# Young Consumers' avoidance towards Public Bus Services of urban areas in Bangladesh

Tasmia Ekram Tushi
Faculty of Business Administration
Eastern University, Dhaka, Bangladesh
tasmia.fba@easternuni.edu.bd

**Abstract-***In this paper; young consumers' generic avoidance nature towards urban public transportation facilities in Bangladesh has been discussed. From the discussion, four major categories of negative associations regarding public transportation in the urban areas were identified. While three of them have already been explained in the brand avoidance model, another new dimension added to this particular public bus service context was the safety concerns. According to this study result, public bus services are being highly avoided by young urban consumers due to the safety concerns. All the respondents reported some experience or idea about public bus services in the urban city that put them in an unsafe situation. Physical, financial and psychological safety concerns have been experienced by many individuals. Some of them continued traveling with fear of safety concern implanted in mind whereas most of them stopped traveling through public bus services especially during off peak hour or late night hours. The findings are particularly of managerial interest as further transportation management strategies can be crafted to reduce negative customer associations with public transportation facilities.*

**General Terms**- *Marketing and consumer behavior.*

**Keywords-** *Young Consumers; Public Transportation; Avoidance Model; Urban Area; Bangladesh*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the urbanization and population growth in South Asia, Bangladesh became a country with very high population growth rate (1.2%, World Bank, 2014). For higher standard of living and a better lifestyle, a lot of the inhabitants migrate to the capital city Dhaka. As world's population is growing at a higher pace, need for proper transportation facilities in bustling metro cities is also increasing. Particularly population growth rate is alarmingly increasing in South Asia. Population count of this region is 1.67 billion and 33% of this population has been through urbanization (World Bank, 2014).

Many populated cities all around the world are taking reformation strategies in aid to the individual and communal level of development in the public transportation system and policy. The impact of an underdeveloped public transportation service can be as negative as individual stress, delays and absolute uncertainty (Morris et al, 2005)[32]. The public transportation system of Dhaka city, Bangladesh is providing transportation solution to over 15 million people with its long prevailing serious challenges. Among its multi-dimensional problems, poor maintenance, lack of alternatives, heterogeneous traffic with imbalanced distribution of non motorized vehicles along with the motorized vehicles and lack of traffic rule enforcements often result in severe traffic congestion. This not only created unbearable sufferings for the city dwellers but also

resulted in exhaustion of their keenness towards availing public transportation facilities.

In Dhaka city, the urban public transportation system mainly comprises of rickshaws, CNG auto rickshaws, minibuses, buses, taxis and trains. Here, muscle powered rickshaws and other motorized vehicles have imbalance in terms of speed and pace. On a report published by World Bank, this has been confirmed that Dhaka is the only city which does not have a well established transportation system (World Bank 1999). In addition, the current traffic condition confirms that Dhaka city is in need of an effective and efficient urban public transportation system. According to Karim (1999)[24], Dhaka city has a major role to play in the regional and sub regional infrastructural development and this can be realized through the implementation of a proper public transportation system.

In order to design and develop a proper urbanized transportation system, it is very important to understand the requirements of the real users of the public transports. Studies have been undertaken to identify what are the issues related to the public transportation system that the passengers would like to change to better meet their requirement (Andaleeb, Haq and Ahmed, 2007)[1]. However, the development of a better transportation system also requires a dissection of the psychological and behavioral motivations for consumers of avoiding public transportation. Although traditional consumer behavior investigation deal with consumption motivations, avoidance behavior can readily explain the loopholes of a

brand or service better as it scans consumer motivation in a deep down approach.

This study aims to deeply observe the driving forces of public bus service avoidance through the adoption of a previous brand avoidance model as a conceptual framework to explain the multiple negative beliefs associated with public transportation avoidance by the young urban youth of Bangladesh.

## 2.  LITERATURE REVIEW

Rapid urbanization in Bangladesh comes along with mass urban poverty as well. As more people are moving to the city, the transit system is facing more challenges. It is very important to upgrade and manage the entire motorized public transportation system in a city like Dhaka. The service needs to be effective, efficient, affordable, reliable and accessible by the commuters. However, in the sub continental region, public transportation system particularly the local motorized buses has turned out to be the main transport for the poor commuters only who have little to no alternate choices due to limited affordability (Badami and Haider, 2007)[3]. Although Bangladesh government has started developing the metro rail project (DDC, 2014) to provide low cost transport mobility for the urban population, it is important to analyze the current available low cost mobility system too.

