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Finding Solace in The Subway: An Ethnographic Study of Subway

Culture In New York City

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Introduction

This ethnographic study examines the social experience of New Yorkers while riding the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) subway system. As a student in one of the world's greatest cities, I have taken the subway throughout my childhood with my parents and alone, now that I am an adult. The subway is easily one of New York City's most overlooked and simultaneously recognized aspects of city life, as every day commuters complain about their travel, but forget all about their grievances once they have reached their destination. This almost universal mindset has allowed me to understand that riding the subway, especially in New York City, is a

unique social experience made up of varying aspects in one's day to day life.

Given that I have ridden the subway before, I am all too familiar with the unpredictable good or bad that might take place on that given day. Train carts can either be filled with garbage and reeking of urine or almost pristine and neutral smelling. The carts can be a refuge for many homeless people or packed to the brim with regular riders, it always just depends. Relevance is given to my inquiry through the fact that most people in a major city have utilized public transportation, but probably have not truly paid attention to the actions of those around them. Why are people sitting in the cart that smells unpleasant? Are New

Yorkers courteous to others while they are packed like tuna in one cart? What other variables might be thrown in at that time of day and why? These are some of the questions that will help transit riders understand the actions of the strangers they might spend an hour of their day sitting or standing near.



Photo 1
New Yorkers crowd the subway's doors before the train has had a chance to pull into the station.

Assumptions and Early Hypothesis

I have lived in New York City for approximately twelve years, and I surely

have spent the majority of my time riding the infamously known MTA. Yet, I have spent three-fourths of that time unconscious on my book bag. Never have I been fully awake during my commute, a terrible habit picked up as a child who had to travel with his parents all over the city and enforced as a high schooler who had to travel two hours to Harlem at the crack of dawn. My experiences in the subway are limited because of my unwillingness to pay attention to the environment around me during those times. Most of my memories are etched based on whether or not the cart I am in smells bearable, if they were crowded, if I had to argue with someone because there was space they were blocking off, or if I was able to knock out during my ride. I am lacking in New York City-based subway ethnography skills and apparently, so is the world. As I "surfed" (or perhaps walked along almost barren land) the internet for sources, I was irritated at the lack of studies

taken about subway travel, even if it was not NYC based. I was able to find a moment's reprieve during my endless search for a source when I discovered an ethnographic study of NYC's subway system from an Associate Professor of Sociology here at John Jay whose name is Richard E. Ocejo. Once again, the John Jay family pulls through.

Professor Ocejo's work was not the only one I found, despite my exaggerated recollection earlier. However, his findings did play the most prevalent part in shaping my assumptions and early hypotheses, as it assisted in pinpointing my other sources. His research illuminates what it truly means to be a stranger on public transportation, to be "within and without" so to speak, although he describes it as "indifference and involvement." Diversity is also an aspect he addresses and one that I expect to encounter in my own research. As New York City is one of the largest cities in the world, it

would be naïve to think I will not experience exposure to people who are different than myself. This diversity can also vary based on the train line. Take for instance the seven (7) train which now runs from 34th street Hudson Yards, to Flushing - Main Street. This line services a vast amount of Asian and Latino nationalities and because of this, is often referred to as the "International Express," a term coined by the Queens Council of the Arts (Tonnelat and Kornblum). When it comes to waiting for and riding the subway, each person's "technique" for boarding, exiting and riding may vary. A study posted on "The Urban Ethnographer" acknowledges these distinctive methods and clarifies what each category entails. Most of these categories have certain names such as "Sleeper" or "Pole hugger," but more ambiguous subcategories of riders like "Lurkers" might make one raise an eyebrow. Lurkers are people who wait for a certain person, e.g., a

"Pole Hugger" to move or depart the train so they can take over their spot (Kdcosta). I fully expect to encounter all of these aspects with an unwelcoming, antisocial attitude because this is New York and we are all a bunch of assholes.

METHODOLOGY

My primary method used to conduct the research needed was participant-observation, and visual ethnography, as there is no better way to illustrate human behavior than through photos. An informal interview with a young man named Ricardo on DeKalb Avenue was also conducted. The interview lasted a mere five minutes in comparison to the length of time it took to conduct my research, which lasted two hours and consisted of riding both the A and L train lines. An hour's time was given to riding each train line. While observing fellow New Yorkers riding each line, I made my observations with an unbiased mindset, and I made an effort to stay as objective as

possible. No over-analysis as to why anybody did anything, I just wrote down exactly what they did, while they were waiting for the subway to arrive, riding the subway, or just walking through the station.

