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Experiencing Autonomy: Passenger Perceptions of Self-Driving Shuttles Across Diverse User Groups

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ABSTRACT

Self-driving shuttles (SDSs) are increasingly considered as a means of extending public transport connectivity, particularly for short-distance and first- and last-mile trips, yet their integration into multimodal networks depends on whether diverse users find them usable and relevant to everyday travel. Existing evidence on acceptance is predominantly on scenario-based studies, with participants who have not experienced the SDSs firsthand and rarely reflects the perspectives of marginalised users. This study investigates attitudes towards and perceptions of SDSs through a real-world trial in Milton Keynes, UK, using a mixed-methods approach. Twenty-six participants across five demographic groups including underrepresented populations completed pre- and post-ride surveys and took part in focus groups. Survey responses indicate that feelings towards the SDS and willingness to recommend and pay shifted upward after the ride. Focus group findings explained why these perceptions changed. Trust was supported by visible forms of reassurance, including onboard operators and information about the SDS's detection and decisions. However, concerns centred on braking, decision-making at roundabouts, and personal security when travelling without a driver. These findings inform the vehicle design, service operation, and fare and integration policy needed to support the transition from SDS trials to driverless deployment.

Keywords: Self-driving shuttles, Passenger perceptions, Human-centred design, Accessibility, Trust, Acceptance

INTRODUCTION

Self-driving shuttles (SDSs) are low-speed, fixed-route vehicles operating without a driver, and are proposed to extend public transport into areas that conventional services reach poorly and to serve first- and last-mile trips within a multimodal network (Bucchiarone *et al.*, 2021). Realising this potential depends on public acceptance. Acceptance of Self-driving vehicles (SDVs) is shaped by user-side perceptions such as trust, perceived safety, comfort, and usability (Choi and Ji, 2015; Nordhoff *et al.*, 2020a). In the specific context of SDSs, trust, safety and security have been identified as the main factors shaping positive attitudes (Launonen *et al.*, 2021) with perceived safety tied to factors including low speed, detection and decisions, and trust in technology (Nordhoff *et al.*, 2020b).

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These perceptions have predominantly been investigated before people have experienced the SDSs, through scenario-based survey or simulation studies (Debbaghi *et al.*, 2024; Flohr *et al.*, 2024). Such work identifies which perceptions matter, but not whether they remain valid once a person has actually ridden, and road trials have begun to reveal the difference. A national survey in the UK found attitudes differed between areas with and without live trials and recommended conducting trials to facilitate adaptation to the technology (Miles *et al.*, 2018). A subsequent national study ran SDSs trials and found direct experience strengthened feelings of safety more than information alone (Department for Transport, 2023). Direct experience of the SDSs shapes attitudes in ways that surveying opinion cannot capture, highlighting its essential role in informing deployment decisions.

Yet passengers' priorities may differ with their individual needs, preferences and circumstances, while existing SDSs trials have paid limited attention to the diverse perspectives of different user groups. For passengers who may find existing transport difficult to use due to their mobility or sensory needs, a well-designed SDS could widen access and offer inclusivity. How such travellers perceive a real ride may diverge from the general public: where convenience may determine a non-disabled rider's response, adoption for people with disabilities can rest on accessibility and trust (Sharma *et al.*, 2025). These perspectives rarely enter trial-based research, whose samples are drawn mainly from the general public (Bolzmacher *et al.*, 2026; Singh *et al.*, 2026). Alongside this, direct experience of the SDSs is known to improve perceptions (Paddeu *et al.*, 2020; Jin *et al.*, 2026), but whether a single ride shifts the evaluations on which integration into a public transport network depends, such as the intention to use the service for everyday travel and what people will pay, is far less clear.

