

# **ACTION IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT: WHAT THE PASSENGERS WANT**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Passengers on public transport form a very substantial market – in the general commercial sense of the word. For example, it is estimated that there are some 400000 passengers in a typical peak period in the Durban Metropolitan area. (Estimate based on information given in the Durban Metropolitan Area Interim Transport Plan of 1995.) Social reasons alone justify careful consideration of these people's needs and preferences. However, the size of the market emphasises the importance of catering to its requirements – especially when these people have a choice of public transport mode and also remembering the inherent attractiveness of private transport.

This paper brings together the findings from two recent public transport studies that were carried out in two widely different service areas but for basically the same reason.

The first study was carried out on the Mynah bus services in Durban's Berea area – a high income suburb - and the initial findings are given in Roebuck & Simmer (1999). It was found that the main issue at the start of the study was the high fare level. Fares were reduced substantially at a later stage and hence further surveys were conducted to ascertain the public's response. In essence, the purpose of carrying out the study was to ascertain what the passengers liked and disliked about the service to assess whether or not it could regain the popularity that it had lost.

The second study was carried in the Clermont area that adjoins the New Germany and Pinetown light industrial development in the west of the Durban Metropolitan area. Clermont is a relatively low-income residential area – the level of car ownership is estimated to be less than 50 per 1000 population (Durban Metropolitan Area Interim Transport Plan of 1995). In comparison, some two thirds of the Mynah service users in the Berea were found to come from car-owning households (Simmer & Roebuck, 1998). In the Clermont study, the main objective was to find out what the existing passengers liked and disliked about using buses and minibus-taxis to assist in the planning of a proposed new transport service.

## **STUDY APPROACHES AND OUTLINE**

In both studies the basic approach adopted was to interview passengers at boarding points – for self-evident pragmatic reasons. Open-ended questions were used in both cases so as to avoid introducing potential bias into the surveys. Additionally, since the passengers were asked to state their major likes and dislikes, key issues could be identified without resorting to the complication of requiring respondents to rank specific matters. A particular point of interest in the Clermont study was the need to assess passenger's views on the necessity or otherwise of providing a conventional bus service – since the option of providing such a service and/or a minibus-taxi type of service was

available. To address this question, current bus and mini-bus taxis users were interviewed and each group was asked to give their views on both types of service.

## **MYNAH BUS STUDIES**

### **Initial services**

The Mynah services were first introduced in 1987 and at that time, potential passengers stated that they wanted a service that was fast, frequent and cheap. Initial studies showed that in the main the passengers of 1987/1988 were receiving what they wanted - as reported in Roebuck & Simmer (1999). The main problems identified with the initial Mynah services were those of driver attitude/behaviour and non-adherence to the timetable.

### **Ten years later**

The initial findings of the investigation by Roebuck & Simmer (1999) showed that the Mynah services had lost a considerable amount of their initial support and hence a study was initiated to ascertain the probable causes. To this end, a survey of passenger attitudes was carried out in January 1998 at which time it was found that the service characteristics seen as major issues were virtually the same as those from a decade earlier when the Mynah service was first introduced. In 1998, passengers still identified the speed and frequency of the Mynah service as being major advantages. Moreover, driver attitudes were still a major issue; many passengers cited the helpfulness of drivers as being a major like whilst other passengers had some bad experiences of drivers and cited rudeness etc as a major dislike. Fare levels were found to have moved from being a major attraction to a major dislike. This latter result was to be expected in view of the substantial real increase in fare levels that had taken place. Particular mention was again made of adherence to the timetable; many passengers cited adherence to timetable to be a major like whilst a significant number complained when adherence did not apply.

A new issue that was found to have risen in significance over the last ten years was that of driving standards. Specific points made by the passengers were that the Mynah-bus drivers were safer than the taxi drivers were - an observation that is at least subjectively well-founded. Additionally a number of passengers specifically praised the driving standards of the female Mynah-bus drivers whilst others complained about fast/reckless driving. Finally, a significant number of passengers cited the general cleanliness and comfortable seating of the Mynah buses to be a major like.

In addition to the Mynah bus users, a small sample of some fifty taxi users at Mynah bus stops were included in the January 1998 survey in order to ascertain why they were using taxis instead of the Mynah bus service. The vast majority (over 80%) of the users cited the relative cost of the Mynah and minibus-taxi services whilst 10% cited relative speed and a further 10% cited relative frequencies.

