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Negotiating normative goodness and territorial stigma: the affective economies of bus mobilities in the green transition

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ABSTRACT

Public transport is seen as a key player in the green transition of the transport sector in the Global North. The bus is primarily associated with positive values, reflecting a lifestyle and choice-centred sustainability discourse. The paper argues that the bus system can be thought of as an affective economy of “goodness” that stands in great contrast with bus-dependent lived experience of bus mobilities, in particular people living in marginalized urban areas. Qualitative interviews with young and adult bus riders living in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods are contrasted with an analysis of regional transport plans to reveal discrepancies between the envisioned ideal future users and the current collective of bus users. The paper outlines how bus-dependent groups negotiate their own everyday bus experiences, and the affective economy of stigma related to their neighbourhoods, with public discourses on bus mobilities as normatively good. The article highlights the need to acknowledge how affect works in relation to public transport and the green transition, and points to the need to critically engage with questions of equality and justice in policy making and planning practices in the context of public transport.

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1. Introduction

Public transport is often framed as an important piece for the green transition of the transport sector in the Global North. In Sweden, which is the focus of this paper, the bus industry leads the green transition of the transport sector by being almost fossil-free: the publicly procured bus traffic is to 95% powered by renewable fuels or electricity (of the entire bus fleet in Sweden, the figure is 85%).¹ In public transport policies, public transport is increasingly portrayed as a key player for meeting current and future demands of environmentally friendly mobility, as the dependence on fossil-fuelled private cars needs to be tackled. Like *active* forms of transport, *public* transport is aligned with meeting sustainable development goals, positioned as “good” modes of transport, whereas car travel is perceived to be “bad”. The “goodness” of public transport can be thought of as normative, thus regulating and directing practices within conceptions of the good life (cf.

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Berlant 2011). In aiming to promote public transport as central to the green transition, it is not surprising that bus use is predominantly associated with foremost positive values and a sustainable life style choice. It is, however, a discourse that stands in great contrast with the lived experience of bus riders living in marginalized urban areas.

Against this background, we analyse public transport policies and interviews with 32 families in three disadvantaged neighbourhoods in three middle-sized cities in Sweden. Our analytical interest lies in contrasting their perceptions about the bus system with what we refer to as affective economies of “goodness” (Ahmed 2004) and the concept of territorial stigma. By connecting Ahmed’s theory of affective economies to the relationality of place (Massey 2005), and to processes of territorial stigmatization (Wacquant 2007), we may further situate how affect works in the context of bus mobilities and the green transition.

Ahmed’s (2004, 120, our emphasis) theory of affective economies is concerned foremost with “relationships of difference and displacement *without positive value*”, e.g. how negative affect such as hate and fear circulate and intensify, thus creating the effect of boundaries of bodies/subjects, collectives and worlds. We argue that it is not only negative affect which circulate and “stick” to signs and bodies, but that also “positive” affect can have a similar effect – especially if the positive affect is normative. Although “goodness” is not an affect *per se*, the affective economy of goodness work to circulate positive affect. Following Ahmed’s account of how fear and hate regulate behaviour, positive affect can likewise have regulatory effects. These include positive reinforcement, encouragement (such as “nudging”), and the promise of increased goodwill, for example the desire to be seen as a good person by doing good deeds. We draw on Ahmed’s (2004, 15) work to suggest that affect “stick” certain bodies/subjects together by constructing “a collective ideal” of potential future public transport users. Certain bodies/subjects are hence made particularly relevant when imagining and planning for future sustainable transport systems, as these bodies/subjects are aligned with positive affect and to the alleged “goodness” of public transport. However, the experiences and practices of current users are thereby excluded and become misaligned to the affective economy of the goodness of public transport. We argue that such a misalignment to a large extent concerns populations in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, as these populations are more dependent on public transport and travel less with cars than the average population (Traffic Analysis 2018, 17). As we will go on to argue, our research participants – living in disadvantaged areas – have to negotiate bus mobilities less as a normative goodness, and more in relation to the affective economy of stigma related to their neighbourhoods.

Disadvantaged neighbourhoods are in Swedish public discourse often portrayed as “migrant suburbs” (Backvall 2019). Public understanding of segregation relies on a spatial conception, confined to specific geographically bound areas such as the Swedish suburbs (Sarraf 2015, cf. Ekman Ladru, Gustafson, and Joelsson 2023). Inhabitants in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden are often racialized as predominantly non-whites (“othered”), as well as portrayed and imagined as immobile, as “stuck in place” or suffering from a “lock-in effect” (Ekman Ladru, Gustafson, and Joelsson 2023). Their situation is often depicted as extra-ordinarily local, living their lives and remaining within the boundaries of their neighbourhoods. The neighbourhoods are, hence, often depicted as enclaves, cut off from the “rest of Swedish society”, and thus positioned outside or beside Swedish society (sometimes described as “parallel societies”). These neighbourhoods are

further imagined to be lacking in proper affordances for children (ibid.; Pinkster and Droogleever Fortuijn 2009) and perceived as unsafe due to criminal presence (Ekman Ladru, Joelsson, and Syrjäpalo 2022).

