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ASSESSMENT OF THE PUBLIC'S PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE TRANSPORT SERVICES IN OMAN

Abstract:

The transport sector is having a great attention from governments around the world, especially because of the increasing population, its importance and its necessity for community life. Recently, many countries in the Middle East have turned their attention towards developing and improving their public transport systems, as problems such as traffic congestions in cities, low mobility and high individual costs of transport. This study aims to assess and understand the public's perception about the situation of the existing transport services in the Sultanate of Oman and indentifies the reasons or ways to boost this sector. The findings of this study showed a positive response from the citizens about public transport and its use. The unavailability of suitable modes of public transport options, their inadequacy in terms of numbers and frequency, and the low level of people's exposure and awareness of different transport modes have constrained people to use personal vehicles. There is a growing need to introduce newer public transport services in Oman and bolster these services as well as the existing infrastructure to stimulate economic development, increase road safety, and to combat environmental problems. It is recommended to develop innovative solutions and awareness programs to increase individual and collective consciousness about public transport and to encourage people to adopt and use public transport.

Keywords:

Public transport,Public Perception, Oman transport

1 Introduction

Public transportation services are integral to societies, vitalize economies of nations and play an important role in achieving sustainability. These services improve the quality of urban life by providing safe and efficient mobility through making available cost effective modes; easing traffic congestion, saving money, and creating and sustaining jobs (Tran and Kleiner 2005).

Public transportation is defined as a collective form of passenger transport and mobility services that are accessible for everybody. The criteria and conditions for that service offered such as timetable, routes and prices are set in order to attract people and not travel in their own vehicles White (2002).

The Sultanate of Oman, one of the six GCC countries, has less exposure to the different modes and services of public transport. Oman occupies the southeastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula with a total area of 310 thousand square km and a total population of 2.74 million (2007). Oman is the third largest country in the Arabian Peninsula and is divided into nine main administrative regions (governorates), of which Muscat (27 percent) and Al-Batinah (28 percent) account for more than half of the total population (Statistical Handbook of Oman 2008).

There are many reasons why people do not use public transport to its full potential. The classical factors in this context are time and money (Wardman & Waters, 2001). However, the complex question of how and when people use (or don't use) public transport has also been investigated in different studies with theories and models from. One approach to produce high ridership in public transport is to strengthen the relative attractiveness of public transport versus the car, by offering better supply, higher quality of service and more marketing (TCRP, 2007; Steg, 2007; Gärling & Steg, 2007).

Public transport is considered as one of the most important sector by policy makers globally; however it is major concern and worrying why this sector lacks development in Oman.This study tries to give an insight on the current state of road accidents and whether good public transportation system would ease this phenomenon, by determining and understanding the people's perceptions on the existing public transport services and indentifying the reasons and the factors that would encourage them to use public transport rather than private car.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The state of Public Transport in Oman

The lack of public transport services and resulting initiatives are not limited to Oman only, the situation is noticeably the same in some other countries especially the GCC countries region. This is due to the rapid growth in private vehicle ownership, inefficient public transport, and the deteriorating urban environment (Belwal, 2010).

Apart from taxis, the only other form of public transport in the Sultanate og Oman is the coach and bus service provided by Oman National Transport Company. The best way of traveling

between larger cities is taking an inter-city bus. These buses are normally air-conditioned and relatively comfortable, although they aren't a very fast way to travel. Muscat's main ONTC bus depot is based in Ruwi, with daily connections to places like Sohar, Nizwa, or Salalah.

Despite catering to the largest population, the Al-Batinah region lacks a public transportation system for commuters. The situation is even worse in other regions of Oman except Muscat the capital city, where large buses, micro-buses, and taxis are available. People either struggle for the few seats in shared taxis or depend on private cars. While unavailability of public transport causes inconvenience, the excessive dependence on private cars leads to heavy traffic, a large number of accidents, and high individual expenditure on transport (Belwal, 2010).

In order to create a demand for a public transport system and to reduce excessive reliance on private cars, Oman needs to take strong initiatives in this regard.