In so far as ascertaining passengers requirements of a transport service is required, likes and dislikes of a characteristic have equal importance since they are identifying the service characteristic in question as being of significance to them. Consequently, it can be deduced that public transport passengers in the Berea area were concerned about the following service characteristics:

- ADHERENCE TO TIMETABLE
- COMFORT/CLEANLINESS
- COST
- DRIVER ATTITUDE/DRIVING STANDARDS
- FREQUENCY
- SAFETY

### **Ten years later with lower costs**

Cost was identified as the major issue requiring early attention if the Mynah service was to maintain patronage levels and in August 1998, Durban Transport implemented some changes to the Mynah service fare scales. In effect, passengers travelling after the morning peak period were afforded a substantially reduced fare. These changes were not totally in line with the recommendations arising from the January 1998 survey but a perfect opportunity was presented to carry out an empirical investigation into the effect of reduced fare levels on usage patterns. Additionally, the opportunity was taken to obtain updated data on passengers' likes and dislikes in the light of the reduced fare levels.

Surveys were carried out in December 1998 and as occurred in the January 1998 survey, passengers cited some service characteristics as being likes and also as dislikes - according to each passenger's personal experiences and perceptions.

Service frequency was commented upon by nearly 30% of the passengers - most of whom complained about the low frequency service. Adherence to timetable was the second most frequently cited issue and in the main, passengers complained that the buses did NOT run on time. Driver attitude was ranked almost equally with adherence to timetable though in this instance views were equally divided; whilst some 7% of the passengers said the drivers were helpful an equal amount said that they were rude and uncooperative. Safety was commented on by many passengers; the majority stated that the Mynahs were safer than minibuses though about a third of passengers commenting on safety complained about fast/reckless driving.

Passengers' comments on their likes and dislikes clearly show that the problem of high fares had been addressed to many people's satisfaction. Unfortunately, however, the service characteristics of frequency and adherence to timetable - which could be inter-related in many cases - were giving rise to dissatisfaction amongst many passengers. It appears that the incidence of dissatisfaction with these characteristics had increased between January and December 1998 but it must be noted that the December survey comprised primarily valley period passengers.

## **Discussion on Mynah services**

The issues that have “stood the test of time” insofar as Mynah bus passengers are concerned include cost, adherence to timetable, frequency and driver attitude. However, safety is an issue that has come to the fore since the Mynah services were first introduced. In spite of the Mynah passengers generally expressing satisfaction with the speed and frequency of the service it is found that taxi users in the same area perceive that the taxis provide a faster and more frequent service.

## **CLERMONT BUS AND TAXI STUDIES**

In effect, the results from these studies (Roebuck, 1998) address three basic questions.

- Firstly, is a need seen for a conventional bus service and if so why?
- Secondly, what do the passengers see as the main issues with the public transport service?
- Thirdly, what do bus and minibus-taxi users see as being the main advantages and disadvantages of bus travel and of minibus-taxi travel?

### **Are conventional bus services needed?**

Most of the existing bus users stated that it was “important to use a bus rather than a taxi”. The main reason given for this view was since coupons could be used, it avoided the need to carry cash and also that it involved paying a relatively low fare. Other reasons cited by a significant proportion of the respondents were as follows: driver attitude, service hours and punctuality. The point made about driver attitude was that the bus drivers “showed respect” to the passengers. With regard to service hours, bus users cited the availability of bus services at night and during the valley period.

It can be seen that the reasons given for needing a conventional bus service all relate to what is being provided by the buses at present. The characteristics of service hours and punctuality (relative to a schedule) are obviously specific to scheduled and possibly subsidised services – regardless of the type of vehicle used as such.

### **What the passengers see as main issues**

The issues presented here are those identified by the public transport users in Clermont as being either a major ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ of the bus or taxi services that they were using. In this regard some users cited certain service characteristics as being a “like” whilst others cited them as being a “dislike” – according to personal experiences.

The main issue with Clermont passengers was cost. Nearly a half of the responses related to cost with most passengers citing low fares/coupons as being a major “like”. After cost, space cum crowding was cited as being a major issue by just under a third of the passengers. The spaciousness of buses was liked by many passengers but a number of passengers complained about the lack of space in minibus-taxis.

Driver attitude, frequency/service hours and speed were each cited as being a major issue by approximately a quarter of the passengers. Passengers liked the attitude of the drivers when this was perceived to be good but disliked attitude when this was perceived to be bad. Views on frequency and service hours were divided. In the main the frequency of taxis in the peaks is liked, as is the

availability of buses in valley periods and evenings. The relatively high speed of taxis was liked whilst the relatively low speed of buses was disliked by some bus users.

Safety and aspects relating to a scheduled service were cited by a significant number of passengers. In this regard the perceived safety of travelling by bus was liked whilst the perceived lack of safety of travelling by taxi was disliked. The provision of scheduled services as such - when and where they were available - were cited as being likes.

A small proportion of the passengers raised various other issues and in this regard it is interesting to note that only 5% of taxi users mentioned the facility of being picked and/or dropped off at any point as being a major like. Consequently, there is little call from the passengers for the inconsiderate, disruptive and dangerous practice of taxi drivers stopping wherever they choose.

