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Public transport qualities and inequalities in pandemic times¹

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1. Introduction

In spring 2020, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic instigated a mobility crisis. Municipalities and operators faced novel challenges in keeping public transport (PT) systems running. Media outlets and officials stigmatised PT as sites of potential infection, leading to unprecedented decrease of ridership, closure of transport networks, and gloomy predictions about the “end of public transport” in the US (De La Garza, 2020), the UK (Clark, 2020) and Germany alike (Schwenn & Hauser, 2020). In response, technical-managerial safety measures were applied, such as disinfecting vehicles or fencing off and limiting spaces to enforce physical distancing (UITP, 2020a). Yet, these responses remain only partially effective. Moreover, they have worsened working conditions by disregarding the workers’ needs. For instance, bus drivers in Stockholm described fearing for their lives when many of their colleagues contracted the virus, and some died. Despite this situation, the authorities refused closing the front doors in vehicles, during the first initial weeks of the pandemic.

Policies further failed to account for the affective side of PT, and to consider users’ expectations, feelings as well as their fears and hopes regarding post-pandemic transport futures. The sudden breakdown of mobility networks and routines wields broad social significance, since the “freedom of movement, as represented in popular media, politics and the public sphere, is the ideology and utopia of the twenty-first century” (Grieco & Urry, 2011, p. 4). Interrupted global supply chains, closed metro networks, deserted transportation hubs, and locked borders fundamentally contradict the capitalist paradigm that equates movement with individual and collective prosperity. Moreover, the impact of the pandemic on mobility appears to be socially and spatially uneven, raising questions about mobility justice (Sheller, 2018). How do hierarchies of perceived risk and

¹ This paper is part of the project "Public Transport as Public Space in European Cities: narrating, experiencing, contesting (PUTSPACE)", which is financially supported by the Joint Research Programme HERA (www.heranet.info), co-financed by AKA, BMBF via DLR-PT, ETAg and the European Commission through Horizon 2020.

² In alphabetical order.

stigma intersect with existing hierarchies of access and use? Who gets to move around safely, and to feel safe as they move?

Therefore, we discuss qualities and inequalities of PT not only looking at ridership figures, but also regarding atmospheres, mundane experiences and power structures. To understand user perspectives, we conducted an online survey (collecting 2164 responses, 1095 thereof full) in various European countries, and qualitative semi-structured interviews, focusing on cities in Belgium (17), Estonia (10), Germany (10), and Sweden (10) from May to August 2020. While we acknowledge strong class and gender bias related to the online methodology, we argue that it nonetheless helps to explore the affective side of PT. Our findings are supported by an analysis of media and policy documents, which we have examined from a global perspective, while keeping the European focus of the empirical work.

2. User experiences and atmospheres

The pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures altered the everyday atmosphere of cities, particularly in and around PT infrastructures. Passengers have developed mixed feelings about its use: while some felt increasing anxiety and uncertainty, others reported to enjoy calm and comfort in near-empty vehicles (Fig. 1).

Among the passengers who continued using PT after the COVID-19 outbreak, many emphasised its mute and anti-social dimension, as the probability of interacting with other passengers significantly decreased. A respondent noted: “people are sitting in silence. Suspicious and silent and self-absorbed.”³ (Tallinn, 19.05.2020). With the challenge of maintaining physical distance in dense and closed spaces of PT vehicles, face-covering obligations were introduced, which were welcomed by many, strengthening the feelings of safety and solidarity. For others, however, this measure affected the convivial character of the transport space by hampering exchange, be it a consenting smile or the observation of other passengers, and display signs of distance. A respondent commented:

“Of course, I can personally get used to this mask obligation. But, I am honestly afraid of the consequences. I think that a very important social component is lost. Watching people's faces somehow. Also, to observe how they smile at each other or don't.” (Berlin, 16.06.2020).

Passengers also adapted their travel behaviour, notably by avoiding peak hours or even leaving crowded vehicles. A respondent confessed to feeling guilty riding without “a proper reason”, taking up space from people who really needed it (Munich, 27.05.2020). Others justified their decision to stop using PT with a lack of necessity and solidarity towards those without any other choice, thus reflecting the official policy discouraging passengers from travelling needlessly. As one user points out:

3 All quotes have been translated to English (from Estonian, French, German, Swedish, or Russian) by the authors.

“I haven't used PT since the beginning of the lockdown because I've always managed to get around on foot or by bike. As long as I can get by with these options, I prefer to leave my place in [public] transport to those who can't do without it.” (Brussels, 15.05.2020)

Similarly, respondents associated a perceived risk of infection with the level of cleanliness. “When it is clean you feel safer; when it is dirty right away you feel uncomfortable and [...] stressed.” a respondent argues (Brussels, 13.05.2020). In this regard, the efforts of operators and local authorities, physical distancing, mask obligations and regular disinfection were considered positive. At the same time, respondents describe how they now see PT as a vector for viruses:

“I have realised during the pandemic how many people you meet in the PT that can be contagious, this insight will motivate me more to continue cycling instead.” (Stockholm, 05.05.2020).

