

## Performance Assessment in Public Transportation Services: A Review of Research Approaches

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### Abstract

This article presents a thematic review of studies on public performance in public transport services. Based on a structured analysis of the literature, it explores five major areas: local governance of public services, public management, Delegation of public services management, Public performance steering and Public transportation performance. The aim is to identify the main approaches, key concepts and evaluation criteria used in these fields. A summary diagram of the review is provided to illustrate the links between the various themes addressed. Drawing on the results of the analysis, the article introduces an original interpretation model - the GMDP-TC model - which provides a better understanding of the determinants of performance in the context of public transport. This contribution aims to enrich thinking on improving public performance through better governance and more effective management of transport services.

**Keywords:** Public performance, public transport, local governance, delegated management, public management, GMDP-TC model

### Introduction

The public performance of transport services has become a strategic challenge at the heart of urban mobility, environmental sustainability and social equity policies, mainly for local authorities, at the crossroads of

efficiency, equity and sustainability. Within a context marked by increasing pressure on public resources and the demand for transparency and service quality, it is becoming crucial to better understand the determinants of this performance, particularly in the field of public transport. However, the scientific literature on this subject remains fragmented, with diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, making it difficult for a unified framework of analysis to emerge.

Public performance, the cornerstone of our analysis, is considered in our study as an aggregate result (output), the consequence of a complex combination of organizational, institutional and territorial factors. To better explain and clarify our reasoning on the organization of the data collected, we mobilized a thematic analysis of the literature, which enabled us to identify, through logical processing, the structuring elements of our research question: *How does the scientific literature discuss the evaluation of public performance in the public transport sector, and what are the main determinants?* under the form of analytical themes. This approach also offers a strategic tool for identifying research gaps in the existing literature and highlighting grey areas likely to provide guidance for future studies.

It should be noted that the aim of this thematic review is not simply to synthesize existing knowledge: it is also a theoretical construction tool, guiding the development of our perspective of research model and anchoring our thinking in a logic of scientific continuity and innovation.

## **Analysis and discussion**

### ***Local governance of public services***

Our thematic literature review is initiated by the theme of governance of public services. This stage serves as the initial step in structuring our literature analysis. To find the answer to our particular question, we had to refer to the cornerstone of all practices carried out by local authorities, which is governance.

Governance most often evokes a more flexible definition of the exercise of power, based on greater openness in the decision-making process, its decentralization, and the simultaneous presence of several stakeholder statuses (Pitseys, 2010). It provides a framework to facilitate local authorities' approach to management, which means the arrangements put in place to ensure that the outcomes desired by stakeholders are defined and achieved.

According to Gadsden (2014), it is possible to strengthen public powers at regional and national levels, as well as global governance, just by strengthening the integrity of governance at the local level. Consequently, decentralization has triggered the independence of local authorities in managing public services towards a "local governance" approach. Local governance is therefore founded on the proximity of local authorities, citizens

and the territory. This means that the proximity of local authorities can encourage citizen participation in public life and greater control over local civil servants and elected representatives, thereby helping to reduce existing shortcomings and improve public accountability. In this case, local governance takes the form of a set of institutions, mechanisms and procedures that enable citizens to express their interests and exercise their rights and obligations at the local level (UNDP, 2004). The reason why we can say that good governance relies on several pillars: citizen participation, partnerships between local stakeholders and the existence of multiple sources of information.

In fact, local governance tends to be more flexible and suitable than governance on a national scale, especially as it encourages the active and direct participation of local players. As proximity is a factor in participation, it is more effective to take into account the contributions or concerns of each individual on a smaller scale than when involving millions of citizens.

In other words, local governance is based on a territorial approach (El Yaacoubi & Harsi, 2005). It concerns all aspects of planning and improving the territorial situation, particularly in terms of the provision of public services, which is the main concern of local authorities in relation to their citizens, especially with regard to the quality and accessibility of services.

In this perspective, Lorrain (2021) emphasizes that contemporary territorial governance requires a fine-tuned mastery of the interface between public actors and private operators, within a hybrid regulatory framework where the legitimacy of public action is built as much on the results obtained as on transparency and steering capacity. Thus, contractual tools, performance indicators, and citizen participation mechanisms become essential levers for strengthening the credibility and effectiveness of local policies in an environment increasingly marked by delegation and the complexity of institutional arrangements.