Evidence from real-world SDSs trials rarely includes marginalised users; and it is underexplored whether experience shifts the factors on which integration into a network depends, namely, willingness to use for everyday travel and pay. This study addresses these gaps through a mixed-methods study of a SDS trial in Milton Keynes (MK), where SDVs have been trialled since the UK government's first round of *Driverless Cars* projects in 2015 (Miles *et al.*, 2018). The core of the contribution lies in the examination of how a real ride shapes the prospective passengers' expectations, experiences and needs, including users under-represented in SDSs research, providing insights into how such services might be integrated into a multimodal transport network. The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the research methods used in this research. Section 3 presents the results, and Section 4 highlights the main discussion points. Finally, Section 5 details the conclusion and directions of future work.

METHOD

Study Design

The study formed part of the *StreetCAV Plus*, a project led by Milton Keynes City Council (MKCC) and Smart City Consultancy under the UK Government's CAM Pathfinder Programme, which is trialling Ohmio's

SDSs on public roads in central MK with the explicit aim of developing the technology necessary to deliver a driverless Autonomy-as-a-Service model (Milton Keynes City Council, 2025).

This paper reports the project's user needs research, which used a mixed-methods, within-participant design to understand how a real ride shapes perceptions of SDSs. Each participant completed a pre-ride survey, travelled in the SDS, completed a post-ride survey, and then took part in a focus group. The surveys quantified participants' attitudes towards and perceptions of the SDSs before and after the ride, whereas the focus groups examined the underlying reasons for these perceptions and how they evolved following the SDS ride. Data was collected from different target groups on three dates (26 March, 29 April and 15 June 2026) at MKCC offices, from which participants walked to the trial site for the ride. The study received ethical approval from Aston University (Ref. EPS21095), and all participants gave informed consent.

The SDS and the Route

The SDS was an Ohmio LIFT Shuttle, an electric, zero-emission vehicle designed to operate at near-SAE Level 4 within a defined operational design domain. It carries up to eight passengers and operates at up to 15 mph in line with current legislation, and navigates a pre-mapped route using LiDAR, cameras and GPS to detect and avoid obstacles (Ohmio, 2025). It has a low floor with step-free access, a ramp and an allocated wheelchair space with handrails, and seating with seatbelts. An interior display shows the route and real-time sensor information alongside an operator control panel (Figure 1(a)). Safety provisions include an emergency stop, redundant controls and remote monitoring from a control room.

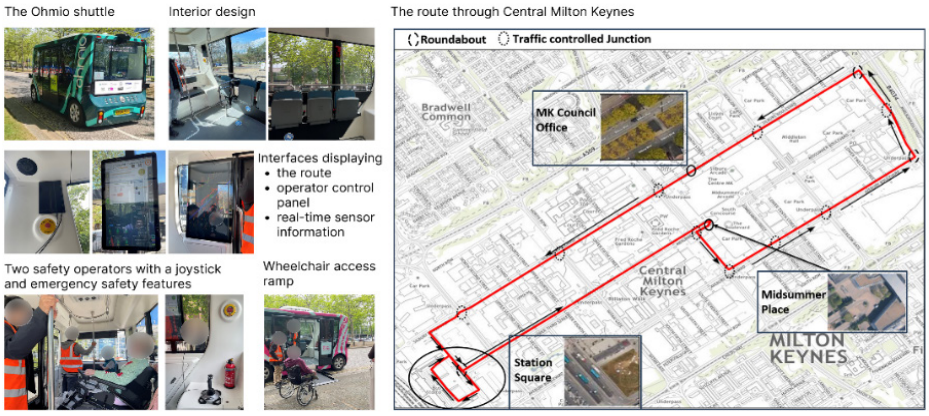


Figure 1: Images detailing (a) The SDS and (b) the route.

The route ran approximately 3.4 miles (about 20 minutes) through central MK and included roundabouts and traffic-controlled junctions (Figure 1(b)). During these trials, two safety operators remained on board to take control

at several points along the route. A joystick was available for this purpose; however, it was used solely to transport the SDS from the car park to the trial routes. The SDS stopped at designated stops and roundabout and resumed only after an operator confirmed it was safe to proceed. The same procedure was followed at junctions, as the SDS lacked connection to live traffic signal information. This connection is expected within a year once the traffic signal controllers are updated and configured appropriately, after which the SDSs will receive traffic-light status in real time.

