Studies show Lyft, Uber more equitable than taxis

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Portland State's Transportation Research and Education Center invited Dr. Anne Brown—assistant professor in the Planning, Public Policy and Management program at University of Oregon—to discuss demographic equity in ride hailing services such as Uber and Lyft.

The event was held May 31, as a part of PSU TREC's ongoing Friday Transportation Seminars.

Brown said she conducted two studies in an attempt to answer three questions about ride hailing services: Where are Lyft trips, who uses Lyft and is there evidence of discrimination in ride hailing and taxi industries? The studies were based in Los Angeles County, California.

The first study Brown conducted, titled "Ride Hail Travel and Equity in Los Angeles," sought to answer her first two questions. In the study, Brown tracked roughly 6.3 million Lyft rides over a three-month period to see where Lyft rides were taken and who was taking them.

Brown concluded Lyft rides were taken in 99.8% of Los Angeles.

"It's pretty remarkable the spread of this service," Brown said.

Brown then shifted her focus to an audit study she conducted in order to see if discrimination was evident in ride hailing and taxi services.

In the study, Brown said she "sent out young adults, University of California, Los Angeles students, all between the ages of 20 and 30, who dressed similarly. They were instructed to wear plain clothes, nothing too flashy…they all have 4.5 star ratings or higher on their Uber and Lyft accounts…and they were all standing at the same locations."

Brown said, for every trip, they recorded wait times: how long it took for a driver to be assigned and how long it took for the driver to reach them. They also reported cancelations.

The results, in Brown's words, "were stark," especially in the case of taxi services.

"How do these wait times and cancellations vary across race ethnicity and gender?" Brown asked. "What I find is that there's no difference between Asian, Hispanic or white riders — there's no difference between men and women riders — but there are significant differences between black and white riders," she said.

According to Brown, "Black riders are 73% more likely to have a trip canceled on them compared to white riders" when using taxi services.

Ride hailing services such as Lyft and Uber fared much better, with only a 4% difference between black and white riders for cancelations, and all riders ended up getting assigned another driver within 18 seconds after being canceled on.

Brown concluded that, while ride hailing services do much better in terms of demographic equity compared to taxi services, there's still a lot of work to be done.

"What I want to emphasize, especially with these latter findings, is that technology isn't a clean slate," Brown said. "It doesn't mean that we're going to erase the decades and centuries of discrimination and injustices we have to date, but they are a tool."

Brown emphasized the importance of policy makers and city planners who will be instrumental in making sure, as transportation systems evolve, that they include all members of society. She referenced a few examples of independent non-profits and other companies in cities like Seattle that are expanding the reach of ride hail services by accepting payment methods that don't involve bank accounts and that can be hailed by landline phones.

Since 2000, TREC has hosted over 450 seminars that feature local scholars who share their work regarding technology and transportation implementation.

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