Even if the metro rail project succeeds, it will need 8 years to simply start up. In the mean time, city commuters will be eventually using the public motorized bus services. However, to enhance the performance and develop a better commuters' experience, public bus transportation owners should have an idea about the customers' needs, wants and demands and their overall perception about the service. Although transportation and transit choices heavily depend on personal characteristics, household income, destination, location, transport availability and others (Fujii and Garling, 2005)[18]; it is highly likely that performance quality of a service is one of the main determination of consumer behavior intention (Cronin and Taylor, 1992)[10] . Whereas good service encourages positive word of mouth (Sureshchandar, Rajendran, Anantharaman, 2002)[38], a failed service experience may result in consumer switching, complaints, negative word of mouth, inertia and brand avoidance (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004 [45]and Lee, motion and Conroy, 2009)[29]

Many different studies have have been conducted on the design and implementation of the public transportation system of Bangladesh. Noteworthy examples include reformation of transportation (Andaleeb, Haq and Ahmed, 2007)[1], Overcrowding management (Katz and Rahman, 2010), implementing and strategizing a sustainable public transport network (Hoque and Alam, 2002). Unfortunately, no study has been undertaken in light of the consumer perception about the local transportation transit network. It is very important to understand consumer perception, their opinion and experience to design, deliver and moderate a

service system and make it sustainable too (Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert and Zeithaml, 1997)[23]. Already generalize assumptions have been made about sub continental public transportation system and service inefficiency have been documented as well (Tiwari, 2002[42], Haider and Badami, 2004 [20]and Badami and Haider, 2007)[3]. This study aims in identifying customers' perception and their major dissatisfaction regarding the public transportation services. The reasons why they want to avoid this service and also the reasons why they think of switching to alternative options.

Similar study of avoidance has been undertaken on general scale by Lee et al. in the year 2009 but the scope of the study did not focus into developing and underdeveloped country context. As a developing nation with unplanned urbanization, Dhaka city failed to provide adequate public service to the number of inhabitants it is sheltering. As a result, commuters find it difficult to travel through city public transportations and a lot of them even avoid available public transportations. This initiated the thought of using avoidance model to understand the underlying motives of avoiding public transport particularly among the heavy travelling youth group.

From the avoidance model, three of the major categories of brand avoidance were identified- experiential avoidance, identity avoidance, moral avoidance. Each of the categories will be checked for relativity under the current context. Other contributing factors can also be found through the process.

## 3.  METHODOLOGY

For this study, young consumers aged between 20-24 have been approached for interview. For understanding inner motivation of consumption through qualitative data, laddering study has been used popularly in previous researches (Zanoli& Naspetti, 2002)[44]. Initially laddering or means-end method was planned to be used to collect data. Due to lack of historical evidence of studying avoidance behaviour through this approach, the initial plan has been dropped. For collecting data, grounded theory methodology has been used.

Grounded theory methodology has been widely used (Glaser and Strauss, 1967[19]; Strauss and Corbin, 1990[37], Lee et al) in qualitative studies. In this method, respondents'' inner motivations can be observed through prolonged discussions. To find whether all consumers can participate in discussions regarding the public transportation avoidance; a sensitization study was conducted on 3 informants. All of them shared some instances of experience where they exhibited public service avoidance tendency. This proves the unecessity of collecting specialized group of consumers with similar characteristics.  An advertisement was posted on 2 private universities and one public university campus which explained that the researcher was keen to know consumers' opinion about the local public transportation

service. On personal interest, they responded to the advertisement and participated in the study.

