

Familiar Strangers in the City: An Overlooked Dimension of Urban and Transport Planning

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Abstract: The "familiar stranger" concept, first articulated by Stanley Milgram in 1972, refers to individuals encountered repeatedly in daily routines without direct interaction. This phenomenon is evident in urban transport systems and public spaces, where repeated but anonymous encounters contribute to subtle forms of social cohesion, trust, and predictability. Despite its significance in shaping everyday urban life, the notion of familiar strangers has received limited attention in urban and transport planning discourse. This study examines the theoretical foundations of familiar strangers and their implications for transport and urban design on a global scale, drawing on insights from sociology, mobility studies, and urban planning literature. Reviewing existing literature, the study explores how familiar strangers contribute to social comfort, resilience, and urban belonging, particularly within public transit and walkable urban environments. In the final discussion, Dhaka is used as a case reflection to illustrate the heightened relevance of familiar strangers in the Global South's high-density, transit dependent, and socially vibrant contexts. By re-centering familiar strangers in planning analysis, the study argues for recognizing these subtle but influential social dynamics in public transport design, transit-oriented development (TOD), and urban public spaces.

Keywords: familiar strangers, urban planning, transport planning, public space, Dhaka, social cohesion.

1.0 Introduction

Cities are places of strangers. In dense urban environments, anonymity often coexists with routine encounters that create subtle forms of social recognition. Among these, the concept of the familiar stranger first identified by Milgram (1972) captures the paradox of urban social life: individuals who remain strangers yet are consistently recognizable through repeated encounters in the same places, at the same time. A fellow commuter on the metro, a shopkeeper who passed daily, or a jogger on the same park route exemplifies this category. They are not friends or acquaintances, but their persistent visibility fosters a tacit sense of belonging, order, and predictability in everyday life.

This phenomenon is a sociological curiosity and highly relevant for urban and transport planning. While urban planning traditionally emphasizes physical infrastructure, land use, and mobility networks, it less often considers the subtle social encounters that shape people's perceptions of safety, comfort, and attachment to place. However, familiar strangers can significantly influence how individuals experience public transit systems, sidewalks, marketplaces, and public squares. As Jacobs (1961) argued in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the vitality of urban streets depends on "eyes on the

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street," a principle closely tied to the repeated presence of recognizable others, even if they remain anonymous.

The neglect of familiar strangers in planning discourse reflects a broader undervaluation of the social dimension of mobility. Much of transport planning remains dominated by quantitative models of efficiency, ridership, and congestion (Banister, 2008). However, mobility is not only about movement from point of origin to destination; it is also a social practice shaped by encounters, rhythms, and routines (Urry, 2007). Familiar strangers embody these aspects by contributing to a sense of routine and social fabric in transit spaces and urban public life. Their presence offers comfort and reduces the alienation often associated with large, impersonal cities (Whyte, 1980; Oldenburg, 1999).

The idea also resonates with concepts from social theory. Goffman's (1963) notion of "civil inattention" describes how strangers acknowledge one another's presence without engaging, maintaining social order in public space. Similarly, Granovetter's (1973) "strength of weak ties" highlights the importance of loose, non-intimate connections in sustaining social networks. Familiar strangers can be seen as a form of ultra-weak tie: not mobilized for instrumental gain, but quietly reinforcing a sense of social trust and recognition.

For transport planning, familiar strangers may contribute to perceived safety and resilience. In routine transit use, passengers are often reassured by the presence of others they recognize, even if anonymously (Kawasaki, 2016). In times of disruption—such as strikes, breakdowns, or crises—these weak bonds can transform into temporary solidarities, where commuters turn to familiar strangers for information or support (Paulos & Goodman, 2004). This demonstrates how even minimal social connections play a role in urban resilience.

Urban design also conditions the production of familiar strangers. Walkable neighborhoods, well-used parks, and mixed-use developments encourage repeated exposure to the same individuals (Gehl, 2010). In contrast, car-dependent urban forms or privatized, exclusionary spaces reduce such encounters, weakening the fabric of everyday public life. Transit-oriented development (TOD), increasingly advocated as a sustainable urban planning strategy, may indirectly foster relationships with familiar strangers by concentrating activity and mobility around shared spaces (Cervero & Murakami, 2009).

