s (2004) Time-Based Resource Sharing (TBRS) model further explains cognitive strain. It suggests that individuals must alternate attention between storage (retaining information) and processing (actively using that information), which inherently compete for mental resources. Attention becomes fragmented when both tasks are required simultaneously, such as remembering a selected option while evaluating new inputs. Without persistent confirmations or visible memory aids, this dual-task burden increases the likelihood of mistakes or dropped steps.

Together, these models suggest that real-time decision-making places a fragile system under pressure. Working memory is not designed to support extended multitasking without external support. Interfaces that assume otherwise risk pushing users toward cognitive saturation, particularly if they lack step-by-step guidance, confirmation feedback, or memory scaffolding. These theories clarify that easing the burden on internal memory is essential for helping users perform reliably under pressure.

Cognitive Load Theory: Managing Complexity in Interface Design

While working memory theory outlines how much information people can hold at once, Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) explains how task complexity and design either support or exceed that capacity. According to Sweller (1988), cognitive load consists of three types: intrinsic load, tied to the task’s inherent difficulty; extraneous load, shaped by how information is presented; and germane load, which supports meaningful learning. Intrinsic load is generally fixed—users must make choices, compare options, and complete tasks—but extraneous load is flexible and highly sensitive to design.

A major contributor to extraneous load is the split-attention effect, which occurs when users must mentally connect related information presented in separate places (Sweller, 1988; Chandler & Sweller, 1991). Suppose key data—price, arrival time, or ride type—is not visually grouped or co-located. In that case, users must shift attention across different interface regions, increasing processing effort and the likelihood of error.

Redundancy also adds to the burden. Users are forced to filter out irrelevant content when information is repeated, such as identical icons, labels, or visual elements, without adding new value. Paas and van Merriënboer (1994) found that this unnecessary repetition drains cognitive resources. Similarly, over-reliance on a single channel, like visual input, can overwhelm users, particularly in mobile contexts where their environment is already cognitively demanding.

To address this, Van Merriënboer and Sweller (2005) advocate for streamlined workflows and reduced decision friction. Disorganized interfaces disrupt mental flow and prevent users from building stable mental models of system behavior, limiting both real-time performance and long-term familiarity.

CLT emphasizes a critical but straightforward truth: even routine tasks can become cognitively demanding when design introduces unnecessary friction. Grouped elements, clear visual hierarchies, and well-balanced sensory input are not just aesthetic choices—they are necessary supports that ease mental load and strengthen user performance.

Emotional Regulation + Its Impact on Cognitive Performance

Cognitive overload is rarely driven by information processing demands alone; it is often shaped by emotional responses that amplify or moderate its effects. Anxiety, in particular, can be especially disruptive because it competes for the same limited attentional and working memory resources needed to complete tasks effectively. As Pessoa (2009) notes, emotionally charged situations—especially those marked by ambiguity or perceived lack of control—can divert cognitive resources away from the task. When system feedback is absent, ambiguous, or delayed, users may begin to doubt whether their actions were registered, which increases uncertainty and emotional strain. This tension becomes especially pronounced in fast-paced interface contexts, where users must interpret ambiguous system cues under time constraints.

Control-Value Theory (Pekrun, 2006) adds that anxiety emerges when people see a task as essential but feel they lack control over the outcome. In fast-moving, ambiguous contexts, this type of stress can escalate quickly. Users may experience physical discomfort, narrowed attention, and reduced focus ability as tension rises. These emotional states can form feedback loops that either support or impair performance, depending on how well the interface supports users cognitively.

Recent research affirms the Yerkes-Dodson principle, which describes an inverted-U relationship between stress and performance. Brulé and Vachon (2022) found that moderate arousal improved speed and accuracy in digital tasks, while high stress levels increased errors. Similarly, Biron et al. (2023) reported that insufficient and excessive stress negatively affected productivity and emotional well-being. These findings confirm that emotional regulation is not peripheral but fundamental to sustained cognitive efficiency under pressure.

