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Hybrid and Electric Vehicle (EV) integration in public transport: Challenges and opportunities

Uthman Opeyemi Abdullahi [1,*] and Adnan Adnan [2]

[1] *Department of Mechatronics and Computer System Engineering, University of East London.*
[2] *School of Architecture, Computer, and Engineering, University of East London Royal Docks Centre for Sustainability, University of East London.*

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Abstract

As cities worldwide grapple with the dual challenges of increasing urbanization and climate change, the integration of hybrid and electric vehicles (EVs) into public transport systems emerges as a critical solution. This article examines the multifaceted challenges and opportunities associated with adopting hybrid and EV technologies for buses and coaches. Key challenges include the high initial costs, the need for robust infrastructure, and concerns regarding vehicle reliability. Conversely, the transition offers significant benefits, such as substantial emissions reductions, improved operational efficiency, and enhanced public perception of sustainable practices. Through an evaluation of successful case studies from cities like London, Amsterdam, and Shenzhen, this article highlights effective strategies and outcomes achieved in the realm of public transport electrification. Ultimately, the findings underscore the necessity for collaborative efforts among stakeholders to drive the successful integration of hybrid and EV technologies, paving the way for a more sustainable urban mobility future.

Keywords: Hybrid vehicles; Electric Vehicles (EVs); Public-sustainable transport; Emissions reduction; Green mobility; and climate action

1. Introduction

1.1. The Importance of Transitioning to Hybrid and Electric Vehicles in Public Transport

As the world faces increasing environmental challenges, transitioning to hybrid and electric vehicles (EVs) in public transport is essential for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving air quality, and promoting sustainable urban mobility. Public transport systems are crucial for reducing congestion in cities, but they also contribute significantly to urban pollution. The shift to cleaner vehicle technologies, such as hybrid and electric buses, offers a tangible solution to mitigating these environmental impacts.

According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), the transportation sector is responsible for nearly a quarter of global energy-related CO2 emissions, with conventional diesel buses being a significant contributor (IEA, 2021). By replacing these with hybrid and electric buses, public transit systems can drastically cut emissions and align with global climate goals such as the Paris Agreement.

From an economic standpoint, hybrid and electric vehicles offer lower operational costs in terms of fuel and maintenance compared to diesel buses. The American Public Transportation Association (APTA) highlights that electric

* Corresponding author: Uthman O Abdullahi

buses can save transit agencies up to 50% on fuel costs over their lifetime, providing a financial incentive for this transition (APTA, 2020).

Table 1 Emissions Comparison of Conventional Diesel Buses vs. Electric Buses

Vehicle Type	CO2 Emissions (g/km	NOx Emissions (g/km)	NOx Emissions (g/km)
Diesel Bus	1,200	6.0	0.5
Hybrid Bus	800	3.0	0.3
Electric Bus	0	0	0

(Source: IEA, 2021)

Furthermore, transitioning to EV technology enhances the public image of transit authorities as they align with the growing demand for eco-friendly solutions. Cities like London and Shenzhen have already made significant strides in integrating EVs into their public transport fleets, demonstrating that large-scale implementation is achievable.

1.2. Goals of the Article

This article aims to explore the challenges, opportunities, and successful case studies of integrating hybrid and electric vehicle technology in public transport. Specifically, it will address:

- Challenges: High initial investment, infrastructure development (e.g., charging stations), and operational concerns such as range limitations and maintenance.
- Opportunities: Long-term cost savings, emissions reduction, and improved public perception of public transport systems.
- Case Studies: Evaluation of cities like Amsterdam, London, and Shenzhen, which have successfully integrated hybrid/EV technologies into their public transport fleets.

By assessing both the barriers and the benefits of this transition, the article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how public transport systems can evolve towards sustainability.

2. Challenges in Adopting Hybrid/EV Technologies

Transitioning to hybrid and electric vehicles (EVs) in public transport comes with various challenges, including financial, infrastructural, and operational hurdles. Addressing these challenges is critical to ensure the widespread adoption and sustainability of EV technologies.

