

1. Videos

Understanding the real reasons why people choose a particular type of transport

By
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Over the past 20 years, improvements in public transport, planning and telecommunications systems have helped to significantly reduce people's preference for travel by car. A look at three Swiss cities: Geneva, Lausanne and Bern.

Why and how do people choose a particular type of transport in their daily lives? It's a vast subject. Economics has a long provided answer to this question specially the transport economics field. It tells us that it's a combination of price and travel time, and that users tend to compare the two and, as far as possible, use the cheapest and the fastest transport mean or combination of transport mean(s). This has been the basis for many moving behaviors models. However, as a sociologist, I always find it a bit frustrating because the reasons why we commute are obviously much more varied. There are lots of others logics and actions which might influence our choices of a particular transport mean in our daily lives.

Pleasure, safety and privacy: other reasons for choosing a particular mean of transport

Price and time are undoubtedly key factors when it comes to choosing a particular mean of transport. However, they are not necessarily the only factors at work. For instance, people may very well use their car to work - even if it takes longer - because they enjoy driving and like to be in their own little protected world. Their car is like a compartment they can seal off, meaning they're not travelling with other people, like in public transport. They can listen to the radio or do other things, albeit in somewhat confined surroundings. From a much broader standpoint, the more we explore these issues, the more it becomes clear that there are many reasons that come into play, that are sometimes overlooked when modelling these behaviours. To address these issues, let's begin by reviewing a study that was conducted in Geneva, Lausanne and Bern in the mid-1990s and in 2011. These studies allow us to draw a comparison over time: the data we obtained in can be compared with that obtained in 2011, since we used comparable sample groups. The quantitative research was carried out on a sample of 3,000 people in employment who live in Geneva, Lausanne and Bern urban areas. The inquiry centred on how people choose their transport in their daily lives.

1994: culturally predisposed to cars

In 1994, the majority of people in Geneva, Lausanne and Bern preferred to use the car rather than other means of transport. Why? For reasons that had little to do with price or speed, because car travel is often much more expensive and sometimes slower than other means of transport. In fact, the decision

was based on factors such as comfort, autonomy and ownership, the car is mine. Habits were also an important factor. When we use a car, we combine and chain activities in space and time. Changing means of transport signifies not only using the bus or tram instead of the car, but also rethinking the order in which we do our activities in space and time because cars, public transport, or bikes do not offer the same accessibility to the territories. Try to do by public transport what you would normally do by car in commercial areas outside cities. It is extremely difficult to get around between places like superstores, the fitness club and a work place in a business sector using public transport. By car, however, it's very easy. So, in , people were generally predisposed to using a car. What does that mean? Even if it was faster to get to work by public transport, people tended to drive to work when possible. There are limits, of course, there are always constraints when it comes to using different means of transport , it could be parking, traffic constraints or access to a personal vehicle: quite simply, if you don't have a car, you can't use it.

2011: The quasi disappearance of predisposition to the car

Obviously, things had changed by 2011. That's what's interesting. The samples and cities were the same, so what happened? Our research found that people's propensity to use the car had almost disappeared in all three urban areas. The reasons for which people used a particular mean of transport had also become more varied. Many users preferred to move around with other means of transport than the car even if it took longer, which was sometimes the case. And that's extremely interesting. So why the big change between 1994 and 2011?

1. More efficient telecommunications systems

The first thing that made a significant impact was the improvement in telecommunication systems. We all have iPhones, tablets or laptop. We can connect to the internet while walking down the street. This has changed the way we use our time. In public transport, you can go on Facebook, send text messages, make phone calls, or other such activities. You can do the same on foot. It's obviously harder in a car, and it is of course forbidden, unless you've got a hands-free kit. Other than this option, it is difficult to use all the possibilities offered by a smartphone when you're driving which makes daily car use less appealing than it was in the past. At the same time, it increases the appeal of other forms of transport.

2. An improved, more diverse range of public transport solutions

Another factor that worked in public transport's favour was the fact that the three urban areas we studied made major investments in improving their public transport offerings. Bern created the SBahn network, which is similar to France's RER commuter rail system. The network is highly efficient and serves all of the municipalities in and around Bern, nearly all of which have a station. 13 lines leave from Bern station. A new tram line has been carried out. In other words, a public transport system that allows people to move around anywhere, almost anytime. As a result, people have started using more and more public transport - which now has a much more positive image. The same happened in Lausanne. An automad metro line (M2) has been carried out and a commuter rail network with a regional express system has been developed which may not rival that of Bern in terms of performance, but is not far. This greatly improved the image and use of public transport. In Geneva, the restructuring of the tram network over the past 20 years has had a similar effect. In the early 1990s there was only one tram line, 10km in length. Now, the network spans nearly 40km. This is interesting because it shows that investment in alternatives to the car can lead to a change in people's practices and aspirations as concerns use of different means of transport.

3. More cycle paths and pedestrian cities

A third factor is urban planning and cycling, which have also had an important impact. I think we can link the two. 20 years ago, in 1994, cycling was seen more as a leisure activity than a mean of transport

in these three cities. By 2011, it had become a mean of transport in its own right, which people also used as a form of exercise. That's something else that has changed: the idea that mobility is now part of the way people think and reason. People think that if their daily commute can also be a source of physical exercise, it's a good thing. It kills two birds with one stone, giving commuting another purpose. There has been a significant rise in the use of bicycles and walking, with more people were walking in 2011 than in 1994. An interesting parallel can be drawn with urban planning in this respect, because in Bern, Lausanne and Geneva, there have been a number of city-planning initiatives in favour of pedestrians to make getting around on foot more ergonomic.

The importance of routine

Habits are another factor. This study and other investigations on this topic have shown that means of transport are not interchangeable; they offer different types of accessibility. People have some daily routine and use it to do different things. If they were to use another means of transport, they would have to do things differently, in different places, and in a different order. This is also very important in the decision-making process and ways of thinking.

The commute as an activity in its own right

Finally, there is the matter of how we use our time during our movings, with remote telecommunication systems This last point is of particular importance, and is perhaps the most significant change of all because it has altered the meaning of moving. Traditionally, moving was seen as wasted time between activities. That is why economic and econometric modelling have tended to suggest that people seek to minimise commute time because it is simply time between other activities. In other words, the shorter the better because it is simply time wasted. However, with remote communications systems and the fact that people have begun to cycle or walk as part of their daily commutes for health reasons, to take exercise and get fit, commute itself has taken on new appeal. Commuting has become an activity in its own right. It is no longer simply a hiatus between other activities, which, I feel, is a key development. This is why, while it was fair to assume that people based their choice of transport mean in order to reduce commute time years ago, the same is no longer true today, because the assumption is less and less a reflection of real attitudes regarding such practices.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Associated Thematics :

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- Alternative mobilities
- Cars / motorcycles
- Change in practices

Policies

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 - Public transport
 - Cycling & Walking
 - Cities & Territories
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Vincent Kaufmann, a Swiss sociologist, is one of the pioneers of mobility and inventor of the concept of motility. He is director of LaSUR at the EPFL, General Secretary of CEAT and professor of sociology and mobility analyses. He is the Mobile Lives Forum's scientific director.

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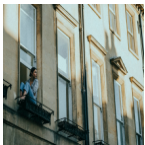
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