Nevertheless, despite these connections, familiar strangers remain understudied in planning literature. While sociologists and urban ethnographers have documented their presence, transport planning focuses on measurable flows and efficiency rather than the intangible social dynamics of routine encounters. This study seeks to address this gap by systematically examining the relevance of familiar strangers to urban and transport planning, using a global perspective and concluding with a reflection on Dhaka as a case from the Global South.

2.0 Origins of the Concept: Milgram and Beyond

The notion of the familiar stranger originates in Stanley Milgram's (1972) pioneering work, later published in 1977 on urban social life. Milgram observed that in cities, people

frequently encounter individuals repeatedly in public settings—such as train stations, parks, or neighborhood sidewalks—without initiating direct interaction. These individuals are neither acquaintances nor strangers but occupy an intermediate category. Recognizing familiar strangers introduces an underappreciated layer of social life in urban environments, offering comfort and predictability amid the anonymity of modern cities. In his inspiring experiment on familiar strangers, Milgram (1972/1977) photographed (shows in Figure 01) commuters at the Trumbull Street station of the New Haven Railroad in New Haven and later asked individuals to identify which faces they recognized. Remarkably, participants consistently recognized a significant number of people they had never interacted with directly, highlighting the prevalence of “familiar strangers.” These individuals were not acquaintances but were recognizable through repeated co-presence in the same public setting. Milgram argued that such non-interactive recognition fosters a subtle sense of connection, what he termed “fantasy relationships,” which provides urban residents with a degree of familiarity and stability within otherwise anonymous environments. This insight demonstrates how the urban experience is not solely about isolation and anonymity, but also about the quiet comfort derived from recurring encounters in shared spaces (Milgram, 1977).

Figure 01: The familiar stranger experiments. The people in the experiments were asked to name which passengers they could recognize from the photo.



Source: Milgram, 1972

Milgram's concept drew from his broader interest in how individuals navigate complex social systems. In the high-density, impersonal setting of New York City, he argued, familiar strangers represent a paradox: they embody the anonymity of urban life and its continuity and cohesion. This idea resonates strongly with other foundational urban sociological perspectives, such as Simmel's (1903/1995) essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, which described the tension between individual autonomy and collective anonymity in urban contexts.

Subsequent scholars have extended Milgram's idea to different domains. Paulos and Goodman (2004) studied familiar strangers in public spaces through mobile technologies, emphasizing how recognition without interaction fosters both comfort and anxiety. Later

research, particularly in transport studies, began to recognize the implications of familiar strangers for commuting cultures, public safety, and social trust (Kawasaki, 2016; Laurier & Philo, 2003). Zhou, Xu, and Zhao (2018) scaled Milgram's original concept to the population level, using large-scale mobile phone data to reveal collective regularities in familiar stranger encounters across an entire city. More recently, Zahnow and Corcoran (2024) reframed familiar strangers as a form of guardianship within everyday mobility, highlighting their role in fostering reassurance and security in public spaces. Building on this, Zahnow and Corcoran (2025) argued that familiar stranger encounters in transit stations, parks, and retail environments nurture belonging and place attachment, suggesting that urban design, which facilitates repeated co-presence, can help mitigate loneliness and enhance social cohesion.

2.1 Familiar Strangers and Public Space

Urban public spaces are prime sites for familiar stranger encounters. Goffman's (1963) concept of "civil inattention" helps explain how such encounters function: individuals acknowledge one another's presence through fleeting glances or gestures, while simultaneously respecting boundaries of privacy and anonymity. This delicate balance allows public spaces to function without constant social tension.

Jane Jacobs' (1961) classic advocacy for "eyes on the street" also indirectly references familiar strangers. Jacobs argued that the safety and vibrancy of urban neighborhoods depend not only on formal surveillance but on the regular presence of residents, shopkeepers, and passersby who, by their visibility and mutual recognition, maintain informal social control. These actors are often familiar strangers who reassure one another by their consistent presence.

William H. Whyte (1980), in his empirical studies of plazas in New York, also highlighted how the repeated use of public space fosters subtle familiarity among users. Similarly, Oldenburg's (1999) idea of "third places" like cafes, parks, and community hubs—suggests that producing familiar strangers is intrinsic to spaces that enable repeated encounters outside home and work. Together, these perspectives highlight the social ecology of public spaces where familiar strangers quietly sustain urban social order.