2.1. Cost Efficiency

One of the main barriers to adopting hybrid and EV technologies in public transport is the high initial investment. Electric buses typically cost more upfront compared to their diesel counterparts. However, long-term savings can be achieved through reduced fuel and maintenance costs. According to the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), EVs can cut fuel costs by up to 50% over their lifespan. This economic benefit is appealing but can take years to materialize, making initial financing a critical issue.

Funding and Subsidies: Many governments offer funding and subsidies to offset these high initial costs. For example, the U.S. Federal Transit Administration's Low or No Emission (Low-No) Program provides grants to transit agencies to purchase electric vehicles and install the necessary infrastructure.

2.2. Infrastructure Needs

The successful adoption of EV technology also requires significant infrastructure investments.

- Charging Station Requirements: To support an electric fleet, a robust network of charging stations is essential. This involves both depot charging stations for overnight use and on-route fast chargers for quick energy top-ups during operational hours. The availability of charging infrastructure is a challenge, particularly in densely populated urban areas where space is limited.

- Grid Capacity: Increased electrification in public transport puts pressure on the electrical grid. Upgrading the grid to handle the additional load from EVs, especially during peak usage times, is critical to avoid energy shortages and ensure reliable service.
- Maintenance Facilities and Technician Training: Public transport agencies need to upgrade their maintenance facilities and provide training for technicians to service hybrid and electric buses. This includes understanding high-voltage systems, battery management, and specialized diagnostics, which differ from conventional diesel vehicle maintenance.

2.3. Reliability and Performance

While hybrid and electric buses offer significant environmental benefits, reliability and performance remain concerns, particularly in public transport systems that require consistent, long-distance service.

Range Limitations and Battery Life: EVs are often limited by their range, which can be affected by factors such as terrain, passenger load, and temperature. Battery life and degradation over time also pose long-term operational challenges, with replacement costs being a significant factor in overall lifecycle expenses.

Performance in Different Weather Conditions: Extreme weather conditions—such as cold winters or hot summers—can negatively impact the performance of batteries in electric buses. Cold temperatures, for example, can reduce battery efficiency, affecting vehicle range and requiring additional energy for heating systems. These performance variations can disrupt service reliability and complicate route planning.

3. Opportunities Offered by Hybrid/EV Integration

The transition to hybrid and electric vehicles (EVs) in public transport systems offers various advantages beyond emissions reduction, operational efficiency, and public perception. These include long-term sustainability, potential for technological innovation, and contributions to broader societal goals.

3.1. Emissions Reduction

One of the most significant opportunities offered by hybrid and electric buses is the reduction of harmful emissions. EVs produce zero tailpipe emissions, significantly lowering levels of carbon dioxide (CO2), nitrogen oxides (NOx), and particulate matter (PM) compared to conventional diesel buses. This has a direct impact on urban air quality, improving public health and helping cities meet environmental regulations such as those set by the Paris Agreement or local clean air initiatives. Cleaner public transport systems contribute to the overall sustainability goals of cities worldwide.

In addition to improving urban air quality, the transition to hybrid and electric buses helps cities comply with international environmental regulations aimed at combating climate change. The transportation sector is one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, responsible for roughly 24% of global CO2 emissions (International Energy Agency, 2021). By reducing emissions from public transport fleets, cities can significantly lower their carbon footprints and contribute to achieving global climate goals, such as the Paris Agreement's target to limit global warming to below 2°C.

Moreover, this reduction in emissions can also have positive economic effects. Reduced healthcare costs associated with treating respiratory and cardiovascular diseases caused by air pollution can save governments billions annually. Cities that proactively reduce air pollution through EV integration can see marked improvements in public health outcomes over time, potentially lowering the burden on healthcare infrastructure.

