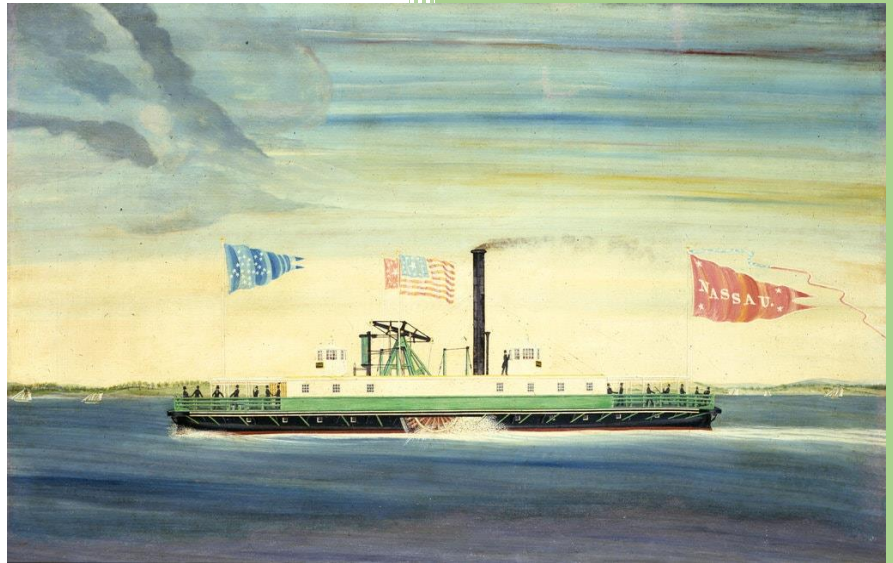


Rediscovering NYC's Waterways



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Sociology 790

INTRODUCTION

For hundreds of years, Native Americans and New York City residents depended on its waterways to transport them around the island. With the advent of the subways and the automobile, however, New Yorkers abandoned their waters and traveled on land. As the subways have fallen into disarray due to underinvestment and the environmental toll of our cars become impossible to ignore, it is clear that alternatives to our current transportation options are desperately needed. In response to the city's transportation and climate needs, administrators have revitalized the ferry as an alternative form of public transportation. However, the cost to run such a system is significantly higher than other forms of public transportation. The aim of this paper is to determine if the financial, environmental, and social benefits of New York City's new ferry service outweigh its cost.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

In the summer of 2017, New York City introduced four new ferry routes and by the end of the summer, it had vastly surpassed its ridership projections while obtaining a 93% approval rating (NYEDC). Two years later and the NYC ferry now has a total of nine routes with a ticket price of \$2.75 per ride. While its popularity continues to increase, so does its cost. The average per ride subsidy is \$10.73, with some routes being subsidized up to \$24.75 per ride (McGeehan). Though the NYC's ferry service is currently operating at a significant loss, especially when compared to other public transportation option, there are possible benefits associated with the new service which may outweigh its financial burden. By providing transportation alternatives to several underserved communities, such as Rockaway Beach in Queens and Sunset Park in Brooklyn, the city is redirected local residents away from both their cars and its overburdened public transportation system. Additionally, tourist and other city residents, who may have never considered visiting these neighborhoods are now discovering them and bringing welcomed stimulus dollars. For my project I hope to examine just how beneficial the NYC's new ferry service is to the communities which it serves. Do the benefits these communities receive outweigh the cost of this service? Lastly, I hope to analyze what policy changes might help to reduce costs, making New York City's ferry a viable long-term investment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first NYC ferry service was established in 1814 and transported Brooklyn Heights' residents to the South Street Seaport for 4 cents per ride, or a \$10.00 annual fee (Roberts). At that time the population of Brooklyn was calculated to be 2,000, but less than 60 years later it would grow to 400,000 (Roberts). It was the beginning of the expansion of the lower Manhattan city center into the rest of the boroughs and it was all due to a steamboat called the "Nassau". Soon after in 1883, the Brooklyn Bridge was completed and in 1904 New York City would get its first subway route. As a result, New Yorkers increasingly began to rely on other modes of transportation, beside the ferries, and by 1969 Staten Island Ferry was the only remaining regular ferry service in New York City (Roberts).

