

Fewer students taking private buses to school

By

ness is Teo
Boon Trans-
port Service.
It now

fetches 30
students to Yishun Primary
School, down from 50 last
year.

. In the face of falling de-
mand, most school bus opera-
tors have not upped their
fares this year. A check with
10 operators showed that one
had lowered his rates, three
had raised theirs by between
\$2 and \$5, while the rest
maintained their charges.

Mr Ng Ang Heng, who
owns Sin U Lian Bus Trans-
port Service, said: "I was
planning to raise fares by \$3
to \$5 this year actually, be-
cause maintenance costs kept

TOUGH TIMES
GERALDINE YEO

The article which I have chosen is called “Fewer Students taking private buses to School” from The Straits Times on January 26, 1999. This article discusses how even though a new school year has begun, there is bad business across the many private school bus operators. In this essay, I will aim to discuss the sociology of transportation in Singapore. This essay will first describe and explain the sociology of transportation. I will then explain the context and history of the article and lastly, explore my experience growing up taking public buses as a mode of transportation and how that has shaped my current view of taking private transportation in general.

The movement of people in a lived space is a fundamental and complex challenge for societies. How people can navigate the spaces around them can give rise to different relationships and interactions between their physical space and society. This includes the types of human activities or even the structuring of the built environment (Yago, 1983, 171). In Singapore’s context, being such a small city-state, land-use planning is extremely crucial to ensure the effective use of the limited land resources to meet the land-use needs of the present and the future (Sapuan, 2007). An extremely efficient transport system is thus fundamental in ensuring that residents can move around the island safely and timely.

To help with this, a dense network of public transport, consisting of public buses and a Mass Rapid Transit span across the island to connect the urban city. In addition, a huge host of private transportation options are available for residents ranging from privately chartered buses to private hire vehicles and even owning a personal vehicle. Some characteristics of private transportation would be that it usually is quicker as compared to taking public transportation, and is less crowded as there are a limited amount of passengers. However, the downside of taking private transportation is that it is significantly more costly. Hence, taking private transportation regularly can indicate that an individual would be from a higher socio-economic status (SES) as they have a higher disposable income to spend on a more comfortable and private ride. The type of transportation taken can be a form of objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 280-291) which can be a reflection of perceived class. Someone willing to spend to take a more private and luxurious form of transport could have a higher perceived social class.

Diving into the article, we find that back in 1999 January, despite the start of a new school year, private school buses were struggling to find business as more parents are withdrawing their children from taking these private school buses to school. In the article, bus operators talk about how “in this economy”, bad business is expected even if it is the start of a new schooling year. A reason for that was that this article was situated during the Asian Financial Crisis. Starting in the late 1990s, it significantly affected East Asia and Southeast Asian countries. Although Singapore was not as badly affected as compared to our neighbouring countries such as the Philippines or Malaysia, the financial crisis still had a huge impact on our economy. Bus operators in the article have stated that because of the financial crisis, they have lowered the prices of their service to \$10. In comparison, the maximum fare back in 1999 was \$1.20 and \$1.50 for non air-con and air-con public buses (PTC | *Chronology of Fare Adjustment*, n.d.). This meant that taking the private school bus was more than 6 times that of taking a public bus then. During an economic downturn, many people might experience downward social mobility

as they lose their jobs and might not be able to maintain the lifestyle they used to have (Antolihao, 2022, 94). It then becomes understandable how parents considered taking the private school bus a “luxury”, thus cancelling their private school bus service subscription in an attempt to save money during that difficult time.

When discussing this article with my parents, they told me that private buses in general used to be much more prevalent in Singapore. Up until the early 2000s, different private buses would operate bus routes similar to public bus routes but with fewer stops and better seats, providing a quicker and more relaxing travelling experience at a considerably higher cost. To my parents, taking a private bus back home was considered a luxury and they would only do so as a “treat”. They classified themselves as from the working class, differentiating themselves from the “rich elites” who could regularly afford a more premium form of transportation like taxis and private bus services. This translated into my upbringing as I started to internalise the concept that as someone from the working class, I should only spend on necessities and not on frivolous things. This resulted in an association between private modes of transportation being an upper-class luxury. My parents have taught me to take cheaper and slower public transportation in an effort to not waste money, despite how tired I am or how crowded the public buses are. Compared to my friends, I am much more hesitant in taking private hire vehicles as a form of transport. One such instance was when I was in the army, I was willing to wake up significantly earlier at 5 am to take public transport from the North to report at my base in Changi at 730 am. Meanwhile, my friend staying nearby was willing to pay significantly more to book a private hire vehicle as he considered the price reasonable for a better use of his time. The association of spending money on extraneous things or services as an upper-class behaviour has made me more willing to use more time and effort in an attempt to spend less money.

Different forms of transportation types can lead one to have different forms of interaction with the urban spaces around them. Commuting on public transport can be a form of culture, where formal and informal norms exist to dictate the appropriate behaviour while travelling on public transport (Stryhul et al., 2021, 616). Someone who does not regularly take public transport would not be privy to this aspect of commuting culture. Hence people of different classes might not have the same experience of travelling. The morning rush hour for someone taking public transport might mean an uncomfortable ride, being packed like sardines on the bus. Whereas it might mean a comfortable rest on a Grab due to a jam on the expressway, and those driving their personal cars might feel anxious about the morning rush hour jam trying to avoid an accident. Choosing different forms of transportation can be a way people try to display and even maintain their social class. Personally, as I become more aware of how different services or items I use can affect how others view me and give them a perception of my class, I have become more open to taking private hire vehicles with friends in hopes to be more approachable.

You need to discuss how your analysis fits within the "sociological orienteering" framework, which you are required to use for this assignment.

Overall, this is a good essay covering an interesting topic and showing a good grasp of social issues and sociological concepts.

working class student (personal compass),
commuting, mode of transport (cultural map),
transportation (social terrain)

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