In parallel, users reported heightened awareness of their own behaviour. One user describes the fear of "looking sick" and others mention increased efforts to show passengers that they are aware of and abiding by new distancing rules. This way, safety measures, users' sensorial sensitivity and behaviour changes have reaffirmed the shared nature of PT as a space held in common and re-emphasised the expectations, etiquette, and fleeting interactions. A respondent from Brussels remarked:

“I felt like people were behaving as [...] with a shared consciousness that there was something in common. It's my general feeling since the outbreak. Every time I go out, I feel like there's something that we share when people look [at] each other” (Brussels, 30.03.2020).

Interestingly, the perceptions of the risk of contracting COVID-19 vary unevenly according to user patterns. In a comparison with grocery stores, for example, people who continued to use PT regularly stated that they felt PT to be safer (Fig. 2). A related finding is that, as household income increases, dependence on PT for everyday activities and thus its use during a pandemic decrease. Consequently, a risk exists that privileged and occasional users may show weaker support for maintaining or increasing public subsidies for PT.

Whilst COVID-19 may not have killed off PT yet, it has probably homogenised its users. Without students, parents with children, elderly, and tourists, as well as a diminished nightlife, PT seems to have become a means for the working class to reach their jobs, reflecting a growing social divide exacerbated by the pandemic.

3. Challenges, government responses, fare systems

The pandemic has generated both pressure on public services as well as significant support for their existence. Transport operators need to navigate between maintaining quality and frequency of service with additional responsibilities for cleaning and distancing - accomplishing this all while increasing revenues via fare hikes or subsidies is difficult.

The declining passenger numbers weigh heavily on operators' budgets. While PT systems with high public subsidies (eg. Tallinn) were able to maintain the service, other systems were threatened in their existence by the unprecedented losses in fare-box revenues (UITP, 2020b). The pandemic has also increased public support for the state's role as guarantor of public services, particularly in health care but also for PT. Transport for London (TfL), for instance, received a £1.6bn bailout in May 2020 (BBC News, 2020). However, these occasional transfers appear unsustainable in a financial model that continues to rely on income from passenger fares. Additionally, many interviewees saw the responsibility with governments, and not with individual passengers, to make up for transport companies' losses and ensure a continuous provision of service.

Hence, as PT governance is at a crossroads, many operators consider shifting to a fare-free model. Before the outbreak, PT was fully free in at least 120 cities. In response to the pandemic, fares or their control were temporarily suspended in further 80 localities, predominantly in the global North (e.g. Berlin, Brussels, Lisbon and Montreal) and often as a strategy to protect drivers from a potentially dangerous interaction with passengers. Other transport systems suspended fares for essential works (e.g. Chişinău, Istanbul, London, Nizhny Novgorod, Quito). The pandemic thus appears as an opportunity to “do things differently”, to embrace options that have been on the table, but lacked momentum for their introduction⁴.

4. Future of public transport: Long-lasting changes?

The remarkable scale and likely duration of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and the resultant perceived danger of proximity, have made governing, providing and using PT services particularly challenging. While PT has been recognised as an essential public service, and a public space where people meet, the ongoing crisis has also highlighted that PT usage is dependent on class, related economic and employment status, and access to private means of transport. In the midst of urban lockdowns, while some residents reduced their mobility to a minimum, others had to continue commuting in packed vehicles. In many European cities the modal share of walking and cycling has increased – leading cities such as Brussels to quickly plan for expanding car-free areas, designing cycle routes, and reducing motorised traffic. Elsewhere, the return to private cars suggest that the dominance of automobility is far from challenged (Kessler, 2020).

At present, it is too early to assess where this leaves PT. Bucking the gloomy predictions, our brief study shows that PT is far from dead. It continues to serve those who depend on it. Certainly some associate PT spaces with increased health risk, yet many use more neutral terms to describe their feelings, as our survey and interviews indicated. It is important to be wary that a city without socially diverse and truly collective PT transport is subjugated to continued primacy of private mobility, which exacerbates rather than addresses social inequalities. A solution to this threat could be to render PT services not only safer to its users, but also cheaper or free, and hence more egalitarian. Having abolished or suspended fares in response to the pandemic, many localities have

⁴ For example, the mayor of Charlotte (North Carolina, USA) admits considering fare-free PT already back in January 2020 (Peralta & Hopkins, 2020).

tested fare-free PT. Moreover, in some localities the pandemic has helped articulate the importance of not only maintaining and funding PT as a universal service, but also of attempts towards mitigating the ongoing climate crisis. Finally, the pandemic has brought to the fore the plight of transport workers, hailed as essential employees, and heroes of our time, putting their lives at risk to provide mobility to others. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis may yield some progressive outcomes for PT systems, but declining passenger numbers and image threats remain long-term challenges.