It would take a devastating hurricane to revive the prospects of ferry service in New York City. In 2013 soon after Hurricane Sandy destroyed portions of the subway system, leaving Rockaway residents without any subway service, the Bloomberg administration set up a temporary ferry route, which transported residents to Wall Street for \$3.50 a ride (Norris). While the ferry route was discontinued in the summer of 2014, local residents rallied for its extension, opening the door to the expansion of ferry services to communities which lacked transportation options (Norris).

Three years later, the De Blasio administration, lacking the authority to remediate a subway system in crisis, decided to revive the ferry service instead. The initial ferry service which began in the spring of 2017 was made up of 4 routes: East River (a pilot route which had

been operating since 2011), Astoria, South Brooklyn, and Rockaway. Charging \$2.75 a ride and transporting riders in sleek new boats operated by the private company, Hornblower, the ferry service quickly rose in popularity and ridership. A year later the city added two more routes, the East River and Lower East Side. Currently, the ferry service boasts an approval rating of 93% and an on-time performance of 92%, easily putting other public transportation options to shame (NYEDC).

Despite its glowing success, the ferry is not without its critics. Recently, the city controller, Scott Stringer, criticized the increasing cost of the ferry, which currently receives an average per ride subsidy of just under \$11.00. Stringer has also requested that the Department of Transportation take operational control of the ferry system from the New York Economic Development Corporations in an effort to rein in costs (Kabak) Policy organizations such as the Citizen Budget Commission (CBC) have argued that a subsidy of near \$11.00 is unacceptable when other forms of public transportation, such as the subway, receive subsidies as low as \$1.05 (Kabak).

While the cost of the new ferry service is well understood, it's necessary to also understand and calculate all the possible benefits of this new transportation system. Many other states and countries have established their own highly subsidized ferry service and have conducted studies into the economic, environmental and social benefits derived from their ferries. In Norway, millions of coastal residents depend on an extensive network of ferries to transport them across the country. In 2007 the cost of operating the ferry service was 3,100 million NOK, which was 1,400 million NOK more than what the service received in revenue

(Jorgensen). A 2010 study which calculated the social benefit received by the coastal residents who depend on the ferry concluded that such benefits were worth over 4 billion NOK, clearly justifying the subsidy (Jorgensen).

In the case of Hong Kong, several remote, underdeveloped islands depend on ferries as their only connection to the mainland. This historical dependency on ferries has lead researchers to promote the concept of Ferry-Oriented Development (FOD), in which ferry terminals serve as the center of island urban development plans (Leung). It is believed that ferry-centered urban development has the potential of promoting economic development, reducing pollution, and allowing these islands to maintain their unique culture and identity (Leung). Though the financial cost of modernizing and expanding Hong Kong's ferry services may be high, increasingly urban planners are viewing the environmental cost of building fixed links, such as bridges, tunnels, and engineered land connections, as even higher (Leung).

International studies have therefore found that there are social, environmental, as well as economic benefits to investing and subsidizing ferry networks. It is therefore premature to criticize the expense of New York City's ferry service when studies have yet to measure the various ways in which local residents are benefiting from this new service. This project aims to begin the process of quantifying those many possible benefits of the new ferry service in New York City.

RESEARCH METHOD

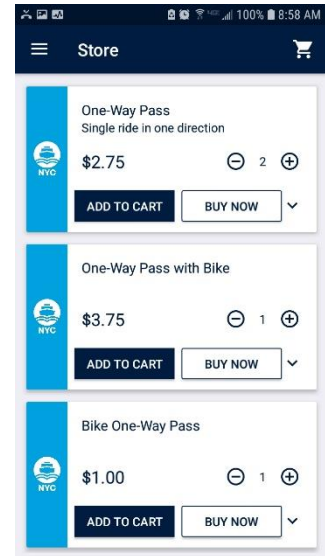
For my project I utilized both a qualitative and quantitative approach. For my qualitative approach, I conducted an ethnography by riding on the Rockaway ferry line on a Saturday morning. I observed the accommodations and amenities provided on board the ferry and compared it to my experience traveling to Rockaway by subway and bus. I also observed the demographics of the ferry passengers compared to those traveling by MTA public transportation.

