

# Public transport behaviours explained

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Victoria University graduate Jared Thomas spent many hours riding buses and trains in the greater Wellington region as part of his PhD research.

"My focus was to look at the social needs of public transport passengers and the delicate balance between the need for privacy and social interaction on public transport," says Dr Thomas.

As part of his PhD research, Dr Thomas observed the behaviours of 1,703 passengers, including seat selection, activity use and whether they conversed. He also surveyed around 900 public transport commuters about their attitudes and behaviours, such as which seats they chose and why.

"My findings showed the seating layout of public transport forces people into an intimate distance with strangers, causing a degree of social discomfort. I found that people use a range of interactive strategies to adapt to this close yet impersonal social situation, including defensive behaviours such as reading, listening to music or talking on cell phones, which restricts their ability to engage with their fellow travellers. Others adapt with physically defensive behaviours such as putting their bag on the seat next to them, which also reduces their ability to socially interact."

Dr Thomas said there is evidence that interactive strategies—such as talking and positive body language with other passengers—are more successful than defensive strategies at reducing social discomfort.

"Much like reading a magazine in a dentist's waiting room, defensive strategies may make the time pass more quickly, but they do not necessarily reduce the underlying discomfort of the situation."

Interactive strategies are used by around one-quarter of commuters, but more would interact if there were fewer barriers to interaction, he says. Part of the problem is that social niceties, such as smiling and greetings, are ignored in a crowded public transport setting.

"Another key barrier to [social interaction](#) is the seat layout of both buses and trains. Most passengers are offered seats immediately beside one another, where facing each other to communicate important non-verbal signals is awkward. These passengers are about 30% less likely to engage in a conversation than those sitting in other layouts, such as those passengers that are facing each other."

Dr Thomas, who is himself a public transport user, is currently working for Opus as a transport researcher. He says his research could be used by public transport agencies, passengers, and those who design carriages and buses.

Dr Thomas graduated with a PhD in Psychology from Victoria University in December and was supported in his study by funding from the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FRST). His principal supervisor was Dr Marc Wilson.

Provided by Victoria University

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