Pessoa's framework further explains that heightened emotional demands compete for the same resources needed for memory and attention. Matthews et al. (1999) support this view, noting that anxiety weakens attentional control, especially when system cues are delayed or unclear. In these cases, users may become preoccupied with uncertainty—rechecking selections, repeating steps, or hesitating—rather than progressing confidently through a task.

These models show that emotional regulation is deeply tied to cognitive performance. When systems fail to account for emotional strain by offering clear feedback, timely confirmation, or supportive cues, they risk diminishing the user experience and undermining functional accuracy and decision quality.

Trust, Feedback, and Automation Complacency

Trust is critical to human-system interaction, especially in partially automated environments where users depend on system feedback to confirm their actions. Unlike fully manual or fully automated systems, interactive interfaces require ongoing trust calibration—users must understand what the system is doing, anticipate what will happen next, and know whether their input was received. This process becomes especially fragile when system responses are delayed, ambiguous, or absent, undermining users' confidence and orientation.

Endsley's (1995) situation awareness model emphasizes the importance of real-time feedback in helping users stay oriented within a system. When users cannot perceive system status, comprehend its meaning, or predict its next step, situation awareness declines, resulting in higher cognitive load and reduced performance. As for Parasuraman et al. (2000), they expand on this in their automation misuse and disuse framework. Misuse arises when users place too much trust in automation and stop monitoring it, while disuse occurs when trust erodes, and users avoid using the system altogether. Both outcomes are often rooted in inconsistent or insufficient feedback. Lee and See (2004) define trust as a dynamic, context-sensitive state that adjusts based on system behavior. It depends on how predictable, transparent, and responsive the system appears in real time. Under time pressure, mismatches between user expectations and actual system responses can lead to hesitation, unnecessary rechecking, or complete task abandonment.

These models show that trust in automation is emotional and a cognitively regulated process built through repeated, meaningful interaction. When these elements fail, trust erodes, cognitive strain increases, and interaction becomes more error-prone. Designing for timely, clear, consistent feedback is essential to supporting trust and reducing mental effort during interaction.

Design Review: Lyft Interface

This section applies the behavioral frameworks outlined in Part I to specific interaction points within the Lyft ride-scheduling interface. Each figure reveals how working memory, cognitive load, emotional regulation, and trust are engaged—or strained—during everyday user interactions.

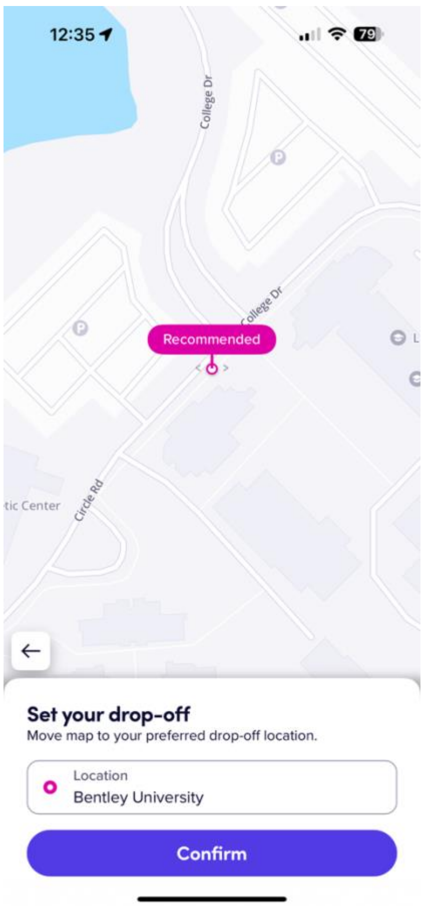

Figure 1: Ride Location Drop-off Screen

In Figure 1, this screen requests a drop-off location but offers no clear feedback once a destination is selected. Users are left to infer whether their action has been registered, placing excessive reliance on internal memory. According to Baddeley's (2000) model, this requires the visuospatial sketchpad to manage map navigation while the central executive monitors task state without visual confirmation—an unsustainable task in high-speed environments. Endsley's (1995) situation awareness model explains how poor feedback leads to degraded mental models of system status. Without confirmation, users may lose track of whether a step has been completed, prompting repeated actions or second-
mory and a trust breakdown. A simple, persistent summary cue—such as "Drop-off set at 125 Summer St"—would mitigate this by reducing working memory load and reinforcing trust calibration.