For my quantitative approach I distributed 5 question survey to Rockaway ferry service riders. I conducted my survey research on a Saturday, which has a significant effect on the demographic make-up of the respondents. The vast majority of the weekend ferry passengers were traveling for leisure and their starting point being Wall Street. During the week, the majority of the ferry passengers are likely Rockaway residents heading to and from work. While this posed limitations in the representativeness of my sample population, it did not undermine the overall purpose of my survey, which was to quantify the amount of economic stimulus ferry riders provide to the areas they visit and whether the ferry service is a more eco-friendly transportation alternative.

FINDINGS

A. Ethnography

Early Saturday morning I downloaded the NYC Ferry app and was able to conveniently purchase my round trip tickets for \$5.50 on my smartphone. Living in southern Queens, I'm actually a quick 20 minute train or bus ride from Rockaway Beach, but for the sake of this study, I took the A train (in the opposite direction) to Wall Street in order to hop on the ferry. After a half an hour train ride and twelve minute walk to the docking area, I find a line of commuters waiting to board the ferry. Despite the line, I make my way onto the ferry very quickly and without difficulty.



To say that the ride was scenic would be an understatement. It was nothing short of exquisite. The vast majority of the riders headed to the upper level to get a clear view of downtown Manhattan as the ferry quickly pulled away. Riding on the subway and bus, you completely forget that you are living on an island, the ferry however brings this reality home with profound intensity. As we pass by Coney Island and I catch sight of the Ferris wheel and



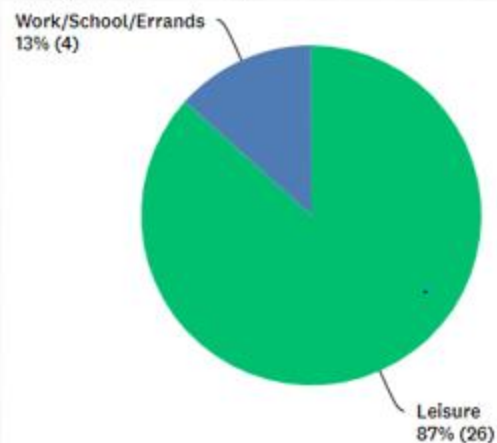
Parachute Jump I realize that the ferry ride itself is an experience. While there is nothing about the ferry which is particularly luxurious, there's something about sailing itself that seems to imbue a sense of luxury.

Once reaching my destination, I found that I had arrived at a portion of Rockaway that seems somewhat deserted. Unlike the area by Beach 90, there are very few restaurants, bars, or shops. There is a free shuttle waiting just outside the landing to transport ferry riders down to the lower streets, but I can't help but wonder how much these additional free shuttles are costing the NYCEDC. I was extremely disappointed to find that I would have to take an additional shuttle bus if I wanted to enjoy any interesting dining options or entertainment. Perhaps now that the ferry landing is located at Beach 108, more investments will be made to the area in order to cater to ferry riders, but I saw no indication that this was in fact the case. Ultimately, rather than take the ferry back to Wall Street, I decided to spend an additional \$2.75 to take the Q53 SBS back home, because it was significantly more convenient for me. At the end of my first ferry trip, I was left feeling unexpectedly conflicted.

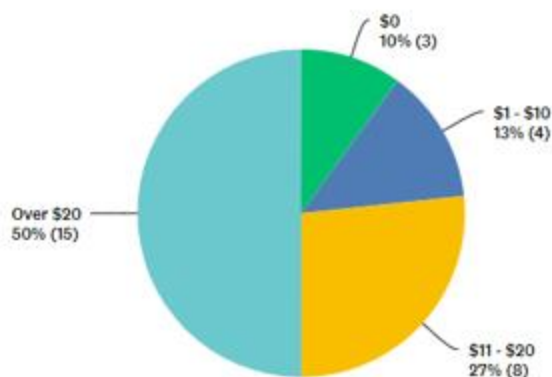
B. NYC Ferry Survey

For my survey I received a total of 30 responses. Of those who responded 87% percent were NYC residents and 87% were traveling for leisure. 67% of riders refrained from making any purchases on the ferry, but once on land over 75% of riders spent \$11.00 or more, an amount that is greater than the average per-ride ferry subsidy. It is worth noting, however, that 63% of respondents stated that before the ferry service began they traveled to Rockaway by MTA bus or train. Additionally, 10%

Are you traveling for:



How much do you plan on spending at your destination?



stated that they biked to Rockaway prior to ferry service. A total of 20% of respondents stated that they had driven or taken a taxi/rideshare to Rockaway before there was ferry service. Only, 7% of respondents stated that they did not travel to Rockaway prior to the ferry service.