2.2 Familiar Strangers in Transport Sociology

Transport systems constitute some of the most routine-generating environments in cities. Commuters often follow fixed schedules and routes, producing repeated encounters with the same strangers. John Urry's (2007) mobilities paradigm situates commuting as a technical act of moving and a deeply social practice structured by time, space, and embodied routines.

In this context, familiar strangers play an important role. Laurier and Philo's (2003) ethnographic studies of car travel and commuting highlight how people develop micro-level social norms in shared spaces. Kawasaki (2016), examining Tokyo's commuting culture, observed that familiar strangers foster trust in otherwise crowded, impersonal environments. These repeated encounters create a rhythm of recognition that reassures

commuters, enhancing both psychological comfort and collective density tolerance.

Marc Augé's (1995) notion of "non-places" is also relevant here. Airports, highways, and metro systems are often described as transient environments devoid of lasting social relations. However, familiar strangers challenge this characterization by introducing continuity and recognition into anonymous transit spaces. While one may not speak to a fellow passenger, the repeated sight of the same individuals transforms the non-place into a recognizable micro-community.

The significance of familiar strangers becomes particularly visible in times of disruption. Paulos and Goodman (2004) showed that familiar strangers often become sources of information or solidarity during transit breakdowns, strikes, or crises. Their presence can mitigate the stress of uncertainty and build temporary networks of mutual support (Zhou, 2020). This capacity highlights the resilience dimension of familiar strangers in transport systems.

2.3 Weak Ties, Trust, and Social Cohesion

Mark Granovetter's (1973) concept of the "strength of weak ties" helps theorize familiar strangers. While Granovetter emphasized acquaintances as weak ties that enable information flows across networks, familiar strangers represent an even looser connection, which could be termed "ambient ties" (Paulos & Goodman, 2004). These ties rarely involve communication, yet they enhance social trust by reassuring individuals of shared routines and predictable patterns.

Trust is a critical outcome of interactions with familiar strangers. Kawasaki (2016) notes that Japanese commuters derive comfort from recognizing familiar strangers in crowded trains, reducing the anxiety of navigating dense public environments. Similarly, Forrest and Kearns (2001) argued that trust is built through strong community ties and repeated weak or ambient encounters in public life.

This form of everyday trust has significant implications for urban resilience. As Klinenberg (2002) documented in his 1995 Chicago heat wave study, neighborhoods with stronger social infrastructure based partly on weak and ambient ties were more resilient in crises. Familiar strangers, regularly populating shared spaces, are part of this social infrastructure, quietly contributing to resilience and well-being.

2.4 Familiar Strangers and Urban Design

Urban design decisions directly influence the production and maintenance of familiar strangers. Walkability, density, and mixed land uses increase the likelihood of repeated encounters, while car-dependent, low-density designs reduce them. Jan Gehl (2010) emphasized how cities designed for people rather than automobiles facilitate routine encounters that enrich public life.

Transit-oriented development (TOD), a key strategy in contemporary sustainable planning, also indirectly fosters networks of familiar strangers. TOD creates dense nodes of repeated mobility flows by concentrating housing, commerce, and services around transit hubs (Cervero & Murakami, 2009). This intensification of daily overlap among

residents and commuters produces opportunities for recognition without interaction, deepening the presence of familiar strangers.

Conversely, privatized and securitized urban spaces may diminish such encounters. Low (2006) critiques the rise of gated communities and controlled access spaces, where interactions with strangers are minimized in favor of curated exclusivity. Such environments may reduce the resilience benefits and social comfort derived from familiar strangers. Thus, designing inclusive, open, and accessible public spaces is crucial for sustaining the phenomenon.

2.5 Technological Mediation of Familiar Strangers

Digital technologies have altered how familiar strangers are recognized and experienced. Paulos and Goodman (2004) experimented with mobile sensing devices to track and identify familiar strangers in public spaces, highlighting technology's potential to make previously unnoticed relationships visible. Social media and location-based services also blur the boundaries between strangers and acquaintances, as repeated offline encounters may be reinforced by digital recognition (Hampton & Wellman, 2018).

