Bus Tales: Travel-time use, technologies, and journey experiences on the bus

Abstract

Recently there has been a growing interest in the ways in which people use their time during travel, and what different types of value (economic or personal) such 'travel-time activity' provides. The activities of public transport passengers have been explored from a number of perspectives, and several of these have been reported to have a positive influence on the experience of the journey. However, within existing research the bus has received almost no specific attention, with most studies focussing on the train. At the same time, there is a stated policy need to improve the attractiveness of bus travel and increase patronage on local bus services in the UK. This thesis draws these strands together, and investigates how the activities in which bus passengers engage on-the-move give meaning to their journeys and help to shape their experiences and perceptions of the mode. In doing so, it considers how a focus on travel-time activity is potentially a valuable way of improving the experiences of users, and potentially increasing the attractiveness of bus travel to non-users.

Identifying the need to explore travel-time activity on the bus, the thesis develops a discussion of what is already known about the ways in which passengers (largely rail passengers) use their time, and how this has been found to influence their experiences and perceptions of the journey. Within this, specific attention is paid to the importance of carried objects and mobile technologies (mobile phones, books, music players, and more) in facilitating travel-time activities. In doing so, this thesis considers how existing travel-time research is relevant to the context of the bus journey. It identifies and addresses three gaps in existing knowledge:

(i) It provides the missing link between research which has demonstrated that travel-time activity has the potential to improve journey experiences for public transport passengers, and research which has specifically explored the journey experiences of bus passengers.

(ii) It explores the current lack of understanding concerning the ways in which travel-time activities on the bus give meaning to passengers' experiences of the journey. In particular, there has been little focus on how the travel-time "tools" – the carried objects, mobile technologies, and ICTs – are potentially enabling bus passengers to conduct different activities during travel-time.

(iii)   It seeks to fill a gap in existing knowledge in terms of specific research into subjectivity of travel-time on the bus, and how it is enacted and experienced differently by different individuals and groups.

The thesis follows a three-phase methodology in generating new empirical data on travel-time activity and journey experience on the bus. First, two phases of qualitative data collection were undertaken. This involved a novel online discussion group utilising the popular social networking site "Facebook". Following this two focus groups were conducted with bus users and car users to explore the qualitative findings in greater depth and inform the construction of the final quantitative phase. This consisted of a large-scale on-board questionnaire survey of 840 bus passengers on five routes in Bristol, UK. Thus the qualitative data provided rich discourses and explanations of passengers' experience of travel-time, and the quantitative data tested these findings amongst a sample of the wider bus user population.

This thesis finds that there are several activities and technologies particularly suited to the bus journey, and that people engage in these for a number of reasons. For example, travel-time activity is sometimes valuable for providing a "slice" of personal time within which to relax or complete personal tasks. For other passengers (or at other times) it helps to mitigate some of the more common negative experiences encountered along the journey such as boredom, stress, and social discomfort. The subjectivity of the passenger is central to explanations of travel-time use on the bus; travel-time is perceived differently by different people and thus is used and experienced in many ways. The thesis pays attention to the tensions that this creates within the collective experience of the journey. In particular the intensely social nature of bus travel is explained as being at the heart of the experience. For some the journey is a chance to socialise, where for others the public spaces of the bus can engender a lack of a sense of personal space and a negative experience.

In concluding, the thesis identifies a disparity between the quantitative and qualitative findings. The qualitative data go into depth in explaining the rich, contextual experience of activity, where the quantitative findings focus on the immediate experience and find other factors to be of more primary significance than activity – particularly punctuality, age, and a person's social disposition. Thus, the thesis contextualises its own findings, highlighting the potential of travel-time activity in increasing the attractiveness of bus travel, whilst at the same time firmly framing the importance of this new knowledge within the wider picture of the bus as a service.