

Uncertainty, Everyday Mobility, and Urban Citizenship: Civic Storytelling of Public Transport Use in Surabaya, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

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Mobility Justice

Public transportation is often evaluated through technical indicators such as punctuality, coverage, affordability, and integration. However, these approaches do not fully capture how mobility is experienced in everyday urban life. This article examines how users of the Suroboyo Bus and Wira-Wiri Feeder services in Surabaya interpret and narrate their daily journeys, and assesses civic storytelling as an analytical lens for revealing the gap between transportation modernization policy narratives and the realities of use.

This study employs an interpretive qualitative case study that combines phenomenological sensitivity, narrative inquiry, and contextual observation. Eight active users were interviewed in depth regarding their entire travel chain, from accessing the service to arriving at their destination. The findings indicate that uncertainty constitutes a central condition shaping everyday mobility experiences. User evaluations are not limited to in-vehicle experiences, but encompass stages of access, waiting, boarding, intermodal transfer, and arrival.

Participants' narratives are structured around five interrelated themes: distributed security, everyday adaptation, experienced accessibility, emotional burden, and the construction of citizenship. The most positive assessments are directed toward the bus interiors, while negative experiences are concentrated at the periphery of the system, particularly along access routes, waiting points, and transfer processes. This article argues that public transportation functions as an infrastructure of experience, emotion, and urban citizenship, and underscores the importance of more human-centered transportation evaluations that incorporate users' lived experiences and narrative evidence.

1. Introduction

Urban mobility has become one of the most visible arenas in which contemporary Indonesian cities stage modernization, administrative capacity, and sustainable development. Bus reform, route integration, digital ticketing, and feeder systems are commonly presented as signs that urban governance is becoming more innovative and more responsive to public needs. In this policy language, transport is not simply a practical service. It is also a symbol of an orderly and future-oriented city (Fan et al., 2025; Pandyaswargo et al., 2025; Udin & Taufiq, 2025). Yet the presence of new routes, vehicles, and digital systems does not automatically mean that mobility is lived as reliable, safe, or inclusive. Between the formal promise of transport improvement and the ordinary experience of getting through the city lies a more uneven reality.

This tension is especially important because public transport research remains strongly shaped by technocratic evaluation frameworks. Operational efficiency, route coverage, punctuality, affordability, usability, and network performance remain central criteria for judging system quality, and rightly so. They offer indispensable tools for planning and institutional benchmarking. However, they also privilege what can be measured easily over what may be more difficult to quantify but no less consequential in everyday life. A service can be available in formal terms yet still feel difficult to enter, confusing to navigate, emotionally draining to rely on, or unsafe to wait for. Users do not encounter transport as a spreadsheet of service attributes. They encounter it through walking, waiting, interpreting, worrying, transferring, adjusting, and sometimes enduring uncertainty across multiple stages of a journey (Sukhov et al., 2021; Macedo et al., 2021; Paulsen et al., 2021; Romero et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2023).

Recent scholarship has increasingly shown that public transport is experienced affectively as well as operationally. Waiting-time uncertainty shapes users' judgments of quality and imposes cognitive strain (Shelat et al., 2021). Reliability and congestion can affect mental well-being, while travel satisfaction depends not only on movement itself but also on the conditions in which movement is organized (Conceição et al., 2023; Mouratidis et al., 2023). Research on transit environments similarly demonstrates that safety perceptions are unevenly distributed across stations, stops, and surrounding areas, and that these perceptions matter for trust, willingness to use the system, and the social inclusiveness of mobility (Ceccato et al., 2022; Sundling & Ceccato, 2022). Studies of real-time information and passenger decision-making further show that formal service provision does not eliminate the interpretive labor required of users when information is incomplete, delayed, or insufficiently actionable in practice (Macedo et al., 2021; Paulsen et al., 2021; Romero et al., 2023).

A related strand of work has shifted attention from abstract accessibility to perceived accessibility and mobility justice. This perspective argues that mobility quality should be understood not only in terms of whether routes exist, but whether people feel able to use them with confidence, convenience, and dignity. Perceived accessibility is shaped by social position, spatial context, and the practical experience of reaching and using the system rather than by network availability alone (Olsson et al., 2021; Lättman et al., 2024; Chau et al., 2024). From the standpoint of mobility justice, transport inequalities also concern whose movement is enabled, whose burdens are normalized, and whose needs are treated as legitimate within urban planning (Haxhija et al., 2024; Luke, 2024; Pot et al., 2025). These interventions are important because they reposition mobility as an issue of recognition and social inclusion, not merely circulation.