At the moment, Oman does not have a rail network or, indeed, any major railway line. Going along the development strategy of this sector, Oman envisions the development of the Sultanate's National Railway Project. The alignment of approximately 1,000 km long double track railway system, with provision made for introduction of high speed trains. Feasibility study covering the development of the network has already been finalized, extending from Khatmat Malaha on Oman's border with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to Duqm on the Wusta coast. The authorities have identified locations for the establishment of around 25 commuter stations and intercity stations along the route of the network. (Ministry of Transport and Communications, 2013)

Figure 1: Route Map for the GCC Rail Link

2.2 The state of Road Safety in Oman

In the Sultanate of Oman, road traffic crashes become a major concern to authorities and communities; it has one of the highest traffic crashes in the world, according to the World Health Organization. Unfortunately, Oman had the highest fatality rate (23.7/100,000 pop.) in 1996 in the MENA region (Figure 2), and there has been no relief in the past 10 years, despite of advancements in vehicles and road safety measures (Table 1). Among the nine governorates, Al-Batinah records the highest number of fatalities caused by road accidents.

Between 2000 and 2006, the Royal Oman Police reported close to 5,000 deaths on the Sultanate's roads. An additional 55,000 were injured during this time. These numbers are alarming for a country with a population only slightly over two million. In 2005, police sources estimated that road crash mortality rate in Oman was 28 per 100,000 population, which is 1.5 times the global average of 19 per 100,000.

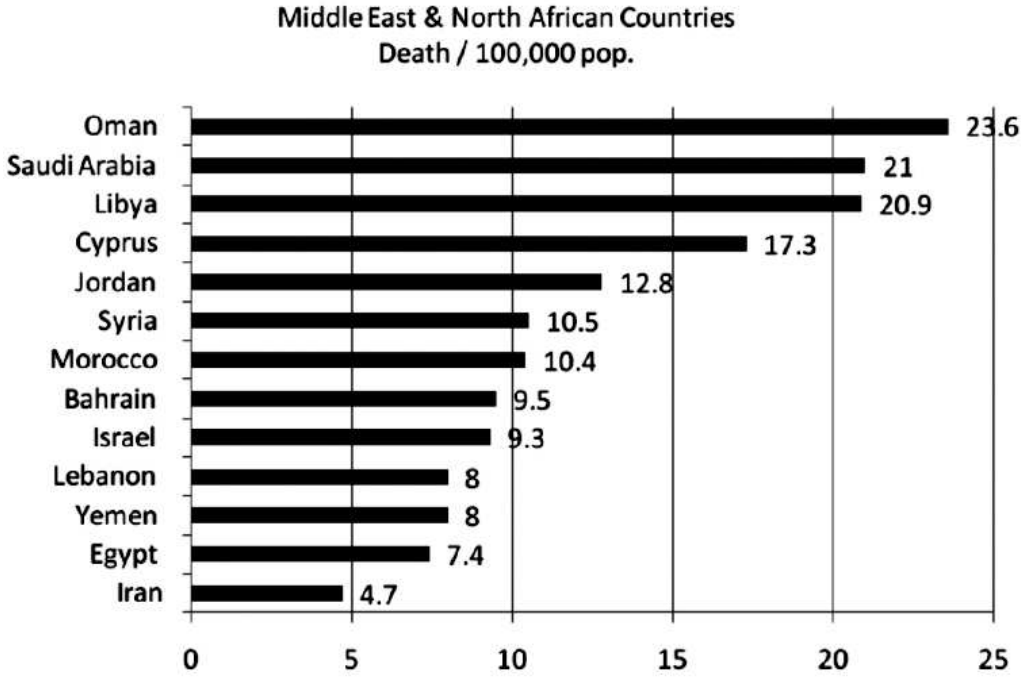

Figure 2: Middle East and North Africa Fatality Risk (1996)

Source: http://www.factbook.net/EGRF_Regional_analyses_Africa.htm

Tab. 1: Road Accidents and Fatalities in Oman (2001-2007)

	2007	2006	2005	2003	2001
Total Population	2,743,000	2,577,000	2,509,000	2,416,000	2,341,000
Road Accidents					
Fatalities	8,816	9,869	9,247	9,460	10,197
Fatalities/1,00,000					

	650	550	548	490	428
	23.7	21.3	21.8	20.3	18.3

Source: Statistical Year Book 2008, Issue 36, October 2008, Ministry of National Economy,Sultanate of Oman.