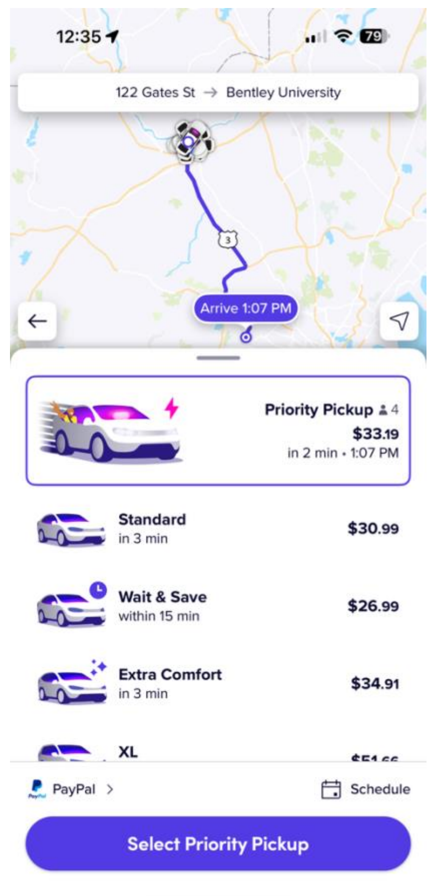

Figure 2: Ride Comparison Interface with Limited Memory Support

A closer examination of Figure 2 reveals multiple similar ride options—Priority, Standard, and Wait & Save—without distinct visual grouping. Users must simultaneously retain pricing, estimated time of arrival, and vehicle type details. Cowan's (2001) chunking theory indicates that working memory can only handle a few meaningful units simultaneously. Users are forced to mentally compare minor distinctions across multiple options without scaffolding, which easily exceeds this threshold. Sweller's (1988) cognitive load theory further explains the friction here. The interface creates an extraneous load through its uniform visual presentation, which fails to chunk or organize related elements. The split-attention effect is especially salient, as users must visually jump between columns and components without guidance, increasing the likelihood of confusion or selection errors.