Even so, an important gap remains. Much of the literature recognizes emotional experience, perceived accessibility, and transport-related inequality, but fewer studies examine how users narrate these experiences as interpretations of the city and of their place within it. In many transport studies, the user still appears primarily as a passenger, respondent, or data point rather than as a civic subject whose stories disclose how public systems are encountered, judged, and made meaningful in everyday life. This matters because mobility problems are rarely experienced as isolated technical defects. They are often interpreted as signs of whether the city sees public transport users, protects them, and considers their needs worth accommodating (Fan et al., 2025; McIlroy, 2023; Haxhija et al., 2024).

This article addresses that gap through the concept of civic storytelling. Here, civic storytelling refers to the ways in which ordinary users narrate personal experience as socially meaningful knowledge about public systems, institutional responsiveness, and urban belonging. Storytelling in participatory and civic settings has been shown to support citizen voice, democratic imagination, place-based knowledge, and the articulation of alternative public narratives (Angarita Lozano et al., 2021; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2025; Gonçalves et al., 2025). Applied to public transport, civic storytelling allows mobility to be studied not only as movement across space, but as an interpretive practice through which people evaluate safety, uncertainty, fairness, comfort, and recognition. Stories about buses, feeder services, stops, and transfers are therefore also stories about the city.

Surabaya offers a particularly relevant setting for this inquiry. As one of Indonesia's major metropolitan centers, Surabaya has pursued public transport reform through services such as the Suroboyo Bus and Feeder Wira-Wiri, both of which are positioned within a wider agenda of accessibility, service innovation, and urban order. Existing studies suggest that these reforms are meaningful within the local policy context and that user satisfaction is an important concern in

evaluating them (Dewi & Ayuningtiyas, 2024; Udin & Taufiq, 2025). But the existence of visible reform does not settle how mobility is actually experienced from below. Public transport also depends on pedestrian access, stop conditions, waiting environments, transfer logic, and information clarity. For that reason, Surabaya is useful not only as a case of transport improvement but as a case through which to examine the mismatch between policy narratives and lived mobility.

The central argument of this article is that the quality of public transport in Surabaya is best understood as a chain of experience structured by uncertainty and interpreted through civic meaning-making. Users judge the system not only by whether vehicles run, but by whether the full journey feels manageable, safe, intelligible, and respectful. The article therefore asks: How do users of the Suroboyo Bus and Feeder Wira-Wiri experience, interpret, and narrate everyday mobility in Surabaya? And how does civic storytelling illuminate the gap between policy narratives of transport improvement and the lived realities of daily travel?

The article makes four contributions. First, it introduces civic storytelling as an analytical lens for urban mobility research in Indonesia. Second, it shows that mobility quality is organized across the full travel chain rather than inside the vehicle alone. Third, it demonstrates that affective burden and perceived accessibility are central, not peripheral, to transport evaluation. Fourth, it argues that public transport functions as an everyday interface of urban citizenship through which recognition, neglect, and unequal care are interpreted.

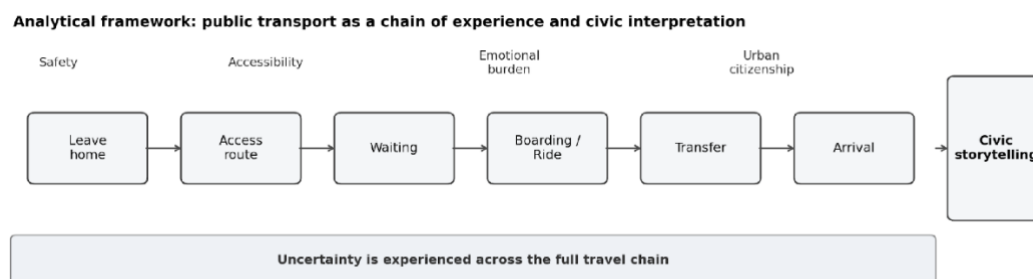


Figure 1. summarizes the article's analytical framework.