Combining theories of affective economy and territorial stigma means that we see place and subjects/bodies as aligned, as subjects/bodies are emplaced and become racialized (Molina 1997). Affect, in this case fear, circulate by blurring material boundaries between subjects/bodies and places. We suggest that mobile places, such as the bus, further circulate affective orders. It is therefore pertinent to address questions of situatedness, through embodiment and place in tandem, to understand the affective economies of bus mobilities (cf. Rink 2016, 2022).

The article is organized as follows: in the first part, we connect our study to previous research that concerned the overall themes of bus mobilities and affect. We then introduce the study context and the methodological framing. We describe the research participants, the methods applied and the context in which the study took place – including the prerequisites for transport planning in Sweden. In the results section we present and analyse our findings, while in the final discussion we discuss these findings in relation to affective economies and territorial stigma. We conclude with a discussion of what the analysis means in terms of supporting social and ecological sustainability through public transport planning.

2. The difference(s) of bus travel

Bus travel receives increasing attention in the social sciences and cultural studies, which has resulted in the need to also consider the distinctions between e.g. train and bus travel, as they materially manifest different infrastructures, and thus are likely to produce different socialities (Hutchinson 2000; Wilson 2011). For instance, transit and bus dependency tends to be concentrated to low-income neighbourhoods, as low-income households are less likely to own a car and tend to live in peripheral neighbourhoods where buses are the only (affordable) option (Lubitow, Rainer, and Bassett 2017; Martens 2016; Pereira, Schwanen, and Banister 2017; Ureta 2008). Bus use is therefore unevenly distributed, partly due to socio-economic conditions, partly to the unevenness of infrastructural investments. Scholars have hence pointed to the need to take aspects of poverty and other vectors of inequality into account when discussing bus socialities (Hutchinson 2000).

As a growing body of work in mobilities show, care responsibilities deeply affect many people's everyday mobilities (Jiron and Carrasco 2019; Plyushteva and Schwanen 2018). Adopting a relational understanding of everyday mobility where social, cultural and material dimensions are addressed may highlight how e.g. time-spatial obligations of families with many children become significant barriers in everyday life (Joelsson, Balkmar, and Henriksson 2025). Likewise, Sarkheyli and Sarkheyli (2026) show how the needs of children and caregivers are not usually taken into account in public transport planning or provision, and that many of their survey respondents found travelling with children on public transport as difficult due to time management pressures, affordability concerns, safety concerns and limitations to comfort and convenience. Although these few studies point to some common concerns around public transport from family perspectives, there is a significant lack of studies focusing on families' experiences of

public transport, and particularly of low-income families living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Bus mobilities hence need to be analysed in their social, cultural, and spatial context, as multi-layered assemblages or configurations, “a space of intense materiality” of corporeality and other forms of “stuff” which make up the bus as a sociality (Wilson 2011, 646). Bus riding has historically been associated with the young people, the elderly or the (often racialized) poor, discursively positioning the bus pejoratively as “loser cruisers” (Kay, cited in Hutchinson 2000), a low-class transport mode of “last resort” (Stradling et al. 2007). The historical trajectory of bus riding is of importance in understanding the cultural conceptions associated with bus travel. For instance, in hip hop and rap music, certain public transport services come to represent the neighbourhood, for instance, via the use of the bus number (or metro line number). These cultural representations contain rich cultural meaning signifying spatial and cultural belonging for marginalized and racialized youth, precisely due to their operation in stigmatized places (Saaristo 2025).

Following this, questions of difference and asymmetry need to be considered in order to understand public transport socialities, so as not to reproduce togetherness as sameness, or merely convivial co-presence (Welch and Panelli 2007), and to further develop work on differences between bus and other public mobilities. Wilson’s (2011, 646) has argued that the bus is a site of intimate diversity, not only where differentiation between bodies takes place, but also where sociality, connection and “temporary communities” develop (see also Koefoed, Christensen, and Simonsen 2017).

The negative cultural conceptions of the bus are often acknowledged by bus riders themselves (Stradling et al. 2007). Stradling et al. (2007) note how the bus riders in their study (in Edinburgh, the UK) reported the centrality of social and affective dimensions of their bus journey (safety, unwanted arousal, cost, disability and discomfort), including questions of self-image (“e.g., ‘Travelling by bus does not create the right impression’”, 285). The respondents’ perception of an ideal bus journey did not adhere to their real-life experiences (Stradling et al. 2007, 290). In this vein, it can be argued that the cultural conceptions of the bus and bus-riders can shape the disposition of bus riders in a more general sense. Such pejorative connotations can “stick” to the figure of the bus-rider, creating affect that lasts over time, and further accentuate other vectors of inequality.

3. Affective bus socialities

Research into the bus as a public space has been concerned with how the bus space is constituted by the social negotiations which take place among the bus passengers (e.g. Rink 2016; Sträuli 2023; Wilson 2011). Work focusing on the social relations on public transport has been complemented by work on the material and affective aspects of passengering. For instance, Bissell (2010) has called for better understanding of dwelling on/in public transport, and how these spaces of negotiation constitute sociality through affect by developing the notion of affective atmospheres (see also Anderson 2009; McCormack 2008). How affect circulates, and for instance facilitates practices and produce and regulate bodies, has received increasing attention in relation to mobilities. Bissell (2010, 284) contends that affective relations are central to everyday train conduct, and are “not the outcome of conversational practices; rather they emerge through the complex interplay of technologies, matter and bodies”. Affective atmospheres are “a pull or change

that might emerge in a particular space which might (or might not) generate particular events and actions, feelings and emotions” (Bissell 2010, 273).

