

See it, say it, sorted - Suspicious behaviour on public transport

Holly Jefferis, Dr Calli Tzani & Thomas James Vaughan Williams
University of Huddersfield, Department of Psychology

Introduction

Security in public transport has often been accused as inefficient, particularly since repeated terrorist attacks have taken place over the past years (Carter, Paragreen, Valfre & Fletcher, 2016). Terrorist groups aim to create mass panic, and train stations have a high number of passengers; therefore, provide terrorists with an accessible target. Following the 2004 Madrid train bombings and other attacks on bus and train stations around the globe, public transportation hubs focused on this critical issue of security.

In 2016, the British Transport Police (BTP) launched the campaign “SEE IT, SAY IT, SORTED”, to encourage passengers and station users to report suspicious behaviour. The campaign includes posters displayed in the major stations across the UK, as well as audio security announcements made over the intercom of the stations and the trains. A text service was also added later to enable the public to report incidents in a confidential and discreet way, alongside a telephone system which enables the public to speak to a representative to report an incident (Media.btp.police.uk, 2019). Public transport users appeared to be focused on specific signs, which they considered as suspicious, including hoodies, and avoiding eye contact, although other aspects have attracted attention (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity).

The wearing of hooded sweatshirts has been perceived as an indicator of suspicious and criminal activity for many years due to its association with urban youth culture. For example, a British newspaper article in 2005 described hooded tops as a “*uniform of thugs and muggers*” (Allen & Roberts, 2005). Furthermore, examination of media’s coverage of stereotypes linked to teenage males and their clothing, has demonstrated that the word

“hoodie” holds negative perceptions and labels, which in turn can lead to a negative perception that the teenage males who wear hoodies have criminal intent.

Regarding behavioural indicators of suspicious behaviour, the UK and USA police forces have identified avoidance of eye contact, an increase in smiling, speech issues, and rapid hand movements (Chifflet, 2015). However, Johnson (2007) demonstrated that although such indicators improve accuracy in laboratory-based experiments, they do not hold great significance when distinguishing between criminal and non-criminal activities within the field of policing and do not aid convictions. However, these behaviours deemed suspicious can vary between cultures, which risks creating an ethnicity bias within the Police and the public. A large proportion of the experiments, which support the accuracy of such behavioural indicators, have predominantly relied on white participants of European ethnicity, and didn't account for cultural variations (Winkel & Vrij, 1990).

Throughout research, it has been argued that a criminal racial stereotype could potentially be present within the police culture and public perceptions. Studies have shown when individuals of African American origin and White American origin acted out the same behaviour, participants viewed the African American actor to be significantly more “violent” and “mean” compared to the White American. Further research within demographics also concluded that participants are significantly more likely to report the sighting of a weapon (falsely) than an inanimate object when they are shown stimulus of an African American face compared to a white face (Payne, 2001), indicating a predilute or stereotype within race and ethnicity as an indicator of suspicious behaviour.

Aim

This study considered the requirement for security improvement on public transport, as well as the need to identify what the public deems as suspicious behaviour and

investigated what behaviours the public perceives as worthy of reporting, in comparison to the criteria the BTP sets as suspicious and worthy of investigating.

Methodology

This project utilised a sample of 245 participants ($N = 245$) who use public transport and were divided into four groups based on their age range: 16-21 years old ($N = 78$); 22-24 years old ($N = 71$); 25-34 years old ($N = 49$); and 35-70 years old ($N = 47$), (197 female, 47 male). The sample consisted largely of atheists ($N = 153$) and Christians all denominations ($N = 71$), with very few participants belonging to the other religious groups (Muslim $N = 12$; Sikh $N = 1$; Jewish $N = 1$; Other $N = 7$). Participants completed online a twenty-question survey, which incorporated factors from the British Transport Police's Official website, deemed to be suspicious and worth of reporting.

Results

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare suspicious behaviours within males ($N = 47$) and females ($N = 197$) participants. However, the difference was not significant. Moreover, there were no significant differences found amongst the genders regarding perceptions of concealment. However, the one way between groups ANOVAS, showed a significant difference between religious groups and their beliefs on what they deem to be suspicious avoidance behaviour. Particularly, there was a statistically significant difference between the level of avoidance behaviour for religious beliefs ($F(5, 239) = 3.59$, $p = 0.004$). Similarly, there was a significant difference between the level of hooded wearing and suspicious behaviour for the four age groups ($F(3, 241) = 6.15$, $p = .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.001$). Post-hoc analysis revealed that, when compared to the other three groups independently, the age group 35-70 rated wearing a hooded as suspicious behaviour significantly higher than the other age groups did.

Following, a two way between groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the beliefs around the suspicious loitering behaviour within age and gender groups, but interaction effects between gender and age on loitering behaviours were not significant. However, there was a statistically significant main effect for gender and loitering ($F(2, 236) = 5.35, p = .005, \eta^2 = .01$).

Moreover, a two way between groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the beliefs around unattended baggage within age and gender groups; no significant results were found, although the main effect appeared significant, ($F(2,236) = 14.74, p < .001; \eta^2 = .02$).

A two way between groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the differences within beliefs of males and females of different age groups in relation to ethnicity and race as an indicator of suspicious behaviour, however the interaction effect was not significant and there was no significant main effect for gender.