At the same time, technological mediation introduces new forms of anxiety and surveillance. The comfort of a familiar stranger rests partly on anonymity and maintaining boundaries. If digital systems collapse this anonymity by revealing identities, the dynamic may shift toward discomfort. Thus, planners and designers must carefully consider public transport and urban space technologies such as intelligent surveillance, ticketing apps, or real-time mobility tracking intersect with the social ecology of familiar strangers.

2.6 Gaps in Literature

Despite recognition in sociology and urban ethnography, the concept of familiar strangers remains underexplored in planning literature. Transport studies often emphasize efficiency, reliability, and cost-benefit analysis, while urban design scholarship highlights aesthetics, density, and spatial form. Repeated, non-interactive encounters' subtle but influential role has received less systematic attention in planning policy or empirical research.

Most studies on familiar strangers are qualitative and rooted in sociological observation. There is limited empirical research integrating familiar strangers into urban performance indicators, planning models, or policy frameworks. Moreover, much of the literature comes from Global North contexts, such as New York, Tokyo, or European cities, while the phenomenon may be even more pronounced in the Global South's dense, transit-dependent, and socially vibrant cities. This gap motivates the need to explore contexts such as Dhaka, where familiar strangers are integral to everyday survival, safety, and belonging.

3. Methodological Approach

This theoretical and conceptual research investigates the notion of familiar strangers and its implications for urban transport and urban areas, especially public space planning. As a conceptual inquiry, it does not involve primary field data but relies on systematic review and synthesis of existing literature across sociology, psychology, mobility studies, and urban planning. The literature surveyed spans from the early foundational work of Milgram (1972, 1977) on familiar strangers to more recent studies on social behavior, commuter interactions, public space dynamics, big data, and urban mobility (e.g., Paulos & Goodman, 2004; Laurier et al., 2008; Kawasaki, 2016). The study critically examines how repeated, anonymous encounters in public transit and urban spaces contribute to social comfort, trust, predictability, and a sense of belonging. Dhaka is used as a reflective case to illustrate the relevance of familiar stranger dynamics in high-density, transit-dependent, and socially vibrant contexts. The research is conducted through a thematic and analytical synthesis of literature, connecting social-psychological insights to urban planning and transit-oriented development considerations, thereby offering conceptual guidance for integrating subtle social dynamics into urban design.

3.1 Conceptualizing Familiar Strangers in Urban Studies

Studying familiar strangers is inherently interdisciplinary, at the intersection of sociology, psychology, and urban planning. While Milgram (1977) introduced the concept through experimental and observational methods, its continued relevance lies in its analytical potential rather than rigid methodological prescriptions. For urban and transport planning, the notion of familiar strangers can be approached as a conceptual category that reveals hidden dimensions of everyday urban life, those subtle encounters that shape trust, belonging, and city resilience.

Familiar strangers serve as a lens to interpret how repetition, proximity, and recognition contribute to social order in public space. Conventional indicators of social capital, community participation, or urban design performance cannot capture their presence. However, they form a background ecology of recognition that influences how people perceive safety, comfort, and connectedness in cities.

3.2 Analytical Dimensions

In applying the concept of familiar strangers to urban and transport planning, three analytical dimensions are considered:

1. **Spatial Dimension:** Familiar strangers are a function of place. Public transport nodes, sidewalks, parks, and marketplaces generate predictable social ecologies where people see each other regularly. The spatial configuration of cities' walkability, density, and accessibility conditions the intensity and visibility of these encounters (Gehl, 2010; Jacobs, 1961).
2. **Temporal Dimension:** Familiar strangers are also a function of time. Commuting schedules, daily routines, and cycles of urban activity generate patterned encounters. Rush hour commuters, school pickup zones, or morning

market goes exemplify the temporal structuring of familiarity (Lyons & Urry, 2005).

3. **Relational Dimension:** Although no direct interaction exists, familiar strangers embody a latent social tie. They reduce anonymity, offer reassurance, and can transform into active social support in moments of crisis (Granovetter, 1973; Kusenbach, 2006). This relational dimension makes them relevant for planners concerned with resilience, safety, and civic trust.

Together, these dimensions provide a framework for understanding how familiar strangers function as a hidden layer of urban life.