Affect is productive, and emotions are performative – they *do* something (Ahmed 2004). For instance, in Mowri and Bailey’s (2023) study on women’s everyday bus commuting and experiences of harassment in Dhaka, Bangladesh, gendered violence and class inequalities is central for the experiences of unsafety of public transport (see also Ilyas and Garg 2025). Unsafety must therefore be considered an assemblage “shaped by associations, norms, knowledge, interpretations, identities, technologies, negotiations, contestations” (Mowri and Bailey 2023, 10). The commuting women’s emotions were enduring in that the gendered and classed affects lingered for a long time, and were distributed along a continuum of empowerment to disempowerment, of encouraging or discouraging agency. Due to these experiences, all the women commuters found that they would use private transport modes if they could afford it. Mowri and Bailey (2023, 10) find that further research is needed “to understand the ways in which other commuter groups [than women] nurture affects in transport that is likely to impress upon each other’s experiences of the shared commuting space”. Affect in relation to mobilities can thus be further developed by thinking through the situatedness of emotions: how iteration and intensity, in tandem with temporality, work in stabilizing affect in particular places and spaces.

Whereas Bissell (2010) is interested in affects as a powerful disciplinary force without commenting much about difference, Ahmed (2004, 119) has instead suggested that “emotions work by sticking figures together”, a stickiness that might attach certain figures together more readily and easily than others. Ahmed (2004) holds that objects (such as bodies) are joined together, while others are separated. Her theory is hence grounded in the ways circulation of emotion and affect produce and maintain differentiation. We propose that the presence of criminality, paired with the territorial stigmatization of these neighbourhoods, can be regarded as intensifying a negative affective atmosphere which is not occasioned, but dispositional (Fisher 2002). Routine and regular exposure to negative affect – territorial stigmatization – make it into a negative affective disposition. In Tolia-Kelly’s (2006, 213) critique against some of affect theory’s “universalist” tendencies, she points to how the mainstream use of affect theory “lacks historicity” as it tends to disregard historically produced difference and “power geometries”. Different subjects/bodies have different affective capacities, not only *here and now*, but also in relation to the layers of meaning that stabilize over time. In this way, certain affects may be more readily available for certain subjects/bodies, and certain subjects/bodies may be ascribed and assigned particular (e.g. negative or pejorative) affect to a higher extent than others. It is therefore highly significant to think about how (asymmetrical) difference is already imbricated in the circulation processes of affect: affect is always material and situated.

Stigmatized neighbourhoods can be thought of in relation to affective economies of stigma, places where negative affects have stabilized into dispositions rather than episodes. There is therefore a need to analytically separate between situational affective processes and the work they do over time. Temporality is of help here, as Fisher (2002) hints at in his distinction between “occasioned” and “dispositional”. This might be particularly important to bear in mind in relation to negative affect, as Bissell (2010) reminds us of. The regular circulation of negative affects over time, works to intensify e.g. territorial stigmatization in our case, making it very difficult to

disregard for individuals. Consequently, it might stabilize into a disposition, which also transmit onto the bus as a public space, and to bus passengers. Conceptualizing “mobility-as-power” (Davidson 2021) aids to situate the circulation of affect in relation to public transport. By considering embodied difference, place and affect, this article is therefore concerned with the circulation of affect which configure public discourse around bus mobilities, as well as users’ experiences of everyday bus mobilities.

4. Studying bus mobilities in Sweden: the research context and study design

4.1. The research context

The qualitative research material was produced with families in three disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods (approx. 7500–10 000 inhabitants) in three middle-sized cities in Sweden: Uppsala, Linköping and Örebro.² In all the neighbourhoods, a majority have immigrant backgrounds. The neighbourhoods consist predominantly of low-income households (below national average in household income), and most residents live in rental housing. In this study, none of the studied neighbourhoods hosts an upper secondary school, and lower secondary schools have been shut down in some of the areas, making children and young people commuters from an early age.³

The PTA policies from the counties these municipalities belong to have also been analysed, as well as marketing and communication material from local bus operators in the three municipalities. Public transport provision in Sweden has been regarded as part of essential welfare, partly financed by taxes, and partly by ticket revenue, and is both subsidized and publicly controlled (Stjernborg and Mattisson 2016; Vitrano and Lindkvist 2021). Public transport is organized into 21 regional transport authorities (PTAs), responsible authorities are regional county councils and associated municipalities. In most regions, public services are procured in competition and operated by private companies (Khan, Hrelja, and Pettersson-Löfstedt 2021), which is the case in the studied municipalities. The fares differ between PTAs, both in terms of zone structure, price and the discounts offered. There is usually a discount for young people and children, as well as for the elderly. The municipalities decide on school bus passes based on geographical distance, which usually is between 3 and 4 km between home and school.

