



Watching Them Watching Me: A Study on Lateral Surveillance in Singapore

by

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Abstract

To the average Singaporean, STOMP, otherwise known as Straits Times Online Mobile Print, is nothing foreign. Since its launch in 2006, the online citizen-journalism website grew notorious for being a site where Singaporeans can anonymously upload self-captured photos and videos to name and shame others. STOMP today features a plethora of ‘bad behaviours’ in public spaces, of which incidents surrounding the priority seat on public transport are notably a reoccurring theme. While few studies have explored the role of STOMP in contributing to lateral surveillance and influencing social behaviours in public spaces, they were more focused on the participants and the outcomes of lateral surveillance rather than its process. This thesis seeks to understand the mechanisms that underpin the phenomenon of lateral surveillance in Singapore through a discussion of Singaporean attitudes towards potentially “anti-social” behavior, such as sitting on the priority seat on public transport. Through a mixed-methods sequential explanatory research framework, complemented with participant observation and content analysis of platforms, like STOMP and Instagram, this thesis reveals how shame and the fear of it drive the prevalence of peer-to-peer surveillance in Singapore and foster self-discipline among individuals. At times, this self-discipline is even found to be excessive and at the expense of individual comfort and commute experience. This thesis posits that such a surveillance system has further encouraged the creation of a vigilante culture, exacerbating existing anxieties, skepticism, and distrust in our society.

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Abbreviations

LTA	Land Transport Authority
MOT	Ministry of Transport
MRT	Mass Rapid Transit
NSF	Full-time National Serviceman
NSman	Operationally Ready National Serviceman
SBS	SBS Transit
SMRT	SMRT Corporation Ltd
STOMP	Straits Times Online Mobile Print

Chapter One: Introduction

“Whether you're hopping on a bus or taking the train, Singapore's world-class transport system will make getting around our city a breeze.”
– *Visit Singapore's website*

Imagine this: you are travelling on the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) in Singapore. Suddenly, a woman standing near you starts lashing out at another commuter for standing ‘too close’ to her. She yells and points at the commuter. “There is so much space over there,” she shouts, “I was here first!” What will you do?

Now, imagine: you have just boarded a double-decker public bus in Singapore. After making your way to the upper deck of the bus, you come across a woman spitting on the seats in front of her. She changes seats when she sees you but continues to spit on the seats around her. What will you do?

Imagine again: you are a pregnant woman who has just boarded the MRT in Singapore to travel home. Spotting an empty priority seat in the train cabin, you proceed to make your way towards it. A man is standing right in front of the seat and you politely ask if he could move so that you can sit. He stares at you wide-eyed and then asks you for proof that you are indeed pregnant. When you question him why, he then complains about how you are “not in pregnant wear”. He eventually walks away. What will you do?

In reality, the individuals who have encountered these events chose to film the happenings and submit the footage to STOMP, otherwise known as Straits Times Online Mobile Print (Daley 2021; Ng 2020; STOMP 2016). Launched in June 2006, STOMP is an online citizen-journalism website premised on contributions from its users. Despite not limiting the type of content that its users can submit, STOMP

quickly grew notorious among Singaporeans for being a site where they can anonymously name and shame others. Private cars dangerously cutting lanes on the highway; uncles putting their bare feet up on adjacent seats on the bus; hawkers charging seemingly too much for a bowl of prawn noodles; foreign workers being indecent in public – STOMP features a plethora of ‘wrongdoings’. But amidst these, one theme is particularly perennial: public transport, or to be more specific, the scrutiny and vigilance surrounding the priority seat on public transport. To examine this phenomenon of lateral surveillance through online naming and shaming, this thesis will explore and discuss people’s attitudes towards sitting on the priority seat. But what is so special about a reserved seat?

Figure 1: Reserved Seats on public transport in Singapore (Peh 2011; xuantinghoo 2015)



The Ghost of the Priority Seat: From Encouraging Kindness to Instilling Fear and Anxiety

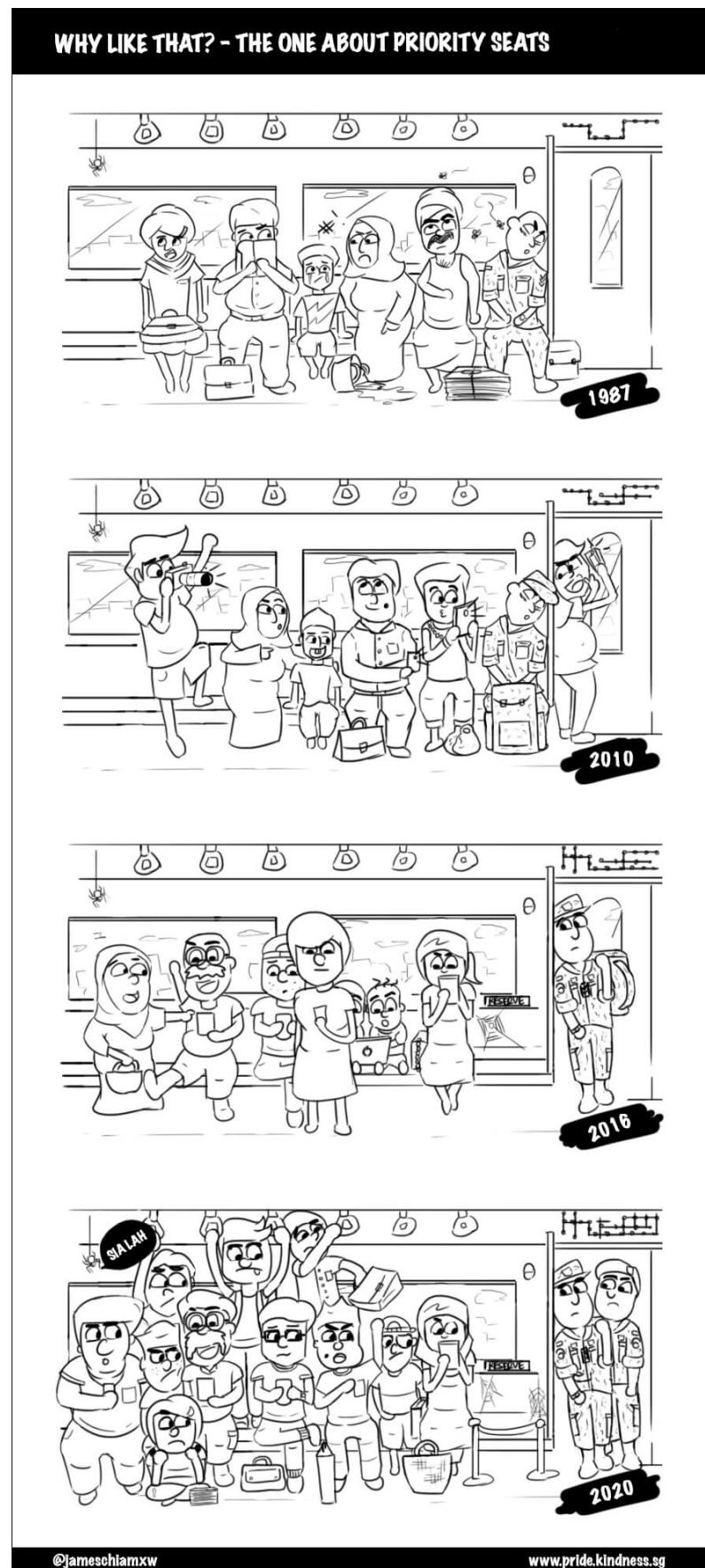
The priority seat on public transport in Singapore finds its roots in the Singapore Kindness Movement. In his 1996 New Year Message, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong underscored a need for Singapore to mature as a gracious society to “match [its] material prosperity” (Ministry of Information and the Arts 1995). This led to the formation of the Singapore Kindness Movement in 1997, in which it seeks to motivate “Singaporeans to make a real commitment to gracious living through simple acts of kindness in their daily activities” (Singapore Kindness Movement N.d.). It is against this backdrop that the Land Transport Authority (LTA) began organizing annual Graciousness Campaigns to foster a “gracious commuting culture” in 2009 (Ministry of Transport 2019). One of such initiatives was the introduction of the designated priority seats on most modes of public transport. These priority seats are intended for the convenience of commuters with urgent needs – namely the elderly, pregnant, injured, and parents with young children – and are thus situated near the entrances/exits of public transportation. These seats are not only marked with a different color but are also labelled with signs that read “Reserved Seating” or “Priority Seat”. Commuters, who fail to fit into the categories of commuters with recognized needs, can also sit on these priority seats albeit strongly encouraged to give the seat up when met with commuters who may need it more. This act of giving the priority seat up to others was stressed by LTA in its published list of “considerate commuter behavior”, where it states: “Offer your seat to someone who needs it more... DO NOT Hog priority seats not meant for you”. This list of ‘dos and don’ts’ on public transport was republished by public transport operator, SMRT Corporation Ltd (SMRT), on its

website. This list, however, can no longer be accessed and found on both LTA and SMRT's current websites as it seems to have been deleted¹.