2. Method

The study adopted an interpretive qualitative case study design to investigate how public transport is lived and narrated in everyday urban life. This design was appropriate because the research problem concerned meaning, experience, and interpretation rather than the measurement of system performance. The study combined phenomenological sensitivity with narrative inquiry within a bounded urban case. Phenomenological sensitivity was used to attend to first-person experience, especially the felt dimensions of waiting, safety, vulnerability, comfort, and uncertainty. Narrative inquiry was used to examine how participants organized those experiences into stories and how those stories carried civic judgments about public systems and the city. The case study framework allowed these experiences and narratives to be analyzed within a specific policy and spatial setting: Surabaya and its current public transport services (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

The qualitative orientation also followed from the article's theoretical premise. If public transport is partly an infrastructure of feeling, interpretation, and recognition, then understanding it requires methods capable of capturing nuance, sequence, and context. A survey could reveal whether users are satisfied or dissatisfied, but it would be less able to show how a journey becomes stressful before boarding, why a transfer becomes a turning point in the story of a commute, or how neglected waiting spaces come to signify unequal civic attention. For these reasons, narrated everyday mobility experience was treated as the core unit of analysis.

The research was conducted in Surabaya, Indonesia. The study focused on the Suroboyo Bus and Feeder Wira-Wiri because these services are among the most visible elements of the city's current transport modernization agenda. They also present a useful empirical contrast between formal service improvement and the everyday conditions through which mobility is made workable in practice.

Participants were selected purposively from active users of one or both services. The inclusion criteria were designed to ensure experiential depth rather than demographic representativeness. Participants had to be at least 18 years old, use the service routinely for recurring activities such as work, study, or errands, and be willing to participate in an in-depth recorded interview. Recruitment was supplemented through snowball sampling in order to capture variation in route conditions, travel purposes, and socio-spatial location. The final corpus comprised eight active users, reflected in the anonymized identifiers P01 to P08 used in the findings. This sample size was considered adequate for the study's interpretive purpose because the analysis sought depth of understanding and thematic saturation rather than statistical generalization.

Data collection combined in-depth interviews, contextual observation, and field notes. Interviews were the principal data source because the article centered on how mobility is narrated and interpreted. Each interview began with contextual questions on route patterns, travel frequency, trip purpose, and typical travel times, then moved to sequential prompts that encouraged participants to recount the journey from leaving home to arrival. This sequencing mattered because it helped reveal how the meaning of the trip was distributed across multiple stages rather than confined to the vehicle. Participants were encouraged to discuss not only what happened but how they felt, what they anticipated, what they had to figure out, and how they judged the transport environment as city users.

Observation complemented the interviews by documenting the settings in which mobility occurred. Observations were conducted in locations directly associated with participants' everyday travel, including bus stops, feeder pick-up points, transit areas, and where feasible the vehicles themselves. Attention was given to peak and non-peak periods to capture variation in crowding, visibility, waiting conditions, pedestrian access, and perceived safety. Field notes recorded environmental details, immediate impressions, analytic reflections, and the interaction between narrative claims and observed settings.

The principal instruments were an interview guide, an observation sheet, field notes, and a coding framework organized around the study's conceptual interests. The interview guide was designed to elicit extended accounts rather than short evaluative statements. It included prompts on safety, comfort, waiting, accessibility, information, coping practices, route choices, emotional responses, and participants' broader reflections on what public transport meant to them as residents of Surabaya. The observation sheet documented features relevant to these narratives, including stop visibility, lighting, signage, shelter, pedestrian connectivity, waiting-space conditions, and interaction patterns.

Table 1. Analytical dimensions guiding interviews, observation, and interpretation.

Dimension	Empirical focus	Interpretive question
Safety	Waiting areas, access routes, vehicle interiors, time of day	Where is safety felt or disrupted across the travel chain?
Accessibility	Ease of finding, reaching, and entering services	Does formal availability translate into practical usability?
Continuity	Waiting, transfers, route logic, information clarity	How smoothly can users move from one stage of the trip to another?
Emotional burden	Anxiety, irritation, relief, fatigue, confidence	How does the system shape the affective rhythm of daily life?
Adaptation	Leaving early, informal information, coordination, avoidance	What work do users do to compensate for uncertainty?
Civic meaning	Recognition, neglect, fairness, belonging	What do service conditions communicate about the city's regard for users?