2.3 Factors Affecting Public Attitudes and Needs

A number of studies have been made to identify and rank the factors that the public considers important in using conventional public transport. The results of these various studies were far from identical, or even similar in some cases. These factors or traveler's needs have been identified as being the major causes of the deficiencies in public transport (GFK, 2008).

One of the most comprehensive studies ranked needs in order of importance. The figure below illustrates a hierarchy of transport needs represented as a pyramid consisting of six different levels.

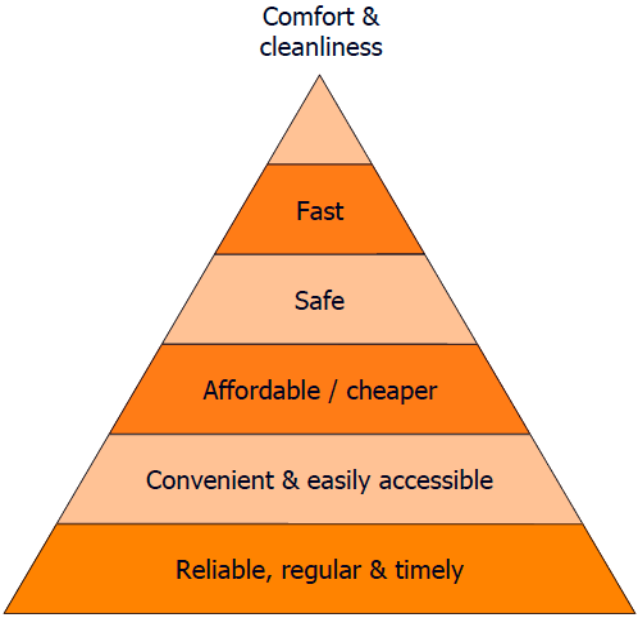

Figure 3: Hierarchy of transport needs

The most basic need is shown at the bottom of the pyramid - a reliable, regular and timely transport system. The higher needs in the pyramid only come into focus when the lower needs are satisfied, so that once an individual has moved upwards to the next level, needs in the lower level will no longer be prioritized. However, if a lower set of needs is no longer being met, the individual will re-prioritize these needs by focusing attention again on the unfulfilled level (GFK, 2008)..

So, the basic need expressed was that transport must be:

- *Reliable, regular and timely:* Users want public transport services to arrive punctually, predictably and to deliver them to their destinations with fewer delays.
- *Convenient and accessible public transport*: meaning having bus stops and train stations within easy walking distance from people's homes, from work places and shopping and leisure facilities, as well as the assurance that transport modes would be easily accessible for groups such as elderly and disabled travelers.
- *Cheaper and more affordable:* Travelling using public transport provision definitely should be cheaper than making the same journey by car.
- *Safer:* this theme covers safety from other travelers who might be violent, criminals or terrorists; assured safety from accidents when on public transport, and ensuring that road travel is as safe as possible through more appropriate, usually tighter, regulations on speeding and dangerous driving.
- *Fast, efficient and well integrated transport*: More direct bus and train routes.
- *Comfortable and clean*: Comfort was predominantly seen in terms of having a seat but also in terms of not standing in very packed carriages and buses. Ideally, users want to enjoy a pleasant stress-free journey in a clean and comfortable environment, without over-crowding.

Taking into consideration the factors mentioned above would help satisfy and retain current public transport users and might help attracting car users to alternative modes of travel.