4.2. Study design: the research material and analytical procedures

In each neighbourhood, 9–12 families participated (32 in total), resulting in 47 qualitative in-depth interviews with children, young people and parents on their experiences of their everyday mobilities. The interviews included detailed questions related to everyday travel, and prior to the interviews the participants made notes about their everyday travel in mobility diaries designed by the research team that also encouraged notes about experiences related to affect. In addition, we have collected photographs of the research participants’ surroundings and mobilities, conducted field observations, including bus travel, in the case study neighbourhoods, as part of an ethnographically informed research methodology.

Some of the interviews were individual, but many were also carried out as family or group interviews. In total we have interviewed 35 adults (10 fathers and 25 mothers), and 36 children between the age of 3 and 18 (18 boys and 13 girls; 8 children in the ages 3–6 years). Most families consisted of a mother and father and up to nine children, but the sample also has a few single parents as well as a woman hosting a family consisting of a mother and three daughters in her apartment. The participants have different backgrounds in terms of nationality, education, employment and number of children. Some interviews were conducted in other languages than Swedish, such as English or Somali. In the analysis we focus on the interview material with adults and young people (12–18 years), whom had the vastest experience of everyday bus travel.

A thematic analysis has been carried out in a reflexive manner (Braun and Clarke 2019) on the interview material. First, the interview material from each case-study has been thematically analysed in several stages. The focus was on themes related to everyday mobilities that stand out in each case-study. Second, these themes were related to the other case-studies, to find similarities and differences between the case-studies. At this stage of the analysis, the affective dimensions of bus mobilities emerged as a prominent theme in all case-study settings. We then “traced the bus and bus mobilities” by focusing on when and how affect was highlighted or talked of by the research participants. By shifting back and forth between each case-study setting, as well as between research participants within each case-study, it has been possible to analyse accounts of the affective dimensions of bus and bus mobilities in depth. The findings from this analysis are presented in the second part of the article.

Supplementary material has been collected to clarify how PTAs of Uppsala, Örebro and Östergötland County and bus operators conceive the bus traveller, and the role of bus mobility in municipal contexts. The analysis focuses on the county traffic supply programs that steer municipal and regional work on public transport and mobility services. These policies range from around years 2020–2022 up until year 2030 (Uppsala, Örebro) or even year 2040 (Östergötland). Selected marketing and communication material provided by the bus operators’ websites and social media in the three municipalities of Uppsala, Örebro and Linköping has been analysed. This material consists of operators’ descriptions of their mission on their websites and public campaigns to increase bus travel (between the years 2020–2025).

Combined, the policy and marketing/communication material from the PTAs and the bus operators shape the *public discourse* around bus travel and the bus traveller. Cultural conceptions and social norms around bus mobilities can hence be discerned through discourse analytical procedures. We have employed parts of Bacchi’s (2009) “What’s the Problem Represented to be?” method (WPR), which can be seen as “a heuristic framework” for policy analysis (Stevenson, Balling, and Kann-Rasmussen 2017, 91). Problematizations in policy define and shape what we see as “social problems”, as the “issues that are problematised – how they are thought of as ‘problems’ – are central to governing processes” (Bacchi 2009, xi). Our interest lies in how problematizations are articulated in policy and in the marketing/communication material, i.e. what are articulated as problems and solutions to the problems. We first present the findings from the discourse analysis to contextualize our research participants’ narratives.

5. Mapping the normative goodness of bus mobilities

The analysis of the PTA policies shows that the PTAs consider public transport as tools for the development of society. For example, Region Uppsala (n.d.,16) emphasizes the need to shift perspective from the traveller to societal needs, and Region Östergötland (2022, 61) frames public transport in light of societal benefits, some of which are difficult to “value in monetary terms”. The PTA policies recognize the key role of public transport to facilitate *accessibility* for travellers to participate in education, labour market, service, culture, and recreational activities, and all stress the importance of public transport *for and in the green transition*. Uppsala county summarizes the benefits of public transport as threefold: for the society, for the citizen and for the traveller (16).

The benefits that public transport brings to society have to do with opportunities for increased employment through commuting, but also include, for example, reduced environmental impact, fewer traffic accidents, reduced congestion and freed up space for urban development and better public health through cleaner air and increased physical mobility. For citizens, public transport contributes to increased accessibility to work, school and services as well as to cultural and leisure activities. (...) Public transport also contributes to making the transport system accessible for those who for various reasons have to use the car. The benefit for the traveller is being able to get to their destination and at the same time be able to utilise the product advantages that public transport provides. (Region Uppsala, 16)

The strategies in the PTA policy in Uppsala are e.g. “based on demonstrated shortcomings in the current public transport system and identified development potential in order to achieve the goals and encourage more people to choose public transport over cars” (Region Uppsala n.d., 17). In all PTA policies, attracting new bus users is a prioritized question articulated in terms of a goal to *increase the market share of public transport*, particularly by achieving a modal shift from private car use to public transport. The attractiveness of public transport is formulated as about accessibility, travel time, frequency, reliability, simplicity, price and comfort (Region Örebro län 2022). Public transport is framed as a vehicle for increased digitalization and tech-driven mobility services, positioned as solutions to environmental concerns and private car dependence (Region Uppsala n.d.), as well as to broader processes of urbanization, globalization, geopolitics and increased individualization (Region Östergötland 2022). Public transport is also seen to equalize socio-economic differences and to contribute to integration, for example, by improving the connections between different parts of the city, and the safety on public transport (Region Uppsala, 19). Combined, these framings position public transport as inherently attractive – contributing to so much more than “transport”.