All the in-depth interviews were taken in the faculty office of the respected university campuses. The private environment and the professionalism of the interviewer helped the participants to openly share their all sort of public transportation experiences and beliefs. At the initial stages, the participants were asked to list the public transportations that they avoided or would like to avoid to because of the financial reasons. The whole discussion revolved around the reasons of their negative experiences or beliefs which would restrict them from using public transportations. The respondents also listed the restricting factors for which they could not avoid or will have difficulties in avoiding public transportation in near future. Using grounded theory for understanding consumers' avoidance behavior is not new (Lee et al, 2009[29], Thompson and Arsel, 2004[40], Kozinets and Handelman,

2004)[27]. Historical evidence of understand consumer avoidance and consumer motivations both have been recorded using this method. Thus, the use of this methodology can be justified in this particular context as well. Table 1 lists the participants' detailed information which is relevant to the context. Avoidance due to financial constraint is a factor which we ignored as all of the respondent reported public bus to be financially affordable and there is no reason for them to avoid it due to financial constraints.

## 4. FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

From the discussion, four main reasons of public transportation avoidance have been identified. The spontaneous comments of the respondents made it evident that all of them had negative sentiments related to public transportation service in Dhaka city.

| | Gender and age | Availability of Private transportation | Family Income | Educational qualification |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sensitization Int PM** | Male, 21 | Yes | 50,000-1,00000 | Undergrad (Private) |
| **Sensitization Int RC** | Male, 21 | Yes | 1,00000-1,50000 | Undergrad,Public |
| **Sensitization Int FK** | Female, 23 | No | 1,00000-1,50000 | Undergrad, Public |
| **Int 1, RP** | Male, 21 | No | 50,000-1,00000 | Undergrad, Public |
| **Int 2, MFH** | Male,22 | No | 1,00000-1,50000 | Undergrad Private |
| **Int 3, ANS** | Male, 23 | Yes | 1,50000-2,00000 | Undergrad, Public |
| **Int 4, NM** | Female, 21 | Yes | 50,000-1,00000 | Undergrad, Public |
| **Int 5, FM** | Male, 20 | No | 1,00000-1,50000 | Undergrad, Private |
| **Int 6, TWK** | Male,24 | Yes | 2,00000 and more | Undergrad, private |
| **Int 7, AAJ** | Female, 23 | Yes | 1,00000-1,50000 | Undergrad, public |
| **Int 9, NP** | Female, 21 | No | 50,000-1,00000 | Undergrad, public |
| **Int 10, MH** | Male, 23 | No | 2,00000-more | Undergrad, private |
| **Int 11, MM** | Female, 24 | Yes | 2,00000-more | Fresh graduate, unemployed |
| **Int 12, RP** | Male, 22 | Yes | 50,000-1,00000 | Undergrad, private |
| **Int 13, SS** | Female, 24 | Yes | 50,000-1,00000 | Undergrad, private |
| **Int 14, THR** | Female, 23 | Yes | 1,00000-1,50000 | Undergrad, Public |
| **Int 15, SM** | Male, 22 | No | 50,000-1,00000 | Undergrad, Public |
| **Int 16, JM** | Female, 20 | Yes | 50,000-1,00000 | Undergrad |
| **Int 17, PJ** | Female, 23 | No | 1,00000-1,50000 | Undergrad |

Figure 1: Participants' detailed information

## 4.1 Experiential Avoidance

From the in-depth interviews, one of the most common complaints received was the discomfort inside the public transportation. This included the uncomfortable seats, under maintained interior and often unhealthy and unhygienic environment inside the vehicle. Many of the respondents reported that given an alternative they would not travel through a public bus because they feel sick inside. While discussing about the extreme experienced discomfort, one of the respondents articulated,

" I go to college everyday by travelling almost 6-7 km by Bus. By every day, I mean, 5 days a week. They were (Seats) so dirty and full of dust and I was always allergic to dust. I was counting minutes to reach my destination so that I could come out of that mighty bus! I wanted to feel independent and travel by myself in whichever public bus that was available…it is cheap and reaches me fast to my destination….but, the dirt was making things difficult for me. Almost all of them (the buses) in my route were dirty and dusty. I started planning for saving my pocket money so that I can buy my own scooty at least by the time I graduate" (PJ, 23)

The participant explained how uncomfortable she feels everyday when she is travelling towards her college. Due to lack of alternate choices, she claimed to be compelled to use the public bus services. This can be a major cause of her dissatisfaction. From her comment, it is clearly visible that she was committed in traveling on public bus due to the economic value but she was also thinking about alternate choices upon financial independence. This means, she developed a continuance commitment for the public bus service. Lack of alternatives and involuntary choices lead to continuance commitment which results in lack of loyalty among consumers, particularly in service industry (Evanschitzky, Iyer, Plassmann, Niessing and Meffert, 2006)[14]. This gradually can lead to change in a service preference resulting in service avoidance.