Sample

Twenty-six residents of MK took part, recruited by the MKCC team into five groups: college students (FG1, n = 6); advanced drivers (FG2, n = 5); a mixed group of two members of a regional Bus User Group and individuals with disabilities (FG3, n = 6), including one manual wheelchair user, one powered wheelchair user with their carer, one registered deaf and blind (with slight residual hearing and vision at close distance); LGBTQ+ individuals (FG4, n = 5), all of whom identified as neurodivergent; and a group of working professionals that also included a manual wheelchair user unable to attend FG3 (FG5, n = 4). The sample captures younger and older adults and individuals with sensory, mobility and neurodivergent needs, whose perspectives are under-represented in SDSs research and recruited, in the hope, to identify reasons why they may not adopt SDVs in their everyday lives, as they represent groups who were perceived to be the most unlikely to.

Data Collection

The surveys used a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) covering general attitudes; comfort and safety (including specific aspects such as speed and braking), and service priorities.

Three items (confidence to use, willingness to use, willingness to use for everyday travel) referred to SDVs before the ride; and to SDS after it. Five further items (feelings, willingness to recommend, willingness to pay, comfort and safety) kept the SDS as their referent throughout, worded as expectation before the ride ("I expect to feel…") and as perception after it ("I felt…").

Willingness to pay was also measured as a stated maximum amount respondents were willing to pay per trip, chosen from fixed options capped at £3. Preferred service features were selected from a fixed list of twelve attributes.

Following the post-ride survey, each group took part in a 30–40 minutes audio-recorded focus group for subsequent analysis. Facilitators guided each session around three pre-defined areas (A. Ride experience; B. Pricing and willingness to pay; and C. Technology understanding and trust) and put follow-up questions as the discussion developed, so that participants also raised matters beyond the guide.

Data Analysis

Survey responses are reported descriptively using medians and full response distributions. Focus group recordings were transcribed and analysed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2022) in two stages. Transcripts were first summarised at the semantic level into codes by one analyst. These codes were then structured deductively against the areas of the discussion guide which formed the main categories; and grouped within each into subcategories by shared aspect of the question. Subcategory classification was agreed after discussions among the analyst and three researchers with expertise in autonomous vehicle, human factors and transportation research. For each subcategory, the number of contributing participants (np) and groups (ng) are reported as indicators of spread. Quotes are presented verbatim, with ellipses marking omitted parts and square brackets editorial notes for readability.

RESULTS

Pre- and Post-Surveys

Participant Characteristics

The 26 participants were of a wide age range, with the younger (18–24) and the older ($\geq$ 65) age groups having the most participants, each accounting for 7 people. Fifteen identified as men, eight as women, two as non-binary and one as other. Fourteen reported being able to drive and twelve drove currently. The most used modes of transport were private car (7), walking (6), and bus (5).

Attitudes to SDVs

Three items on attitudes to SDVs returned a median of 3, spread across the full scale (Figure 2(b), labelled 'pre'). Willingness to use and confidence divided participants around a neutral centre, and willingness to use for everyday travel sat lowest, with six disagreeing and thirteen neutral.

Attitudes to SDSs

Confidence and willingness to us SDSs each returned a median of 4, while willingness to use for everyday travel held at 3, six participants disagreeing and nine neutral (Figure 2(b), labelled 'post').

Feelings, willingness to recommend, willingness to pay moved upward together from a median of 3 to 4 (Figure 2(a)). The favourable share of recommendation responses roughly doubling. Comfort and safety held at a median of 4 across the ride. Overall, the comfort ratings remained positive. Safety held at the same median while its distribution widened. Every participant had expected to feel safe at neutral or above, whereas four disagreed afterwards.