### ***Public Management***

Public management, as the second theme, illustrates the continuity in elaborating our thematic review. We began with the notion of governance, but in order to explain the practice of governance, it seemed important to continue moving on to public management.

Public management is an action, an art, or a way of leading an organization, directing it, planning its development and controlling it, which applies to all areas of organizational activity, whether private, public, for-profit or not (Thietart, 1999). Quite simply, it is a method, of which the public sector is a prime example of its application (Laufer & Burlaud, 1980).

Our position takes its cue from AKTOUF (1989), who sees public management as a series of integrated and interdependent activities, designed

to ensure that a combination of financial, human and social resources can generate the production of goods or services that are economically and socially useful and, if possible, profitable for the for-profit enterprise.

In a public management context, the management function is not simply a question of managing the public sector, but rather of managing in a way that respects the legitimacy of local authorities and the regulations governing the provision of public services. Consequently, it's not just the development of a dynamic focused on transforming the organization that takes precedence, but rather the search for legitimate goals and the formulation of a management model that can be applied.

In fact, this is where public management comes in as imperfect management, in which the tools that have proved effective in the private sector are used, with a few adaptations at the margins, or even without adaptation (Zampiccoli, 2011, p. 4). Indeed, all these theorists assume that private-sector concepts can be transposed to the public sector, as noted by Pettigrew (1997). This vision of public management finds its concrete manifestation in a powerful logic of latent action, in a dynamic aiming to transform the entities responsible for implementing programs and policies.

This conceptualization of reliance on the private sector is part of the New Public Management (NPM) theory, which is closely related to the Chicago School, yet remains opposed to the abolition of all forms of public ownership. For NPM theorists like Hood (1991), the question of ownership is even secondary; what counts are behaviors and management methods, and the public sector must therefore draw inspiration from the private sector in these fields.

If we assume that the NPM is based on the transposition of private-sector management methods, which are generally more advanced than those of the public sector. Amar & Berthier (2007) consider the public sector to be inefficient, extremely bureaucratic, rigid, costly, self-centered (following the Leviathan effect), lacking in innovation and with a centralized hierarchy. Therefore, in order to improve the sector, managers need to be given more room for specialist manoeuvre, to enable them to better meet citizens' expectations at the lowest possible cost.

This exposure to private-sector practices has revealed the multidisciplinary nature of the NPM, which combines strategic, financial, marketing and human resources functions (Amar & Berthier, 2007).

The NPM is forcing local authorities to question their role and missions, which ones they must carry out, which ones they can delegate or entrust to private agencies or companies, and which ones they are likely to carry out in partnership with the private sector. This argument is reinforced by Braun (2001), who has argued that virtually all foreign models show a clear

correlation between the reduction in size and missions of local authorities and a managerial transformation susceptible to remarkable success.

This reconfiguration of responsibilities is intrinsically linked to a broader managerial shift. This hybridization of management approaches reflects a desire to bring public administration closer to the performance standards of the commercial sector. More recently, Bezes (2020) emphasizes that this evolution is not merely technical but deeply structural, as it involves a redefinition of the roles, competencies, and instruments of public action. NPM thus marks the transition from a bureaucratic approach focused on procedures to a form of governance based on results, performance indicators, and contractualization, while posing new challenges in terms of balancing efficiency and democratic legitimacy.

In the present study, we have opted for the aspect of delegation of the management mission in order to visualize the impact of this managerial choice on our main study of the determinants of public performance.

### ***Delegation of public services management***

The emergence of public management techniques has created new opportunities for local authorities to delegate the management of public services. The existing disparities between the needs of local authorities and their financial capacities are a number of factors that are prompting the consideration of new strategies and operating methods for making the necessary investments (Zarrouk, 2001) to meet the needs of the community and satisfy the demands of citizens.

Within the framework of our research, the particularity of approaching delegated management is justified considering the case study we have opted for. For this reason, in addition to NPM theory, we have proceeded to outline several theoretical approaches that motivate the choice of delegation. Namely, the x-efficiency theory (Leibenstein, 1966), which sees cooperation between the public and private sectors as a factor contributing to the elimination of the x-inefficiency factors it defines, in local authorities, enabling them to revitalize their performance and competitiveness in the provision of public services.