Note. The dimensions were used to connect narrative accounts, contextual observation, and civic interpretation during analysis.

Data analysis combined thematic analysis, narrative analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis. Thematic analysis was used first to identify recurring patterns in the corpus, including uncertainty, waiting-related strain, distributed safety, adaptation strategies, and

civic judgments. This process involved repeated reading, open coding, iterative category development, and analytic memoing (Byrne, 2022). Narrative analysis then examined how participants structured their stories: where journeys began in their telling, which moments were emphasized, which disruptions became turning points, and how participants positioned themselves in relation to the transport system and the city. Finally, interpretative phenomenological reading deepened the analysis of lived meaning by attending to vulnerability, routine negotiation, embodied effort, and the emotional texture of travel (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). The combination of these approaches made it possible to move from descriptive accounts toward an explanation of how mobility is experienced, narrated, and socially evaluated.

Several strategies were used to strengthen trustworthiness. First, triangulation across interviews, observations, and field notes helped prevent overreliance on a single source. Second, thick description was used to retain contextual specificity and make the interpretive reasoning visible. Third, analytic decisions were documented through coding sheets, thematic matrices, and memos, creating an audit trail of how findings were generated. Fourth, reflexive journaling was used to monitor the researcher's assumptions and to remain attentive to how interpretation was shaped by positionality. Selective member checking was used where necessary to confirm whether interpretations captured participants' intended meanings.

Ethically, the study treated mobility narratives as potentially sensitive because they could involve fear, stress, exclusion, and vulnerability. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, the use of audio recording, and their right to withdraw at any stage. All names and identifying details were removed from transcripts and reporting. Audio files, transcripts, and notes were stored securely, and quotations are presented only through anonymized participant codes.

3. Result and Discussion

The findings show that uncertainty is the central condition through which everyday mobility is experienced in this case. Participants did not define public transport as a bounded service encounter that begins upon boarding. Rather, they narrated mobility as a sequence of linked thresholds: leaving home, reaching the stop or boarding point, waiting, boarding, transferring, traveling, and arriving. Across this sequence, users continuously assessed risk, clarity, timing, comfort, and whether the journey still felt manageable. The result is a picture of public transport as a chain of experience rather than a vehicle-centered event.

3.1. Participant Contexts and Uneven Mobility Dependency

Participants were all routine users, but they did not depend on the system in the same way. Some relied on public transport as a primary mode for recurring activities such as study, work, and errands. Others used it more selectively, depending on route compatibility, time pressure, or perceived safety. This variation mattered because those with higher dependency tended to experience service uncertainty more acutely. For regular users, minor disruptions did not remain minor. Unclear timing, inconsistent waiting conditions, or fragile connections could reverberate through the rest of the day.

One participant described this heightened sensitivity clearly: *"I use it almost every weekday for campus and sometimes for other errands. Because I depend on it, I notice every small problem more. If the timing is unclear, it affects my whole day"* (P03). This suggests that mobility quality is relational rather than uniform. A system that appears acceptable from an occasional user perspective can be significantly more burdensome to those who depend on it repeatedly.

Participants also distinguished strongly between morning and evening travel. Morning journeys were narrated in terms of urgency, punctuality, and the need to avoid lateness. Evening journeys were narrated more in terms of caution, exposure, and whether a stop still felt safe when activity and visibility declined. As one participant noted, *"In the morning I mostly think about being late, but in the evening I think more about whether the stop feels safe and whether I want to wait there alone"* (P07). Time of day therefore shaped not simply the schedule of movement but the meaning of mobility itself.

3.2. Mobility as a Chain of Experience

A central finding is that participants evaluated public transport across the entire journey rather than through in-vehicle conditions alone. The trip often began to feel difficult before the formal service had even started. Access to the stop, the quality of pedestrian routes, clarity of the boarding point, and the effort required to enter the system were all treated as part of the transport experience itself. One participant explained, “Sometimes the bus itself is fine, but getting to the waiting point is already exhausting. If the route to the stop is inconvenient, I already feel burdened before the trip even starts” (P05). In other words, the urban environment surrounding the service was not external to transport quality; it was constitutive of it.

