

EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT: MAPPING BUS BEHAVIOUR IN MARIBOR

MÁRTON HUSZTI,¹ BORIS EVTIMOV,² KORNELIA BAJDA,³
ZSOMBOR NAGY,⁴ FILIP NĚMEC,⁵
MARTIN MAROŠ MONSBERGER,⁶ TILEN KOLAR⁷

¹ University of Pécs, Faculty of Science, Pécs, Hungary
husztimarci@gmail.com

² St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University, Sofia, Bulgaria
b.evtimov05@gmail.com

³ Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Kraków, Poland
kornelia.bajda@student.uj.edu.pl

⁴ Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary
zsombor.nagy5@stud.uni-corvinus.hu

⁵ Charles University, Faculty of Science, Prague, Czechia
nemecf1@natur.cuni.cz

⁶ Comenius University in Bratislava, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia
martin.maros359@gmail.com

⁷ University of Leeds, School of Geography, Leeds, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
t.kolar@leeds.ac.uk

This paper examines the emotional and social expressions of the local transportation passengers in the city of Maribor. While transport research typically emphasises technical efficiency, this study examines the lived and emotional aspects of mobility. Through systematic observation of four bus routes, we documented behaviours, interactions, and spatial contexts across weekday and weekend journeys. The findings show that public transport in Maribor is primarily used by students, the elderly, and those without cars, reflecting the country's high motorisation rate and the social stigma associated with bus travel. Passenger moods were frequently marked by fatigue and disengagement, often expressed through phone use or passive waiting. Yet moments of social connection, such as casual conversations or small acts of kindness, revealed that buses can also provide comfort and a sense of community. These insights highlight how public transport functions not only as a technical system but also as an emotionally and socially meaningful space.

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VSAKDANJA SREČANJA V JAVNEM POTNIŠKEM PROMETU: KARTIRANJE VEDĚNJA NA AVTOBUSIH V MARIBORU

MÁRTON HUSZTI,¹ BORIS EVTIMOV,² KORNELIA BAJDA,³
ZSOMBOR NAGY,⁴ FILIP NĚMEC,⁵
MARTIN MAROŠ MONSBERGER,⁶ TILEN KOLAR⁷

¹ Univerza v Pécsu, Fakulteta za naravoslovje, Pécs, Madžarska
husztimarci@gmail.com

² Univerza sv. Klimenta Ohrskega v Sofiji, Sofija, Bolgarija
b.evtimov05@gmail.com

³ Jagelonska univerza v Krakovu, Krakov, Poljska
kornelia.bajda@student.uj.edu.pl

⁴ Univerza Corvinus v Budimpešti, Budimpešta, Madžarska
zsombor.nagy5@stud.uni-corvinus.hu

⁵ Karlova univerza, Fakulteta za naravoslovje, Praga, Češka
nemecf1@natur.cuni.cz

⁶ Univerza Komenskega v Bratislavi, Fakulteta za naravoslovje, Bratislava, Slovaška
martin.maros359@gmail.com

⁷ Univerza v Leedsu, Fakulteta za geografijo, Leeds, Združeno kraljestvo Velike Britanije
in Severne Irske
t.kolar@leeds.ac.uk

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Prispevek preučuje čustvene in socialne izraze potnikov v lokalnem javnem prometu v mestu Maribor. Medtem ko raziskave prometa običajno poudarjajo tehnično učinkovitost, se ta študija osredotoča na doživete in čustvene vidike mobilnosti. S sistematičnim opazovanjem štirih avtobusnih linij smo dokumentirali vedénja, interakcije in prostorske kontekste med vožnjami ob delavnikih in vikendih. Ugotovitve kažejo, da javni promet v Mariboru večinoma uporabljajo študenti, starejši in osebe brez avtomobila, kar odraža visoko stopnjo motorizacije v državi ter socialno stigmo, povezano z uporabo avtobusov. Razporeditve potnikov so bila pogosto zaznamovana z utrujenostjo in nezainteresiranostjo, kar se je izražalo z uporabo mobilnih telefonov ali "pasivnim čakanjem". Kljub temu so trenutki socialne povezanosti, kot so priložnostni pogovori ali drobna dejanja prijaznosti, pokazali, da avtobusi lahko nudijo tudi udobje in občutek skupnosti. Ta spoznanja poudarjajo, da javni potniški promet ne deluje le kot tehnični sistem, temveč tudi kot čustveno in socialno pomemben prostor.



1 Introduction

Transport geography research has historically approached mobility quantitatively as a function of transporting an individual from one place to another. This has been demonstrated through the overwhelming majority of studies focusing on transport planning solutions that, for example, prioritise the reduction of travel time, the quality of infrastructure, the cost-benefit analysis of transport provisioning, and other similar considerations grounded in positivist geographical thinking (Shaw & Hesse, 2010).