A broadly positive perception of the ride held alongside a specific negative opinion to the braking behaviour of the SDS (Figure 2(c)). Overall satisfaction, perception of the speed and positive impression change each

returned a median of 4, while braking comfort was the lowest-rated item at a median of 2, with most participants (16 of 26) rating it in disagree or strongly disagree.

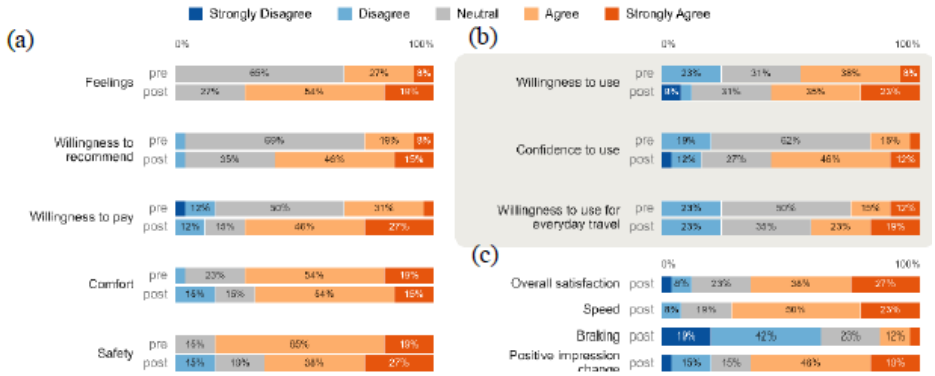


Figure 2: Distribution of responses to the attitudinal items (n = 26).

Maximum Fare Per Trip

This measure and the Likert item of willingness to pay above moved differently. Before the ride, the £3 was the most common choice (12 of 26). After the ride, those choosing £3 fell to nine, the £1-£2 options increased from 7 to 10, and the number refusing to pay fell from 5 to 4. Some participants declined to name a single amount in both surveys and indicated it should depend on the journey.

Preferred Service Features

The preferred service features are reported by how often each was chosen, see Table 1. After the ride, participants prioritised features that support safety and confidence in using the SDSs, including direct contact with the control centre (17), live CCTV monitoring (14) and an onboard human assistant (13). Service reliability and integration were also important, particularly fixed bus stops with real-time information (17) and links between transport interchanges (16).

Table 1: Preferred service features.

Service Feature	Pre	Post
Fixed bus stop with real-time information	16	17
Virtual stops along a set shuttle route	9	10
E-haling service via a mobile phone app	8	8
Telephone booking system	7	3
Fixed route shuttle bus service	8	7
Maximum journey time of thirty minutes	5	5

(Continued)

Table 1: Continued.

Service Feature	Pre	Post
No maximum journey time	5	4
Onboard screen showing shuttle bus	12	10
Onboard human assistant	12	13
Direct contact with shuttle bus control centre in the event of emergency	17	17
Live monitoring of CCTV by shuttle bus control centre	16	14
Between transport interchanges (bus and train stations, mobility hubs)	13	16

Focus Groups

Table 2 shows the pre-defined areas, the main and sub- categories, and, for every subcategory, the number of contributing participants (np) and groups (ng).

Table 2: Categories with the number of contributing participants and groups.

Main category	Subcategory	ng	np
A. Ride Experience			
A.1 How would you describe your overall experience of riding the SDS today?			
Overall experience	Impressions	5	16
	Expectations	3	5
	Attitude shift	4	6
	Willingness to use	3	7
	SDSs within the public transport system	3	7
A.2 How comfortable did you feel during the ride? What affected your comfort?			
Comfort	Braking	5	15
	Seating	4	10
	Sensory environment	2	6
A.3 During today's ride, were there any situations when you felt more safe or less safe? What, specifically, made you feel that way?			
Safety	Driving behaviour and road safety	5	12
	Interior design	5	12
	Emergency equipment and surveillance	4	12
	Safety information	4	8
	Boarding	4	9
A.4 Would being alone or with other passengers influence how confident or comfortable you would feel in the SDS at any stage?			
Personal security	Personal security perceptions	5	23

(Continued)

Table 2: Continued.