In all the PTA policies, and in the marketing and communication material from the bus operators, environmental sustainability is highlighted. As one of the bus operators states on their website, under the section “That’s why we exist”:

We connect Östergötland. We create the conditions for a simpler and more sustainable everyday life. And whether you commute with us every day to work and school, take the bus to training or travel with us every now and then, you make a difference.⁴

This kind of language of making a difference, of being part of the transition to environmentally friendly everyday travel, is commonplace on the websites. It is also evident in the campaigns the bus operators launch, and in their social media posting. Two of the bus

operators have launched several campaigns directed to (white) fathers, or to (white) high-income men.

A humorous campaign was launched by Upplands lokaltrafik (Uppsala) in 2025, “Change the car to the bus”, to get men and “boomers” to travel by bus (Figure 1).⁵ The visual material of the campaign – displayed in bus stops all over the city in January 2026 and on their website – illustrates how a daughter teaches and soothes her anxious and unaccustomed father to take the bus. A similar campaign was launched by Östgötatrafiken (Östergötland) in 2024, entitled “Help your father travel sustainably”, signed Östgötatrafiken and “Every dad counts”. These campaigns are directed to the groups that travel the least by public transport, men and people aged 45–85 years.

Another ambiguous and humorous campaign launched by Östgötatrafiken illustrates a business man, and the text reads “We help you make surplus! No matter how you count, a trip with us always ends up in the plus account”., signed by Östgötatrafiken, “Every trip counts” (Figure 2).

In some of the PTA policies, economic dimensions of public transport are brought up – often in relation to financing. Region Östergötland (2022 60) is explicit about how fares



Byt bilen mot bussen – enklare än du tror



Figure 1. Campaign by upplands lokaltrafik in 2025, “change the car to the bus – easier than you think”.



Figure 2. Campaign launched by Östgötatrafiken in 2025, “the plus account”.

are important in attracting bus users, and how pricing can be used to achieve a modal shift:

Expanded public transport that is clearly built up based on the needs and demands of motorists means that several of the trips that are currently made by car can instead be made by public transport. At the same time, expanded public transport of high quality also increases its affordability compared to the car. This can motivate future price adjustments. The public transport pricing system and range of travel tickets should therefore be designed in a way that both increases trips and optimizes revenue.

The Swedish term “prisvärdhet” [affordability] is only used in the PTA policies with reference to the car, i.e. public transport cost is contrasted to the cost of owning a car. Affordability in this sense does not refer to having difficulties paying for public transport, e.g. groups and users that cannot afford public transport altogether, or that need to negotiate when and how there is enough exchange and value buying a ticket (Bondemark et al. 2021; Höjemo, Kupersmidt, and Johansson 2026; Joelsson, Balkmar, and Henriksson 2022). For instance, none of the PTA policies discuss the economic conditions under which large families travel, or the role of public transport for the everyday mobilities of

diverse social groups such as low/no income groups. Children and young people are mentioned as important to target and include, but none of the specific strategies in the policies relate to this group and none relate to the fares of public transport.

In sum, although current users are addressed in the PTA policies, and in the traffic information and news posted on the PTA's social media accounts, the signs which circulate in the public discourse produced by the PTAs centre around the bus as a solution to future needs of collective transport. The signs of the bus are marked by their positivity, the potential in public transport to aid individuals to get to where they need (accessibility) and to contribute to the transition to more environmentally sustainable transport futures (environmental sustainability). The movement between signs and bodies/subjects work to increase the affective value of the normative goodness of the bus. In the daddy campaigns, the humorous jokes address generational gaps, and in the other campaign, humorous language plays with the ambiguity on the economic benefits of travelling by bus. In both campaigns, positive affect is thus associated with bus travel and the unlikely but potential bus travellers (middle-aged men and high-income men). The problems these portrayed future travellers are encountering are being unaccustomed to and not knowledgeable in bus travel, and the cost of car travel. Bus travel is associated with lower costs than riding the car, thus suggesting that bus riding will save the user money and lead to economic benefits for the affluent business man (current car user). Public transport is framed as unproblematic to use, the result of a choice to be made as opposed to being a necessity for everyday life (Salvo et al. 2023). Material, cultural or social restrictions are thereby made invisible, including the subjects that might encounter such barriers, and are left silenced in the discourse of public transport.

In this vein, the positive emotions of being or becoming part of a bus sociality conveyed in the PTA policies and the communication/marketing material *do things*, as "they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed 2004, 119). Similar reasoning can be found in a study about municipal planning for sustainable mobility, where Swedish planners expressed hesitance towards attaching other emotions than joy and happiness to bus travel. Everyday bus travel as mundane, burdensome or boring has no place in sustainability communication, the planners reasoned (Henriksson 2014).

In sum, the affective signs that produce the normative goodness of public transport, centre on its capacity to produce positive impacts not only for the environment and social sustainability, but also its users' private economy. The public discourse centres around how some people should find it worth the trouble of transitioning from car to bus use in not too distant a future.