We also relied on the agency theory of Jensen & Meckling (1976), which considers recourse to the private sector within the framework of contractual public-private cooperation agreements, an approach that enables local authorities to minimize their agency costs.

In addition, there are other theories, notably transaction cost theory (Coase, 1937), which states that the delegation process generates costs associated with finding a partner, negotiating contracts, controlling the partner and possible litigation costs. And theories that address the relationship between delegate and delegator, namely incentive theory (Martimort &

Fleckinger, 1980), incomplete contract theory (Williamson, 1975) and contestable market theory (Baumol, Panzer, & Willig, 1986), which assume that local authorities must refer to the private sector.

After evoking the theoretical foundations justifying the choice of public service delegation, we thus found ourselves confronted with the effects of globalization, confirming the aforementioned theories in a perspective of economic globalization, which considers the efficient and modern management of public services as a key factor in the country's competitiveness and the attraction of local and foreign funding (La cour des comptes, 2014).

Indeed, delegated management of public services is intended to help public services evolve in line with the advantages this mode offers over direct management, and the opportunities it offers the public sector, enabling the increasingly scarce resources allocated to these often capital-intensive sectors to be devoted to other missions of general interest.

In addition, the disproportion between the needs of local authorities and their financial capacities is a strong incentive to find new solutions and specific operating methods for making the investments required to meet the needs of the community and satisfy the demands of citizens (Zarrouk, 2001). This is where local authorities have turned to the private sector through delegated management, which has enabled many local public services lacking infrastructure to renovate their equipment and networks or acquire new resources under conditions that exceed their own financial possibilities.

More recently, Hilali and Elyousfi (2023) point out that the mobilization of the private sector is not solely a response to budget deficits, but also reflects a desire on the part of local authorities to professionalize the management of public services, better control technical risks, and improve the quality perceived by users. This dynamic is part of a paradigm shift in which delegation is no longer just an economic alternative, but a lever for strategic transformation of territorial governance models.

This evolution in perspective also reshapes the role of local authorities, not as passive delegators, but as active regulators. To this extent, local authorities have simultaneously delegated the service in order to better offer and meet citizens' demands, as well as finding themselves with new missions that include, within the framework of the provision of a permanent resource, all the powers of control to ensure, on documents and on site, the smooth running of the delegated service and the proper execution of the contract they have signed with the delegatee. Although delegated management offers an opportunity to improve and progress towards public performance, it entrusts local authorities with the responsibility of steering this performance, as the delegatee is essentially concerned with the operation of the public service.

### ***Public performance steering***

Now that we've looked at the delegation of public service management from a public performance perspective, it seems essential to continue our analysis with a focus on performance management within local authorities. In fact, we believe that this approach contributes to reinforcing the results expected from delegation.

The extension of this theme has enabled us to gain a clearer understanding of the role of local authorities in the management and provision of public services, regardless of the management approach they choose. This is because local authorities face the challenge of having a rational management process that determines the quality of the service or provision they offer, notably in terms of adaptation to citizens' needs, efficiency given existing skills and resources, and the strategies they can use to achieve rationalization and productivity gains.

In addition, the steering process is essential because it enables opening up to new territorial data while taking into account budgetary constraints and changes in public action, and all this, while keeping abreast of the expectations of elected representatives, residents and users who are proving to be increasingly demanding and better informed (CDG, 2016).

In this context, we're talking about performance-based management, which requires a set of tools to guarantee its success. These include, first and foremost, the deployment and implementation of performance indicators, which constitute proof of the performance of public services (Tabi & Verdon, 2014), as well as the setting up of dashboards using a set of indicators to monitor the progress of the policies that local authorities are responsible for implementing.

Yet, in a context of delegated public service management, one of the steering approaches that local authorities can adopt is to consider performance when concluding contracts with private operators. Recently developed tools, such as the global public performance contract or the public partnership contract (CESE, 2019), offer local authorities numerous tools to make the most of a delegation contract with the private sector.

For each local authority, there is an appropriate solution that can be chosen according to its needs, considering the specific problems of the territory, the skills available internally, the governance model adopted, and the risks it decides whether or not to transfer to the operator. In fact, outsourced management of public services is bound to evolve. Such evolution necessarily implies taking user needs into account, improving service quality and applying an appropriate price to the service rendered. These challenges can only be met by reinforcing internal control and implementing effective, constructive external control, in which local authorities are encouraged to define the pillars of public performance on which they rely, and to gear the delegation approach



and all their related missions to the operational and strategic objectives relating to the specific features and nature of the delegated public service.