ANALYSIS

While I thoroughly enjoyed the ferry ride and loved traveling on the water, I couldn't ignore the fact that it was a novel experience that I probably wouldn't be doing again. It occurred to me that when you add the amount of time spent on the ferry and the additional time spent on the shuttle bus, the ferry commute time is about the same as traveling on the A train. It's not a faster or more convenient mode of transportation. The only advantage the ferry currently has over MTA trains or buses is that it provides a more elegant and less crowded experience, but I'm not sure that justifies the exorbitant subsidy.

With regards to increasing access to public transportation, Beach 108 is not an area which lacks transportation options. There are multiple bus lines and a train line which services the area and provides residents access to various neighborhoods in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. In fact 70% of ferry riders would have traveled to Rockaway regardless, relying on a significantly less expensive form of public transportation or a bicycle. The extremely limited number of landings provided by the ferry makes it fairly restrictive and parochial compared to the A train and Q53 SBS.

As for the environmental benefit, 20% of ferry riders would have relied on a car to travel to Rockaway if not for the ferry. This is not an insignificant amount. If an elegant ferry ride is what is required to convince car lovers to abandon their vehicles in exchange for public transportation, then the ferry may be worth it. However, in its current form, I'm not certain if converting this 20% of car lovers is worth the amount of subsidy which is being spent on each

ferry ride. I feel that changes need to be made to reduce the subsidy and in doing so, make the ferry both environmentally and financially beneficial.

CONCLUSION

After experiencing the ferry for myself and having analyzed the results of my survey responses, I am unable to conclusively determine if the benefits of the new ferry service justifies the current levels of subsidies. There are several clear benefits to the ferry, perhaps the most significant being its ability to provide an environmentally sustainable alternative to driving. Of the ferry riders surveyed, 20% stated that if it were not for the ferry, they would have relied on a car to travel to Rockaway. The ferry, therefore, successfully lured NYC drivers out of their cars and into a more eco-friendly mode of public transportation.

Additionally, amongst those riders surveyed, 73% stated that, if not for the ferry, they would have relied on a MTA bus or train to get to Rockaway. This suggests that the ferry has successfully taken some of burden off of the beleaguered MTA transit system. During the busy work week, any reduction in the number of commuters on crowded MTA buses and trains is greatly welcomed.

The ferry has also been successful at introducing some travelers to Rockaway for the first time. Survey results showed that 7% of ferry riders would not have traveled to Rockaway if it were not for the ferry and Rockaway would not have benefited from the economic stimulus they provided. In total 77% of ferry riders stated that they spent at least \$11 at Rockaway Beach. This would indicate that the economic stimulus provided by the vast majority of ferry riders is greater than the average per ride ferry subsidy.

With regards to providing Rockaway residents increased access to public transportation, however, I found that the area is far from being a transportation desert. With the Q53 SBS express bus connecting Rockaway residents to Howard Beach, Woodhaven, Rego Park, and Jackson Heights as well as both the A and J trains, Rockaway residents are not isolated. Furthermore, compared to the Q53 and the A train, the ferry provides a very limited number of Rockaway residents with direct access to only one part of the city.

The variety of transportation options suggest that without the ferry visitors would still travel to Rockaway albeit via a more affordable form of public transportation. As 73% of riders stated, they could just as easily take an MTA bus or train to Rockaway. While I understand that the ferry provides a unique and luxurious experience, which is necessary in order to convince New York drivers to leave their cars at home and persuade first time travelers to make the trip, does the price tag have to be capped at \$2.75?

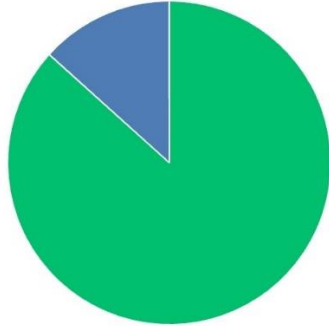
RECOMMENDATIONS

If ferry riders are able to pay a premium for a higher-end service, they should and will. Look no further than the Long Island Railroad as evidence that commuters will ultimately pay more for a higher-end public transportation experience. The city should therefore consider pricing ferry rides at rates that are comparable to those of the LIRR. In addition to charging higher ticket prices, the ferry should also consider adopting LIRR's pricing tiers based on the time and day a rider is traveling. Unlike the LIRR, however, rather than charging higher prices during peak travel times and work days, the ferry should take advantage of the high number of leisure travelers and charge higher prices on the weekends and off-peak hours. By doing this, the ferry can dramatically reduce the amount of subsidies it currently receives.