"We have two private cars but sometimes I can not avail one and take a bus to my university. Those journeys are not the happy ones. I cannot understand why the seat covers are so damp, I can smell food, smoke, hair oil, betel leaves - areca nuts and what not. What if they can buy a bottle of air freshener to neutralize the air inside? I feel suffocated and also I get body aches after each ride. I am a heavy built person and most of the buses are so congested that I do not find enough room for me. The bus bumps so hard with each turn it takes…it feels like I am having a stone massage on my back (Laughing). " (TWK, 24)

"I do not understand what it takes to paint the busses regularly. In this way they can keep it look fresh at least. Some days I feel like meeting the owner and punch him on the face asking why he would take money if he was not providing us with at least a clean and nice looking vehicle. (THR, 23)

In the above cases, it is clear that the features of the bus were not being preferred by the users. This can definitely lead them towards making alternate choices by avoiding public bus. Previous study has also supported this notion as Fujii and Garling (2005)[18] suggested that the features of the transport system affect the transportation choice among the consumers.

In both the cases, the dissatisfaction seemed a little more than simple dissatisfaction. Rather it seemed the respondents were angry on the service provider. Woodside, Frey and Daly (1989)[43] have indicated consumers' behavioral intentions are moderated by the level of satisfaction within service industry. If consumers are highly dissatisfied they are likely to make complaints and if they get angry with higher dissatisfaction level, they tend to get back to the organization to take some action against the respective service provider (Bougie, Pieters and Zeelenberg, 2003)[6]. This may not allow the managers of the service providers to immediately plan for a service recovery action. As such, out of anger and aggression consumers may complain or switch to avoid (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004)[45]

## 4.2 Identity Avoidance

Consumer self image has always been a moderating factor in identifying consumer choice making decision (Landon, 1974[28]; Sirgy, 1982[35]; Escalas and Bettman, 2005)[13]. In this study respondents have explained, how the public bus service was creating undesired self-concepts among the travellers. Many of them shared their experiences where they were ashamed to be identified as a city dweller that was using the public bus transportation system.

"…no matter what, I would never want to travel on those buses with my girlfriend. Despite the affordability, I value what she thinks about my lifestyle" (MFH, 22).

This quotation is an evident example of how people may want to avoid something, which does not support their ideal self image. Previous literature regarding avoiding the consumption of a product or service has also supported this concept (Englis and Soloman, 1995[12]; Bhttacharya and Elsbach, 2002[5]; Lee et al., 2009)[29]. More than building an impression, some respondents reported their self integrity as a reason to avoid the public bus services. They did not want to be recognized as public bus service users. They articulated their negative emotion and wanted their family members to refrain from using public transportation system. -

"I avoid traveling through bus particularly with family or friends or anyone I care for, because this is not how I like to treat them when they are traveling with me. I would rather go with a taxi." (RP, 21).

"I will never let my own kid use the public buses in Dhaka. They should not have the feeling that they are one of them" (AAJ, 23).

Negative associations are visible in the excerpts mentioned above. The study of consumption avoidance

due to association with negative reference group has been done already and researchers have particularly found that consumers detest associating themselves with products or services that they think are being used by negative reference groups (Lee et al, 2009)[29]. Although the notion of avoiding a particular product or service has been studied on developed countries mostly, on a recent study Khan and Lee (2014)[26] have confirmed that even in developing nation context, undesired self identity is an important factor in determining the level of consumer avoidance.

### 4.3 Moral Avoidance

Studying consumer behaviour in the context of individual morality is not new. Researchers have used idealism scale and relativism scale to determine consumers' level of moral conscience and their stands regarding products or services that they morally disapprove for valid reasons (Brinkmann, 2004)[8]. In their study, Lee et al (2009) have also stated that consumers avoid brands and services that they find morally inappropriate to adopt mainly due to country of origin effect and brand hegemony. However, Folkes and Kamins (1999)[15] confirmed that, socially accepted moral practices undertaken by a inferior quality service provider does not have much influence on the minds of the consumers. The same notion was confirmed by the respondents as they did not talk about country of origin or brand hegemony. They rather talked about child labor.