6. Negotiating bus riding: the mis-alignment of signs and bodies

The experiences of the current bus-dependent users in our study can be analysed with reference to the normative goodness of public transport outlined in the previous section. There is a dissonance between the public discourse around the normative goodness of bus mobilities, as it is framed around the imagined bodies and collectives of future users, and the current bus-dependent users in our study. The sign of the bus as a solution to current and future needs of private transport is not aligned with the experiences of our

research participants. Instead, the affect that circulates in the narratives of our research participants' bus mobilities, is *stress*. Although the bus is portrayed as both an essential and at times much appreciated everyday mobility, the research participants also account for several stressful aspects related to *time, expenses, care responsibilities, crowding and social risks*.

The time-consuming character of travelling by bus was particularly highlighted in the interviews, as it was considered to increase everyday stress. Having to manage unforeseen situations such as delays, cancelled or altogether absent bus services, further accentuated the stressful aspects of dealing with uncertainty. No upper secondary school is located in any of the neighbourhoods, and lower secondary schools have been shut down in some of the areas, making children and young people commuters from an early age. Some of the young people have experiences of being placed in schools far away from where they live, often coupled with more distant bus commuting every day to and from school. Malik and Teoma, both 13 years old, were placed in schools in other neighbourhoods when they first arrived in Sweden, and they both speak of the school journey as stressful. Teoma needed to change buses, whereas Malik, referring to the long bus journeys to school as boring, also mentions how bus delays on top of the actual journey created an extra stress: "The first bus, it took a long time. If the bus was late, then I had to wait for twenty more minutes I think (...) It was stressful, really".

The temporality of bus mobilities in relation to everyday life – adjusting to time tables, handling delays, and the experience of bus riding in general as time-consuming – connects to the normative, neo-liberally imbued, valuation of "time as money". The time optimization logic underpinning contemporary transport planning highlights time efficiency as a primary goal, with the consequence of constructing travel time as "dead time" (cf. Stradling et al. 2007). In relation to the train system, the bus infrastructure is more dynamic, as the routes and time tables can change (within the available road network). Even though bus transport is likewise framed in relation to time efficiency as one important factor for attracting new bus users, the bus infrastructure as a system, also caters for other needs on the municipal and regional level as we illustrated in the previous section.

One of the most stressful aspects of bus mobilities for many of the research participants, particularly the young people, was high fares (Joelsson, Balkmar, and Henriksson 2022). Asif, 15 years, hold that "it is good for the environment that many take the bus", whereas 18-year-old Muna reflect upon how the fares affect the possibilities for being "environmentally friendly". She says that "it is so expensive to take something which benefits the environment, it makes people less willing to take it because it is so expensive". Being environmentally friendly is often framed as desired by the young research participants, but most of them dream about getting a driver's licence and a (preferably electric) car when growing up rather than riding the bus. The car signals status, is considered a necessity, and a more flexible and convenient mode than public transport. Getting a driver's licence is part of growing up and becoming an autonomous adult, whereas bus riding is associated with the life phase of youth and of dependency (cf. Hutchinson 2000).

However, very few of the adult research participants touch upon the bus as either a "good" or "bad" option in relation to environmental sustainability, as managing everyday life is their primary goal. Comfortability, punctuality, affordability and how well the

bus system in general could cater their everyday needs appeared to be the most important in this regard. Jasmine, mother of three, brings up the tiring aspects of being dependent on public transport, when she speaks of how her husband, a previous bus rider, uses the car everywhere all the time: “He says, ‘it’s enough with ten years of public transport, I have done my part. Now I must drive a car’”. Although she has a driving licence and access to a car, she prefers to walk to the local stores. On one occasion when the family car needed repair, she recounts how her husband became stressed about how to cope with their everyday life. In her account, the story of her husband illustrates how many bus-dependent people value comfortability, flexibility and the imagined seamlessness of car travel, and that bus mobilities are rather perceived as the “last resort” (Stradling et al. 2007). Jasmine’s husband is portrayed as someone who has already contributed to lessening the transport emissions by using public transport for ten years. His reward for doing his share is a transition to car mobilities, by getting a driver’s licence as an adult. For Jasmine, the re-valuation of bus mobilities is not only associated with being a better choice for the environment, but is also a matter of health. She thus aligns herself closer to the public discourse on the normative goodness of public transport.

Nasro highlights how care responsibilities are not easy to combine with bus mobilities. In his account, having a large family and many children to transport while not having a driver’s licence, is “very difficult”.

Yes, I need to transport them [my children]. Sometimes they need to go into town. It is difficult. You lose so much time if you go by bus all the time, but if you go by car, you save a lot of time. Last month I was at an indoor playground. And I took the bus and it was very difficult for me with four kids. The bus there, and back again. You take one bus from here to the city center, and then another bus, and then you have to walk for 15 to 20 minutes. And that was difficult. (Interviewer: Yes, yes, with four kids.) First it was easy because they had energy, you know. But when they have played, after, then it became difficult. They could not walk to the bus stop. They were tired and I had a double stroller, but it was already three in it. To the big one I said, “you can walk”. They were tired. They were falling asleep. Then, afterward, I thought, “I must take the driving license”. (Nasro, father of four)

Nasro’s is one of the fathers in our sample that do not have a driver’s licence. A significantly higher amount of the mothers did not either. In particular life phases, when their children were younger, their everyday mobilities are inseparable from their care responsibilities (Jiron and Carrasco 2019; Plyushteva and Schwanen 2018). Many of the mothers thus address how their previous bus-dependent life was challenging due to having to combine their care, and educational/work responsibilities. Some mothers spoke of these as experiences of a stressful past, when the children were younger. On their way to work or education, they needed to leave children at the preschool or at school. Some who still have young children use the bus to these institutions, while others combine walking to pre/school and then taking the bus to work/education (see Joelsson, Balkmar, and Henriksson 2025).

