



Why driving to work is less fun than we think...

By Valerie Flynn

COMMUTING by car rather than bus is a mug's game, according to new university research.

And getting behind the wheel is often the wrong choice and irrational, reckons UCD's David Comerford, who has been using city commuters as guinea pigs in his new study.

More than 1,000 people who commute to UCD's Belfield campus were part of the test.

POSITIVE

Mr Comerford found that, a few hours after reaching the campus, drivers said getting there was an enjoyable experience.

But those who were encouraged to remember how they had felt while they were driving - for instance how tired they felt, how exhilarated, how attractive - took a significantly less positive view of driving.

By contrast, public transport has negative mental associations that are not borne out in reality, Mr Comerford found.

The results of the study for bus users were found to be the reverse of those for car drivers. When those who had travelled by bus were encouraged to think rationally about their commute, they gave it the thumbs up.

Mr Comerford, a doctoral student at UCD's Geary Institute, said people are culturally conditioned to associate the idea of driving with positive concepts like freedom, control and exhilaration, rather than with the reality of sitting in traffic. Advertisements establish an association between driving a car and speeding along deserted roads in the Alps," said Mr Comerford.

"This gets entrenched over time because we label experiences that are similar to the advertisements as pure driving experiences.

EMPTY

"For example, when my dad

used to take us on Sunday afternoon drives in the Wicklow mountains he would sometimes announce 'now this is driving' as we sped along an empty stretch of smooth country road.

"Of course, only a tiny proportion of the time he spends driving fits my father's definition. But he never changed his concept of driving.

"The results of my experiment suggest that this is true of a lot of people."

Mr Comerford is a committed cyclist, and it was the experience of whizzing past traffic jams that gave him the idea for his research, which was funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and which has now won him a prestigious Fulbright scholarship to top US institute Duke University.

At Duke, Mr Comerford will work with a medical doctor and a psychologist to apply his findings about decision-making to the area of public health.

hnews@herald.ie

