

Understanding residential and travel preferences of South Asian international students ¹

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Abstract

Australia's population is on the rise, and immigrants, including international students, are playing a big role in this growth. Because of the resulting strain on the transport system in the country, it is important to have some insight into how immigrants travel. Research in Australia has found demographic and travel habit differences between native-born Australians and immigrants but the reasons for these differences are not clear. To learn more, focus groups were undertaken amongst domestic and international (South Asian) students attending Monash University, a large suburban university campus in Victoria. New insights into public transport and car use were noted, with carpooling and carsharing amongst South Asians being an important mode. For South Asians, living with friends or family in an area reminding them of home was convenient; however, this often resulted in longer travel times and poorer connectivity which is a price most South Asians were willing to pay. For the Australians, trying to live near their daily destination or in an area with good public transport was preferred. Despite the two groups having different mobility preferences, much of the discussions revolved around the limitations of public transport in the suburban location of the university, hinting at a car-dependent future. International students can be the agents of change the Australian transport system needs to move away from cars. Their concerns should be evaluated and researched further by policymakers and transport planners urgently.

1 Introduction

Australia's rapid population growth is placing enormous strains on the transportation system. Much of this growth is driven by high rates of immigration, primarily skilled immigrants and international student, with the latter being the focus of this study. However, there is very limited research on the travel of immigrants in Australia; preliminary research in Australia suggests that this is not to be the case – immigrants travel differently even when such factors are accounted for (Klocker, Toole et al. 2015,

¹ This is an abridged version of the paper originally submitted for ATRF 2019. For further information about this research please contact the authors.

Kerr, Klocker et al. 2016). It appears that something beyond traditional socio-economic factors is contributing to why immigrants travel differently to native-born Australians.

This paper aims to understand the factors that influence the mobility and travel choices of South Asian international students, and how this compares to native-born Australian university students. South Asian students were selected because they are one of the largest non-Western immigrant and student groups in Australia. To explore this research aim, focus group sessions were undertaken amongst university students attending Monash University, and comparisons were made between South Asian international students and domestic students. Monash University. The paper is structured as follows. First, a summary of relevant literature has been presented that helped design the guide for the focus groups. Next, the research approach and methodology are presented, which is followed by the results section. Lastly, the paper concludes with key study limitations and future research considerations.

2 Literature review

Australia's population has grown rapidly in recent years, largely driven by immigrants. Recent immigrants are also more likely to arrive from South Asia or China, whose contingent is ever-growing in Australia, particularly Victoria (ABS 2016). At the same time, the proportion of immigrants arriving as international students is increasing (Gothe-Snape 2018); as of 2018, 30% of all temporary visa holders were students (ABS 2019). Since South Asians are the largest, non-western immigrant group in Australia (ABS 2016), and international students make up a large proportion of those immigrants, they are the focus of this study.

International students and immigrants could be the “agents of change” (Tal and Handy 2010) that help transform Australia away from a car-centric society. Despite the size of the international student market, they are usually underrepresented in travel surveys, such as VISTA. This underrepresentation is an issue for travel survey datasets in general (Stangeby 2000, Wang, Khattak et al. 2012).

2.1 Attitudes towards cars, public transport and household structure

There is very limited existing research on skilled or financially sound immigrants anywhere in the world. Most travel research on immigrants is from the United States, where low-skilled and low-income immigrant groups, particularly Hispanic and other ethnic minority groups, are often the focus of the research (Handy, Blumenberg et al. 2008, Liu and Painter 2012). Australia is unique as most immigrants are skilled and/or financially sound. Prior research in Australia has found differences in travel behaviour between native-born Australians and immigrants (Shafi, Delbosc et al. 2017). However, the reasons were not all demographic.

2.1.1 How cars are perceived

People value cars highly for many reasons, including comfort, safety and social status. South Asians consider car ownership a privilege – it is often associated with education level and occupation (He and Thøgersen 2017). On the other hand, few young people in Australia think of car ownership as an indicator for “doing well in life” (Delbosc and Currie 2014).