Former Minister for Transport Khaw Boon Wan argues that the Graciousness Campaigns, like the above, have been largely successful in promoting acts of thoughtful behavior on public transport. Drawing from LTA's 2019 perception survey, he evidenced that 70% of commuters notice that more seats are being given up on public transport as compared to 2012 (Ministry of Transport 2019). While it does seem that the Graciousness Campaigns have met their goals, Singaporeans on the ground are telling a less than perfect story, where more harm than good might have been done.

¹ Refer to Appendix 1 for a copy of the list that was republished by SMRT on their website.

Figure 2: A comic about the reserved seats on public transport (*Chiam 2016*)



Drawn by a local artist, the comic in Figure 2 anecdotally depicts an ‘evolution’ of the priority seat: from a seat like any other to an ‘art exhibition’ that everyone avoids and is overly cautious around. The comic, illustrating how Singaporeans are increasingly critical of, and some even ‘policing’, who can and cannot sit on these reserved seats, aptly reflects a longstanding and growing tension between local commuters. It is hence no surprise that many Singaporeans describe being ‘afraid’, ‘confused’, and ‘hesitant’ to approach the reserved seats on public transport (Chiam 2016; Koh 2017; Choi 2019; Yang 2019). Worries and concerns, like ‘Can I sit on the reserved seat when there is no one around me who needs it?’, ‘Is the priority seat only for the pregnant, elderly, young and injured?’, ‘How old is old? How young is young?’ and ‘How injured must one be to rightfully get the seat?’ are not uncommon among commuters. Further aggravating this fear is Singaporeans’ habit of “capturing, on photo or video, incidents of daily life – whether socially desirable or undesirable and controversial – and sharing these” on social media sites, like STOMP (Jiow and Morales 2015:328). This constant scrutiny by the surrounding commuters, added with the threat of going viral on the Internet and facing criticisms by the rest of society, put some into a state of distress and wary of sitting on the reserved seat. The reserved seat is thus observed to be empty most of the time with many going out of their way to avoid sitting on it, as if the seat is haunted by ghosts. As a local netizen aptly words it, Singaporeans’ “overthinking of the priority seats has only succeeded in making a simple concept very, very complicated” (Chiam 2016).

With public transport being an integral part of everyday life for the average Singaporean as well as a reoccurring theme on STOMP, the priority seat on public transport makes an apt starting point for discussion. This thesis then seeks to answer the following questions: how can we understand this trend of STOMP-ing (i.e., the

practice of uploading self-captured videos of others acting in perceived undesirable ways on social media) in Singapore? What are its impacts on both individuals and society? Are there differences in impacts between individuals? Lastly, how does this make sense in relation to social behavior, civility, social control, and surveillance?

Literature Review

Foucault's (1995) conception of Panopticism provides the foundation to understanding the scrutiny and fear that manifest on the public transport in Singapore. Introduced by Jeremy Bentham (1995), the 'Panopticon', which translates to 'all-seeing', is a prison that involves "a perimeter building in the form of a ring with a tower at the centre, pierced by large windows, opening on to the inner face of the ring" (Manokha 2018:222). The prison officer, who is situated in the central tower, watches every movement that the inmates make without himself being seen by them. The prisoners, on the other hand, are isolated in individual cells in the perimeter building and behave under the impression that they are consistently being watched. Bentham's (1995) Panopticon functions on the premise of three assumptions: the assumption that the prison authority is omnipresent, reinforced by his total invisibility; the assumption of universal visibility of the objects of surveillance; and the prison inmate's rational assumption of constant surveillance by the prison authority. In the Panopticon, the prison inmate exercises self-restraint and self-discipline, and will conform his behavior to expected norms. Surveillance, within the prison, is then permanent even when discontinued; it does not matter who is in that central tower or if there is even someone in that tower as its presence alone reminds the prisoners of the threat of coercion should they act out of line. This disciplinary power that the inmates resultantly exert over

themselves to conform to the perceived expectations of the authorities, *without* actual coercion by the authorities, is what Foucault (1995) argues to be the ‘power of the gaze’. He (1995) notes that the inmates inscribe in themselves “the power relation in which [they] simultaneously [play] both roles” of the ‘watched’ and the ‘watcher’. While both Bentham and Foucault felt that the ‘gaze’ facilitated by the Panopticon can be applied to and found in modern institutions of everyday life, like schools and hospitals, Foucault saw the Panopticon more as a metaphor for the modern disciplinary society. Surveillance, as such, has always existed in social life. The extent of surveillance, as Manokha (2018:226) notes, “has particularly grown with the rise of modernity and of a centralized bureaucratic state”. With the development of new technologies as well as the growth of a risk society, surveillance models have diversified over the years; of which, lateral surveillance is noted to be “extremely prevalent” in Singapore (Jiow and Morales 2015:329).

Lateral surveillance, according to Andrejevic (2005:481), is “not the top-down monitoring of employees by employers, citizen by the state but rather the peer-to-peer surveillance of spouses, friends and relatives”. Though it may seem like peer monitoring is nothing particularly new, Andrejevic (2005:481) denies the claim that lateral surveillance today “merely rehabilitate, in technological form, the everyone-knows-everyone-else’s-business world of traditional village life”. He highlights two important differences: the appeal to visual evidence rather than stories that are heard through the grapevine, and the democratization of access to technologies and means for surveillance. Compared to Panopticism, Jiow and Morales (2015:329) contend that lateral surveillance elicits “a greater disciplinary effect” on social behaviors; it is no longer just the political authority watching you but your fellow friends, neighbors, commuters, and colleagues as well. With the omnipresence and ubiquity of these

relationships, individuals are compelled to persistently modulate their behavior as it is almost impossible to exactly pinpoint who from these circles are watching, much less when, where, and how they are watching.

Unlike the threat of coercion that the inmates face in the Panopticon, existing literature on lateral surveillance continues to be relatively quiet on the source of the disciplinary power that it enacts. That being said, both the studies of Skoric et al. (2010) and Jiow and Morales (2015) suggest that shaming is the main driver of the disciplinary power of lateral surveillance observed in Singapore. Shaming, as defined by Kahan and Posner (1999:368), “is the process by which citizens publicly and self-consciously draw attention to the bad dispositions or actions of an offender, as a way of punishing him for having those dispositions or engaging in those actions”. It can manifest in different forms, such as the state choosing to publicly disclose the names of criminals, or a mother choosing to scold and spank her child in public for ill manners. With Singapore’s high Internet and mobile smartphone penetration rates, online shaming grows increasingly popular among its citizens (Skoric et al. 2010; Jiow and Morales 2015). Since the early 2000s, numerous websites and applications have surfaced to provide platforms for eager Singaporeans to call out ‘bad behavior’ in public spaces and play social police. STOMP, being one of such websites, is noted to have played a crucial role in encouraging online shaming in Singapore, so much so that the word ‘STOMP’ has long been appropriated by the local population into a metaphor for the act of being shamed by others online.

Delving into the phenomenon of online shaming in Singapore, Skoric et al. (2010:181) find that locals who contribute to online shaming are primarily motivated to “raise awareness about a lack of civic mindedness in society”. They seek to call attention to the ‘bad behavior’ and deter others from emulating such actions. These

individuals are observed to possess a high sense of social responsibility and tend to be open to new experiences. The study further notes that individuals who are more likely to be deterred by online shaming are often socially more responsible, more neurotic, subscribe more strongly to ‘Asian values’, cooperative, and agreeable.

With the dearth of knowledge on lateral surveillance and its impacts, Skoric et al. (2010) and Jiow and Morales (2015) contributed pioneering pieces to understanding the surveillance model in Singapore. Yet, they are inadequate in understanding lateral surveillance in Singapore today. First, both groups of researchers were lacking in their elaborations on shame and its relationship with lateral surveillance. Second, the two groups of researchers failed to account for the feelings of fear that arise in this backdrop of lateral surveillance despite it being frequently mentioned by their own respondents and anecdotal accounts. Third, an important question has been left unanswered: why and how are these individuals motivated to watch each other? Lastly, the emergence of new applications and social media sites, like Tiktok, and the decline of traffic on STOMP necessitate a relook at how online shaming takes place over these new platforms. It is on top of the questions mentioned in the Introduction that this research paper further aims to bridge the gaps in the literature.