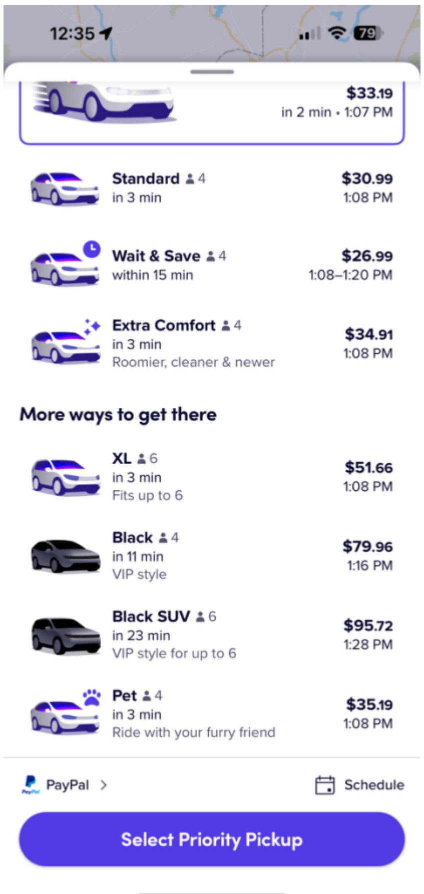

Figure 4: Expanded Ride Type List with Minimal Categorization

Figure 3 provides critical insight into an expanded list of ride types, each presented with nearly identical visual formats. The repetition of icons, text, and layout elements, without meaningful differentiation, leads to redundancy effects. As Paas and van Merriënboer (1994) explain, redundancy places unnecessary strain on cognitive resources by forcing users to suppress or sort through repeated information rather than process it meaningfully. The Time-Based Resource Sharing (TBRS) model sheds light on this issue by showing that users must divide their focus when trying to hold onto previous decisions while considering new ones. Making the users split their attention between remembering and actively thinking, which relies on the same limited mental capacity, makes design supports like memory cues, progressive disclosure, or filtering tools, this dual-task burden can quickly exceed capacity and impair decision-making. Streamlining content and grouping ride types—for example, in collapsible categories—can ease the load and help users make faster, more confident choices (Barrouillet et al., 2004).

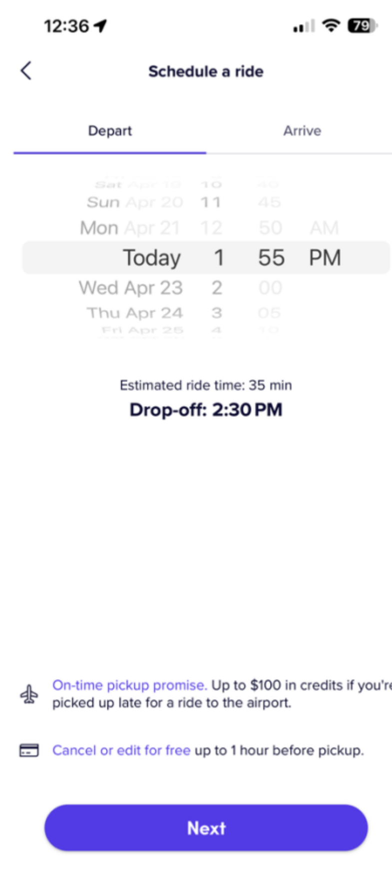

Figure 3: Lyft Interface – Depart Time Selection View

In Figure 4, after choosing a departure time for a scheduled ride, the interface does not offer any lasting visual cue to confirm the user's scheduled departure time selection. Without this feedback, users may struggle to track their progress, an issue that becomes more pronounced when decisions need to be made quickly. Drawing from Control-Value Theory (Pekrun, 2006), this lack of clarity can increase anxiety, particularly when the task feels important but users are uncertain whether their input has been acknowledged.

From a cognitive perspective, the Time-Based Resource Sharing (TBRS) model (Barrouillet et al., 2004) highlights how this scenario splits attention between storing the selected time and processing additional information or navigating through other panels. Without visual anchors or confirmation cues, users must hold that information in working memory longer than necessary, which increases the risk of forgetfulness or mistakes.

This also affects the user's trust in the system. When clear cause-and-effect feedback is missing, people may question whether the system functions as expected. As Lee and See (2004) describe, trust calibration depends on alignment between user actions and observable system responses. Inconsistent feedback can lead users to second-guess their actions, repeat steps, or abandon the process altogether, adding emotional stress and unnecessary cognitive load.

Finally, Figure 5 introduces a different scheduling context—selecting an arrival time rather than a departure—but offers no continuity cues or transfer of prior inputs. Users must mentally reconstruct what they selected on the previous screen and whether that data still applies. Endsley (1995) describes this lack of linkage as situation awareness decay: the user no longer understands the system's current state or how their previous actions affect it. Task switching also imposes measurable strain. According to Wickens' (2002) multiple resource theory, toggling between conceptual frames (depart vs. arrive) forces users to redirect attention across incompatible cognitive channels. Without transitional aids or cross-referenced summaries, the switch introduces cognitive friction, slows decision-making, and increases the likelihood of incomplete or incorrect scheduling.