Waiting emerged as the most emotionally charged stage of the travel chain. Participants described waiting as a period saturated with calculation: whether they were in the correct place, how long the service would take, whether others were present, whether the environment felt exposed, and whether they had enough information to trust that the journey was still proceeding. One participant summarized this vividly: “*The most tiring part is often waiting. You keep thinking: am I in the right place, how long will this take, and is it safe to stay here?*” (P06). Waiting was therefore not passive downtime. It was the point at which operational uncertainty became personal and emotionally salient.

Transfers further exposed fragility in the system. Users described route changes as moments of doubt, especially when signs were unclear or service timing felt loosely connected. Even when the system was institutionally described as integrated, the lived experience of integration was not always convincing. “*When I need to switch to another route, that’s when I feel least certain. If there’s no clear sign or timing, I start doubting every step*” (P08). Transfer points thus worked as practical tests of whether formal integration actually translated into lived continuity.

Figure 1 is useful here because it visualizes the key finding that users move through a chain rather than a single transport event. Each stage presents its own vulnerabilities, and weaknesses at the edges of the chain can diminish the value of improvements inside the vehicle.

3.3. Core themes in civic storytelling narratives

Five interrelated themes organized participants’ stories: safety, adaptation, accessibility, emotional burden, and civic meaning-making. These themes overlapped substantially. Together they show that mobility was experienced simultaneously as a practical, affective, spatial, and civic condition.

3.3.1 Safety is distributed across the travel chain

Participants generally described the interior of the Suroboyo Bus as relatively orderly and reasonably secure. The strongest feelings of vulnerability clustered elsewhere: along access routes, at waiting points, and around feeder pick-up areas, especially when visibility was poor or social presence was thin. “*Inside the bus I feel okay most of the time. The part that makes me uneasy is the waiting area, especially if it’s quiet and poorly lit*” (P02). This distinction matters because it widens the meaning of transport safety. Safety was not treated as an onboard characteristic alone. It was distributed across the surrounding ecology of mobility.

Night travel intensified this pattern. Participants repeatedly emphasized that the same stop could feel very different after dark. Reduced visibility, fewer people, and a heightened sense of exposure altered how users evaluated whether it was worth continuing the trip or waiting alone. As (P07) put it, “*In the daytime, I don’t think too much about it. But after dark, even the same stop feels different. I’m more careful and more anxious.*” Safety perceptions were therefore temporally structured as well as spatially distributed.

3.3.2 Adaptation strategies reveal negotiated competence

Participants did not simply absorb the system’s uncertainties passively. They developed practical routines to make mobility workable: leaving earlier than necessary, using informal information, coordinating travel with others, or avoiding certain times and places. These adjustments were described as ordinary habits rather than exceptional responses. One participant explained, “*If I really need to be on time, I leave much earlier than necessary because I don’t want to be trapped by uncertainty*” (P06). Another noted, “*Sometimes I trust advice from friends or what people share online more than the official information, because that feels more practical for what I’m dealing with*” (P04).

These accounts suggest that everyday mobility depends partly on user competence, but not in a celebratory sense. Adaptation certainly demonstrates agency and situational intelligence. At the same time, it indicates that part of the work of producing reliable mobility has been transferred to users themselves. Participants were not only taking transport; they were compensating for its incompleteness. The system functioned, but it functioned partly because users learned how to navigate its weak points.

3.3.3 Accessibility is lived entry into the system

Participants consistently distinguished between formal service availability and practical usability. A route could exist, but that did not mean it felt accessible. Boarding points could be difficult to identify with confidence, access routes could be physically awkward, and the logic of entering the system could remain unclear, particularly in less central areas. *“Just because the route exists doesn’t mean it feels accessible. Sometimes you still have to figure everything out on your own”* (P04). Accessibility, in this sense, was not identical with network presence. It was a lived threshold defined by clarity, confidence, ease, and surrounding support.

This distinction was sharper for participants traveling from peripheral or less central areas. They were more likely to describe fragmented support, weaker access conditions, and a greater burden before formal transit even began. *“From my area, using public transport still feels like a struggle before the actual trip begins. It’s not as simple as just boarding”* (P05). The promise of an integrated system was therefore unevenly distributed across urban space. For some users, integration was more visible in central corridors than in the everyday geography from which the journey actually started.