Main category	Subcategory	ng	np
B. Pricing & Willingness to Pay			
B.1 What do you think is a reasonable fare for a typical SDS trip in Central Milton Keynes? What would you consider most when deciding how much would you pay for the SDS ride?			
Willingness to pay	Fare structure	5	13
	Concessions and integration	5	12
	Reference points for value	3	5
	Determinants of willingness to pay	3	6
C. Technology Understanding & Trust			
C.1 After today's ride, how much did you trust the SDS to operate safely on similar urban routes? What influence that level of trust?			
Trust	Factors building trust	5	12
	Limits and boundary conditions	4	10
	Trust in operation	2	4

Ride Experience

Overall Experience

Overall impressions were positive across all five groups, and several participants reported that the ride exceeded a cautious prior expectation: *"it was a lot more enjoyable than I thought it would have been"* (FG3_P3). The low operating speed was read as an advantage: *"it just felt nice and calm and reassuring"* (FG4_P4), often by explicit contrast with the driving style of conventional bus drivers.

This positive impression, however, did not extend to acceptance. For some participants, willingness to use was stated as conditional (np = 7), contingent on reliable timekeeping, adequate route coverage, and, for those requiring assistance, on arrangements the ride did not test such as pre-booking the wheelchair space.

Comfort

While overall comfort was rated acceptable, this concealed a consistent complaint. Negative comments on braking were the most prominent, mentioned by 15 participants across all 5 groups, ranging from *"a bit jolting"* (FG3_P3) to being *"flailed around"* (FG5_P1). For the wheelchair users in FG3, harsh braking became a safety concern rather than one of comfort.

The sensory environment brought about a distinctly different and more positive experience (np = 6). Neurodivergent participants identified the quieter cabin as an advantage a conventional bus does not offer.

Safety

Safety perceptions separated into two aspects: the behaviour of the SDS on the road, and the passengers' physical safety inside it. Criticism centred on the SDS's hesitancy: *"if it was a human person, it would be a terrible driver…*

very hesitant" (FG2_P4), and two participants framed this as frustrating rather than unsafe.

Inside the SDS, participants raised several concerns related to interior design. Seatbelts were considered as essential given the harsh braking (np = 6, ng = 4). Regarding emergency facilities, two participants mentioned seeing them present can enhance perceived safety, however, two participants noted that such devices were not usable from every seat. The strongest instance concerned emergency escape, with a wheelchair user pointed out the escape facilities cannot achieve an escape: "*even if I got the hammer… what can I do then? You've got to climb over a seat to get out"* (FG5_P4). Under emergency situations, the participants preferred a means of communication (np = 4) instead of a means to stop (np = 1).

Boarding and alighting constituted another safety issue, raised by 9 participants. The recurring issue was the SDS's ability to align with the kerb: *"there is a gap between the step and the kerb… it was difficult for me to adjust the height"* (FG3_P2), with related accounts of the entrance lacking safety handrails.

Personal Security

The question on personal security concerns drew the widest response by 23 of the 26 participants across all five groups. The shuttle cabin size contributed to these concerns: *"it's a very small, intimate space"* (FG2_P1). The absence of a driver was perceived as the removal of a capacity to intervene and would harm personal security: *"How would you manage if you get a bunch of teenagers on"* (FG3_P5).

Concerns about co-passengers were conditional on circumstance (np = 6): *"it varies massively on people and time of day"* (FG3_P6). Women described apprehension in the enclosed space: *"I would not feel particularly safe. I would be apprehensive"* (FG2_P5). One participant reasoned the other way, drawing an analogy with a lift breaking down, suggested that the co-passengers could reduce anxiety through company: *"you can help calm each other."* (FG4_P1).

Pricing and Willingness to Pay

Views on payment showed a consensus, with 25 of the 26 participants accepting that the service should be paid for, with a single exception stating *"I wouldn't really want to pay... Well I already contribute my council tax"* (FG2_P2).