Such a positivist approach often overlooks the relational spaces that take place in the act of moving itself. New mobilities scholarship, first introduced by Sheller & Urry (2006), tries to address this gap by holistically considering mobile bodies as both producing and being affected by spaces of mobilities that afford emotions, embodied and sensorial experiences. In other words, mobility is not considered solely as a function to bridge the distance between two or more places, but as a spatiotemporal affordance of someone's identity- and world-making practices experienced through, among other things, daily encounters.

Wilson (2011) discusses how different passengers experience everyday encounters on the bus differently, based on their identities and previous interactions—the feelings emerging from non-verbal (and sometimes verbal) cues when sharing space with others intersect with identity markers. More specifically, for example, in the case of the LGBTQ+ population, Weintrob et al. (2021) consider how such encounters in public transport represent the emotional cost of mobility because of fear of potential assaults or negative experiences. Such research emphasises the importance of considering subjective spatiotemporal experiences of passengers, foregrounding the embodied elements of transit space and not solely perceiving transit as a non-space, as a function in-between places, but as a social arena facilitating “throwntogetherness” (Koefoed et al., 2016).

Slovenia ranks high in motorisation rates, being 9th in the EU in terms of vehicles per 1,000 inhabitants (see Acea, 2024). There are more reasons for this, perhaps the most prominent being a quasi “American dream” aspiration to own a large house and live a suburban, motorised lifestyle, whereas using public transport is considered culturally regressive (e.g., Bole & Gabrovec, 2014). Overwhelmingly, the Slovenian

people prefer driving a car to using the public transportation system. Trains and buses in Slovenia are mostly used by students, who have discounts provided by the government, or by people who do not own cars and rely on public transportation. The use of public transport is hence stigmatised and often perceived as “a personal failure” of not being able to afford a car and practice in the dominant “mobility citizenship” (e.g. Bole & Gabrovec, 2014). In the present day, as the European Union encourages citizens to use public transportation, it is even more important to focus on the quality of travel and to “erase” the stigma associated with using public transportation. In Slovenia, the share of public transport in total passenger traffic has been continuously decreasing since 2000. While it was 17.1% in 2000, it dropped to 13.2% by 2010 (Odyssee-Mure, 2024).

Although the study by Bole & Gabrovec (2014) culturally addresses transportation in Slovenia, it focuses on the macro-scale, which may overlook the relational aspects of microspaces created during transportation. Drozg (2017) zooms in on the urban scale by examining the social structure of bus passengers in Maribor, finding that predominantly women and the elderly use them, further supporting the argument about the stigmatisation of public transport use. We advance Drozg’s (2017) observational approach by “zooming in” even further, also observing the relational and affective dimensions of buses in Maribor. Thus, our study tries to contribute to the absence of the empirical focus on such relational transit spaces by focusing on the behaviour and everyday encounters taking place inside Maribor buses. We explore how public transportation is socially experienced and emotionally perceived by the passengers. Attention is given to differences between age and gender in order to understand how these factors influence observed behaviours and interactions on buses. At the same time, we consider how the characteristics of bus infrastructure and the spatial context of stops and routes affect passengers’ feelings of comfort, safety, and engagement.

2 Methods

The primary method employed in this study was observation, a technique commonly used in mobility studies to capture everyday practices and interactions within transport environments (Merriman, 2014). Observations were conducted on four preselected bus routes serving different parts of the city to cover a larger portion of its territory. For this reason, the research team was divided into pairs, which also

made it possible to better capture the atmosphere inside the buses as well as in their surroundings. In addition, photographic documentation of the environment inside the buses and around the bus stops was conducted, providing further insight into the material context of the observed situations. The observations took place on two separate days: Wednesday after 5 p.m. and Sunday morning.

The method of observation offered valuable insight into the everyday functioning of public transport, but it also has its limitations. The research was time-consuming, and due to the language barrier (the researchers not speaking Slovene), we decided not to conduct interviews with passengers. As a result, the dimension of emotions and affective experiences could only be captured indirectly, through outward expressions. As Roy, Bailey, and van Noorloos (2025) point out, combining observation with interviews is crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of emotions associated with mobility. Nevertheless, the chosen method made it possible to systematically observe actual practices and to provide our subjective interpretation of how people use the transport environment in their everyday lives.