3.3.4 Emotional burden shapes the rhythm of travel

Participants described uncertainty not only as inconvenience but as a recurring emotional condition. Anxiety, irritation, alertness, and mental fatigue accumulated through repeated exposure to unclear timing, unreliable continuity, and uncomfortable waiting. *“What drains me is not only the trip itself, but the constant uncertainty around it. That part stays in your head”* (P08). The emotional cost of mobility was therefore central to system evaluation. It shaped how users entered the day, how they anticipated routine travel, and whether the city felt manageable.

Participants also described the opposite condition: the immediate relief of a smooth journey. When the trip unfolded clearly and without disruption, relief was often expressed in strikingly affective language. *“If everything goes smoothly, I feel relieved right away. It changes my mood for the rest of the day”* (P01). This contrast reveals that the transport system regulates not only physical movement but the emotional tempo of daily life. Predictability restores control; uncertainty drains it.

3.3.5 Civic meaning-making links mobility to recognition

Perhaps the most conceptually significant finding is that participants interpreted public transport as a civic signal. They did not discuss transport only in terms of getting from one place to another. They also used transport conditions to judge whether the city cared about ordinary users, whether it recognized their dependence on the system, and whether some places or people were being left to cope alone. One participant stated, *“When the system feels organized and humane, I feel like the city is actually paying attention to people who depend on this service”* (P03). Another observed, *“If the stop feels neglected, it gives the impression that users are expected to handle the difficulties by themselves”* (P06).

This meaning making converted infrastructure into a language of citizenship. Orderly, safe, and intelligible mobility environments signaled recognition. Neglected access points, ambiguous stops, and weak support communicated unequal attention. Public transport thus became an everyday interface through which users interpreted institutional care, fairness, and urban belonging.

Table 2. Summary of themes and interpretive implications.

Theme	Empirical emphasis	Interpretive implication
Distributed safety	Vulnerability concentrated at stops, access routes, feeder points, especially at night	Safety must be evaluated across the full travel chain, not inside vehicles only

Adaptation	Leaving early, using informal information, coordinating with others	User agency coexists with institutional gaps that require compensation
Lived accessibility	Routes exist but remain difficult to find, reach, or use confidently	Accessibility should be assessed as usability, not mere availability
Emotional burden	Anxiety, irritation, alertness, relief, mental fatigue	Affective manageability is a core dimension of mobility quality
Civic meaning-making	Service conditions read as signs of care, neglect, fairness, and status	Public transport operates as an everyday interface of urban citizenship

Note. The table condenses how participants' stories moved from experiential description to broader civic interpretation.

3.4. Core themes in civic storytelling narratives

Participants generally acknowledged that public transport in Surabaya had improved. They recognized visible progress in the existence of services, in-vehicle order, and the city's apparent effort to modernize mobility. Yet these acknowledgments were repeatedly qualified by stories of incomplete access, uncertain waiting, uneven support, and persistent emotional strain. *"There is improvement, yes, but the experience is not automatically easy. Some parts still feel very inconvenient"* (P05). In other words, improvement was recognized but not fully embodied.

A second pattern sharpened this gap. The strongest positive evaluations were attached to the formal core of the system, especially once participants had boarded. The strongest criticisms clustered at the edges: before boarding, during waiting, and at points of transfer. As P08 put it, *"Once I'm inside, it can feel quite good. But everything before boarding is what often makes the journey difficult."* The city's modernization narrative therefore appeared strongest where the service was most visible and institutionally controlled, and weakest where users had to enter, interpret, and connect the system on their own. This is the point at which civic storytelling becomes particularly revealing: it shows that formal success and lived adequacy do not fully overlap.

3.5. Core themes in civic storytelling narratives

The stories collected here indicate that mobility quality shapes more than transport satisfaction. It also shapes how users feel about their status in the city. Positive experiences were associated with feeling respected and considered; negative experiences with feeling overlooked or treated as secondary. *"Good public transport makes you feel respected, not just transported"* (P07). Such statements do not simply add emotion to transport research. They identify a broader civic dimension of infrastructure: the way everyday systems communicate who counts.