3.3 Conceptual Integration into Urban and Transport Planning

To use familiar strangers as an analytical category, urban and transport planners can integrate the concept into three levels of planning thought:

- **Micro-level (Design of Public Space):** Examining how sidewalks, plazas, and transit waiting areas can enhance visibility and repetition of encounters. Design interventions such as seating, lighting, and walkability increase the likelihood of familiar stranger recognition (Whyte, 1980; Oldenburg, 1999).
- **Meso-level (Transit and Mobility Systems):** How schedule reliability, transit hub design, and passenger flow management affect commuter familiarity. Transit-oriented development (TOD) frameworks can be enriched by acknowledging familiar strangers as part of the social life of mobility (Cervero et al., 2002).
- **Macro-level (Urban Policy and Governance):** Recognizing familiar strangers as an implicit contributor to social capital and resilience. Urban policy that supports mixed-use development, density, and inclusivity indirectly sustains networks of familiar strangers that stabilize urban life (Putnam, 2000).

3.4 Why a Conceptual Lens Matters?

For planning, the conceptual framing of familiar strangers illuminates what traditional metrics often obscure. Transport planning typically measures passenger flows, travel times, and modal shares, while urban planning tracks density, land use, and accessibility. However, the lived experiences of commuters and residents—the subtle comfort of seeing the same faces every morning—escape such measurements.

By incorporating the concept of familiar strangers into analytical frameworks, planners can bridge the gap between quantitative indicators and qualitative lived experiences. This aligns with the growing recognition of cities as physical infrastructures and sociocultural ecologies where informal, often invisible, relationships play a crucial role.

4. Discussion

4.1 Transit Design and the Ecology of Familiar Strangers

Public transport systems—metros, buses, and commuter rail—serve as fertile grounds for the emergence of familiar strangers. Unlike private modes of travel, these systems concentrate people in shared spaces and synchronize their daily schedules, creating repeated exposure that cultivates a sense of recognition and subtle belonging (Milgram, 1977; Paulos & Goodman, 2004). Recent studies have further explored this phenomenon, highlighting its significance in urban mobility.

For instance, research by Zhang et al. (2022) introduced a new measurement framework to capture the spatial-temporal dynamics of familiar stranger encounters within transit networks. By analyzing smart card data from Brisbane, Australia, they developed metrics beyond traditional volumetric measures, providing a more comprehensive understanding of these interactions.

Additionally, a study by Zahnow (2023) examined the association between familiar stranger presence and incidents of theft and disorder at train stations. Utilizing transit smart card and crime data across 22 stations over six months, the study found that the presence of familiar strangers was linked to lower crime rates, suggesting that repeated encounters may enhance guardianship and compliance with social norms.

Well-designed transit systems can nurture these dynamics by emphasizing regularity, visibility, and safety. Reliable schedules ensure that commuters encounter the same individuals repeatedly, reinforcing a sense of predictability. Station design encourages visibility—such as open waiting areas with clear sightlines—and supports recognition. Lighting, seating, and crowd management strategies also influence whether these encounters produce comfort or anxiety (Gehl, 2010).

4.2 Urban Public Space and the Role of Design

Familiar strangers are equally important in non-transport public spaces like sidewalks, plazas, markets, and parks. Jacobs (1961) argued that the vitality of city streets depends on repeated encounters among diverse users, which in turn creates safety through the informal surveillance of "eyes on the street." Whyte (1980) similarly documented how plazas functioned as social theaters, where recognition among strangers generated comfort and a sense of shared belonging.

Recent studies have further explored this phenomenon, highlighting its significance in urban public spaces. For instance, a study by Zahnow (2024) examined the importance of public familiarity for a sense of belonging in urban environments. The research found that repeated, albeit brief, encounters in communal spaces contribute to social identity and a sense of community, even without direct interaction. Urban design that supports walkability, mixed-use development, and active frontages increases the likelihood of encountering familiar strangers. Sidewalk cafes, small shops, and public seating areas create repeated visual exposures, while pedestrian-friendly infrastructure slows mobility and enhances the chances of recognition (Gehl, 2010). Conversely, automobile-oriented planning reduces the opportunities for such encounters, reinforcing anonymity and social

fragmentation (Newman & Kenworthy, 1999). Significantly, familiar strangers in public spaces extend beyond safety. They foster what Lofland (1998) calls the public realm—a sphere of social life where recognition without intimacy sustains civic culture. For planners, designing environments that enable this form of subtle connection can be seen as a form of social infrastructure (Klinenberg, 2018), complementing formal institutions with informal relational ecologies.