As for myself, when I boarded the A train, I sat at the end of the cart in the seat furthest in the corner, so I would be able to observe most of the cart since the A train was an older model with side seats only. As I continued riding through Queens into Brooklyn, I realized two things. Firstly, I had just truly observed one side of the train and secondly, I ride the A train every day for my commute to school. In a moment of spontaneity, as the conductor announced the train transfers at the Broadway Junction stop in Brooklyn, I zoomed off the train before the door closed and went upstairs to transfer to a train that I was not familiar with at the stop: The L train. For the duration of the study that lasted on the A train, I did not exit the train. I stood aboard and observed every

single person who boarded while for the L, I exited on DeKalb Avenue, Bedford Avenue and 14th Street-Union Square to observe.

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Although I was on a different train line, many of the actions of the people who waited and rode the subway were almost identical to those on the A train. Many people would walk back and forth from where they are sitting to look down the platform to see whether or not the train is pulling into the station or will continuously check to see when the next scheduled train is. Often, riders look around to fill the time, or standby idly on their phones, making it seem as if they are seriously engaged when they are not. I watched as an older gentleman open and closed the Facebook app five times on his phone, it is that serious. Transit riders also wait for the train to arrive to walk to the back of the station and ride in the last cart and crowd the doors before other passengers have a chance to

exit at their stop. Conversations during this waiting time are flowing, as the stations were triumphant with loud, boisterous talking. One distinctive trait between the two lines are the ways performers decide to share their art. For instance, there are hardly any performers in the stations on the A line, but a handful were performing in the stations on the L line, 14th Street being where most of the artists assembled.



Photo 2

A group of performers draw attention by performing with lights in the middle of the Union Square train station.

Once boarded, the animated scene that was the platform is left behind for a heavily contrasting dull environment. Many are still seen to be on their phones with headphones plugged in, assumedly listening to music with fatigued expressions on their faces. The only noise that one can hear is the sounds of the train scraping against the rails as it bursts through the borough, with the only disturbance of this setting being a young man trying to sell candy for his supposed football team. In the face of a person who looks like they do not have any time to be bothered, most would look away, but not New Yorkers. Many will sit in the available empty seat next to these people without exchanging a single word or even ask them to move over if they are taking up space, undeterred by their frigid appearance. Different groups of people such as the “Sleepers” and were at large, with many of the passengers falling into one of the categories mentioned earlier, especially the

sleeper category. In Photo 3, for instance, one can see how many people would fall into said category.



Photo 3
Passengers on their way home on the L line.
All things considered, I believe that the

actions of the passengers are justified through self-motivation. As riders are often either beginning or finishing their days, the majority of New Yorkers are using their time on the subway to relieve some of their stress through “alone time”, often shutting out other passengers while simultaneously

respecting their space. My brief interview with Ricardo, a high school senior, sums up how New Yorkers feel about the transit system despite seeking solace in it. When asked to describe New York City in three words, he chose: “Hectic, but entertaining.” When asked to describe the subway, he said: “Dirty as shit.” He believed that the idea of



Photo 4

A picture of Ricardo's outfit. Ricardo was not comfortable with having his face in the picture, so his outfit was the best option.

only staying on the subway for only a fraction of your day encourages New Yorkers to leave their local stations in crummy conditions. “Also, because people

are just unsanitary and dirty. You can't control that.”

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, my findings were aligned with the research I had examined previously. The subway was extremely diverse, many people fell into one of the categories from the research done by “The Urban Ethnographer,” and many of the passengers were both indifferent and involved. Deeper examination would be relevant, as I feel my research only touches the surface of subway ethnography and while I feel it does an amazing job in doing so, there are still so many facets of subway riding culture left in the wind to be evaluated. A considerable flaw in my research was my lack of enthusiasm towards interviewing others. Had I not been required to interview at least one person, I would not have interviewed anybody at all. Despite my outgoing exterior, I am more of an introverted person, which made it effortless to brush off any

thoughts of interviewing a stranger.

Ethnographers who are more willing to

immerse themselves through active

participation would be better suited to find

out more about why New Yorkers ride the

subway the way they do.

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