2.4 Changing User's Perceptions

Reducing car use is one of the main topics in transport policy and research. Recent studies have shown that inducing mode change requires both making the car less attractive and increasing travelers' awareness and knowledge of alternative modes of transport (e.g. Handy *et al.* 2005). One of the main reasons for not public transport as an alternative mode is due to the distorted perception of the private car users regarding the quality of these alternative modes, which have considerable influence on their choice-sets. Car travelers disqualified alternative modes in advance, based on subjective perceptions of their viability and desirability in particular with respect to travel time. (Kenyon and Lyons 2003), Kingham *et al.* (2001)

Although distorted perceptions may have a considerable effect on mode choice, there is also evidence that perceptions can be changed and that this may lead to changes in attitudes, consideration of alternatives and mode choice behavior. Kenyon and Lyons (2003) showed that presentation of information to habitual travelers about the cost, duration, comfort, and convenience of alternatives for their trip could challenge existing perceptions and lead to consideration and use of these alternatives. They also found indications that a positive experience with an alternative mode of travel may in influence consecutive travel choice.

3 Study Methodology

The study survey was conducted among the public transport users and non-public transport users. The study was conducted in Al-Batinah region in which respondents from three regions only were considered namely Al-Khaburah, Saham and Sohar. The questionnaire was designed to gather information on socio demographic data, (such as age, gender, occupation, monthly income, etc), information on the trip purpose, respondents' perception concerning the the most important reason for the existing public transport services, opinion on the security provided, and the most important aspects that needed to be improved if they want to choose public transport as their means of transportation especially for respondents who are currently not using public transport reason. The questionnaire was distributed directly to the respondents using a simple random sampling method.

General characteristics of the respondent are shown in Table 2.

Tab. 2: Summary Characteristics of the Survey Respondents

Nationality	Omani	93%
	Non-Omani	7%
Gender	Male	81%
	female	19%
Age	Less than 30	33%
	Between 30 to 50	60%
	More than 50	7%
Resident of	City	64%
	village	36%
Driving License	Have	75%
	Don't have	25%
Work Status	Employed	67%
	Student	15%
	Unemployed	9%
	Retired	2%
	Housewife	7%
Monthly Income	Less than 300 RO	30%

Between 300 – 600 RO	40%
More than 600 RO	36%

4 Results Analysis

4.1 Statistical Facts Data on Road Fatalities in Oman

The number of road accidents in Oman in 2011 saw a rise of more than 20 per cent, compared to 2010, statistics issued by the Directorate General for traffic stated. , The following facts and numbers reflects the actual existing situation indicating a worrisome trend. (Facts & Resources 2013).

- Every hour someone is injured in a car accident,
- Every eight hours someone is killed in a road traffic accident
- Every 56 km there is a death on Oman's roads.
- Speeding and reckless driving account for 72% of all accidents.
- In 2011 the police issued over 2.24 million fines for speeding.
- There was a 30% increase in the number of deaths as of a result of speeding from 2010 to 2011.
- Nearly 60% of all deaths on the road are due to excessive speeding.
- According to the World Health Organization, road traffic accidents are the third biggest killer of people in Oman.
- 41% of all fatal accidents in 2011 were people under the age of 25.
- Speeding accounted for 56% of all deaths on Oman roads in 2011.
- 41% of those killed in road accidents are under the age of 25.
- In 2011, the Royal Omani Police issued 2.24 million tickets for speeding.
- The risk of injury in a car crash almost doubles with each 5km/h increase in speed on a 60km/h speed limit road.

Therefore, introduction of better modes of public transport is emerging as a public concern that could help in ensuring safety on the roads.

4.2 Survey Results

Figure 4 gives the composition of the respondents with respect to their use of public transport. While the majority (54%) never used public transport, only (9%) of the respondents use public transport once a month to meet their transport needs.