Interestingly, the positioning of our researchers' bodies on buses influenced the type of data we gathered. There was a difference in the position we occupied during our observations. For example, in the first observation, we sat next to each other at the back of the bus, whilst in subsequent observations, we sat at the front and rear of the bus, facing each other with a full view of the bus. At the back of the bus, we were unable to observe people's facial expressions in enough detail to reflect on their reactions and emotions but were primarily able to analyse their spatial positioning.

3 Results

In this section, we compile various observational notes regarding the use of specific bus lines.

3.1 Bus line G01

Line G01 departs from Maribor's main bus station and ends in the southeast, in a suburban area with garden houses, in the Tezenska Dobrava district. This line does not pass through the historic city centre, but instead crosses the Drava River at the first opportunity. Consequently, only one of its stops is located relatively close to the

city centre, which also turned out to be the most crowded boarding point during our research.

The starting point of our journey, the bus station, features a passenger information system (displays) that makes it easy for locals to find their way. However, as a foreigner, it was not clear which platform belonged to the G01 service, as the display only showed platform numbers for long-distance buses, while local services were indicated by signs on the glass doors. During our observation, as described in the methodology, we focused on a Wednesday afternoon and a Sunday morning service, during which we travelled on three different buses.

We noted a fundamental difference between our weekday and weekend trips: while on Wednesday, women made up the majority of passengers, on Sunday, we observed a greater number of men. We concluded that older people and women tend to choose seats at the front and in the middle of the bus, which are closer to the driver and therefore potentially safer, as the bus did not have CCTV cameras. The seats at the back of the bus were often occupied by young people, or sometimes left unoccupied. In addition, during our weekday commute and weekend bus trip, when we arrived at the final stop, we were the only ones left on the bus, which shows that not many people use this service to travel from the suburbs to the city centre.

However, the most important aspect of our observation was how people interacted with their fellow passengers and the leisure activities they engaged in during their journey. This observation is significant because in other countries, such as Hungary, listening to loud music can cause discomfort among fellow passengers. In contrast, in Maribor, we encountered the following cases: during our Sunday trip, the bus driver, sensing that we were the only ones left on the bus, listened to loud Slovenian music to relax when the bus was empty at the terminal, but as soon as the bus started moving, he turned down the music so as not to disturb the passengers. In addition, one passenger, unaware that he was, in our opinion, listening to music too loudly, used headphones at a volume that could be disturbing to those around him.

The bus also proved to be a suitable space for discourse when two elderly ladies engaged in conversation during our weekend trip, from which we can conclude that they felt comfortable.

One of these conversations is of particular interest to us because the woman at the bus station behaved in a way that suggested she was distracted and nervous, but after her neighbour arrived, she appeared to feel more comfortable and calmer. Based on our observations, it appears that public transport on this route is less used by passengers, which could reflect a tendency towards car reliance in the area. At the same time, it was noticeable that young people already view this differently, as buses can be an ideal means of transportation for them in Maribor.

3.2 Bus line G03

The G3 bus line is a circular route. We start and end our observation at the main railway station in Maribor. The route connects the city centre with residential neighbourhoods, suburban areas, and semi-rural zones with open fields and forest patches. We carried out our observations during two separate journeys: one on Wednesday afternoon and another on Sunday morning.

The vehicle was adequately equipped, with electronic panels clearly showing the stops and transfers. On one ride, retro background music created a surprisingly pleasant atmosphere, compared with the otherwise monotonous silence. During both rides, the bus was never crowded. Typically, between 6 and 15 passengers were on board at the same time, with the number increasing in the outer residential districts. We noticed clear differences between the two observations. On Wednesday, the line was used primarily by women, often middle-aged or elderly. On Sunday, however, there was a noticeably higher share of men, some of whom carried sports equipment (such as a bicycle wheel).

The general atmosphere was calm and quiet. Many passengers looked neutral or tired, especially on the weekday journey in the late afternoon. Their activities were repetitive: staring out of the window, scrolling on their phones, or chatting quietly with friends. Elderly passengers often prepared to get off much earlier than necessary, standing at the doors well before the bus had reached the stop. Some passengers expressed visible fatigue; for example, a middle-aged woman reading and filling out paperwork during the Wednesday ride, who was constantly frowning. By contrast, Sunday morning passengers seemed more relaxed, with couples and pairs of friends laughing quietly or engaging in casual conversations.

A few unusual or noteworthy situations stood out. Two teenage boys boarded at the very first stop of our Wednesday journey and remained on the bus for the entire circle, still staying on board after we had left the railway station. They occupied the entire back row, spreading across several seats and repeatedly dropping their bottles, disturbing the otherwise peaceful ride.

Another interesting feature was the final circular stop at Tabor, where, on Wednesday, passengers were required to leave the bus for a short break, while on Sunday, the pause was shorter, and we were allowed to stay on board. However, most of the passengers from Wednesday returned immediately to their original seats, resuming their passive waiting. On Wednesday, there was also an older woman who kept smiling throughout the entire ride, even smiling at other passengers.