Compared to a flat rate, tiered pricing models was preferred such as charging by distance and with a daily cap. Participants favoured integrating the SDSs tickets into existing public transport fare scheme and setting up combined tickets for SDSs and trains. User group-based pricing concessions such as free travel for the elderly and people with disabilities are favoured (np = 9). It met an objection that a single fare was fairer, *"because you're using the exact same thing"* (FG1_P3).

Similar debates exist regarding the criteria upon which ticket prices should be set. Reliability is viewed as more important than comfort (np = 4).

The absence of a driver entered as a reason the fare should fall below a conventional bus: *"there's no driver… why am I paying the same for that?"* (FG5_P3). Two participants reasoned from the operator's side, asking about *"the payback period"* (FG2_P4).

Technology Understanding and Trust

Trust in the SDSs was shaped less by the technology than by two visible forms of reassurance. The first was visible information (np = 7) such as a display showing what the vehicle had detected and why it acted: *"I trusted it because you could see on the panel why it was stopping"* (FG3_P3). The second was a visible person (np = 6): *"having the human presence there definitely reduced tension"* (FG1_P5). Trust was also explicitly bounded, held to the low speed (np = 2) and the grid layout of central Milton Keynes (np = 8), and not extended beyond them.

Participants expressed concerns about the operations without drivers (np = 4): *"how are they going to check the bus before it goes into service?"* (FG5_P4), and whether one remote supervisor watching several SDSs could respond in time.

DISCUSSION

Direct experience of the SDSs improved attitudes (feelings, willingness to recommend and pay) while leaving comfort and safety unchanged, which differs from Paddeu *et al.* (2020) who found improved comfort after riding. Comfort was reduced by the braking, which a positive overall impression could not fully offset, suggesting comfort gains after experience depends on the specific SDS and route.

The acceptance reported in this trial was conditional. The features that maintained participants' safety and trust, such as onboard operators and a display showing the SDS's detection, would not normally be retained in driverless deployments. The reliance on such temporary features is also recorded in national SDSs trials (Department for Transport, 2023). When asked about personal security, participants referred to the absent driver and the loss of someone able to intervene. A driverless service therefore needs to rebuild the reassurance by other means, or the acceptance observed under supervised trials may not carry over to deployment.

Accessibility determined whether the service is usable for diverse passengers. The shuttle improved on conventional transport for people with sensory and mobility needs, yet its accessibility features did not fully meet their needs. For example, the ramps are not always aligned with the kerb, and wheelchair users lack escape routes in emergencies. Accessibility is a prerequisite for using the service and must be considered from the initial design stage.

The findings point to design recommendations at three levels. At the level of the vehicle, the most important factors are those that determine access and physical safety: smoother deceleration and secure handholds; ramps that align with the kerbs; reachable emergency equipment; and a means of escape for people with mobility needs. At the level of the service, participants' trust rested on a present or reachable person and on visible evidence of what

the vehicle was doing, so a driverless operation would need to reconstruct both through responsive remote contact and an in-cabin display of detection and intent. At the level of pricing, willingness to pay was reasoned against existing travel modes; participants expected the SDSs to sit within current bus fares and concession schemes and to connect with rail, and to cost less where no driver is carried.

The findings are based on a small sample of 26 participants from targeted user groups. While it is not representative, its selection aims to reach perspectives from those perceived unlikely to use a SDV transport service and often overlooked in SDSs research and to point to priorities for design and further study.

CONCLUSION

Direct experience enhanced participants' perceptions of the SDSs and their willingness to recommend and pay. Reassurance from temporary features including safety operators which will be removed in future driverless deployments, contributed to this. Accessibility barriers remain but offer an improvement on traditional buses. The findings highlight the need for safer and more inclusive vehicle design, effective remote assistance, clear information about vehicle's decisions to enhance perceptions of safety. Integration with existing public transport fares and services would enhance perception of willingness to use the service. Successful SDSs deployment depends not only on technology readiness, but also on building trust, usability and accessibility across diverse passengers.

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