In the case study neighbourhoods, children and young people make up almost half of the population. The effect is that certain services during peak hours are crowded, despite the fact that there might be up to four different services to the area, or that the bus companies put in extra buses in peak hours. Overcrowded buses were a particular challenge during the Covid-19 pandemic (no space to keep a distance) especially for children commuting to school. Experiences of the bus as

a crowded space were recurrent, and the encounters were described as trying, at times enforced. Isla, 25 years old, describes how crowding at times feels like “You can barely breathe. It is really crowded on the bus, it really is. People can hardly sit”. This can also lead to conflicts, as “there are a lot of prams, and people argue about who gets onboard with the prams first, like that. Then it can get loud on the bus”. The research participants speak of not knowing which bus is going to be crowded, and they need to be at work or school on particular times, it is difficult to avoid overcrowded buses (which might drive by without stopping). Either they risk being late, or risk standing up the whole journey (or during the Covid-19-pandemic, risk infection). Ahmed, 18 years old, conclude that “this has been a problem for many years, but it is only recently they have tried to put in more buses [during the Covid 19-pandemic]”.

Other kinds of social risks were a prominent theme in our material as well. For example, Nazli, 46 years old, and Noor, 14 years old, both share experiences of (potential) bus violence. Whereas Nazli has witnessed “two [persons] beating up each other and one also hits the driver”, Noor reflects on why she, as a woman, does not use the bus at night. “I would have been dead scared”, she says, referring to a situation recently where her male friends “took the bus twenty past midnight”. She contends that “the boys are freer. (...) They can do sort of everything”. Noor later links such experiences of insecurity to the need for introducing more guards on the buses. Many regard the presence of guards as reassuring, but it can also be regarded as the increase of surveillance and control of disadvantaged and territorially stigmatized places – leaving the population and the neighbourhood paradoxically more surveilled yet underprotected (Schclarek Mulinari 2023; see also Stjernborg 2025). It also points to the “throwtogetherness” (Massey 2005) character of bus sociality, which also calls upon fellow passengers to intervene in threatening and violent situations. Nimco, 14 years old, elaborates on the importance of intervening, even though these interventions can be violent in themselves:

There was actually this time when I was on the bus, it was this winter, I saw a guy who told another guy that he was an immigrant, so he should not be on this bus. But then some other girls came up and stopped him. I actually thought that those who stopped him did the right thing. I actually wanted to go up and beat him.

Interviewees further reflected upon the situation of waiting for the bus as potentially uncomfortable. Hawa, a single mother, talks about the need to “be brave sometimes” but by intervening you might put yourself in danger. Isla, aged 25, thinks that the bus is relatively safe, “since you are with other people”, but that she can feel unsafe waiting for the bus. She holds that she feels safer when it is crowded, as more people present give a sense of security. While violent encounters are rare, it nevertheless shows how the wait at the bus stop makes people hyper-visible and exposed to passers-by. Disadvantaged neighbourhoods are perceived to be both safe and unsafe, and the daily negotiations around, e.g. criminality, have potential implications for how public transport is perceived and experienced (Rajé 2007).

In sum, the bus is essential for our research participants everyday mobilities. The most highlighted emotion in their account is stress: related to time, expenses, care responsibilities, crowding and social risks. How bus mobilities are entrenched in

affective economies of goodness matters, in that the experiences of the bus users are affectively misaligned to the public discourses of environmental sustainability and public transport.

7. Concluding remarks

By analysing the way affect circulates in the narratives of bus-dependent research participants, in this paper we have discussed how the public imaginaries of the green transition and the role of public transport in it can be regarded as an affective economy of goodness. This affective economy regulates the public discourse around public transport in the green transition through the circulation of positive affect. Affective signs associated with the bus on the discursive level stick to certain people, thereby binding them together as a *future* collective, with resources to choose how they transport themselves in everyday life. The affective economy of goodness is related to practices which enhance the image and experience of being a good person and doing good deeds (in this case, e.g. for the environment).

As societal goals are set out to increase the use of the bus among the groups which currently use private cars, most notably affluent people of the middle and upper classes, the public discourse of bus mobilities is foremost linked to environmental sustainability (instead of, e.g. affordability for low-income groups). Even if Sweden is known for radical green politics such as environmental taxes, environmental communication has tended to centre around private choice and lifestyle (Bradley 2009). Moreover, although shame and guilt undoubtedly circulate in public discourse in relation to questions of environmental sustainability, the individualized perspective on “green lifestyles” has effectively shifted the attention toward behaviours and attitudes (Cupples and Ridley 2008). The underlying logic in e.g. nudging and other individualized strategies for promoting sustainable lifestyles lay on the premise of rational choice (Levy 2013), and can also be analysed in relation to shifts in subjectivation processes taking place in the wake of the *profligation* of society, i.e. the image of how others perceive you is more important than being authentic (Moeller and D’ambrosio 2021).