"I find it so inhuman when I see those young kids working as bus helpers and collecting ticket moneys. Most of the passengers misbehave with them and the driver does the same." (JM,20)

Historically, consumer boycott has been reported to be a popular mechanism against child labor but moral avoidance has not been reported by the consumers in this context as a reason of public bus service avoidance.

### 4.4 Risk Avoidance

Safety concerns regarding public transportation is not a new phenomenon (Carr and Spring, 1993[9]; Ingalls, Hartgen and Owens, 1994[22]; Beirão and Cabral, 2007)[4]. Safety concerns mainly stem from the fear of being victimized by the crime inside the bus. As for such, majority of the respondents reported that they mostly avoid local public bus services during off times or late in night.

"If I am well-dressed I will never travel alone or with another woman on bus…because they (the co-passenger) tease and stare." (NM, 21)

This notion has also been supported by Badami and Haider (2007) as they indicated overcrowding, lack of service reliability and congestion to be the primary reasons for ladies and children avoiding the bus service. They have also remarked sexual harassment as one of the most frequently occurring incident inside the bus during the transit. Levine and Wachs (1986) have also indicated that women, children, and elderly people find it less secured to travel through public bus. This has also been

founded as one of the respondents' talks about her experience in the bus-

"I do not understand why they will always have to find a reason to touch the women whenever and wherever it is possible for them. Even if I am sitting in the reserved sits for women and elderly people, they would keep on staring, making me very uncomfortable" (SS, 24).

For this study another major concern that has been found is about personal safety among both male and female. Researchers have already found that personal security from crime is one of the most important moderating factors of people's choice in transit system (Austin and Buzawa, 1984[2]; Thrasher & Schnell, 1974[41], Loukaitou-Sideris (1999)[31] identified unsafe neighborhood, bad neighbors, desolation and lack of surveillance and easy escapes being the primary reasons for crime inside the bus.

"I used to keep my wallet in the back pockets of my trouser and stand inside the overly crowded bus. One day, on my way back home (from university) there were too many people inside the bus. When I reached my destination, it was gone. I had my salary from my first job…the money was little but the emotion was huge. I have never travelled again on that bus." (MH, 23)

"Pick-pocketing, personal abuse, sexual harassment, foul comment pass, staring these all come as a package to me every day. Every time I step into this 1 hour long bus journey, it feels like I am starting a new fight and I do not feel safe and sound." (NP, 21)

"These days, I feel scared to ride on buses as I have seen many TV reports on criminals traveling on public buses in disguise of passengers. After getting in the bus, they do crime. I do not want to be a victim of the same situation." (ANS, 23)

From all the above inputs, this can be clearly understood that safety concerns are common but safety concern has a wide range of safety issues being identified and addressed by the customers. Safety in public transportation services has always been a popular topic of research. Particularly Stradling, Carreno, Rye and Noble (2007) [36]identified the behaviour of other passenger, waiting time concerns and night time traveling concerns to be the most reported concerns that customers have talked about. This supports the current finding of this report as most of the respondents from the study have also shared similar kind of information.

## 5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

This paper examined the causal reasons of public transportation avoidance by the young urban consumers in a metro city like Dhaka. If the findings are empirically tested, the results can be generalized for other cities with similar format. Metro cities are growing all around the world and most of them have already developed complex public transportation management system for providing superior customer services. However, with the development of the Metrorail project by government of

Bangladesh in association with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) will expose potential threat to other transportation facilities' competitiveness. Hence, the findings will enable the public transportation service owners and managers to come up with a better transportation service system for the young consumers who are more likely to commute through public transportations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This is a conceptual paper which explains probable extension of the existing brand avoidance model. This paper also provides information on the current level of performance that the public transportation system is providing to the urban customers of Dhaka, Bangladesh. The focus group discussion facilitated free flow of conversation among the participants. Whereas a lot of the participants demonstrated helplessness, others indicated different kinds of negative sentiments towards the public bus service. Regardless, all the participants shared different kinds of negative experience about the discussed topic. This clearly indicates that plenty of reformation is required to provide the customers with a smooth, reliable, accessible, and sustainable transit service.

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