Chapter Two: Methods & Methodology

According to the Ministry of Transport (MOT) (N.d.), public transport in Singapore includes trains, which comprise the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) and the Light Rail Transit, buses, and taxis. To better observe and understand the social interactions that take place on public transport, this research paper narrows to look specifically at the MRT and public buses. This focus is significant as these two are the most popular modes of public transport in Singapore: the MRT, run by SMRT and SBS Transit (SBS)² has more than 3.4 million daily ridership in 2019, whereas public buses, operated by SMRT, SBS, Tower Transit, and Go-Ahead Singapore, has more than 4.1 million daily ridership in 2019 (Land Transport Authority N.d.).

A mixed-methods sequential explanatory research design was employed for this study. This research design constitutes two distinct phases, where quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed in the first and second phases respectively (Creswell et al. 2003). In gathering quantitative data first, I was able to gain a “general understanding of the research problem” and identify potential areas of analysis to later explore and examine (Ivankova, Creswell, and Stick 2006:5). The qualitative phase then builds on and expands the quantitative phase. Exploring the respondents’ views in greater depth, the qualitative phase captures nuances and details from their narrated feelings, opinions, and experiences (Rahman 2017). The collected qualitative data thus refine, “explain, or elaborate on, the quantitative results obtained in the first phase” (Ivankova et al. 2006:5).

² SMRT operates the North-South Line, East-West Line, Circle Line, and Thomson-East Coast Line while SBS operates the North-East Line and the Downtown East (Land Transport Authority, n.d.).

In the quantitative phase of this study, an anonymous survey was conducted with 40 Singaporeans³, who were between the ages of 21-years-old to 54-years-old and were active users of the MRT and public buses. The survey was disseminated through social media (e.g., Instagram) and was further circulated through word-of-mouth. While survey questions were a blend of multiple-choice and Likert Scale questions, qualitative short answer questions were included as well to enable respondents to briefly elaborate on their choices. Survey questions were structured to fulfil three main objectives: first, the survey sought to learn about how respondents would behave during their commute on the MRT and/or buses, such as their willingness to sit on the priority seats in the mode of transport as well as the factors affecting their willingness to do so. Second, the survey aimed to identify respondents' general attitudes and feelings towards the priority seats on the MRT and buses. Third, the survey hoped to pick up any potential differences in attitudes and behavior on public transport between age groups.

Following the survey, a total of 15 one-on-one interviews were conducted. These 15 interviewees⁴, between the ages of 22-years-old and 48-years-old, were conveniently sampled; they were recruited through an opt-in section in the quantitative survey, where they indicated their willingness to be interviewed. These volunteers left their details to be later contacted for their interviews. Such a sampling method proved to be beneficial for the interview process as these interviewees were already comfortable to discuss their opinions and experiences. To further encourage and grant interviewees greater freedom to openly share their thoughts, the interviews were also semi-structured. The interviewees guided the conversations with their responses to a

³ Refer to Appendix 2 for the survey sample's demographic details.

⁴ Refer to Appendix 3 for the interview sample's demographic details.

great extent, rendering deeper insights into the research problem. More importantly, such flexibility allowed for unexpected information and dimensions to be uncovered for possible analysis (Burgess 1984). Given the circumstances of the pandemic and safe-distancing measures, interviewees were given an option to choose between having their interviews conducted in person or over Zoom. 12 interviewees chose to have their interviews over Zoom while I met the other three interviewees physically. On average, the interviews took 45 minutes to one hour. Lastly, the names of the interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms for confidentiality.

Building on the quantitative data collected earlier, the qualitative interviews sought to delve into three main areas of the study: firstly, interviewees were asked to discuss their commute experiences as well as how they would typically behave on public transport in Singapore. Interviewees were subsequently shown a video that was originally uploaded on STOMP⁵ in 2012, where two commuters are depicted to be arguing over the reserved seat in the MRT. Interviewees were invited to share their thoughts and feelings after watching the video, and if they had similar experiences before. Respondents were also asked if sites, like STOMP, will influence their behavior on public transport. Secondly, the interviewees shared their opinions as to why shaming takes place in Singapore. Lastly, I concluded the interviews by getting the interviewees to explain, in their own words, appropriate behavior that one should exhibit on public transport.

To complement the primary data collected, participant observation was carried out on the MRT and buses over three months. During my commutes on the MRT and buses, I observed how commuters behave and interact with each other, and detailed

⁵ The video was originally uploaded on STOMP and was later re-uploaded on Youtube. The video is titled “Quarrel Over MRT seat – Younger ‘Ah Lian’ vs Older Auntie Fight and ARGUE Over Reserved Seat” on Youtube.

these observations in fieldwork notes. Even though pictures were taken during these commutes, I was careful to avoid capturing the faces of commuters. Having said that, the faces of any depicted commuters have been blurred to protect their privacy. Observations made on public transport helped create a more complete picture of social behavior on public transport and filled gaps that may have been overlooked during the survey and interviews (Becker and Geer 1982). Further, content analysis of existing videos, articles, and comments posted on social media sites, such as Instagram, Tiktok, and STOMP, were also conducted, in which the sites and their content were combed for any incidents that have occurred on public transport.

Chapter Three: Shame on You

When presented with the statement, “I am worried that I will be STOMP-ed by others on public transport in Singapore”, 10 out of 15 interviewees sympathized and agreed with the statement. The remaining five interviewees, however, disagreed and rationalized that they have no reason to be worried because they make “conscious efforts” to avoid any “STOMP-worthy” behavior. Yet, ironically, these deliberate attempts to regulate their actions and behave in ways ‘unworthy’ of STOMP inherently connote an inclination to avoid being shamed and feeling shamed.

‘Face’ and the Fear of Non-Conformity

One way to understand this worry and fear of being shamed by others is offered by interviewee Zendaya:

I mean no one would want their face slandered by the public over any act that they do. Everyone will want to protect their *face*, nobody wants to kena⁶ STOMP-ed by others. It’s so embarrassing.

Face is mentioned twice by Zendaya here: the first is to be understood in the literal sense, while the second is a reference to an important cultural concept embedded in Singaporean everyday life. The latter idea of *face*, elucidated by Ho (1976:883), is the “respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct.” *Face* has multiple dimensions: it can be lost, gained, maintained, or

⁶ *Kena* is a Malay word commonly used in Singapore. It means to suffer from something or be afflicted with something.

given to others. Zhang, Cao, and Grigoriou (2011:131) emphasize that these dimensions of face are separate from each other; not gaining *face* does not necessarily constitute a loss of *face*, and not losing *face* does not necessarily constitute a gain in *face*. For example, an individual may gain *face* when his “social performance goes above and beyond social expectations on him”, but it does not mean that he loses *face* when he underperforms (Zhang et al. 2011:131). Rather, he stands to lose *face* when his conduct “falls below the minimum level considered acceptable or when certain vital or essential requirements, as functions of one’s social position, are not satisfactorily met” (Ho 1976:871).

From these, it is evident that one’s conduct crucially influences the amount of *face* he has. However, *face* is ultimately determined and conferred to the individual by others. It is a social product of value and validation that other members of the community accord to an individual. To lose *face* then translates into a feeling of rejection by others, causing the individual to experience embarrassment, shame, and humiliation (Scheff 1988; Kim and Nam 1998). Being painful emotions that threaten individual identity, self-esteem, and self-worth (Thomason 2015), these emotions are a strong deterrence against losing *face*. Individuals must then navigate their social interactions and relationships to seek and maintain “a position of approbation in the social group to which they belong” (Qi 2011:281). Compared to gaining *face*, individuals are thus more concerned with saving and protecting *face* “if he cares for maintaining a minimum level of effective social functioning” (Zhang et al. 2011:131). The desire to avoid being STOMP-ed among my interlocutors then makes sense as being STOMP-ed puts the individual at risk of facing widespread criticisms, a loss of *face*, and correspondingly, embarrassment and shame.

The notion of *face* is also culturally significant in Singapore. With many of its governing principles adapted and modelled after Confucian ideals, collectivism is highly valued in Singapore (Tan 2012). Enshrined in its national ideology of the five Shared Values, the first tenet states “Nation before community and society before self”. This emphasis on ‘We’ over ‘I’ signals that the interests of the community will supersede the needs of the individual. More importantly, such emphasis further means that the individual is first identified by his relationship to the social group rather than by his personal characteristics. Personal identity is then relational, where it is “dependent on continued relations with the [social] group” (Bedford and Hwang 2003:130). Following this train of thought, *face* is then not just the concern of the individual but his social networks as well. When an individual loses *face*, his family, friends, and colleagues are also implicated by association as their relationship with the individual will cause them to lose *face* as well. Yohan exemplifies this in his interview:

I am scared to find myself on STOMP la. I mean I have never been STOMP-ed – I try my best not to but just the thought of it scares me. Like what if my relatives find an article of me online? Or like people from school or work? They will think that my parents didn’t teach me manners. And then what if they start attacking my parents and family for what I have done? I will feel so guilty if that happens.