In contrast to the future collective, groups that are dependent on the bus in their daily life are part of the *current* collective of bus users (thus with a lower carbon emission footprint than the average) and often live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They tend not to be fore-fronted as role-models within lifestyle-centred discourses of environmental sustainability (Joelsson, Balkmar, and Henriksson 2025). It is the current collective and their experience of bus mobilities we have highlighted.

What our research participants describe, is connected to the affective economy of stigma, of living in disadvantaged racialized neighbourhoods ridden by criminality and unsafety. This is further accentuated as the research participants account for situations of violence and unsafety on the bus, bus stops and other places of transit. The bus as a public space has different meanings in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, i.e. where affective economies of stigma regulate the circulation and accumulation of negative affect over time, making it important to be specific about how public transport as public spaces needs to be situated in time and place (cf. Tuvikene et al. 2023). It is notable, that feelings of unsafety on buses and bus stops is a gendered matter, and negotiated by our research participants on an

everyday basis. However, the bus-dependent users' experiences of unsafety are seldom conveyed in public discussions on public transport. One interpretation is that the effect of the affective economy of stigma can lead to a disregard for other kinds of narratives to surface and become topical. The population in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is diverse, but every resident is vulnerable to criminality and unsafety and negotiate it on a daily basis. The political measures directed at these "problem-ridden places" have instead of protecting the population been mostly punitive, consisting of more surveillance and control (Schclarek Mulinari 2023) – including on ticket inspections on buses (Schclarek Mulinari and Nassef 2024) – and increasing criminalization (Thapar-Björkert, Molina, and Villacura 2019). The most prevalent affect accounted for by the research participants, aside from feelings of unsafety, was that of stress in relation to time, expenses, care responsibilities, and crowding. Such matters are rarely discussed in the public discussions on the green transition, but need to be addressed in knowledge production, policy making and planning practices when it comes to public transport and its place in the green transition.

Public transport is perceived as an important infrastructure in the green transition, with the imagined potential to not only sustain the mobilities of people, but also attract people from car-based mobility to public transport. The imaginaries surrounding public transport often centre around green transitions, as it is perceived as a realistic alternative to the private car. Public transport is also often associated with notions of democracy, publicness, openness and diversity, as a continuation of public transport being conceived of as a public space (Sträuli 2023; Tuvikene et al. 2023). However, the "throwntogetherness" constituting public transport space is conflict ridden and ambivalent, precisely due to its heterogeneity and multiplicity (cf. Massey 2005). How public transport is differentiated is hence of vital importance to investigate. Travelling by bus or by train can be very different experiences, where e.g. previous research shows a strong association between socioeconomic condition and bus dependency (Lubitow, Rainer, and Bassett 2017; Ureta 2008). Part of the current collective of bus users – where bus use is a necessity rather than a "choice" (c.f. Salvo et al. 2023) – could thus be seen as an effect of economic inequality and housing segregation, further accentuating sociospatial inequalities. Interestingly, and contrary to our findings in this study and other research in Sweden, the costs of public transport are seldom addressed in public discourse (Bondemark et al. 2021; Højemo, Kupersmidt, and Johansson 2026; Joëlsson, Balkmar, and Henriksson 2022). As we illustrated, public transport is considered cheap *in relation to car use*. Car use is normative, and the association between car use and socio-economic position is yielded invisible. Socio-economic inequality is mentioned in the policies, and bus use is rather regarded as a solution – and hence also as a tool for integration (cf. Ekman Ladru, Gustafson, and Joëlsson 2023).

As Salvo et al. (2023) has argued in relation to public health promotion programs, we argue that public transport policies must acknowledge the different conditions under which people travel. Not all travel is an effect of rational choice. Seen in this light, everyday mobilities are a highly political issue, and the need to attend to questions of difference, equality and justice, a matter of public concern.

Notes

1. https://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/mekka-traffic-group/blog_posts/bussbranschen-leder-transportsektorns-groena-omstaellning-114352.
2. The study has been ethically reviewed by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, no 2020–03246.
3. The travel patterns by young people living in the studied neighborhoods is partly a result of the 1992 “free school reform”, parents can choose which schools their children can attend. Like the public transport system, schools are financed by taxes, but no fees are allowed. Privately owned schools receive municipal funding through a voucher system where every student brings a voucher to the chosen school. Surplus from these tax-funded vouchers can be used as profit for shareholders, resulting in an internationally compared extremely decentralized and market-oriented school system (Sjögren 2023). A plethora of private and public schools, and the possibility to choose school freely, have resulted in longer travel distances to school for pupils, but also in more socio-economically segregated schools (Trumberg and Urban 2021).
4. <https://www.ostgotatrafiken.se/info/darfor-finns-vi/> (accessed 2026–02-24, 13:50 CET).
5. <https://www.unt.se/nyheter/uppsala-lan/artikel/kanner-du-dig-traffad-av-reklamen-da-ar-du-kanske-en-boomer/jn1on3nl>.

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