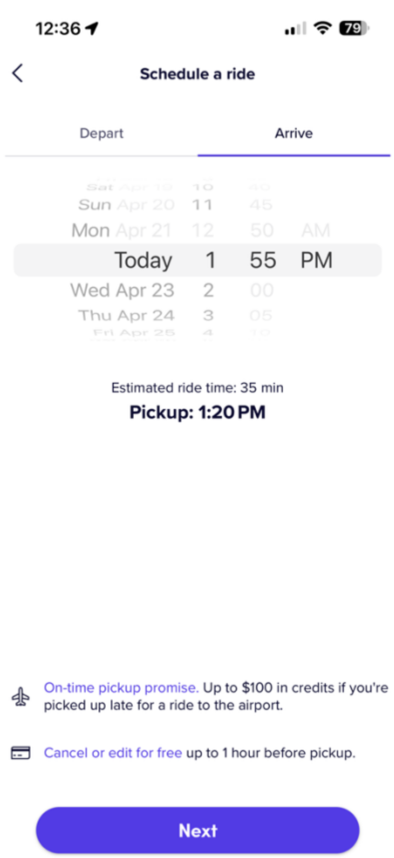

Figure 5: Lyft Interface – Arrive Time Selection View

This ambiguity amplifies user stress emotionally. As Pessoa (2009) explains, unresolved uncertainty consumes attentional resources. If users must pause to interpret whether the system preserved their previous selections—or worse, assume it didn't—the interface invites over-checking, hesitation, or even task abandonment.

Recommendation

The findings in this review highlight several practical ways to improve ride-scheduling interfaces. While booking a ride may seem routine, the task often involves more than it appears—users must evaluate several options at once, navigate changing screens, and interpret what the system is doing, sometimes under time pressure. When the interface does not provide enough feedback or visual organization, it can place more strain on memory, increase stress, and erode trust in the system.

For instance, Figure 1 illustrates the absence of a confirmation cue after selecting a drop-off location, forcing users to rely on short-term memory rather than receiving direct visual validation. Second, cognitive load can be reduced through visual grouping and hierarchical organization, as shown in Figures 2 and 3, where ride options are ungrouped and visually indistinct conditions that complicate comparison and overload attention. Third, minimizing redundancy and avoiding split-attention effects is critical; Figure 3 highlights how duplicated icons and text elements increase cognitive friction without contributing to clarity. Fourth, maintaining continuity across task views helps users form stable mental models. The shift between "Depart" and "Arrive" screens—depicted in Figures 4 and 5—lacks transitional cues or preserved inputs, forcing users to reconstruct the task context from memory. Finally, emotional strain should be anticipated and addressed through transparent system behavior. As shown in Figures 4 and 5, the absence of clear real-time feedback often leaves users unsure whether the system has captured their actions, which leading them to double-check steps and second-guess their progress, especially when they are short with times or in a rush This response goes beyond simple confusion; it reveals a deeper disconnect between user expectations and the system's ability to provide reassurance and support during high-pressure tasks.

Conclusion

While ride-scheduling interfaces may appear intuitive, this review has shown that they often conflict with fundamental cognitive and emotional constraints. Drawing from established behavioral models—including working memory theory, cognitive load theory, emotional regulation frameworks, and trust calibration research—this paper has demonstrated that even minor interface oversights can introduce significant cognitive burden and psychological stress.

These are not minor usability inconveniences; they represent core human factors principles violations. Systems requiring users to store task-critical information, interpret ambiguous feedback, or recover from poor state continuity risk degrading performance and trust. Such issues are particularly harmful in time-sensitive or high-stakes use contexts, where minor delays or misunderstandings can result in missed outcomes or abandoned tasks.

As digital tools increasingly shape how people move through cities, make decisions, and engage with automated systems, designers must take a more behaviorally grounded approach to interface development. Supporting cognitive performance ensures interfaces remain accessible, reliable, and usable across diverse real-world contexts. When ride-scheduling systems are designed to reflect actual human capacities, rather than idealized or overly simplified ones, they become more resilient, intuitive, and responsive to the demands of everyday life.

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