

A Media Effects Tetrad Analysis of Uber

Introduction

Uber is an app that changed a form of public transportation forever. The app is designed to connect riders with drivers as quickly as possible. According to Uber itself, the idea started in 2009, when Travis Kalanick and Garret Camp were stuck in Paris, in the snow, unable to find a taxi. Camp then came up with the idea to create UberCab, an easier and cheaper way to procure transportation. The prototype of the app was built by Camp, with Kalanick as the major advisor to the endeavor. In February 2010, Ryan Graves was the first Uber employee, and was named CEO in May 2010. Uber's services and app was launched in San Francisco in 2011. Originally, the app only allowed consumers to call for a luxury car and the price was 1.5 times the price of a taxi. In 2011, the company changed its name from UberCab to Uber after complaints from San Francisco taxicab companies. Towards the end of 2011, Uber became a nationwide app. In July 2012, Uber came out with UberX, a cheaper option that allowed drivers to use non-luxury vehicles, even their personal vehicles, providing a background check, proper insurance, registration, and vehicle standards. By the end of 2012, Uber was being used in multiple countries. In 2014, UberEats was launched, and in May 2019, Uber officially became a public company.

Theory

Marshall McLuhan's Laws of Media outline four principles that help to understand the impact of media and technology on society. These "laws" create a way to analyze the effects of new technologies. McLuhan proposed that every medium undergoes four stages: enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval, and reversal. He explained that any new medium "enhances some human function" while simultaneously rendering an older one obsolete. His famous phrase, "The

medium is the message,” emphasizes that the nature of a medium shapes how we perceive and interact with content (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988). New technologies also retrieve elements from the past, as McLuhan noted: “Each new technology creates an environment as a process in human affairs” (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988). While media enhance certain capacities, they simultaneously obsolesce older forms. Moreover, technologies, when pushed to their limits, eventually reverse into something new or unintended. McLuhan's laws can be applied to many different areas, such as discussing how Uber has transformed public transportation.

Uber Analysis: Enhancement

Uber enhances public transportation by increasing accessibility and convenience for consumers. Uber’s rideshare model offers an on-demand service that fills gaps left by traditional transportation systems, especially in areas with limited access to buses or trains (Bergal, 2023). Research has shown that ridesharing services like Uber can reduce the “first-mile, last-mile” problem, facilitating smoother commutes to and from public transit hubs. This integration between ridesharing and public transport networks can enhance overall mobility, making transportation more efficient and accessible for consumers who live in areas underserved by existing transit infrastructure (Brown et al., 2021). Uber is an enhanced form of transportation, as it collects vast amounts of real-time data on ride patterns, demand hotspots, and traffic flow. This data can be used to optimize routes, reduce congestion, and improve the allocation of resources in public transit systems (Reza, 2018). Overall, Uber enhances public transportation by providing flexibility, efficiency, and valuable data.

Obsolescence

There is a decline in public transportation due to Uber (Pan, 2023). Due to the offering of a more convenient, accessible, and personalized alternative, consumers choose Uber as their

form of transportation. Uber allows consumers to use travel time for other activities (Watkins, 2018). Traditional transportation systems use specific routes and schedules, limiting their flexibility for users, especially in less urbanized areas. Uber's services eliminate many of these issues by providing personalized, direct transportation that is available at any time, and from anywhere (Watkins, 2018). In densely populated cities, this has particularly impacted buses and taxis, as Uber's service offers a more adaptive transportation solution. Research indicates that ride-hailing services reduce the need for personal vehicle ownership, but simultaneously decrease the ridership of public transport systems by providing a competitive option that undercuts the slower and less reliable alternatives (Hampshire, 2023). Over time, this creates issues with public transportation systems, leading to declining revenues and fewer passengers. As Uber and similar services expand, public transportation risks becoming obsolete.

Retrieval

The emergence of Uber has significantly revitalized public transportation by integrating technology into traditional transportation. By using an app, Uber offers consumers a convenient and easy way to book rides, which increases accessibility and brings in a diverse customer base. This app has transformed the perception of public transportation from a rigid schedule to a more flexible system, because of it being so easily available. Uber has led to increased transportation in urban areas, reducing dependence on personal transportation and promoting greater utilization of existing public transit options (Kerlin, 2024). Uber has prompted traditional public transportation to innovate and adapt. Many transportation officials are collaborating with ridesharing services to enhance first-mile and last-mile connectivity, addressing gaps in service that often hinder public transit use (ITS, 2022). This change not only improves the overall

consumer experience but also encourages more people to utilize public transportation as part of their daily commute.

Flip

Uber has transformed public transportation, reversing traditional quality of service. Public transportation used to rely on fixed routes, and schedules, often leading to a lack of flexibility for users. Uber has reversed this by creating real-time service availability. Consumers can request rides on-demand in the app, creating personalized travel experiences that before were not available. Uber has also reversed the economic dynamics of public transportation. In the past taxi services operated on a 'medallion system' that controlled the number of vehicles on the road, using higher fares and limiting competition (Kowalski, 2024). Uber's platform changed access to transportation, allowing anyone with a vehicle to become a driver. This has driven down ride costs for consumers and increased availability, forever changing expectations on public transportations. Uber has led to a re-evaluation of public transportation, by emphasizing flexibility, and accessibility.

Evaluation

As someone who often has to use public transportation, Uber has made commuting much easier. It is a reliable and cost-effective alternative to traditional taxis and public transport. Uber has also created numerous job opportunities for drivers, creating a flexible work environment, and enabling people to earn income on their own terms. However, there are drawbacks to Uber. Traditional public transportation is impacted by having decreased ridership, which leads to less income for public systems. The rise of apps like Uber has prompted many cities to reconsider their transportation policies, leading to a shift in infrastructure investments and resource allocation (Nwankwo, 2023). As McLuhan's theories suggest, Uber demonstrates how new

technology can enhance certain human functions while also making older systems obsolete (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988). While Uber offers a more efficient and user-friendly way of transportation, it also poses challenges to the sustainability of public transportation networks and labor rights for drivers. However, I do think that Uber is an innovative idea to the issues that former public transportation systems faced.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Uber has fundamentally changed public transportation by increasing accessibility, rendering traditional transportation obsolete, retrieving elements of past transportation through technology, and reversing conventional economic systems. By providing a flexible service that directly meets user needs, Uber has addressed significant issues in public transportation. While Uber's convenience has led to a decline in ridership for traditional transportation, it has also sparked a wave of innovation, forcing public transit systems to change and integrate with ridesharing services. As Uber continues to evolve, its impact will likely shape the future of public transportation, encouraging a more accessible and efficient transportation system.

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