4.3 Resilience, Safety, and the Latent Power of Familiar Strangers

One of the most overlooked contributions of familiar strangers is their role in urban resilience. In moments of disruption, whether transit breakdowns, natural disasters, or public emergencies, familiar strangers often become the first sources of assistance. Their latent ties, though weak, activate rapidly under stress (Granovetter, 1973; Kusenbach, 2006). For example, commuters stuck on a delayed train are likelier to cooperate with individuals they recognize, even if they have never spoken to them.

Recent studies have further explored this phenomenon. For instance, a study by Zahnow (2025) examined the extent to which familiar stranger encounters in everyday communal places act as an important source of social identity, belonging, and perceived attachment. The research found that repeated, albeit brief, encounters in communal spaces contribute to social identity and a sense of community, even without direct interaction.

This has profound implications for planning. Safety and resilience are often conceived in infrastructure (robust buildings, reliable systems) or institutions (emergency services, governance). Nevertheless, the ecology of familiar strangers represents a social infrastructure of resilience that planners rarely acknowledge. Supporting environments where repeated recognition occurs may indirectly strengthen collective capacities to cope with crises.

4.4 Global Perspectives: Developed and Developing Cities

The significance of familiar strangers manifests differently across contexts. In developed cities, transit systems and public spaces are often designed with predictability and safety in mind. Tokyo's metro, London's Tube, or New York's subway foster robust networks of familiar strangers, where repeated commuting creates a micro-community of recognition. Technology has begun to mediate these encounters, and apps and digital platforms can connect commuters who routinely share city routes.

In developing cities, however, familiar strangers take on added importance due to infrastructural deficits and dense populations. Informal transit modes such as rickshaws, minibuses, or shared three-wheelers generate high levels of repeated exposure. Public markets and street-based economies intensify encounters, embedding familiar strangers more deeply into the rhythms of everyday life. However, these benefits are often counterbalanced by overcrowding, safety risks, and infrastructural neglect, which can undermine the comfort that familiar strangers typically provide.

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attachment. The research found that repeated, albeit brief, encounters in communal spaces contribute to social identity and a sense of community, even without direct interaction.

Thus, while familiar strangers are a global phenomenon, their contribution to urban life is context specific. In high-income cities, they add comfort to otherwise anonymous systems. In lower-income megacities, they can be essential for survival, safety, and resilience in precarious urban conditions.

4.5 Reflection on Dhaka: Familiar Strangers in a Megacity Context

Dhaka presents a vibrant case for examining familiar strangers due to its density, reliance on public transport (according to RSTP 2015, 67 percent of people in Dhaka use public transport), and vibrant street life. With a metropolitan population exceeding 20 million, Dhaka epitomizes the challenges of urban anonymity and congestion. Nevertheless, paradoxically, its crowded transit systems, street markets, and neighborhoods produce high recognition among strangers.

Commuters often encounter the same bus passengers daily, creating a subtle sense of routine even amidst overcrowdings. In traditional bazaars, stall owners and repeat customers become familiar strangers who provide comfort and a sense of order in otherwise chaotic environments. Even on sidewalks, where rickshaw pullers, vendors, and pedestrians share space, recognition without intimacy is pervasive.

However, Dhaka's familiar stranger ecology is strained by infrastructural deficits—unpredictable transport schedules, unsafe pedestrian conditions, and insufficient public space. Instead of fostering comfort, repeated encounters sometimes reproduce anxiety, especially for vulnerable groups such as women or the elderly. Planning in Dhaka has historically prioritized mobility infrastructure without fully accounting for the social dynamics embedded in these systems (Rahman, 2021).

Integrating the concept of familiar strangers into Dhaka's planning practice could offer new perspectives. For instance, transit-Oriented Development (TOD) around the new MRT lines could consciously design for repeated safe encounters by creating open, well-lit stations, active public plazas, and accessible pedestrian pathways. Similarly, upgrading sidewalks and markets could enhance the positive potential of familiar strangers as contributors to safety, belonging, and resilience in a rapidly urbanizing megacity.