Participants similarly used mobility conditions to infer how urban governance regarded public transport users. *"From the way the system treats us, you can tell whether the city really sees public transport users as important"* (P03). Public transport, then, functioned as more than a logistics network. It became a lived interface through which citizenship was evaluated in ordinary time. This does not mean that every stop becomes an explicit political symbol, but it does mean that routine transport environments help shape felt inclusion and exclusion.

The findings demonstrate that uncertainty is the central organizing condition of everyday public mobility in this case. This uncertainty is not reducible to one variable such as delay or information deficit. It is produced across a chain of conditions: access routes that are tiring or unclear, waiting environments that demand vigilance, transfers that fracture continuity, and information that does not always reduce practical doubt. The contribution of this finding is conceptual as much as empirical. It shifts the evaluative center of gravity from isolated service indicators toward the lived structure of the journey. Public transport appears not simply as a system that works or fails, but as an infrastructure that organizes anticipation, effort, caution, and adaptation in daily urban life.

This perspective extends existing work on travel satisfaction and waiting-time uncertainty by showing that uncertainty is not only temporal but spatial and civic. Research has already established that waiting, reliability, and delay-related uncertainty shape travel evaluation, path choice, and mental well-being (Shelat et al., 2021; Berggren et al., 2022; Rezapour & Ferraro, 2021; Conceição

et al., 2023; Mouratidis et al., 2023). The present findings deepen that insight by demonstrating that uncertainty is distributed unevenly across the travel chain and interpreted through broader judgments about the city. Users are not merely frustrated by waiting longer than expected. They are asking whether they are in the right place, whether it is safe to remain there, whether the route still makes sense, and whether public institutions have made sufficient provision for those who depend on the service. Uncertainty therefore operates simultaneously as a practical burden, an affective pressure, and a civic signal.

A second major implication concerns the scope of transport evaluation. The study strongly suggests that in-vehicle quality is only one layer of mobility experience and not necessarily the decisive one. Participants often evaluated the bus interior positively while describing access routes, waiting points, and transfers in much more negative terms. This finding resonates with first-last-mile and place-based research showing that the weakest points of transit systems often lie in the interfaces that connect users to formal service (Brown et al., 2021; Ward & Oakley, 2022; McIlroy, 2023). In Surabaya, these edge conditions were central to everyday judgment. The quality of mobility depended not only on what happened inside the bus but on whether users could enter the system without disproportionate effort, confusion, or exposure. The practical implication is clear: transport improvement cannot be confined to vehicles, routes, or digital systems. It must also engage the surrounding ecology of access.

The findings on accessibility reinforce this point and add a justice dimension. Previous studies on perceived accessibility show that availability and accessibility are not the same and that people assess mobility partly through whether travel feels manageable in their actual social and spatial context (Olsson et al., 2021; Lättman et al., 2024; Chau et al., 2024). The present study confirms this distinction in a context where formal transport reform is visible yet unevenly lived. Participants from less central areas were especially likely to describe the journey into the system as a struggle in itself. Accessibility, then, is best understood here as lived entry rather than network presence. This interpretation aligns with mobility justice scholarship, which argues that transport inequality concerns differential burdens, uneven usability, and the normalization of inconvenience for some groups and places (Haxhija et al., 2024; Luke, 2024; Pot et al., 2025).

The prominence of adaptation strategies also deserves careful interpretation. On one level, the findings show users' competence and situational intelligence. Participants learned when to leave early, which sources of information were more useful, which waiting areas felt safer, and when to avoid certain conditions. In this respect, mobility is actively produced by users rather than passively consumed. Yet it would be misleading to read these strategies only as resilience. Adaptation frequently signaled institutional insufficiency. The smoother the system, the less compensatory work users should have to do. When users must routinely rely on informal information networks, protective habits, and extra time buffers, part of the burden of creating reliable mobility has effectively shifted from institutions to citizens. This interpretation is consistent with research on information systems and service reliability showing that formal provision does not automatically remove the interpretive labor of mobility (Macedo et al., 2021; Paulsen et al., 2021; Romero et al., 2023).