Despite my reservations regarding the current pricing and levels of subsidies provided to the NYC ferry, I believe that it is a worthy and valuable investment. It is an environmentally sustainable public transportation option which is charming and elegant enough to successfully convincing New York drivers to leave their cars at home and hop on a ferry. If properly managed and priced the ferry can provided an affordable and vital service to New Yorkers for decades to come.

I. Question 2 Graph

2. Are you traveling for:

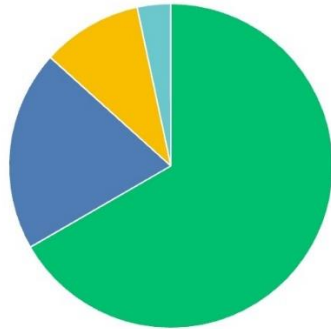


Answered: 30 Skipped: 0

Leisure	86.67%	26
Work/School/Errands	13.33%	4

II. Question 3 Graph

3. How much do you plan on spending on concessions on the ferry?

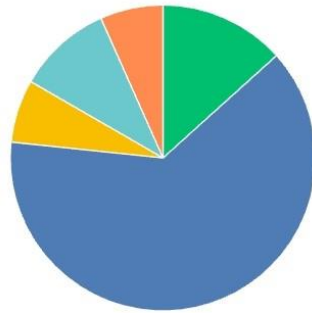


Answered: 30 Skipped: 0

\$0	66.67%	20
\$1 - \$5	20%	6
\$6 - \$10	10%	3
Over \$10	3.33%	1

III. Question 5 Graph:

5. Before the ferry, how did you commute to this destination?



Answered: 30 Skipped: 0

Car	13.33%	4
MTA Bus or Subway	63.33%	19
Taxi/Rideshare	6.67%	2
Walk/Bicycle	10%	3
Did not travel to this destination	6.67%	2

IV. Survey Questions:

NYC Ferry Survey

1. Are you a:

- Out-Of-Towner
- New York City Resident

2. Are you traveling for:

- Leisure
- Work/School/Errands

3. How much do you plan on spending on the ferry?

- \$0
- \$1 - \$5
- \$6 - \$10
- Over \$10

4. How much do you plan on spending at your destination?

- \$0
- \$1 - \$10
- \$11 - \$20
- Over \$20

5. Before the ferry, how did you commute to this destination?

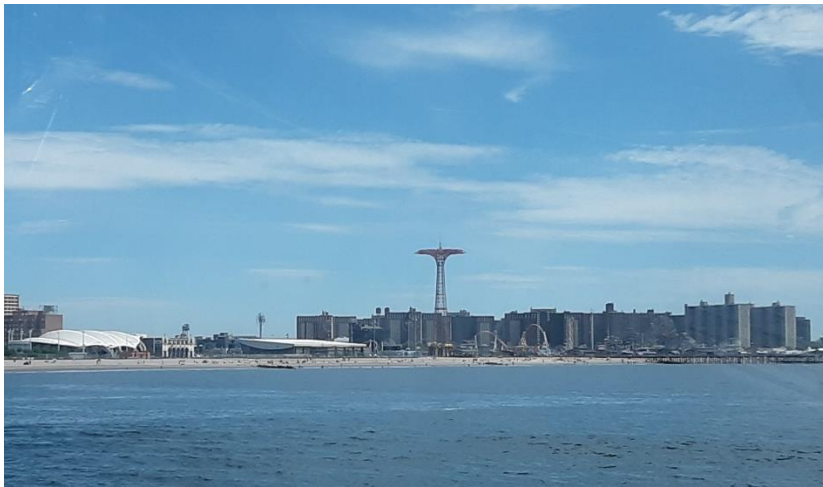
- Car/Taxi
- Other form of Public Transportation
- Did not go

V. Additional Pictures:

- The Bridge



- Coney Island



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