Given that public performance forms the core of our research, we referred to several models, classifying them into three approaches - economic, partnership and quality - evoking public performance, in order to arrive at our own research model. These models include: the performance management model; the BOUCKAERT and POLLITT model; the Relevance-Efficiency-Effectiveness model; the Inputs-Outputs-Outcomes model; the Public Sector Scorecard; the Adapted Expectation Confirmation paradigm; the customer model of quality; the hybrid measurement model of perceived quality of public services; the Sabadie model and the QSP model. These are all models that can be adopted and adapted to public performance management systems within local authorities.

To provide a better direction for our research sequence, we decided to focus on the field of our study, i.e. the public transport service.

### ***Public transportation performance***

Public performance management in local authorities has a clear and precise aim, which is to provide an efficient public service. At this stage of our literature review, we therefore sought to understand how it is possible to measure the performance of a public transport service. The idea was to visualize the effects of a public performance management system on service performance. To do this, we looked at the theoretical approaches and indicators that define public transport service performance. As far as performance indicators are concerned, steering by performance indicators on the basis of specific missions is a key factor. The literature has enabled us to identify three families of indicators that seem to be preferred (Faivre d'Arcier & al., 2018): Socio-economic efficiency indicators (from the citizen's perspective); Service quality indicators (from the user's perspective); Efficiency indicators (from the taxpayer's point of view).

In our definitional approaches to the performance of public transport services, we have noted the predictive power of user-perceived quality in determining public transport performance, notably at the level of the French standard NF 13 816 and the Qualbus model of perceived quality. We also referred to the ISO 18091 standard as an alternative to the two-level quality management system for public services, namely quality management and quality control.

Public transport service performance is also a measure of involvement in environmental quality; the latter can be explained by the Euro standard, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, noise pollution caused by transport, and the adaptation of the transport service to social and urban changes. There are two other elements

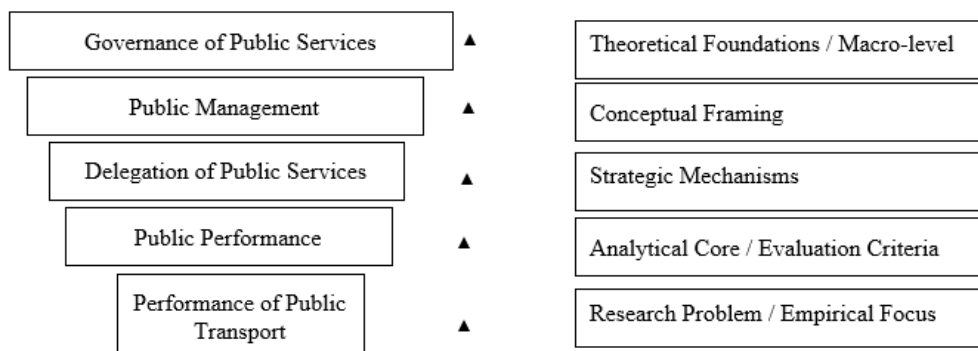


defining the performance of public transport services: functional efficiency, economic strategy and service sustainability.

## Results

Our research involves a systematic and structured approach, mobilizing a variety of theoretical and conceptual approaches in order to pinpoint the determinants of public performance within local authorities. Given the complexity of the subject under study, we believe that a detailed understanding of the interactions between several levels of analysis is required, which our thematic literature review helps to clarify.

The above diagram illustrates the top-down logic of our analysis, which starts with the general foundations of public service governance and ends with the core of our problem: the performance of public transport services. Each conceptual level (governance, public management, service delegation, public performance) constitutes an essential stage in the construction of our thinking, enabling us to link general theoretical orientations to the specificities of our object of study.