3.3 Bus line G04

The G4 bus line runs daily between the Main Bus Station and Studenci/Lesarska šola. The route runs through the historic centre and the southwest part of Maribor, which consists of suburbs with detached houses and modern housing estates. We began our observation on Wednesday, 27 August at 6:00 p.m. at the bus station. We travelled the route in both directions and finished our observation at 6:50 p.m. There were only a few passengers on the bus, around 6 people. At peak times, there were 8 passengers travelling on the G4 line simultaneously.

We noticed that there were only a few passengers travelling on the line that day. The vast majority of passengers on the G4 line were teenagers and elderly people. In addition, the bus was mostly used by women, while men accounted for a very small proportion, which chimes with Drozg's (2017) findings discussed above. Most people consider travelling by bus to be stigmatising (e.g., Bole & Gabrovec, 2014), especially men who view a car as a personal space where they can assert their independence (cf. Balkmar, 2018), leading to buses being predominantly used by teenagers, students, women, and the elderly.

Nevertheless, we observed that passengers felt relaxed and comfortable throughout the entire bus ride. They had neutral expressions on their faces. So, the biggest trigger for some kind of reaction for them would be the warm weather, since the G4 bus

had no air conditioning. The passengers tried to open the window or wave their hands in front of their faces to cool themselves down.

We observed that teenage passengers tend to gravitate towards using their phones on the bus as a way to stay connected or engaged, perhaps even as a form of escape from feeling alone. For older people, this was not the case. Elderly people often watch the road or the scenery outside the window during the bus ride, while passengers travelling together, such as couples, usually converse with each other.

3.4 Bus line G06

The G6 bus line also runs daily, but on a slightly different route. It goes from the Main Bus Station through the historic city centre to Vzpenjača, which is located in the southern part of Maribor. The bus terminates just outside the Pohorje mountain range, which is a popular destination for active leisure on days off. We began our observation on Sunday, August 31, at 10:10 a.m. at the bus station and concluded it at 10:35 a.m. at the final stop.

There were not many passengers on the bus. At its peak, the vehicle had 11 people on board. We observed that the line is used not only by local residents but also by tourists due to the recreational nature of its destination. The bus was mainly used by elderly people over 60 years of age. Most of them were senior couples. Contrary to the age dominance, we did not observe a dominance of a specific gender.

During our observations, we noticed that passengers felt comfortable on the bus. People had gentle, neutral expressions on their faces, and couples talking to each other sometimes exchanged smiles. In addition to talking, passengers looked out the window and used their phones. Interestingly, many people travelled with Nordic walking poles. These passengers got off at the last stop, indicating that they used the G6 line to reach Pohorje and spend their free time there.

Importantly, we observed an unusual situation during the journey. At the “Streliška - Ulica Pohorskega odreda” stop, a man in his 50s boarded the bus. He played music on his phone throughout the bus ride, so that it could be heard by everyone. None of the other passengers, nor the driver, paid any attention to him. In general, people did not seem surprised or even interested in the situation. It evoked an emotional

reaction in us, as such an occurrence in public transport would be considered absurd or disruptive in our home countries. The experience of such a situation is quite subjective, since the local citizens did not display any sort of reaction. This could be due to cultural differences. In Poland and Bulgaria, it would be met with at least indignation and hostile looks from most passengers, and most often also with a warning and a request to turn off the music. It was an interesting experience for us, and we were able to view this situation from a different perspective.

4 Conclusion

Our observations indicate that public transport in Maribor is primarily used by women, students, the elderly, and those without access to cars, reflecting the motorisation level of Slovenian society and existing empirical research. Gender and generational patterns were clearly visible: more feminine-presenting passengers used buses more frequently on weekdays, while men used them more often on weekends. Additionally, younger passengers had a more pragmatic approach to bus travel than older generations. Passengers' emotions were often subtle and expressed indirectly, although there were situations where emotional expressions were more direct, such as reactions to music or the weather. The limitation of the used method is the interpretational power of researchers. This vignette should hence be used as an inspiration, the first step, for follow-up interviewing, inspired by some of our preliminary observations, to deeply understand the emotions of the users of the bus infrastructure in the city. Overall, buses are not only a means of transportation but also a social and emotional space where anonymity and community coexist.

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Author Contributions

T.K. supervised and guided the students throughout the process. Students M.H., B.E., K.B., Z.N., F.N., and M.M.M. conducted the observations and fieldwork. The writing was carried out by the students, with T.K. providing supervision and support during the writing process.

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