The possibility of causing his family to lose *face* thus became a motivation for Yohan to watch how he behaves in public. Interviewee Kiara shares a similar experience when she was in Secondary School.

I was travelling on the bus with a group of my friends after school and the whole bus was filled with other students from my school. Because there were so many of us, it was very noisy, and an auntie started filming us with her phone. She muttered under her breath that she was going to STOMP us and report us to our school. I never got to know if the video made it on STOMP but the next day, the Vice-Principal made an announcement and scolded us. She told us to behave more ‘decently’ when wearing the school uniform in public and that there will be ‘serious consequences’ if this continues...She started her announcement with ‘it’s embarrassing to receive such news’...1

In addition, consensus and harmony are often emphasized over conflict and confrontation in Singapore (Skoric et al 2010). Of the five Shared Values, the fourth and fifth values state “Consensus, not conflict” and “Racial and religious harmony”. These values encourage obedience and conformity to social norms and urge Singaporeans to preserve the social order. The importance of maintaining social harmony is further stressed by the Singapore government as it repeatedly “touts social stability as paramount to economic survival, and thus national security” (Chua 2012:715). Using strict laws and punitive punishments to safeguard the social order, the Singapore government inculcates in its citizens an inclination towards conformity as well as a fear of non-conformity (Kamaludeen and Turner 2013; Human Rights Watch 2017). With this weight placed on conformity and social order, individuals are inclined to protect and save their *face* by adhering to social norms and expectations.

Eyes on You

Most of my respondents and interviewees profess that they feel “watched” and “judged” by fellow commuters on public transport. Figure 3 shows a visualization of the words used by respondents and interviewees to describe how they feel if they were to sit on the reserved seat. The relative size of each word corresponds with the frequency that it has been mentioned, of which the words “judged”, “pressured”, “self-conscious” are noted to be most commonly used.

Figure 3: A visualization of words used by both survey and interview respondents to describe how they feel if they were sitting on the reserved seat



Interviewee Sienna elaborates on this feeling of scrutiny inflicted by the other commuters onboard:

If you fall outside of the categories, that is the pregnant, elderly, disabled, and children, and you sit on the reserved seat, people around you will judge you... they will look at you and see if you fit into those categories and when they realize that you don't, they will start thinking of nasty thoughts about you and maybe even yell at you about how you are unkind and selfish... My grandma told me a story of how she was standing on the bus and someone actually scolded a woman into giving the reserved seat up for my grandma.

One survey respondent also likens commuters on public transport to “snakes” that are “watching and ready to pounce on [him]” if he “did something wrong”.

Arguably, this feeling of being watched by fellow commuters is contributed by the characteristics of public transit. Public transit scholars (Davis and Levine 1967; Fried and DeFazio 1974) observe that the design layout of public transport vehicles tends to nurture a ‘socially sterile’ environment that discourages positive and meaningful social interactions. As Thomas (2009:2) posits, the design layout of public

transport vehicles is “driven more by economic imperative than concern for the users’ social requirement”. This translates into more people predominantly packed into the vehicle than there are available seats, forcing commuters into an overly close physical proximity with strangers whom they just met. This happens even when public transport vehicles are below their passenger capacity, where commuters are made to sit immediately adjacent to each other, bunched together shoulder-to-shoulder in a social distance “typically reserved for people with strong personal relationships” (Thomas 2009:3). The confined space of the vehicle further ensures that commuters remain in the peripherals of each other’s line of sight. This lack of personal space and privacy renders commuters a great amount of stress and anxiety. Interviewee Bennett expresses concern over this:

If someone yells and scolds me for something I did on the bus or MRT, everyone will hear about it. I heard about my friend listening to music too loudly on a relatively crowded bus and an Auntie turned to loudly scold him – the whole bus looked at him and judged the heck out of him. To have a whole bus looking at you or an entire MRT cabin? God, can you imagine how embarrassing that will be? I will legit have a panic attack. Just thinking about it makes me feel like puking.

With the lack of personal space, commuters are indeed easily exposed and subjected to the eyes of those who are around them. Parallel to the prisoner in the Panopticon, the commuter on public transport finds it difficult to hide his actions from his surrounding others – be it texting a significant other, writing an email or even the song that he is listening to, a look over his shoulder will reveal what the commuter is doing during his commute. Yet with the overwhelming number of commuters on the public transport, the commuter is prevented from identifying who among the crowd is watching him. This uncertainty is made worse with the constant rearrangements of masses on public transport: individuals alight and are consistently replaced by others boarding the vehicle. Some may stay in the vehicle for longer as the presence of others

may be fleeting. It is almost impossible to fully account for the comings and goings of all passengers, let alone ascertain who is paying attention to your actions. The commuter also finds challenges in escaping the gaze of his surrounding others. In Singapore, the routes of public buses and MRT are planned – where they stop, what time they arrive, and depart each individual stop are meticulously scheduled (Paulo et al. 2018). Commuters cannot alight the vehicle whenever they may deem fit. In other words, commuters will remain confined in the vehicle until the designated stop and will continue to be subjected to the gaze of their fellow commuters until they are able to leave.

Figure 4: An empty MRT cabin [above] (Boonlong 2021) compared to a crowded MRT cabin during peak hours in Singapore [below] (Wan 2015)



Figure 5: An empty public bus [above] (Cheng 2016) compared to a crowded public bus during peak hours in Singapore [below] (Bhattacharjya 2017)



At the same time, the conditions of public transit make it inevitable that the commuter watches his surrounding others as well. He thus puts his fellow commuter through the same feeling of being “watched” and “judged”. In this sense, the commuter is both the object and subject of this peer-to-peer scrutiny, simultaneously playing the

role of the watched and the watcher. Interviewee Kiara exemplifies her “instinct” to watch and judge her fellow commuters:

I will be doing my own thing and out of the corner of my eyes, if I see someone approaching the reserved seat, I subconsciously look up and stare at them. It’s something I’m quite ashamed of but if I see that it is a young person, who looks seemingly okay, seated on the reserved seat while the bus or train is crowded, my first instinct would be to judge the seated person...I feel ashamed because like the whole judging someone’s worthiness to sit on the seat based on their visual indicators is wrong...I know if I’m that person and if I’m having a headache, I would want to sit too and I wouldn’t want people to think badly of me.

Beyond the confines of public transport, survey respondents and interviewees further point to the possibility of being “watched” and “judged” by others who may not even be physically present in the MRT or bus with them. Interviewee Kylie explains:

Nowadays, it is so easy for people to pick up their phones to film you. It is even more easy for them to upload the videos or pictures online for others to shame and judge you... We can be at each end of Singapore, but I will almost instantly know if you did something wrong without being next to you. It is almost unavoidable now these days.

As interviewee Xander puts it, “you never know who will STOMP you”. The act of videoing and uploading someone else’s ‘bad behavior’ onto the Internet is conceivably premised on individual agency. With a surveillance camera that is fixed on the wall, individuals are visually made aware of its existence and are conscious that they are likely to be filmed by it. But, with the surrounding others during a train or bus commute, individuals have to guess and predict who among the crowd would be filming *and* who among those filming would be uploading the content. With photo-taking and videotaping made discreet by smart technologies, most individuals do not have the slightest clue as to if and when they have been filmed until they see themselves circulating on the Internet. Even then, *when* the video or image is uploaded is also

ambiguous as spectators may choose to video now and upload later. With little indication as to when one is being watched and filmed, Xander thus describes “a need to behave properly all the time” lest “a bad moment is captured”.

Interviewee Wendy remarks that “what is worse than” this ambiguity of who and when is the “superficiality of online shaming”. With every evidence of ‘bad behavior’ uploaded on the Internet, netizens are often passing judgements on the individual in question based on that short moment captured. They only see and hear the incident from what the owner of the content has presented, such as through the captions and the angle at which the content is shot. The supposed deviant, who is made visible through shaming, is seldom heard in this narrative, usually denied the opportunity to clarify his actions until much later, where his explanations may even be questioned and discredited. Wendy critiques that netizens “always assume the worst” of the alleged deviant and often end up making “superficial conclusions when they do not know the before and after of the incident”. The deviant is then “seen and treated as an outcast” in society, where even strangers will “suddenly hate on” him. Wendy further drew from incidents over the years to list the possible consequences of online shaming: doxing, harsh criticisms, threats, “extreme embarrassment”, losing *face*, implicating family and friends, and “getting fired at work”. She therefore saw these “what-ifs” and “worst-case scenarios” as reminders to “behave on public transport and in public spaces”. A sentiment that many respondents and interviewees agreed with.