**Figure 1:** Thematic literature review diagram

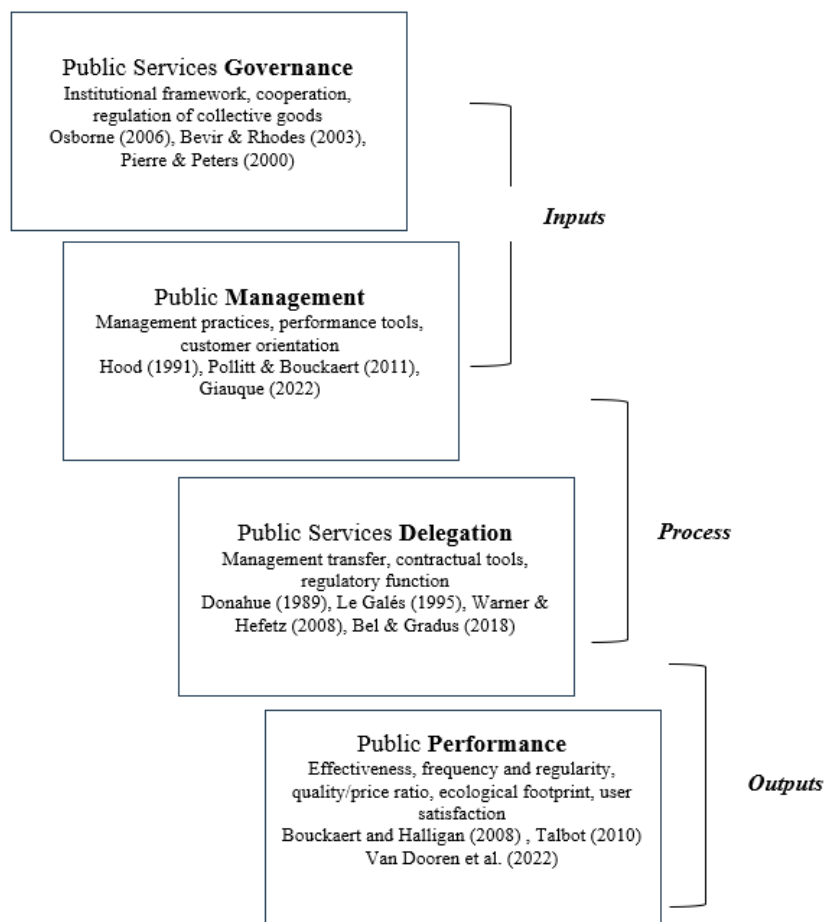
Thus, the thematic review is not simply an inventory of existing literature, but a genuine intellectual structuring tool that traces the internal logic of our scientific reasoning. It has enabled us to :

- Position our research within the main theoretical perspectives.
- Identify the convergence and divergence between existing approaches.
- Clarify the key concepts required to develop our analytical model.

Furthermore, this review highlights gaps in the existing literature and provides a fertile space for the emergence of new perspectives. As such, it is not limited to our own problematic: it also provides a methodological and conceptual basis that can be reused by other researchers wishing to explore the same issues through different analytical logics (comparative, sectoral, territorial approaches, etc.).

To sum up, our thematic review is not only a contribution to the theoretical enrichment of the field of public performance of local services, but also offers a transversal reading of the mechanisms of territorialized public action in a field as structuring as that of public transport. To this end, we have developed an original conceptual model, the GMDP-TC, which follows in the footsteps of Input-Process-Output (IPO) systemic models (Easton,1965), while adapting them to the specificities of local public management.

As discussed in the preceding lines, analyzing the public performance of public transport services in local authorities requires a systemic theoretical approach, integrating the various institutional, managerial and operational levels. The GMDP-TC model we propose is inspired by the Input-Process-Output (IPO) logic, but adapted to the specificities of local public management. It is structured around five major axes: governance, public management, service delegation, public performance and, finally, sectoral performance specific to public transport. Each level of the model is based on solid conceptual foundations derived from international literature.



**Figure 2:** The GMDP-TC conceptual model

The governance of public services, at the macro-institutional level, constitutes the framework within which these services are designed, oriented and steered, emphasizing cooperation between public, private and citizen players, as well as the capacity of institutions to effectively regulate collective goods and services. Bevir & Rhodes (2003) highlight the shift from a traditional hierarchical model to network governance based on negotiation and interdependence. Pierre and Peters (2000) highlight the growing role of states in regulation rather than in the direct production of services, which favors delegation and contractualization. Osborne (2006) proposes the concept of New Public Governance (NPG), focused on collaboration and co-production with citizens. From this perspective, governance appears to be a major explanatory variable in the ability of local authorities to structure effective transport policies.