3.2. Operational Efficiency

Hybrid and electric vehicles offer reduced fuel costs and lower maintenance expenses due to fewer moving parts compared to internal combustion engines. This results in lower lifetime costs, despite higher initial investments. Additionally, EVs provide increased operational reliability because they are less prone to breakdowns, reducing downtime and improving the overall quality of service in public transport systems. Efficient energy use and longer service intervals ensure transit agencies save on operational expenses, leading to better financial sustainability.

Beyond reduced fuel costs, hybrid and electric buses offer the possibility of energy savings through regenerative braking systems. In electric buses, regenerative braking captures kinetic energy that would otherwise be lost as heat and converts it back into electrical energy to recharge the battery. This can further extend vehicle range and increase energy efficiency.

The long-term cost savings are not limited to fuel. Maintenance efficiency is also significantly improved. EVs have fewer moving parts than traditional internal combustion engines, meaning there is less wear and tear on the drivetrain. Components such as transmissions, exhaust systems, and oil filters, which are common in diesel buses, are either absent or greatly simplified in EVs. This results in fewer breakdowns and less frequent servicing needs, thus improving fleet reliability and minimizing costly downtime for repairs.

Additionally, government incentives and tax benefits further improve the financial viability of EVs for public transit agencies. Countries like Norway, Germany, and the United States offer generous incentives to support the deployment of electric buses, making the initial investment more affordable and hastening the payback period (European Alternative Fuels Observatory, 2020).

3.3. Public Perception and Adoption

Adopting hybrid and electric vehicles in public transport enhances the public image of transit authorities and governments, showing a commitment to sustainable practices. Communities increasingly support eco-friendly initiatives, and cities that adopt cleaner vehicle technologies are viewed more favorably by their residents. Positive public perception can encourage greater ridership, as people become more willing to use transport systems that align with their environmental values. Moreover, it positions cities as leaders in climate action, potentially attracting further investment and innovation.

The integration of hybrid and electric vehicles into public transportation systems provides a strong public relations advantage for cities and transit authorities. Promoting green transport solutions can attract attention from environmentally conscious travellers and encourage greater use of public transport. In a time when citizens are increasingly aware of environmental issues, the use of EVs is seen as a progressive step toward sustainable urban living.

Furthermore, this positive public perception can increase governmental and private sector support for further innovation in public transport systems. When EVs are presented as a viable alternative to traditional buses, public enthusiasm for clean energy technologies can drive political action and stimulate investments from both private and public stakeholders. For example, cities that have adopted EVs in public transport, like Shenzhen, have seen an uptick in eco-tourism and urban planning awards, which add value to the city's branding as a green leader (Zhou, 2020).

In the context of consumer adoption, electric buses help to normalize EV technology in daily life. Passengers who experience the quiet, clean ride of electric buses may become more inclined to consider electric personal vehicles in the future. As more cities and transit agencies adopt hybrid and electric technology, the transition toward a broader electric vehicle ecosystem could accelerate, further reducing emissions and fostering a culture of sustainability.

4. Case Studies: City/Country Examples

Several cities and countries have successfully integrated hybrid and electric vehicles (EVs) into their public transport systems, setting examples for others to follow. These case studies highlight the strategies employed and the results achieved in terms of emissions reductions, operational efficiency, and cost savings.

4.1. London, United Kingdom

London has been a global leader in the adoption of hybrid and electric buses. The city’s Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ), introduced in 2019, encouraged a shift towards cleaner transport. By 2023, over 800 electric buses were operating in London, representing one of the largest electric bus fleets in Europe (Transport for London, 2023). This has led to significant emissions reductions, with studies showing a drop in nitrogen oxide (NOx) levels by 44% in central London (London Assembly, 2022). Additionally, the city has reduced operational costs through lower fuel and maintenance expenses, contributing to long-term financial sustainability.

4.2. Amsterdam, Netherlands

Amsterdam aims to make its public transport fleet completely emission-free by 2025. The city has already deployed electric buses powered by renewable energy sources, reducing greenhouse gas emissions while supporting its broader climate action goals (Amsterdam Municipality, 2022). Amsterdam’s strategy includes the establishment of dedicated charging infrastructure and the promotion of green mobility solutions throughout the city. The results have been promising, with electric buses contributing to improved air quality and reduced fuel costs, benefiting both the environment and public finances.