Furthermore, the differences between the beliefs of males and females of different age groups and avoiding eye contact as a suspicious behaviour were explored, however the interaction effect was non-significant. Likewise for the differences in beliefs of gender and age based on isolation being a factor of suspicious behaviour, and the differences within gender and age based on wearing a hoodie as a factor of indicating suspicious behaviour. Yet, there was a statistically significant main effect for age and hoodie wearing ($F(3, 236) = 5.65, p = .001, \eta^2 = .004$).

Discussion

The current study explored public perceptions of suspicious behaviours, investigating if people held the same criteria for suspicious behaviour as the BTP. It was found that 40.7% of participants disagreed that the perception of someone avoiding eye contact is an indicator of suspicious behaviour, while only 37.1% agreed. Furthermore, 22% of the sample neither

agreed nor disagreed on this factor. This result contradicts with previous research (Chifflet, 2015), which claims that avoiding eye contact is an indicator of suspicious behaviour.

Similarly, results also indicated that 72.7% of participants disagreed that individuals wearing hooded sweatshirts were suspicious, rejecting previous research, which stated that hoodies are an indicator of criminal youth subcultures within society (Gatersleben, et al, 2013). Such disagreements could potentially be a result of the demographics of the participants. Thus, highlighting a potential difference between the public's perception on suspicious behaviour and BTP's suspicious behaviour criteria outlined in their campaign.

However, only 10.6% of participants claimed that avoidance of staff and other individuals was not an indicator of suspicious behaviour, with a 75.9% of the sample agreeing with the claim that avoidance is sign of suspicious behaviour. The present study also found that 76.6% of participants didn't perceive race and ethnicity as an indicator of suspicious behaviour, consequently contradicting previous research (Hasham, 2016). This contradiction could be explained by critical race theory, which could suggest racism as a timeless and fixed factor within the social fabric of the population. However, Healy (2014) showcases that this social group think of systematic racism could have decreased with the new generation of the population, hence the disagreement in results and previous literature. This is indicated in the current study by finding a significant difference between the age groups 16-21 and 35-70 on the topic of ethnicity being suspicious behaviour.

Finally, findings concluded that 82.1% of participants believed taking photos of security arrangements to be suspicious; 75.4% agreed avoiding rail staff was suspicious; 94.3% believed concealing objects to be suspicious; 72.6% believed loitering to be suspicious; 90.6% believed leaving luggage unattended is suspicious. These results are in line with the suspicious behaviour criteria set out by the BTP's campaign to make the public aware of potential threats when travelling on the train. Due to the lack of research on the

public perception of suspicious behaviours within train stations, the current study adds valuable contribution into the previous “SEE IT, SAY IT, SORTED” campaign focus and similar campaigns.

However, limitations should be accounted for, including the limited sample size and the unequal size between the genders. If this study is to be replicated, it would be important to encourage a sample which can be more representative of both genders, age, ethnicity, and religion.

Conclusion

To conclude, this project showcases the contradictions between the public’s perception of what is deemed suspicious behaviour and what the BTP assume to be suspicious behaviour. Suggesting a need for the BTP to continue reassessing their campaign criteria for what is deemed suspicious behaviour, to be more in line with what the public perceive as suspicious. Although results have presented evidence that the public perceives some behaviours as suspicious, it is imperative that the public understands that behavioural cues are not verifiable evidence of criminal activity but an indication which potentially could be unreliable. Further research is needed to explore which behavioural cues are more reliable as an indication of suspicious intentions.

References

- Allen, V., & Roberts, B. (2005). Reclaim our Streets: HOODIES and BADDIES; Yobs and petty criminals love them. John Prescott hates them. Tony Blair has backed a ban on them. So what is it that makes hooded sweatshirts so popular? *The Daily Mirror*, 1-4.
- Chifflet, P. (2015). Questioning the validity of criminal profiling: An evidence-based approach. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 48, 238-255.
doi:[10.1177/0004865814530732](https://doi.org/10.1177/0004865814530732).

- Gatersleben, B., Murtagh, N., & White, E. (2013). Hoody, goody or buddy? How travel mode affects social perceptions in urban neighbourhoods. *Transportation Research Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behaviour*, 21, 219-230. doi:10.1016/j.trf.2013.09.005.
- Hasham, A. (2016). Forcillo guilty of attempted murder in shooting death of Sammy Yatim. Available at: <http://www.Thestar.com>.
- Johnson, R. (2007). Race and police reliance on suspicious non-verbal cues. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, 30(2), pp.277-290.
- Media.btp.police.uk. (2019). *BTP / British Transport Police releases its annual report*. [online] Available at: http://media.btp.police.uk/r/15934/british_transport_police_releases_its_annual_report [Accessed 9 Jul. 2019].
- Murphy, K., Hinds, L., & Fleming, J., (2008). Encouraging public cooperation and support for police. *Policing and society*, 18, 136–155. doi: 10.1080/10439460802008660.
- Payne, K. (2001). Prejudice and perception: the role of automatic and controlled processes in misperceiving a weapon. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 81, 181–192. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.81.2.181.
- Winkel, F. and Vrij, A. (1990), "Interaction and impression formation in a cross-cultural dyad: frequency and meaning of culturally determined gaze behaviour in a police interview setting", *Social Behaviour*, Vol. 5 No. 5, pp. 335-50.