Public management, at the meso-organizational level, refers to the set of practices and instruments mobilized to steer public services, marking an evolution towards a logic of performance, efficiency and customer orientation. Hood (1991) introduced the concept of New Public Management (NPM), which transposes into the public sector tools borrowed from the private sector, such as management by objectives, contractualization and performance evaluation. This approach has been taken further by Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011), who propose a typology of managerial reforms in the European public sector, highlighting the importance of national contexts - administrative traditions, political pressures, etc. - in the process. This level of analysis thus provides a better understanding of how local authorities structure their transport policies by adopting results-based management logics.

Following on from this, Giauque (2022) emphasizes that reforms inspired by NPM, while providing more effective management tools, have introduced greater complexity into public action by requiring public officials and managers to juggle sometimes contradictory imperatives: managerial control, citizen expectations, and political constraints. This shows that public performance cannot be reduced to quantitative indicators, but rather depends on the ability to articulate strategic objectives, limited resources, and requirements of general interest.

In this context, the delegation of public services emerges as a strategic process whereby local authorities entrust the management of a service to a third party, usually private or semi-public, while retaining a regulatory role. Donahue (1989) theorizes this logic of contracting out, which enables the administration to refocus on regulation rather than production. Le Galès (1995) highlights the emergence of city management, where delegation becomes a lever for rationalizing local public action. Warner & Hefetz (2008) point out, however, that this process is neither linear nor irreversible, with local authorities oscillating between outsourcing and insourcing, depending

on their capacities, costs and the quality of services provided. This strategic level thus sheds light on the organizational choices made in transport policies, particularly in a context of limited resources.

Similarly, Bel & Gradus (2018) show that decisions to outsource or reinternalize are often reversible and opportunistic, influenced as much by political factors as by performance considerations. Their comparative study of local public services in Europe highlights that direct management is sometimes reintroduced when delegation fails to produce the expected results or leads to contractual tensions. This confirms that organizational choices in local governance remain evolving, contextual, and often experimental, particularly in sensitive sectors such as urban public transport.

Public performance, at the analytical level, refers to a service's ability to achieve expected results in terms of efficiency, equity, quality and user satisfaction. Bouckaert and Halligan (2008) propose a typology of performance management systems in public administrations, ranging from simple reporting systems to integrated, interactive systems. Talbot (2010) emphasizes that performance is a political and social construct, influenced by the indicators chosen, stakeholder perceptions and institutional objectives. In this context, public performance is the measurable translation of upstream governance, management and delegation decisions. In addition, Van Dooren et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of a multidimensional approach to public performance, which is not limited to measurable results, but also incorporates processes, the learning capacity of organizations, and the legitimacy of the choices made. They stress that performance must be conceived as a dynamic balance between strategic objectives, operational constraints, and citizen expectations. This broader vision reinforces the idea that measurement systems are only relevant if they are rooted in a detailed understanding of the institutional context and local governance.

Applied to the urban public transport sector, it becomes the specific focus of our research. Public transport performance is assessed using sector-specific indicators such as spatial and economic accessibility, frequency and regularity of service, quality/price ratio, ecological footprint in the context of sustainable mobility, and user satisfaction. These criteria enable us to analyze the extent to which the public policies implemented by local authorities meet the objectives of public service, social cohesion and ecological transition.

## **Conclusion**

This thematic review has structured the study of public performance in public transport services along five key axes: local governance of public services, public Management, delegation of public services management, public performance steering and public transportation performance. A review of the literature reveals a shift towards more integrated, user-oriented

approaches, emphasizing the growing importance of transparency, accountability and participatory evaluation. However, studies often remain fragmented, and few offer a systemic reading of all the determinants of performance.

To fill this gap, the GMDP-TC model proposed in this article offers a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding the interactions between governance, management mechanisms, performance determinants and expected outcomes in the context of public transport. This model constitutes a methodological contribution by offering a structured lens through which to analyze complex performance dynamics in public transport. Nonetheless, as a theoretical construct, it requires empirical validation and refinement. Its abstraction may also overlook contextual and operational specificities inherent to different local settings.

Future research could build upon this framework by applying it to diverse case studies, thereby testing its relevance and adaptability across varying institutional and territorial contexts. Additionally, incorporating stakeholder perspectives and integrating longitudinal data could enrich the model's explanatory capacity and support the formulation of more responsive and sustainable public transport policies.

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**Data Availability:** All data are included in the content of the paper.

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