
From Slow Slog to Inspired Indulgence – Enriching the experience of time on the bus

This research aims to investigate the notion of the 'bus experience'; and what potential the greater understanding of subjective experience and expectation of bus travel may have for the enrichment of bus services and the user experience in general.

Background

This PhD is a small part of a larger project: *Ideas in Transit* (IIT) – which itself is a part of the *Future Intelligent Transport Systems* (FITS) initiative. FITS takes the view that more efficient mobility will be of benefit to society, the economy, and the environment; through the savings in time and resources that it will engender. This research is oriented to the aims of the FITS initiative, and more specifically to the user-innovation aspect of the IIT project; whilst recognising the independent development of this PhD. As such, the research takes a bottom-up approach to the enrichment of transport options; and is concerned with investigating creative or innovative applications of bus users' travel-time; with specific reference to the influence of mobile technologies (from 'low' technologies – such as a pen and paper; to 'high' technologies – such as personal ICTs) or other carried objects (coffee, umbrellas, luggage, etc) on users' experiences, perceptions, and expectations of the bus.

A key aim of this PhD is to provide recommendations to policymakers and stakeholders in the bus industry concerning the motivational potential that innovative travel-time activity and technology use has to encourage more people to use the bus. The project is rooted in transport sustainability, and as such it recognises the pressing societal need to move away from the current situation of profligate car-use and sprawling development. This research supports a modal shift towards the bus as a more sustainable mode than the private car; and the intent is to

help promote, bolster, and expand patronage on public bus services.

Objectives

The project objectives for this PhD research are provided below:

- To explore the potential applications of creative travel-time use and user-innovation in the context of the bus
- To investigate the relationship between creative travel-time uses (and user-innovation); and users' subsequent experience, expectation, and perception of the bus environment
- To explore the socio-spatial suitability of the public bus environment to the creative use of mobile technologies; in comparison to other, researched modes such as the train
- To investigate of the issue of responsibility for the *subjective* aspects of the bus experience between transport authorities and the user population
- To explore more general travel-time use by bus passengers and its effect on individuals' experiences, expectations, and perceptions of a service

Methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of the research, the project follows a mixed-methods approach for the collection of data. There are three principal rounds of data collection, two of which are now complete with the third in the early planning stages.

The first round of data collection involved the use of a Social Network [web]Site (SNS) – Facebook™ – for the collection of qualitative data. Participants took part in an extended, asynchronous, online discussion – lead by the researcher. The method successfully generated rich, qualitative data that was used to produce working assumptions – or

hypotheses – about travel time use and subjective experience in the bus context.

Using these assumptions, the second round of data collection comprised of two focus groups – one with car users and one with bus users – in which participants discussed in greater depth the themes which emerged from the first round. Analysis of this dataset is ongoing and will inform the final round of data collection.

The final round of data collection is still in the planning stages, and consists of a quantitative questionnaire survey to be administered widely to the student population across the UWE campuses. The intent of this final round of data collection is to test more widely the assumptions about the bus environment drawn from the qualitative datasets, and to confirm and supplement the conclusions and recommendations of the final thesis – which are intended to inform policymakers and stakeholders in the bus industry.

Findings

The qualitative data generated in the research to date has provided unique insight into the bus environment and the relationship between travel-time use, subjective user experience, and perception of bus services. This insight – or these working hypotheses – about travel-time use in the bus context will now be tested more widely through questionnaire survey. As it stands, the data generated in this research suggests:

- That people do not generally get the bus so that they can engage in a given activity; they engage in a given activity *because* they get the bus
- That the specific value/product of the activity itself second-order to the value of the experience which activity provides; *in the bus context*
- That for some passengers the bus is an environment which is *generally perceived* to be 'un-tranquil'
- That many passengers engage in travel-time activity largely to attain a state of tranquillity/comfort on the bus

- That mobile technology use is currently quite prevalent on the bus (at least amongst the study population)
- That there is little evidence of activities specific to the bus environment; largely 'everyday' carried items being used in an 'everyday way'
- That time on the bus is valuable to many people purely as 'time-out'
- That the limited nature of the bus environment in terms of activity might actually be a *desirable* aspect of the experience
- That the social aspects of the bus environment factor importantly in the experiences of many study participants
- That there is higher consistency between respondents' desires for the general bus experience than there is between passengers' desires for a specific activity

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