4.3. Shenzhen, China

Shenzhen is one of the most prominent examples of large-scale EV adoption. In 2017, it became the first city in the world to transition its entire public bus fleet—more than 16,000 buses—to electric power (Zhou, 2020). The city achieved this by investing in a comprehensive charging infrastructure and providing government subsidies to support the transition. This move has led to a 48% reduction in CO2 emissions and significant cost savings from reduced fuel consumption and maintenance needs. Shenzhen's success demonstrates that large-scale EV integration is possible with coordinated planning and support from both public and private sectors.

5. Conclusion

The transition to hybrid and electric vehicles (EVs) in public transport presents both significant challenges and substantial opportunities. The exploration of various case studies has illustrated that while obstacles such as initial investment costs, infrastructure needs, and concerns regarding reliability and performance exist, these can be effectively addressed through strategic planning and collaboration.

5.1. Key Findings

5.1.1. Challenges

- **Cost Efficiency**: The initial capital required to purchase hybrid and electric buses remains a considerable barrier for many transit agencies. However, this challenge is mitigated over time by lower operating costs, reduced fuel expenses, and ongoing government subsidies. The long-term savings associated with maintenance and fuel efficiency often outweigh the upfront investments.
- **Infrastructure Needs**: The successful implementation of hybrid and electric buses necessitates a robust infrastructure, including adequate charging stations and grid capacity. Many cities have risen to this challenge by investing in innovative charging solutions and enhancing their energy grid capabilities.
- **Reliability and Performance**: Concerns over range limitations and battery performance, especially in adverse weather conditions, have been significant in the transition process. However, advancements in battery technology and better integration of renewable energy sources are gradually overcoming these hurdles, ensuring that hybrid and electric buses can meet the demands of public transport.

5.1.2. Opportunities

- **Emissions Reduction**: The integration of hybrid and electric technologies leads to significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and improved urban air quality. This contributes to public health benefits and aligns with global climate action goals.
- **Operational Efficiency**: The lower fuel costs, reduced maintenance requirements, and increased reliability of EVs can result in substantial long-term savings for transit agencies. Furthermore, the use of electric buses contributes to enhanced service quality and increased ridership, as passengers are attracted to cleaner and quieter transport options.
- **Public Perception and Adoption**: Cities adopting hybrid and electric vehicles not only improve their environmental standing but also enhance their public image. By demonstrating a commitment to sustainability, they foster greater community support for public transport initiatives and encourage wider adoption of green technologies.

5.2. Importance of Collaborative Efforts

The successful transition to hybrid and electric public transport is fundamentally reliant on collaborative efforts between governments, manufacturers, and communities.

- **Governments** play a crucial role in setting regulatory frameworks and providing financial incentives that encourage transit agencies to invest in hybrid and electric technologies. By developing clear policies and long-term strategies, governments can facilitate the transition, ensuring that it aligns with broader environmental and economic objectives.
- **Manufacturers** must continue to innovate, developing affordable, reliable, and efficient hybrid and electric vehicles tailored for public transport needs. Collaboration with transit agencies can help identify specific requirements and lead to the development of vehicles that meet those needs while enhancing performance and reducing costs.

- **Communities** play an essential role in embracing sustainable transport solutions. Public awareness campaigns can educate citizens about the benefits of hybrid and electric vehicles, fostering a culture of sustainability and increasing public transit ridership.

In summary, while challenges exist in the integration of hybrid and electric vehicles into public transport systems, the opportunities for emissions reduction, operational efficiency, and improved public perception present compelling reasons for this transition. Collaborative efforts among governments, manufacturers, and communities are vital in driving this change, ensuring that public transport systems evolve to meet the needs of a sustainable future. Through these combined efforts, cities can pave the way for a cleaner, more efficient public transport system that benefits both the environment and their residents

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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