Interestingly, interviewee Kylie confesses that STOMP, referring to the website, is “out of trend nowadays” and claims that “lesser and lesser people are going on to STOMP to post”. But when asked if the decline in traffic meant that individuals today are participating less in online shaming, Kylie disagreed.

Nowadays, there are so many new sites popping up, like Tiktok is something new. There are also those anonymous Instagram confession accounts for you to

submit content in...Twitter, Mothership, Rice Media, Straits Times also have a contribution page now. I wouldn't say that online shaming is on the decline, rather, I think it is happening more frequently actually.

To participate in online shaming, individuals do not need to actively capture and provide new evidence of others' 'bad behaviour' on social media. By simply commenting, sharing, and reposting the original content uploaded by another, they contribute to and exacerbate the shaming of the alleged deviant. With the introduction of new applications and social media sites, some of which were mentioned by Kylie, there are now more means at the public's disposal to exploit for online shaming. Individuals are now sharing and cross-posting content across different sites with greater ease as content spread and go viral at unprecedented speeds. This means that the scale of which shaming takes place is greater than ever: anyone can participate and almost everyone can see and judge. You do not need to be a user of STOMP to read and comment on others' 'bad behavior'. Now, if you open any of your social networking sites, you can immediately access such content without intentionally going out of your way to find it. Moreover, this means that reports and submissions of 'bad behavior' are almost impossible to be completely erased and removed as a copy of it will exist on at least one of the platforms. As Kylie describes, "it will be a permanent stain...everyone will know that you behaved badly and are ill-mannered... they can always easily dig it up again."

A consensus among many of my respondents and interviewees, it is an "unspoken rule" and "general norm" that they should not sit on the reserved seat on public transport, lest they are the pregnant, injured, elderly, or young. In fact, some respondents and interviewees have come to equate sitting on the reserved seat as an act that is shameful and embarrassing. Interviewee Lucas explains:

I don't sit on the reserved seat because I feel like I don't deserve it. I mean I'm not pregnant or disabled. I'm old enough but also not *that* old for standing without support to be dangerous for me and besides, it is kind of embarrassing to sit on it, especially when I don't fit into who the seat is reserved for.

Echoing the sentiment, interviewee Tobias adds:

I get quite embarrassed when I sit on the reserved seat – I try not to and I very rarely sit on it but when I do, I feel very awkward. I don't know why either, there is and should be nothing wrong with sitting on [the] reserved seat but I feel like people are watching me and I get very uncomfortable...

Indeed, there is ‘nothing wrong’ with sitting on the reserved seat – neither LTA nor any of the public transport operators have restricted the public from using the priority seat on public transport. Yet, many seem to subscribe to a narrow understanding of the priority seat by delineating clearly who can and cannot sit on the priority seat. This is arguably due to the use of categories, like the ‘elderly’, ‘disabled’, ‘pregnant’ and ‘young’, which has unintentionally compartmentalized and limited our thinking. Added with the symbols used on the signs for priority seats (see Figure 6), Singaporeans board public transport with a pre-conceived and fixed image of individuals who have been deemed to be in more need for that particular seat. For example, an individual would be only recognized as ‘disabled’ if their injury is visually displayed through symbolic gestures, such as wearing a plaster cast or ankle guard. Individuals, who fail to embody these visual markers and still choose to sit on the priority seat, will then be seen as ‘hogging’ and ‘taking the seat away’ from someone who needs it – a behavior listed by LTA as unacceptable conduct of a gracious commuter.

Figure 6: Symbols used for Reserved Seating on public transport (Choi 2019)



To sit on the reserved seat is then a ‘bad behavior’ that is likely to be shamed and STOMP-ed, potentially threatening one’s *face*. With the fear of being shamed as well as the fear of losing *face*, individuals are motivated to discipline and adjust their behavior to meet the expectations of gracious commuters. It is thus no surprise that this study observes a tendency among the survey respondents to avoid the reserved seat completely when travelling on the MRT and buses. When asked about their willingness to sit on the reserved seat in an *empty* MRT cabin, survey respondents were generally reluctant to approach the seat. This was based on a Likert Scale from one, being extremely unlikely to sit on the reserved seat, to five, being extremely likely to sit on the reserved seat, where a mean of 2.15 was recorded. In a *crowded* MRT cabin, a lower mean of 2.10 was observed. In similar questions asked about the priority seat on a bus, sentiments were paralleled albeit with higher means documented. Means of 2.76 and 2.37 were recorded for the respondents’ willingness to sit on a reserved seat on an *empty* and *crowded* bus respectively. This greater willingness to sit on the

reserved seat in the bus as compared to the MRT cabin is accounted for by respondents in three ways: there are relatively more priority seats in a bus than in a train cabin; priority seats compared to the other seats on the bus are closer to the entrance/exit of the bus; buses tend to remain less crowded than trains.

The fear of sitting on the reserved seat is prevalent beyond my respondents and interviewees. During my commutes on the MRT, I encountered strangers who have refused to sit on the reserved seat despite it being empty (See Figure 7). The most memorable encounter was that of two young men, depicted in the middle photo in Figure 7. In the cabin that I was in, there were two empty seats left, one being a priority seat. When the two men boarded the MRT together, the man dressed in black made the first move to sit on the empty non-reserved seat. His friend, noticing that the remaining seat is a priority seat, chose to stand instead. The man dressed in black was indifferent to his friend's decision to stand and continued to chat animatedly with him.

Figure 7: Pictures taken during my commutes on the MRT



SGAG (2021), a local digital content producer, posted a meme on Instagram illustrating a fear to sit on the priority seat on public transport (See Figure 8). In the comment section, many Instagram users expressed their agreement and empathy with similar sentiments (See Figure 9).

Figure 8: SGAG's meme on the reserved seat on public transport



Figure 9: Comment section under SGAG's meme posted on Instagram

woshiii_gt Still better not to seat incase u didnt see an elderly later kena stomp why this young person dont wan give seat to old people.
52w Reply

wkhlsj I really scared to sit with my school uniform
52w 22 likes Reply
View 1 reply

jiankaigoh Later kena stomped 😱
52w 33 likes Reply

_skootskoot dudok je la
52w Reply

hgv_1.6_2k21 literally got to siam eye contact sia 😂
52w Reply

mr_panda3 Feels wrong to sit even if its free is it just me? 😢
52w 2 likes Reply

laurent_misso Forbidden Seat
52w 62 likes Reply

acxllins It feels illegal to sit there
52w Reply

cl_rx__ I down seat there. Very awkward when you see old auntie or uncle
52w 130 likes Reply

heyain @ikhwanaris better don't sit at all 😂
52w Reply

watlahyou Dont seat later got some kaypoh2 netizen who boliao stomped u with spicy hoax captions
52w 75 likes Reply

— View 1 reply

dylanzxe118 The sacred throne of those drawing cpf
52w Reply

syafiqapls Its not wrong to sit there but it FEELS wrong 😭😭😭
52w Pinned 406 likes Reply
View 2 previous replies

imyza_8 Just sit only then act like u injured once u wanna alight the train 😢
52w Reply

syafiqapls @markaroons hAHAAHAA BASED ON EXPERIENCE ONE
52w 4 likes Reply

wiinduu I only sit there if i'm really really tired and all the seats are full. But every time the door open when the train stop i'll feel insecure 😢
52w Reply

namisaat @syafiqapls feels haram to sit there 🙏
52w 6 likes Reply

elstonnn just feel like everyone staring at me when i sit there
52w Reply

expiz chances of someone taking pic of me and posting online and it goes viral 🚫🚫🚫
52w 3 likes Reply

mr_rxzx Facts
52w Reply

thomas.cai82 that seat is meant to guilt trip people
52w Reply

Inhibited Youths, Indifferent Adults

As outliers, however, survey respondents between 45-years-old and 54-years-old disagreed with general sentiments to avoid the reserved seat on public transport. When asked about their willingness to sit on the reserved seat in an *empty* and *crowded*

MRT cabin, means of 4.50 and 4.00 were noted respectively – a stark difference from the 2.15 and 2.10 overall recorded. For their willingness to sit on the reserved seat in an *empty* and *crowded* bus, older respondents marked means of 3.75 and 3.25 respectively.

