

It's not preference or habit but a transport system that still makes driving the most rational choice

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Why Malaysians won't ditch their cars

DESPITE rising costs, persistent congestion and decades of investment in public transport, Malaysians continue to rely heavily on private vehicles. Experts say the reason is not habit or resistance to change, but a system that still makes cars the most rational choice.

Universiti Putra Malaysia Road Safety Research Centre head Associate Professor Dr Law Teik Hua said fuel price changes are often overstated as a tool for behavioural change. In reality, they are minor compared to the broader cost and convenience calculus of driving in the Klang Valley.

"In the Klang Valley, fuel is only one part of the equation," he said, noting that commuters also weigh tolls, parking, school runs, errand chaining and long travel times.

For many households with commutes of up to two hours daily, small fuel changes do little to shift behaviour. At the core of the car dependence is a mismatch between public transport design and daily travel needs.

Law said the main barriers are practical, not ideological: inconsistent feeder buses, fragmented connections and weak first- and last-mile access.

A trip from Shah Alam to Kuala Lumpur may take about 70 minutes by car. The same journey using multiple modes – bus, rail, walking and transfers – can exceed 100 minutes.

Traffic Index as at May 15			
Worldwide Rank	City	Average congestion	Time lost during rush hour per year
10	Bangkok	67.9%	115 hours
24	Jakarta	59.8%	125 hours
40	Manila	57%	143 hours
162	Singapore	43.9%	81 hours
172	Kuala Lumpur	43.4%	84 hours

Source: TomTom Traffic Index

"When time, comfort and certainty are factored in, the car remains the logical option," he said.

While rail services are generally reliable, perception breaks down outside the train itself. Law said the weakest links are station access, pedestrian safety, escalator reliability, bus frequency and crowding.

This gap between service quality and lived experience helps explain why public transport remains unattractive.

Although driving is often described as a habit, Law said these habits are structurally reinforced. Car ownership is embedded in housing choices, school routines and child-care logistics.

What appears as "car dependency," he

said, is actually a system designed around private mobility.

Even programmes such as BANGUN KL, which encourage staggered travel times, operate within an environment that still favours cars.

Transport behaviour, he said, is largely shaped by urban design. When housing, jobs and schools are separated and linked mainly by highways, the car becomes the default option.

"In places like Shah Alam, land use and road design make walking or transit impractical," he said.

Malaysia's pricing structure further strengthens this. Fuel subsidies, toll systems, financing options and tax policies reduce the

perceived cost of driving, while public transport continues to suffer from last-mile inefficiencies.

For Shah Alam commuters, shifting away from cars would require three conditions: a reliable rail backbone, seamless first- and last-mile connectivity and flexible work arrangements.

Even then, the system must offer not just speed, but predictability and reduced stress.

"If the train takes slightly longer but removes parking stress and driving fatigue, people will consider it," he said.

Safety concerns also extend beyond crime or enforcement. Law highlighted poorly lit walkways, unsafe crossings, motorcycle conflicts and uncomfortable waiting environments – especially affecting women, students, shift workers and the elderly.

"In many cases, the issue is not the train, but the 600 metres before and after it," he said.

The first- and last-mile gap remains one of the most underestimated barriers in the system.

Commuters, he said, judge transport not by individual modes but by the full journey. A short train ride can be outweighed by uncertainty, weather exposure or unsafe walking routes.

If one change could immediately ease congestion, Law said it would be staggered commuting hours.