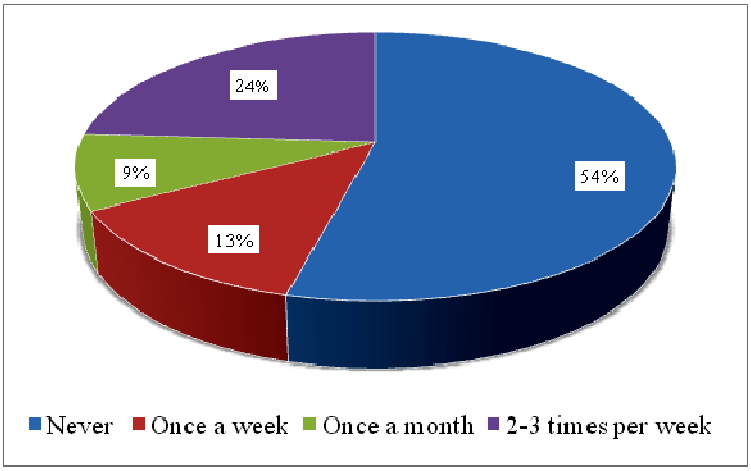

Figure 4: Frequency of traveling using public transport

Figure 5 shows the main reasons for not using the public transportation regularly as claimed by almost (83%) of the respondents are due to the non-availability of the services, or limited operating hours which results in long waiting time for the public transport. Time factor was considered one of the reasons for not using the service; however the fare seems not to be an issue for the majority of the respondents.

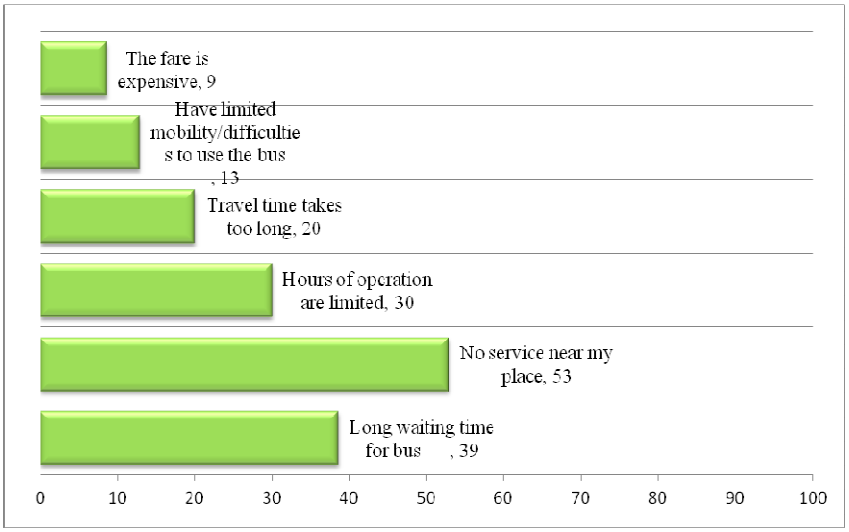

Figure 5: People's preferences for public transport

About (55%) of respondents preferred public transport for long distance travel, (31%) of them also confirmed its need within city. Only few of the respondents preferred public transport for short distance travel as showed in Figure 6.

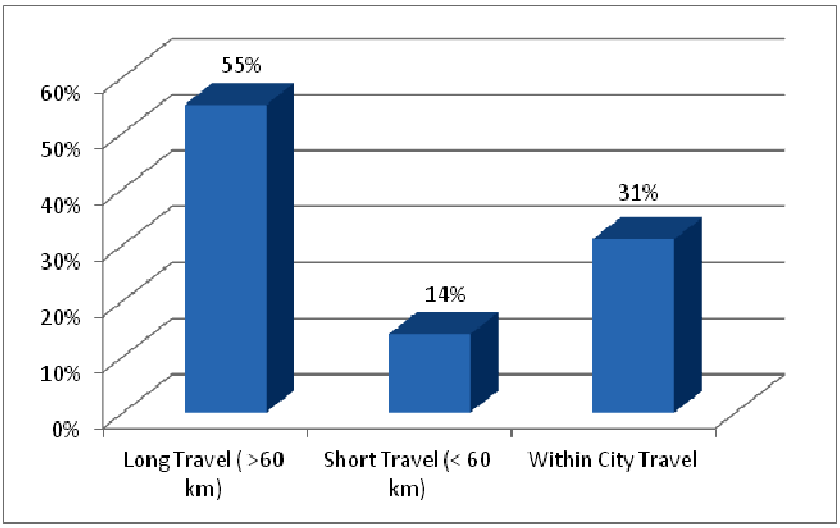

Figure 6: People's preferences for public transport

The survey revealed the extent of awareness of the perceived benefits of public transport. The majority acknowledged its potential for reducing traffic congestion and linking rural/urban areas. Almost (20%) of respondents claimed that using public transport is reducing number of accidents. Others useful perceived benefits of public transport are presented in Figure 7.