4.6 Limitations and Future Opportunities

Despite its potential, the concept of familiar strangers has limitations for planning practice. First, it is difficult to measure—planners work with quantifiable indicators, whereas familiar stranger recognition is subtle and experiential. Second, not all encounters with familiar strangers are positive; in contexts of overcrowding or harassment, repeated exposure can produce discomfort rather than reassurance. Third, cultural differences shape how recognition is perceived, suggesting that the concept may not be universally applicable without adaptation.

Nevertheless, opportunities remain. Planners can integrate familiar strangers as a qualitative planning lens, complementing quantitative mobility models. Ethnographic studies, participatory research, and observational tools can document how familiar strangers shape perceptions of safety and belonging. Incorporating this dimension may lead to planning that moves people efficiently and acknowledges the everyday sociability of urban life.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the concept of familiar strangers and their relevance to urban and transport planning. Originating from Milgram's (1972) seminal work, familiar strangers represent individuals we recognize through repeated encounters in public spaces without formal interaction. Though subtle and often overlooked, these encounters contribute to social cohesion, trust, and resilience within urban environments. By framing familiar strangers as an analytical lens, this study emphasizes the importance of incorporating the social ecology of everyday life into planning practices.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that familiar strangers are pervasive in developed and developing city contexts. In well-designed transit systems like Tokyo or New York, repeated exposure fosters micro-level social networks that enhance commuter comfort and trust. Public spaces, sidewalks, plazas, and markets serve as arenas for recognition, contributing to safety and civic engagement (Jacobs, 1961; Whyte, 1980). Urban design principles, including walkability, mixed-use development, and accessible public amenities, significantly increase opportunities for repeated encounters, reinforcing the social benefits of familiar strangers (Gehl, 2010; Oldenburg, 1999).

The study's conceptual framework highlights three dimensions critical to understanding familiar strangers: spatial, temporal, and relational. Spatially, public transport nodes and walkable neighborhoods generate predictable opportunities for recognition. Temporally, recurring routines, commuting schedules, and cycles of activity structure these encounters. Relationally, even without direct communication, familiar strangers foster latent social ties that contribute to perceptions of safety, resilience, and belonging (Granovetter, 1973; Kusenbach, 2006). These dimensions collectively provide urban planners with a lens to assess the subtle social fabric of cities beyond traditional quantitative metrics.

Reflecting on Dhaka as a case study, the city exemplifies both the potential and challenges of familiar stranger networks. Dhaka's dense population, high reliance on public transport, and vibrant street life produce frequent and repeated encounters, making familiar strangers an integral part of the urban experience. On buses, in rickshaws, and within bustling markets, recognition without interaction creates a form of micro-level social cohesion. However, infrastructural deficiencies, overcrowded transit, unsafe pedestrian environments, and limited public spaces can transform repeated encounters into stress rather than reassurance. Integrating familiar stranger dynamics into planning, particularly through Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, offers opportunities to enhance mobility and social well-being in Dhaka.

The practical implications are twofold. First, familiar strangers should be considered in urban and transport design, emphasizing visibility, predictability, and safety. For

example, well-lit transit stations, accessible sidewalks, and open public plazas can facilitate repeated encounters that promote comfort and trust. Second, planners should recognize familiar strangers as part of the social infrastructure of cities. While invisible in standard planning metrics, these latent networks contribute to resilience during emergencies, improve perceptions of safety, and strengthen everyday civic life (Klinenberg, 2018).

Despite its promise, the concept has limitations. Familiar strangers are context-specific, culturally mediated, and challenging to quantify. Repeated exposure is not universally positive; in conditions of overcrowding or harassment, recognition can produce anxiety. Nevertheless, conceptualizing familiar strangers within planning frameworks opens avenues for more human-centered urban design, bridging the gap between technical infrastructure and the lived experiences of city dwellers.

In conclusion, integrating the concept of familiar strangers into urban and transport provides theoretical enrichment and practical guidance. Globally, cities can harness the subtle social bonds produced by repeated encounters to foster trust, resilience, and public engagement. In Dhaka and other dense, rapidly urbanizing cities, such an approach is particularly pertinent, offering a pathway to design urban spaces and transit systems that are efficient and socially attuned. Recognizing familiar strangers transforms our understanding of urban life, reminding planners that the invisible, everyday recognition patterns are essential components of a livable, resilient, and socially cohesive city.

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