Figure 10: Older respondents' willingness to sit on the reserved seat on public transport compared to overall results obtained

	Willingness to sit on the reserved seat in the MRT cabin		Willingness to sit on the reserved seat in the public bus	
	Empty	Crowded	Empty	Crowded
Overall	2.15	2.10	2.76	2.37
Older respondents between 45-years-old and 54-years-old	4.50	4.00	3.75	3.25

While there is overall a greater willingness to sit on the reserved seat in the bus as compared to the MRT cabin, older respondents are conversely less willing to sit in the reserved seat in the bus as compared to the MRT cabin. Older respondents gave various reasons for this preference. One respondent explains that she prefers the “normal seats at the back” because her bus rides are usually longer than her commutes on the MRT. She claims that she would only sit on the reserved seat on the bus if she is “carrying a lot of bags” and if she is unable to move to the back of the bus due to how crowded it is. Another respondent states that it is “distracting” to sit at the reserved seat as boarding commuters will inevitably pass by the reserved seats to move into the bus.

Nonetheless, older survey respondents and interviewees, compared to their younger counterparts, are found to be more willing and active in choosing to sit on the priority seat on public transport. Expressing little fear of being STOMP-ed, older survey respondents and interviewees converge on how they “deserve” to sit on the reserved seat due to their age. One survey respondent clarifies:

I am nearing my 50s, I am old enough to sit on the reserved seat now haha. I'm old and my body aches. Usually, I will just sit and I don't think anyone else will say me or STOMP me.

Interviewee Phoebe, who is 48 years old, further extends the sentiment:

You all young people don't need to sit la. I see you all party, play sports. Still young. When you reach my age, then you will know. Your leg pain, arm pain, head pain... Sometimes, I stand whole day at work. When I get back home, still need to do chores. Whatever chance I get, I will sit and rest.

That being said, these respondents stress that they would give the reserved seat up when they encounter commuters older than them.

But of course, if I see some auntie or uncle older than me or is disabled, I will give up my seat la. Must be considerate. – Phoebe

I'm probably older than most who are taking the train so I will sit on the reserved seat but if I see someone older than me, I will give it up for them. – A survey respondent

Their responses suggest how seniority plays a part in picturing who is more ‘entitled’ to sit on the reserved seat, such that the older the commuter is, the more “rights” he has towards sitting on the reserved seat. Even though such perceptions are in part shaped by the priority seats’ use of the label “elderly”, they are deeply rooted in local culture too. 22-years-old Kiara, in her interview, accounts for such perceptions with the “Asian values [that the Singapore] society is built on”, specifically “the idea of respecting your elders”. Wendy, who is 21 years old, also describes in her interview

that she was taught “since young that [she] should accord respect and deference to the elder generation”. “Built into the social fabric” in Singapore (Ingersoll-Dayton and Saengtienchai 1999:113), respect for the elderly is highly valued and repeatedly emphasized through moral and civic education in schools as well as government policies and campaigns (e.g. ‘Pioneer Generation and Merdeka Generation Packages'). Mehta (1997) notes that respect for the elderly is locally connoted in terms of courtesy and politeness towards the elderly. This can be displayed through helpful behaviours, of which “[giving] up a seat [on public transport] for an older person” is most frequently mentioned and raised as an example of respect by Singaporeans (Ingersoll-Dayton and Saengtienchai 1999:119).

Correspondingly, younger commuters can thus be understood to have lesser “rights” to sit on the reserved seat on public transport. This thesis finds that ideas of individual ‘worthiness’ and ‘entitlement’ of the reserved seat, mentioned by the older commuters, have caused younger commuters to be afraid of approaching the seat, and even more so when they are dressed in uniforms. Interviewee Lucas divulges his experiences commuting on public transport in his school and Army uniform:

Every time I wear my JC⁷ uniform or like my NSF⁸ uniform, and if I speak a little louder to my friend, people on the train or bus will just stare at me... I can see them looking at the badge on my chest and my uniform to figure out where I am from... I get very nervous, and I will watch if they are raising their phones to take pictures of me and STOMP me.

Numerous interviewees similarly resonated with the feelings of anxiety that Lucas experienced. When asked what may affect their decision to sit on the reserved seat, at least four interviewees explicitly answered: “attire such as army uniform or school uniform”.

⁷ JC is an acronym for Junior College.

⁸ NSF is an acronym for Full-time National Serviceman.

Once I booked out of camp and was wearing my smart 4⁹. From Pasir Ris to Jurong, the whole of the green line [on the MRT], I didn't even dare to sit on any seat. The entire MRT ride home, I stood at a little corner... I was smelly, muddy, dirty. I was scared if I sit, people will scold me or STOMP me. – Bennett

I used to worry more about being STOMP-ed on public transport when I was in Secondary School and Junior College as I would be wearing my school uniform... I was afraid that any actions would be misjudged by members of the public and STOMP-ed unnecessarily. – Wendy

If I am going out after school, I would usually bring an extra set of clothes to change out. If I'm just grabbing a snack with my friends after school, I will just take my jacket and cover my name tag and school badge on my uniform... I know of people who would just take out their name tag and school badge too... I'm not ashamed of my school, it's just what if I do something wrong and was STOMP-ed? – Indira

By actively regulating their behaviour and even altering their appearances, interviewees seem to face heightened fear of being shamed and STOMP-ed when dressed in their uniforms in public. These feelings of fear and anxiety are most prominently rationalized by interviewees with the risk of being “punished” by their respective organizations. Interviewee Nyla recounts:

In the past, when I was in Secondary School and JC, I was highly scared. I would often take public transport in school uniform and getting STOMP-ed would mean getting in trouble with my school... being scolded by teachers, demerit points, calling my parents to school, detention...

Recalling the story that interviewee Kiara shared, the Vice-Principal of her Secondary School warned of “serious consequences” if students continued to be “rowdy” and “noisy” on public transport. What was most memorable of the Vice-Principal’s speech for Kiara was her call for students to “behave in public because [they are] ambassadors of the school”. Though neither Nyla nor Kiara has experienced the “consequences” that their schools have threatened, they felt pressured to be on their “best behaviour at all times” when decked in their school uniforms. Similarly, male interviewees were

⁹ Smart 4 is the common and standard uniform of a NSF.

concerned about the possibility of receiving disciplinary actions from the Army during their NS, which could include being assigned more tasks, exercises, or confinement.

This notion of being “ambassadors” of the organization makes sense when we consider the symbolism of uniforms. Uniforms, as distinctive clothing worn by members belonging to the same organization, “[assume] the properties of totemic emblem and [embody] the attributes of a group” (Joseph and Alex 1972:720). Suppressing the wearer’s personal identity, the uniform is a visual reminder of the wearer’s membership with a specific organization. The uniformed individual assumes the identity of the organization and is seen by others as a representative of the organization, and its values and beliefs. His every action thus becomes synonymous with the organization. This was highlighted by interviewee Bennett as well. He observes that “whenever the news report about a ‘bad behavior’”, the supposed deviant is “always recognized” and identified by the community that he has membership in. News or STOMP headlines are “always ‘NSman¹⁰ or NSF did something bad or Raffles Girls School or ITE¹¹ student did this or Yishun resident murdered cats’.”

Among the male interviewees, they further felt that there were “higher expectations” of propriety demanded from them when they wear their Army uniform out in public.

I was wearing my Army uniform and sitting on the MRT – and it wasn’t a reserved seat. It was just a normal seat but an auntie stared at me throughout my ride... it just feels like people expect NSmen to behave in public like how we would behave in camp... like stand up straight, attention... I don’t know how these people view the Army but even in camp, we also damn chill. – Tobias

In his interview, Lucas joked that NSFs “serve the country” by “not taking the seats away from” fellow countrymen and that for some, it is as if NSFs “killed their family

¹⁰ NSman is an acronym for Operationally Ready National Serviceman.

¹¹ ITE is an acronym for Institute of Technical Education.

by simply sitting” on public transport. Attitudes towards NSFs and NSmen sitting on the reserved seat were also captured in earlier Figure 2, where commuters are depicted taking photos and disapproving of the sleeping NSF on the reserved seat in 2010. The comic later shows the NSF standing and seemingly afraid of sitting on the reserved seat in 2016. Joseph and Alex (1972:725) argue that “everyone who recognizes the uniform to any extent becomes an ‘other’ who has some expectation of how the uniform-wearer will fulfill his position, and manifests these expectations in interaction”. These expectations are, however, assumptions and interpretations by the other, and “may not be completely accurate in their knowledge of the duties or behaviour of the concomitant status” (Joseph and Alex 1972:725). Though he may disagree with the “high expectations” demanded by the public, Tobias felt that he has “subconsciously” internalized these expectations over time, “rarely sitting” on public transport “throughout [his] two years of [mandatory] NS”.