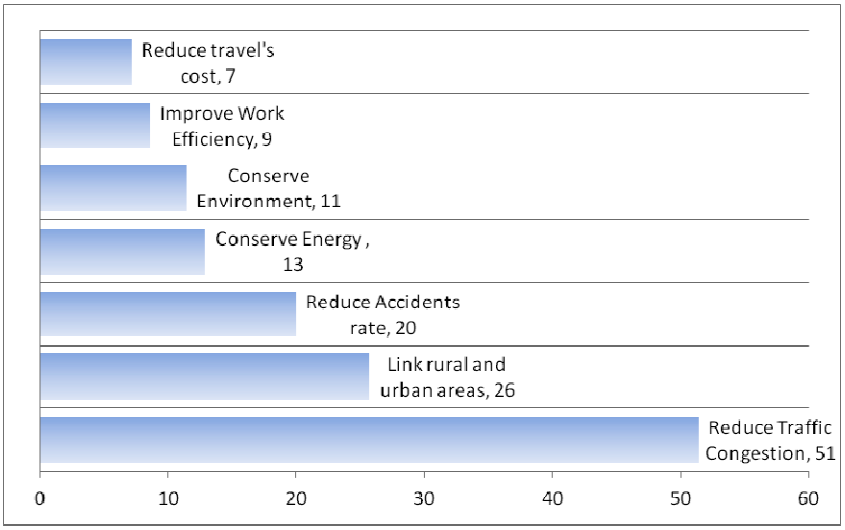

Figure 7: Perceived benefits of public transport

Through our random survey, we discuss some different modes of public transport. Respondents indicated their preference in decreasing order for taxis, trains, large buses, and mini-buses as showed in Figure 8.

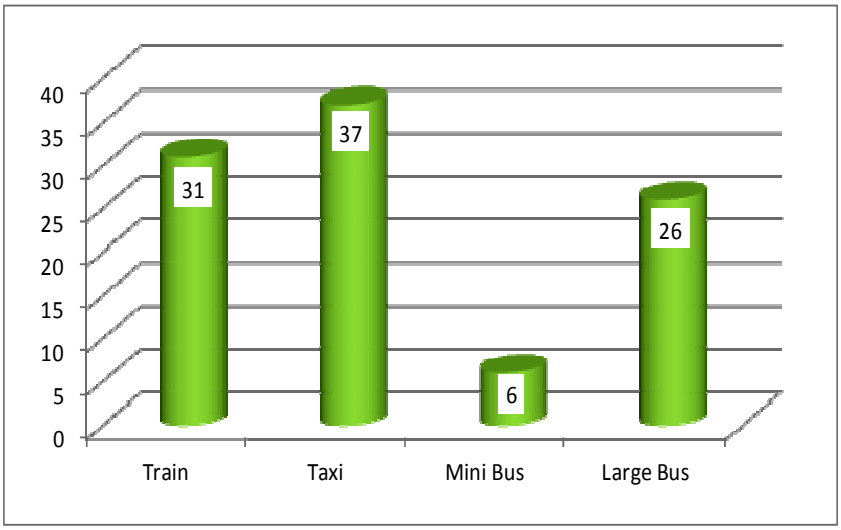

Figure 8: Forms of public transport preferred

Figure 9 represents public's perception of public transport benefits. The height of the bars indicates that people are strongly agreed that public transport benefits society. Respondents express a moderate level of agreement that public transport is convenient, economical, and comfortable. However, public perceptions are mixed about safety aspects. A relatively high number of respondents perceive that public transport is not particularly safe.