The findings also expand current discussions of affect in mobility research. Emotional burden in this study was not a secondary psychological overlay on an otherwise technical service. It was woven into the experience of travel itself. Anxiety, fatigue, irritation, and relief shaped how participants judged whether mobility was viable and whether the system was worth trusting. This supports a growing literature showing that public transport is an affective infrastructure as much as a technical one (Conceição et al., 2023; Gnerre et al., 2022; Mouratidis et al., 2023). What the present study adds is a more explicit account of how that affective dimension is narratively articulated. Participants did not merely report feeling stressed. They embedded stress within stories about uncertainty, exposure, and the need to stay alert. Conversely, smooth journeys were narrated as emotionally restorative because they reduced the mental labor required to hold the journey together. Emotional manageability should therefore be treated as a substantive criterion in transport evaluation.

The article's distinctive theoretical contribution lies in showing how these practical and affective experiences are translated into civic meaning. Civic storytelling proved valuable because it captured not only what participants experienced, but how they interpreted those experiences as evidence of institutional care, neglect, and urban regard. This finding complements research on citizen participation, place narratives, and spatial justice by showing that ordinary mobility stories can

function as public knowledge about the city (Angarita Lozano et al., 2021; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2025; Gonçalves et al., 2025). Transport users were not simply recounting inconvenience. They were evaluating whether the city recognized them as legitimate users whose time, safety, and dependence mattered.

This interpretive shift also clarifies the gap between policy narratives and everyday narratives. Policy narratives in Surabaya emphasize modernization, integration, and public service improvement. The findings do not dismiss those narratives outright. Participants recognized progress, and some aspects of the service especially the vehicle interior were positively judged. The issue is incompleteness rather than falsity. Official narratives describe the system from above and from the center; civic stories reveal how it is inhabited from the edges, where access, waiting, and transfer shape the practical and emotional reality of mobility. The strongest version of the city's transport story appears where the system is most visible. The weakest version appears where users must make the system workable on their own. Civic storytelling is useful precisely because it identifies these mismatches.

For urban mobility research, the article argues for a broader analytical vocabulary. Public transport should not be treated only as a technical network or a service market. It should also be approached as an infrastructure of experience, affect, and citizenship. This does not mean abandoning operational indicators. It means recognizing that they are insufficient on their own. A more complete evaluation of public transport should include lived accessibility, waiting conditions, transfer continuity, emotional manageability, and narrative evidence of how service conditions are interpreted by users. For practice, this implies that transport agencies should pay closer attention to pedestrian links, visibility, lighting, shelter, signage, and intelligible information systems, especially in less central areas and at moments of transfer. It also suggests that structured user narratives could serve as a legitimate input in transport assessment rather than being treated as anecdotal afterthoughts.

The article has several limitations. The sample was small and intentionally qualitative, so the findings are not statistically generalizable. The study focused on one city and on two transport services. It also privileged user narratives rather than the perspectives of operators or policymakers. These constraints are tied to the study's interpretive aims, but they also point toward future research. Comparative work across Indonesian cities, multimodal studies, and research that connects user narratives with institutional perspectives could extend the argument developed here. Future studies might also examine how gender, disability, age, and spatial periphery more specifically condition the relationship between uncertainty and civic recognition.

4. Conclusion

This article shows that everyday public mobility in Surabaya is best understood not as a discrete in-vehicle service encounter but as a chain of access, waiting, transfer, travel, and arrival structured by uncertainty. Users of the Suroboyo Bus and Feeder Wira-Wiri judged mobility across this full sequence and interpreted its conditions through stories of safety, adaptation, accessibility, emotional burden, and civic meaning. The findings indicate that the strongest positive evaluations attached to the formal core of the system, while the greatest strain emerged at its edges, particularly in access routes, waiting spaces, and transfer points.

The article's main contribution is to show that public transport operates simultaneously as mobility infrastructure and civic interface. It moves people, but it also communicates whether they are recognized, protected, and worth accommodating. Civic storytelling makes this visible by revealing how ordinary transport users translate daily experience into judgments about urban care and belonging. More human-centered transport evaluation should therefore move beyond operational indicators alone and take seriously the lived realities of entry, waiting, continuity, emotional manageability, and recognition. In this sense, the quality of public transport is not only a matter of whether buses run. It is also a matter of whether the journey allows citizens to feel safe, respected, and meaningfully connected to the city they inhabit.

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