South Asia has some of the lowest car ownership rates, and naturally places great emphasis on carpooling and carsharing (Enam and Choudhury 2011). How carsharing

works *within* families and friends is less-well studied. The car-driving scenario is also quite chauffeur-centric, further facilitating carsharing.

2.1.2 Public transport in South Asia and Australia

Public transport in large South Asian cities is very different to the Australian context the former is considered far worse than the latter in regards to safety and comfort (Pucher, Korattyswaropam et al. 2005, Enam and Choudhury 2011). Finances and gender play a key role in South Asia, along with the presence of many other door-to-door taxi services (such as rickshaws and auto-rickshaws). There is evidence from the Census (ABS 2011, ABS 2016) and VISTA (TfV2013) showing higher public transport use amongst South Asians compared to Australians, despite similar socio-economics..

2.1.3 Household structure and location

Australians tend to live with family until financial independence, especially up until the completion of their education and stable work; afterwards however, independent living is generally seen as a part of adult life. In contrast, South Asian culture prioritises family bonds in living arrangements; since most South Asians are first generation immigrants, they may prefer to live closer to community members. It is possible we may see cultural trends in housing preferences amongst international students.

2.2 Gaps in literature

Some studies have confirmed that there is a difference in travel habits for immigrants, yet it is not solely based on socio-economics or demographic factors in Australia. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to conceptualise non-demographic factors that influence travel and mobility choices amongst South Asian international students and native-born Australian students. This paper presents research efforts comparing these key aspects: household preferences, perceptions and use of cars and PT.

3 Methodology

This research is focused on understanding a broad spectrum of factors that influence travel behaviour and mobility choices amongst university students; hence, a qualitative approach was chosen. Four focus groups (each an hour long) were run in total – two for South Asians and two for those born in Australia. Sessions were undertaken by groups pre-defined by the country of birth of participants (South Asians vs Australians).

3.1 Data collection and analysis

Monash University was chosen because it is the largest university in Victoria by enrolment and by number of international students. The project was granted ethics approval by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC). The study involved 29 participants split almost equally between Australian and South Asians covering a range of socio-demographic characteristics.

Semi-structured interview scripts were prepared that covered a range of topics including present and future travel and residential preferences, travel behaviour during high school, perceptions of different mode use and influence of family and society on travel behaviour. Many of the questions and results were drawn based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour framework (Ajzen 1991) and hierarchical choice structure of mobility and travel (Salomon and Ben-Akiva 1983).

4 Key findings²

The focus in this paper was on non-university trips/ Specifically, the findings focus on three dimensions – where participants choose to live, how they think about public transport and how they think about cars. Active travel (walking and cycle) was also not a common travel mode and was only utilised by those living on/ near university and when going to class. This section only presents the broader factors raised through the focus groups which multiple or majority of the participants contributed to.

4.1 Housing preferences

A lot of travel decisions are influenced by where participants live and who they live with. Australian students tended to live with their families until they find work or can live independently, mostly due to financial constraints. Of those who do move away from family while studying in university, many choose to live in on-campus accommodation. Their philosophy was to more efficiently use their time and they would rather live where daily commuting becomes shorter.

South Asians were more likely to consider living with friends, relatives and near places of cultural significance. When they first arrive in Australia, most South Asians start by living on or near campus because of unfamiliarity with their surroundings, before they move to a place of their liking. This is a result of knowing a suburb better, forming friendships and social ties, or in some cases, seeking lower rent. Other changes in circumstances, such as buying a car, change in study location or finding new work, did not seem to influence those students to change their residential location if they had friends nearby. When asked about future residential preferences during the focus groups, “*not wanting to move*” was a common theme amongst South Asians. Those stating their intentions to move would do so because of friends or familiarity (mainly because of cultural interests).

4.2 Car ownership, car use and carpooling

When asked about whether participants thought of cars as a “*social status symbol*”, the response was a resounding “*no*” across all four discussion sessions.