Under this pressure to ‘behave’, these uniformed individuals are more than ever motivated to actively regulate and discipline their bodies. While some may choose to hide their group identity by changing clothes, like Indira, some go further to over-police their bodies, like Tobias. As mentioned earlier, we also see how interviewee Bennett made the conscious choice to stand “in a little corner” throughout his one-hour commute home when he could have sat down and rested after a week of training in the Army. In another example, a netizen in 2015 captured a NSF “not daring to take a seat despite [the] MRT being empty” and uploaded this on Reddit (Skythewood 2015) (See Figure 11). Many Reddit users sympathized with the NSF, sharing their own experiences and fears of being STOMP-ed. Others noted the irony of the situation as one user commented “sit kena stomp, stand also kena stomp”. The fear of being shamed and STOMP-ed has so extensively influenced everyday life and seemingly

mundane activities so much so that even in an empty train cabin, the NSF refused to take a seat. Driven by this fear, some individuals, like the NSF, excessively police themselves at the expense of their comfort and commute experiences. Originally intended as an initiative to encourage graciousness among individuals within the society, the priority seat has paradoxically denied graciousness to the individual himself.

Figure 11: Photo taken by Reddit user of NSF chose to stand instead of taking a seat in an empty MRT cabin



Chapter Four: Watching You Watch Me

This thesis posits that the habit of STOMP-ing misdemeanors and the fear of being STOMP-ed among individuals in Singapore have created a ‘vigilante culture’. Though definitions may vary among scholars, existing studies of vigilantism provide the basis for grasping what this thesis coins as ‘vigilante culture’. Traditionally in literature, vigilantism is understood as a form of “self-justice” employed by civilians when they regard the police and legal authorities “as illegitimate and ineffective” (Muhammad and Weenink 2022:163-164). Abrahams (2003:26) describes vigilantism as “an organized attempt by a group of ‘ordinary citizens’ to enforce norms and maintain law and order on behalf of their communities, often by resort to violence”. For Favarel-Garrigues and Gayer (2016), vigilantism is also defined as “collective coercive practices undertaken by non-state actors in order to enforce norms (legal or moral)” (Favarel-Garrigues, Tanner, and Trottier 2020:189). Popularly, vigilantism is assumed and simplified into the idea of individuals “taking the law into their own hands” (Johnston 1996:232). Across these understandings of vigilantism, there are four main elements that cannot be ignored: the involvement of ‘ordinary citizens’; the perceived failure and inefficacy of the law and legal authorities; informal social control; and punishments. It is through the discussion of these four elements that this thesis will propose a working definition of vigilante culture in Singapore.

Convergence among the definitions, individuals who partake in vigilantism are usually non-state actors. These individuals do not have the legitimacy to enact physical violence and have little political and legal power to interpret and apply the law. These are individuals who must seek the help of professionals, such as the police and lawyers, when they either witness or personally experience trouble with the law. In other words,

this refers to most of the population in society. These individuals, in choosing to participate in vigilantism, are not just reacting “to the transgression of institutionalized norms by individuals or groups” (Johnston 1996:232) but also the ‘failure’ of the criminal justice system to discipline these transgressors and uphold what the people perceive and understand is justice. The vigilantes are dissatisfied and indignant at what the criminal justice system has and has not done. ‘Taking matters into their own hands’, they seek to protect and reinstate the social order through informal methods that are not formally endorsed by the state. Lynching is one example. At the same time, it is argued by some that individuals can still turn to vigilantism even when they perceive the law and legal authorities to be effective and legitimate as they “prefer to punish the offender themselves” (Black 1983; Muhammad and Weenink 2022:164).

Acknowledging the work of past scholars, this thesis, however, puts forth that vigilantism is not always a reaction to crimes. In the stories shared by interlocutors and real-life incidents that this thesis has thus far exemplified, the misdemeanors that are STOMP-ed do not often infringe on Singaporean laws and are sometimes just minor acts of deviance. For instance, the act of sitting on a reserved seat has never been delineated and controlled by the law. Rather, it is the society that has constructed the act of sitting on the reserved seat as deviance and has come to police and control who ‘deserves’ to sit on the priority seat – a point that the comic in Figure 2 highlighted through its depiction of the ‘evolution’ of the seat over the years. Thus, since this action does not cross any legal boundaries, it is difficult to involve the authorities in ‘righting this wrong’. Vigilantism therefore emerges as the “only way” to enforce the order. Additionally, as the definitions of deviance change over time, the acts that trigger vigilantism change as well. Nonetheless, vigilantism cannot be simplified as random acts of violence and revenge – not all social transgression will result in vigilantism.

But when values in society are infringed and subverted, which in the case of this thesis, ironically the value of “graciousness”, vigilantism will be the result

Vigilantism traditionally and popularly invokes images of violent, spectacular, and physical punishments (Johnston 1996), like lynching and torturing the transgressor. Such understandings of vigilantism are, however, less relevant in Singapore, where strict laws and punitive punishments exist. Moreover, with the inclination towards conformity as well as the fear of non-conformity that the Singapore government has inculcated in its people, local vigilantes are less motivated to engage in physically violent acts to ‘punish’ the offender. In its place, shaming is alternatively enacted on the deviants in Singapore, which can even vary from a simple name-and-shame post on social order to doxing. Meant to embarrass and humiliate the deviant, vigilantes in Singapore shame the deviant to “raise awareness about [the] lack of civic mindedness” and deter both the deviant and others from repeating similar acts in the future (Skoric et al. 2010:181).

As such, vigilante culture in the context of Singapore can be defined as normalized and widespread practices undertaken by non-state actors to ‘punish’ social deviants and deter others from social transgression as social norms are enforced, reminded of, and reiterated. And such behaviour has been on the rise. Singaporeans are now quicker than ever to resort to vigilantism. When witnessing ‘bad behaviour’ in public, individuals instinctually grab their phones to record the happenings and later upload the content on social media sites. In an anonymous contribution to STOMP in 2019, a conflict between two commuters on bus service 186 was captured (Ng 2019). The male commuter was playing his music loudly on the bus when a female commuter asked him to lower the volume. Another female commuter also chimed in and asked if he could use earphones instead. Outraged, the man claimed that he was going to call

the police on the female for “stopping him from playing his music” (Ng 2019). The two commuters used their phones to film each other, and both threatened that they will be uploading photos of the other on STOMP. The notion of “I STOMP you first” is interesting as it highlights how shaming has become a rational instinct and perceived solution to social misdemeanors and conflicts. This is further exemplified well beyond incidents on public transport too. A Singaporean student, who has been providing photoshop services on Carousell, was reportedly “lowballed by [a] buyer who later refuses to pay” (Chua 2022). Reaching out to Mothership on his own accord, he shared a detailed account of the happenings, supported with screenshots of conversations he had with the buyer. Rather than waiting for a witness or a third party to film and STOMP the incident, the individual, whom we usually see in the video being ‘attacked’ by the deviant, increasingly plays an active in identifying and shaming the deviant.

Enforced “Graciousness” breeds Skepticism and Distrust

This growing vigilante culture in Singapore arguably diminishes the trust that Singaporeans have in their compatriots. In the 2021 global World Values Survey that was conducted in Singapore, 65.4% of those interviewed felt that “they had to be very careful when dealing with people, as opposed to feeling [that] most people could be trusted” (Mathews et al. 2021:132). Compared to the 2012 iteration of the survey, where similar responses were echoed by 62.5% of the respondents, Singaporeans are increasingly watchful and skeptical of each other. In particular, the survey in 2021 found that respondents from “better socioeconomic backgrounds – higher education, higher income, or living in larger housing types” – were generally more trusting (Mathews et al. 2021:132). Mathews et al. (2021), making references to existing studies, rationalize that education informs individuals of different cultures, reduces

misunderstandings between people of different backgrounds, and hence allows them to be more trusting.

Nonetheless, there are overall low levels of trust among Singaporeans observed in recent years. Even among my survey respondents and interviewees, namely from the younger age group, wariness and nervousness are common in the commute experiences that they have shared. Some also suggested how they have grown especially sensitive, such that when a surrounding other lift his phone, they become self-conscious and assumes that he is filming and possibly about to STOMP them. In fact, the very fear of sitting on the reserved seat on public transport among my interlocutors connotes a lack of trust in their fellow commuters – they do not trust their compatriots enough to believe that they will not STOMP them.

Almost ironically, the Singapore Kindness Movement addressed the vigilante culture surrounding the reserved seat on public transport in their 2016 campaign (See Figure 12). Portraying the perennial practice of STOMP-ing perceived bad behaviours as problematic, the campaign highlighted that it is “up to” the individual to create a gracious society and spread kindness.