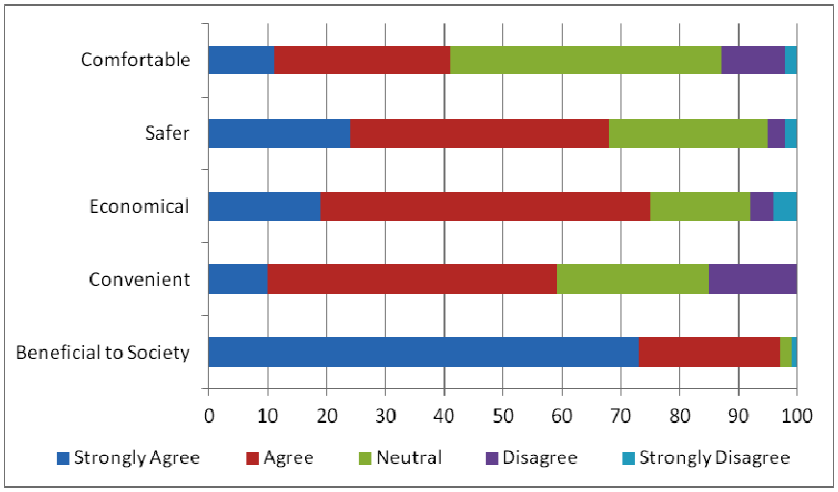

Figure 9: Public perception of public transport service

Most of respondents agree to use public transport in general, but they seem to be unwilling to use it in the summer. Their opinions are divided on the issue of sharing public transport with people, and also on the issue of whether socio-cultural barriers prohibit the use of public transport. Respondents significantly disagree about sharing public transport with public, simply because,

that socio-cultural barriers affect their use of it. They further disagree that the use of public transport degrades and lowers their social status as shown in Figure 10.

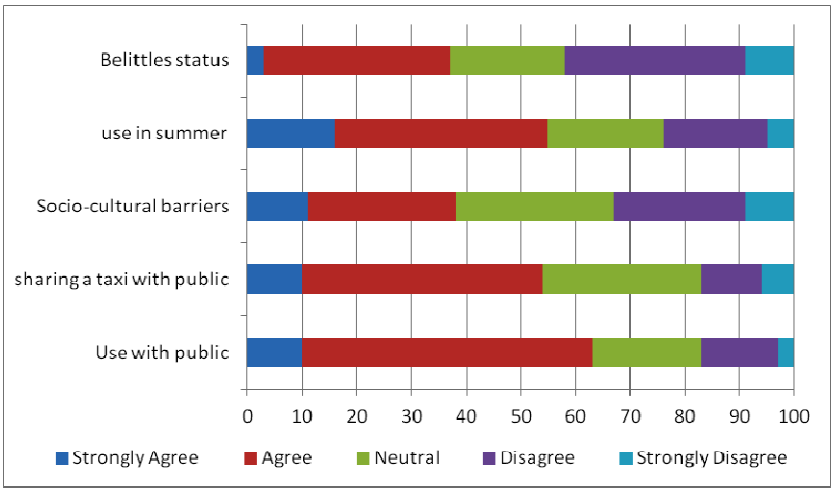

Figure 10: Public's constraints associated with the use of public transport

5 Concluding Remarks

There is widespread consensus in the Sultanate to address the issue, accompanied by a strong political will, including the commitment of the Sultan himself. The government is currently launching actions and initiatives to where improvements can be made.

Since owning a car in Oman is a simple and facilitated process that every person from any economical level could own a car. Banks and financing companies in Oman provides number of facilities that makes the process of owning a car accessible to everyone. This, in turn, precipitates the problem of increasing number of cars in the road, thus increasing road accidents (Belwal, et. al., 2010). It is believed that if the government invests public transport industry surely this will help in reducing the number of road accidents in Oman and will be a key element to the many environmental, economical and social problems such of air pollution, energy restrictions, job opportunities and congestion.

6 Acknowledgements

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