For the Australians, generally their parents bought or gave them a car because they tended to live some distance away from university campus where using public transport on a regular basis was difficult due to long commutes and service unreliability. However, car ownership did not necessarily translate into regular car use.

Amongst the participants, Australian car owners and South Asian car owners use cars differently, with the former making a lower proportion of trips with cars than the latter. Australian car-owners still made trips by public transport (mostly train) to avoid driving long distances. Australian who didn’t own cars on the other hand, mostly relied on public transport. They rarely carpooled amongst friends and family. As to why they used cars, it mostly came down to the shortcomings of public transport.

4.3 Public transport: mostly problems that promote cars

Melbourne’s train network is designed around the CBD, which is also home to an extensive tram network. As such, public transport is considered “a more convenient choice” when going to and from the CBD by both groups. However, in a suburban

² Please note that quotes are not presented in this abridged paper due to page limitations.

setting like Monash University (which requires a bus to connect to the train network), public transport has many limitations. The one problem which directly resulted in car ownership and dependency were the typically long travelling times with public transport can be replaced with shorter drive. On top of infrequent services, there are regular service interruptions, service delays and cancellations. For students, this resulted in being late or missing classes or work. South Asians in particular felt that public transport in South Asia was better with respect to service frequency, especially late at night. Beyond these common problems, there were other concerns raised which were exclusive to either group. Australians for example felt that public transport was less safe compared to cars. South Asians did not raise safety as a concern; rather, some thought it was the safest mode of travel.

There are some commonly-discussed benefits to using public transport: good service going to and coming from the city where driving can be time-consuming, expensive and a “*hassle*”. Australians tended to discuss a broader range of benefits to using public transport, including cost-effectiveness and environmental benefits.

4.4 Growing up: early childhood and high school

Among both South Asian and Australian respondents, their early childhoods were heavily car-dependant; trips to school and family trips to shopping and events were generally by car. For the South Asian respondents, this is likely a reflection of coming from a privileged financial background relative to the ‘average’ resident of their home country. However, travel behaviour differed once the two groups started attending high school (or equivalent). All participants (from both groups) in this study came from car-owning households but most were able to drive during high school.

Australian respondents spoke of learning to use other modes of travel in order to gain independence from their parents. Public transport was their main mode of independent travel over longer distances; this was accompanied with increased active travel. South Asians, on the other hand, were still dependant on cars as a result of their chauffeur-driven culture during high school. They were, in fact, encouraged to do so, and were told to avoid public transport, especially females. However, when cars were not available and they had to travel alone, they preferred to choose rickshaws or auto-rickshaws.

5 Discussion and future research considerations

Several key concepts emerged from the focus group discussions with respect to residential and mobility choices and contrasts them between native-born students and South Asian international students, including carsharing/ carpooling and residential preferences. The most important finding however was how these factors change over time for either group. For the Australian respondents, their past and present travel habits and residence means they are more flexible when it comes to choosing a particular mode of travel, or their next location of residence. Their primary objective is effective utilisation of time. The South Asian respondents on the other hand have never been truly public transport dependent – from their time in South Asia with chauffeured-driven cars and taxi-based transport modes to here in Australia where carpooling and carsharing with friends and community members are an integral part of their commute. Their prioritisation of residence and who to live with rather than where means they are more likely to live in suburbs further away from their work in the future, and naturally, longer and more car-based trips.

Some of the findings confirm prior research. This includes an insight at how ethnic enclaves are formed, carpooling and carsharing. Most of the decision-making revolved around the limitations of public transport, and how private vehicles were able to overcome that. However, many new insights were also noted, including the fact that South Asian international students do not associate success with cars, and that their decision to avoid public transport was not related to social stigma.

Further research from different cultural groups may find similar themes or identify key differences because of different cultural experiences. Policy implications and conclusion. While this study focused on how two groups have different ideas and preferences, the main issue raised is shortcomings of public transport, and this must be addressed more broadly by future researchers and even policymakers.

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