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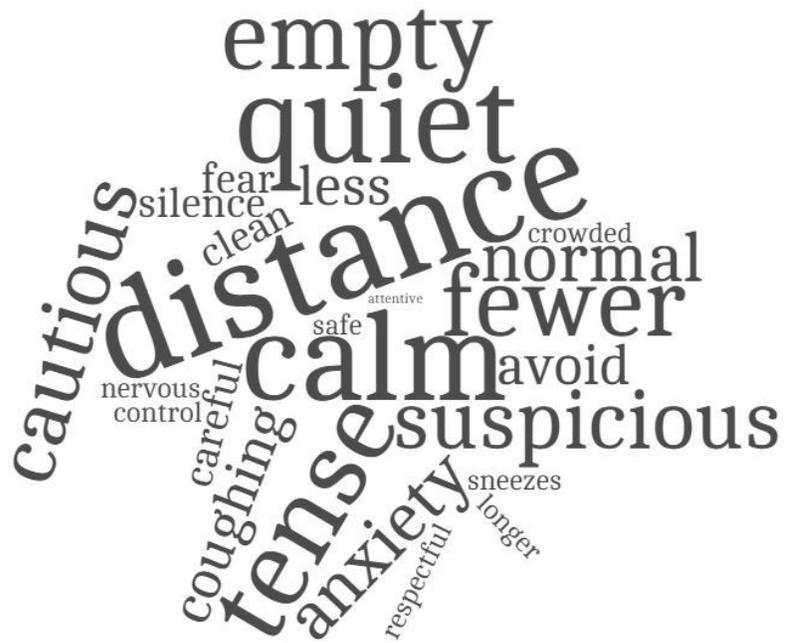


Figure 1. Word cloud summarising responses to the survey question: “Following the COVID-19 outbreak, how would you describe the atmosphere in public transport? Please provide any keywords that come to your mind.” Responses from seven languages were translated into English and added up.

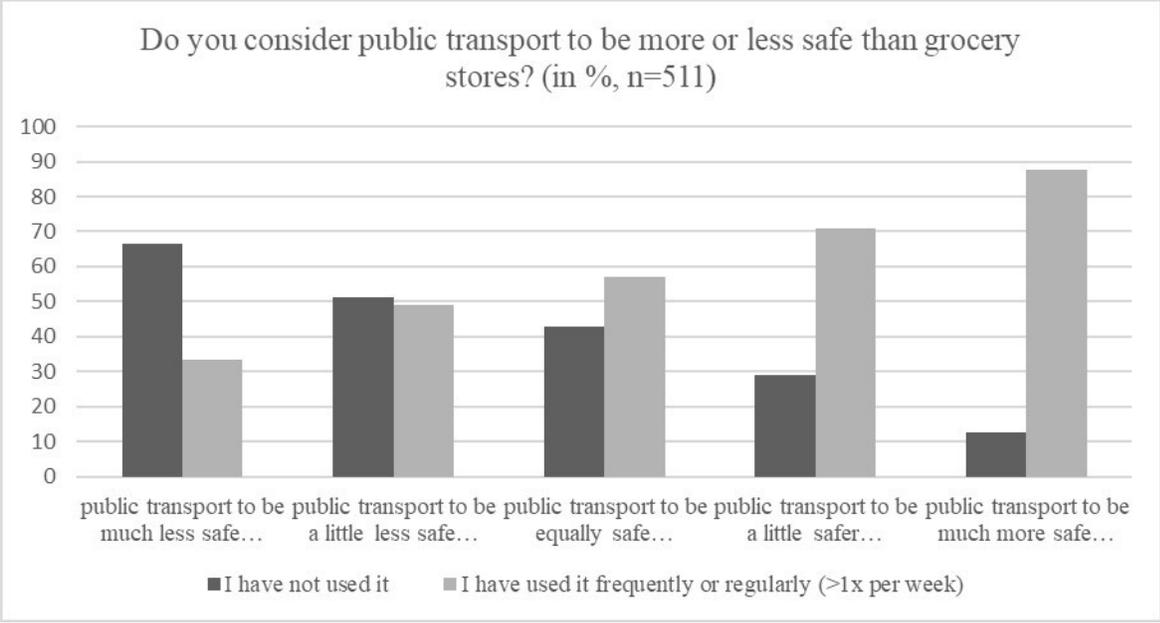


Figure 2. Responses to the survey question "Do you consider public transport to be more or less safe than grocery stores?" sorted by use of PT during the pandemic

Authors' bios

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