### **The pros and cons of buses and minibus-taxis**

What is being examined here is the perception that the passengers have of the mode that they use and of the alternative mode – both in terms of likes and dislikes. This gives an expression of how each group of users see their chosen mode in comparison with the other mode.

#### **Bus users – views in addition to reasons why buses are needed**

The main “likes” of bus-users regarding buses were spaciousness/lack of crowding, cost and driver attitude. Their major dislike related to frequency. Bus-users perceptions of minibus-taxi services showed that they liked the speed but had a major dislike of the lack of safety.

#### **Minibus-taxi users**

The main likes of minibus-taxi users about their service were frequency, speed and cost. Their major dislikes of travelling by taxi were the lack of space, driver attitude and lack of safety.

Minibus-taxi-users perceptions of bus services showed that they liked the cost, space and safety aspects. However, a major dislike was also cost! Obviously this as a result of different travel patterns and experiences.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **Comparison of service areas**

A summary of what the passengers like and dislike about public transport in the two different service areas is given below. Since the results relate to the passengers’ personal experiences and are presented as a percentage of passengers interviewed in each area, they are directly comparable. In presenting the results, the service characteristics have been placed in descending order of total percentage of respondents citing such characteristics as being either a major like or dislike.

PASSENGERS' ASSESSMENT OF TRANSPORT SERVICE CHARACTERISTICS \*

Service characteristic	Berea		Clermont		Clermont	
	Mynah service		Bus services		Taxi services	
	Like	Dislike	Like	Dislike	Like	Dislike
Fare level	10%	22%	35%	13%	33%	12%
Frequency/coverage	15%	7%	#	20%	40%	5%
Driver attitude	25%	10%	23%	3%	4%	20%
Comfort: space/seats	23%	5%	44%	#	#	21%
Speed	14%	#	#	8%	35%	2%
Safety: accidents	14%	3%	10%	#	#	20%
Punctuality	30%	10%	#	#	#	#
Scheduled service	#	#	10%	#	#	10%

\* Percent of respondents in each group citing the service characteristic shown

# Negligible/nil responses

It is evident from the results presented above that the passengers in the two widely different service areas see basically the same service characteristics as being important. The extent to which they are satisfied or not, however, does vary from area to area and more specifically with the type of service, ie. conventional bus or taxi. For example, the taxi users in Clermont dislike the safety aspects of their transport whilst safety was liked by the Mynah bus users in the Berea area.

The fact that some passengers praise a certain characteristic whilst others criticise it is seen to indicate the importance of such a characteristic to passengers. Indeed it shows that the passengers as a group are NOT indifferent to such characteristics.

### Need for conventional services

The Clermont bus passengers strongly expressed their desire for conventional bus services – mainly on the grounds of the availability of coupons, driver politeness, availability of services out of peaks and adherence to timetable. It is further seen from the Mynah bus study that a scheduled bus service stopping at designated places can in fact have a very strong support base – providing that fare levels are acceptable. Under present operating conditions, significant organisational changes would be needed for minibus-taxis to meet the requirements of the bus passengers – though politeness from drivers should not cost anything!

### What do the passengers want?

Returning to the original purpose of the paper, it is interesting to note that the public transport passengers interviewed in the various studies outlined above show a high level of similarity in needs in spite of the differences in socio-economic conditions. Additionally, little variation in needs appear to have arisen across the ten years separating the inception and later review of the Mynah bus services. The only major “new” service characteristic that has come to the fore is that of safety – probably as a result of the declining standards of driving.

The messages from the passengers to the “service” providers are very clear, simple in themselves and hardly unreasonable – especially when put into context. In this regard it must be remembered that the vast majority of public transport users in South Africa use public transport because they *have* to do. Moreover, these people are primarily in the lower income groups and/or are too young or too old to drive themselves. Whilst some need to travel during the general peak periods, others have the need to travel during valley periods and some have to travel at unsociable hours due to the nature of their employment – such as nurses. Consequently, “peak only” transport is not an acceptable state of affairs. That said, the main requirements of passengers are summarised as follows:

- REASONABLE FARES – PREFERABLY PAID FOR BY COUPON FOR SECURITY
- POLITE, HELPFUL DRIVERS
- ADHERENCE TO THE TIMETABLE – PUNCTUAL AND RELIABLE
- SERVICES AVAILABLE OUT OF PEAK PERIODS
- FREQUENT SERVICE AT “POPULAR” TIMES
- COMFORT IN TERMS OF SEATING AND SPACE
- SAFE DRIVING BEHAVIOUR
- GOOD TRAVEL SPEEDS

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## **BRIEF CV**

... born and educated in England obtaining a Bachelor's degree in Civil engineering, a masters in the economics of highway design and a PhD in traffic simulation.

Experience commenced in contracting, dealing with cable and water tunnels, followed by employment in a local authority – latterly as County Road Safety Officer. Came to South Africa to work at the CSIR in Pretoria then moved to a consulting practice in Durban.

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