Figure 12: Singapore Kindness Movement's 2016 Campaign Poster

(Coconuts Singapore 2016)



Interestingly, however, the Movement fails to acknowledge and address the inherent problems that the reserved seat may have caused. Firstly, because the reserved seat is deemed as a priority for the pregnant, elderly, injured, and parents with young children,

commuters with intangible disabilities and needs are neglected. The male commuter depicted in the campaign's poster may physically seem healthy and well but what if he is feeling unwell and possibly need the seat more than the pregnant commuter? The Movement had failed to consider that the reserved seat has compartmentalized and limited our thinking. By encouraging commuters to give the reserved seat to the pregnant, elderly, injured, and parents with young children, is the Movement not denying commuters with invisible needs graciousness? This further ties in with my second point: the reserved seat on public transport has instilled the idea that only abled commuters sitting on the reserved seat can and must give up their seat, and that everyone else on the 'normal seats' does not have to. While the Singapore Kindness Movement sought to motivate Singaporeans to make a real commitment to gracious living, the understanding of graciousness is unfortunately narrowed through the reserved seat. Singaporeans' habit of STOMP-ing may have led to the collective fear of sitting on the reserved seat among the youths but how the priority seat has been constructed and publicized must also be accounted for.

Furthermore, the captions in the campaign poster read: "it's up to us to decide whether Singapore shines as a gracious nation, or not." Is it really our decision? The priority seat on public transport has always been an initiative by LTA imposed on local commuters. Even when "flamboyant" patterns and colours were introduced to the reserved seat to "make [commuters] think twice before taking those seats" (Masramli 2014), these were top-down efforts by authorities. The Singapore government is known for being an authoritarian state that has "aggressively [imposed] legal restrictions to curb [citizens'] civil-political liberties provided by the Constitution (Chua 2012:715). Also known as a 'nanny state', the Singapore government hovers and actively intervenes in the everyday lives of its citizens – from being "exhorted

to be nicer, to speak better English, [to even not chewing] gum” (Kurlantzick 2000/2001:70). It leaves little room for dissent with its harsh and punitive laws; it was either the state’s way or ‘no way’, or better yet, prison. This thesis argues that initiatives by the Singapore government to encourage graciousness, like the introduction of the reserved seat on public transport, can then be understood as efforts to create the ‘perfect’ citizen that would complement the “truly successful, mature country, with a developed economy” (Ministry of Information and the Arts 1995).

Surveillance Society

Considering its paternalistic inclinations, it is no surprise that the Singapore state engages extensively with surveillance island-wide. “[Primarily] meant to capture or deter terrorist or criminal activities” (Jiow and Morales 2015:327), there are 90,000 police cameras currently deployed across the island, and more than 200,000 police cameras are expected to be deployed by at least 2030 (Aravindan 2021) – the ‘Big Brother’ is found almost everywhere.

In recent years, the Singapore government has also progressively endorsed lateral surveillance through the introduction of the OneService. A mobile application, OneService is a “one-stop platform that lets citizens feedback on municipal issues without having to figure out which Government agency or town council to contact” (Smart Nation Singapore N.d.). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, application users can further report individuals whom they witness flouting safe management measures, such as flouting the safe distancing rules and the mandatory mask-wearing rules (National Environment Agency N.d.). Beyond the application, local authorities have also reacted to posts uploaded on STOMP and used the recordings to launch investigations and prosecute deviants. In 2020, for example, a

video of a man “skiing” on the road was uploaded on Facebook. Filmed seemingly by a dashcam, he was “using two ski poles to propel himself while on skates” (Yong 2020). Reacting to the video, the Singapore police brought the man in for investigation and subsequently made a public statement reminding road users to practice road safety. With the endorsement by the government, the community now plays a more active and extensive role in maintaining established social and legal order. This peer-to-peer surveillance complements that of the state – it is now not just the ‘Big Brother’ watching but the ‘Big Other’ as well. It is almost impossible for the individual to escape the gaze. On a simple trip to the convenience store in the neighbourhood, the individual would come across cameras in the elevator, void deck, street, the convenience store, as well as his fellow neighbours, drivers on the road, and the store owner. Individual privacy in Singapore is seemingly an illusion.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In exploring the phenomenon of lateral surveillance, this thesis has explored and discussed Singaporeans attitudes toward sitting on the priority seat on public transport in Singapore. This thesis found that shame and the fear of being shamed drive the prevalence of this peer-to-peer scrutiny in society and pushes individuals to exercise self-discipline in public spaces. More so, younger commuters are found to be more concerned, anxious, and fearful than older commuters of being shamed. At times, younger commuters tend to over-police their bodies at the expense of a comfortable commute experience, ironically denying graciousness to themselves. Lateral surveillance has encouraged the creation of a vigilante culture and has exacerbated existing anxieties, skepticism, and distrust in Singapore society. With lateral surveillance complementing state surveillance, both state and lateral surveillance foster a surveillance society, where individual privacy is sparse.

Over the years, there has been recognition and arguments that the STOMP website is intrinsically problematic. Robin Li, for one, started a campaign on Change.org in 2014, advocating for STOMP to be shut down (Hicks 2014). As of this thesis, the petition, titled ‘Close down STOMP.com.sg’, still exists and has drawn more than 23,982 signatures in support. But will shutting STOMP down make any difference today? The answer is most likely a no. With today’s technology and the numerous platforms that have emerged, STOMP no longer holds the monopoly of being a name-and-shame website as individuals can easily source for another platform to use. Not to mention, the practice of STOMP-ing others has long grown into a habit for many, deeply embedded into everyday life.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Graciousness in the MRT network

[Print](#)

The public transport network is for everyone, thus we encourage you to be responsible and gracious to make your ride a more pleasant experience for yourself and others. Here are some simple things to note when travelling in the MRT network. When in doubt, be courteous and mindful of fellow commuters.

At the faregates

- Maintain a reasonable distance from the passenger in front of you before you move forward
- Give way to those who need to use the wide faregates

DO NOT

- Stop or step back as you are passing through the faregates
- Allow your child to play or jump when passing through the faregates

When using the escalator

- Keep left and let others pass on your right
- Give way to children, pregnant women and the elderly

DO NOT

- Block the escalator and staircase landings
- Allow your child to sit or play on the escalator
- Use the escalator if you are carrying bulky items or foldable bikes, pushing a stroller/pram, in a wheelchair or are feeling unwell. Please use the lift instead.

When using the lift

- Give priority to those who need it more, such as less mobile commuters
- Move to the back of the lift when you enter to make way for other commuters
- If you are close to the button panel, keep the door open for other commuters to enter

DO NOT

- Rush into the lift when doors are closing
- Enter the lift if it is crowded

When waiting for the train

- Stand behind the yellow line at the platform
- When the train arrives, stand to the side of the door and give way to alighting passengers

DO NOT

- Rush to board the train when you hear the train door closing announcement or chime
- Allow your child to run or play on the platform

During the train journey

- Move to the middle of the car to make room for others to board
- Be considerate to fellow commuters. For example, in a crowded train, do not read the papers with your arms outstretched or wear a bulky backpack on your back.
- Avoid leaning on the grab pole so that others can use it
- Offer your seat to someone who needs it more
- Respect others by not playing music or talking too loudly

DO NOT

- Hog priority seats not meant for you
- Hog seats with your belongings or take up more seats than you need
- Put your feet up or stand on the seat
- Sit on the floor as you will obstruct passengers entering or alighting the train
- Allow your child to run or play in the train
- Hog the space meant for passengers in wheelchair
- Block the train door with your pram/stroller or bulky luggage
- Litter and leave your trash behind

[Click here](#) for information on travelling safely on the SMRT network

Rules & Etiquettes

Graciousness in the MRT Network
Items Permitted in the MRT Network
Items Not Permitted in the MRT Network
Customer Commitments
Safety
Security
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Tourists
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FAQ

Appendix 2

Sample size (n)	%	n
Age		
21 – 24 years old	75	30
25 – 34 years old	15	6
45 – 54 years old	10	4
Total	100	40
Gender		
Male	47.5	19
Female	52.5	21
Total	100	40
Race		
Chinese	75	30
Malay	7.5	3
Indian	12.5	5
Others	5	2
Total	100	40

Appendix 3

Name	Age	Gender	Race
Bennett	23	Male	Chinese
Carly	23	Female	Chinese
Charlene	22	Female	Chinese
Indira	23	Female	Indian
Kiara	22	Female	Chinese
Kylie	21	Female	Others (Korean)
Lucas	21	Male	Chinese
Nyla	23	Female	Malay
Phoebe	48	Female	Chinese
Sienna	22	Female	Indian
Tobias	25	Male	Chinese
Wendy	21	Female	Chinese
Xander	22	Male	Chinese
Yohan	25	Male	Chinese
Zendaya	22	Female	Chinese