



Image, not environmentalism: A qualitative exploration of factors influencing vehicle purchasing decisions



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ABSTRACT

Previous quantitative research has suggested people take environmental impact into account when choosing cars, and are largely uninfluenced by issues of image. However, neither of these claims appears to reflect current car buying behaviour in the UK. We hypothesised this may be due to the nature of the questions typically used in earlier research, which may have prompted participants to consider environmental issues, and downplay the role of image, more than they would spontaneously. The current research provides a qualitative exploration of factors important to people when deciding which car to buy. Open-ended discussion with recent car-buyers revealed the factors which were most important during the participants' decision making processes, without prompting participants to agree with ideas raised by the experimenter. These issues were explored in two studies, using a series of focus groups (Study 1), and one-on-one interviews (Study 2). In both studies, the two most central factors were issues of practicality and finance, consistent with previous research. However, unlike in previous research, both studies found image had substantial impact on purchasing decisions. Further, earlier explicit surveys claimed people often considered environmental factors when choosing a vehicle, yet these were hardly mentioned in the current studies. This highlights the importance of using a range of research methods when studying personal travel decisions. Key areas for follow-up research and implications for policy makers aiming to increase uptake sales of low-carbon cars are discussed.

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1. Introduction

There has been a dramatic increase in private car ownership in recent years (Clark, 2009). A survey conducted by the Department for Transport (DfT) (2014) shows that in the UK, car ownership increased by 40% between 1994 and 2014. However, this widespread and increasing use of private motor cars causes serious problems for environmental quality, contributing to a number of problems including dependence on fossil fuels (International Energy Agency, 2008); traffic noise (Brink, 2011; Dratva et al., 2010; European Environment Agency, 2000); collisions (Thornton et al., 2011); and carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, which are considered to contribute to global warming and climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007). Policy makers have attempted to target this problem in accordance with The European Union's current strategy to reduce CO₂ emissions in cars to 130 g CO₂/km by 2015, and 95 g CO₂/km by 2021 (European Commission,

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2016); representing reductions of 18% and 40% respectively compared with the 2007 fleet average of 158.7 g/km. Key strategies in the strive towards emission targets include initiating widespread reductions in private car use (Steg and Gifford, 2005) and the introduction of new classes of 'low carbon' cars, often referred to as Ultra Low Emission Vehicles (ULEVs) (DfT, 2016). Whilst the introduction of UK subsidies have helped to increase uptake of ULEVs, sales of such vehicles still represent a tiny proportion of current UK car sales. Out of 916,000 new vehicles registered in the first quarter of 2016, just 11,750 (1%) were ULEVs (DfT, 2016). More needs to be done to steer car buyers towards these ULEV options, and to do this we need better to understand the decision processes of people buying cars.

A substantial body of research has previously considered this issue (see, for example, Furse et al., 1984; Flamm, 2009; Lane and Potter, 2007; Choo and Mokhtarian, 2004). In many instances, when people have been asked explicitly, they state that they do have concern for the environment, and take this concern into account when deciding which car to buy. For example, using survey data from 1500 Swiss households, Coad et al. (2009) found that the transition to greener vehicles draws on both extrinsic motivation (in terms of financial incentives) and intrinsic motivation (a sense of personal responsibility for environmental issues – see also de Haan et al., 2006; Kahn, 2007).

The claim that people take environmental issues into account when deciding which car to buy is also consistent with a national survey of almost 4000 people conducted in 2009–10 for the UK Department for Transport (Thornton et al., 2011), in which participants were asked to endorse the factors most important to them when buying a car or van. The majority of participants agreed that reliability and costs were important (68% and 55% respectively), and 22% said they considered environmental factors. The survey suggested the image portrayed by the vehicle was fairly unimportant to participants, with only 12% agreeing that the image of the brand, and 10% the image of the model, were significant considerations affecting their purchase. Finally, the survey identified habit as another potentially important influence: 38% of participants agreed that they generally buy the same type and/or size of car every time. Brand of car was found to be less important, such that for every person who said they tend to buy the same brand each time there was another who said they tend not to do this. Overall then, extant survey data present a positive picture: when asked, a substantial proportion of people say that environmental consequences will inform their car-buying decisions and relatively few claim to be swayed by the vehicle's image.

However, these stated preferences do not appear to easily translate into action. Whilst there has been some increase in low-carbon vehicle purchasing (from 0.2% of sales in 2014 to 1% in the first quarter of 2016, DfT, 2016); the proportional market share of low-carbon car sales remains relatively limited (DfT, 2016; Lane and Potter, 2007; Clark, 2009). Moreover, whilst participants in earlier research such as the DfT survey mostly claimed that they paid little attention to image when choosing a car, this does not sit easily with the healthy market for 'prestige' cars, nor the central use of imagery in car marketing (Marketing-Schools, 2015). As such, there appears to be a misalignment between what people state they will take into account during decision making, and the decisions they actually make.

One possible answer might involve the need for decision makers to make trade-offs (see Payne et al., 1993), such as pitting personal values or ideals against practical or monetary concerns. People with high levels of environmental concern may state this is an important consideration when faced with a hypothetical choice scenario, yet in reality they may be forced to trade this off to buy a more affordable option. Following a full normative decision process in which all options and attributes are considered is cognitively very demanding. This may thus lead to more heuristic-based choice rules in which only the most important attributes are considered. Sustainability arguments may then drop out of the equation if sustainability is not one of the top priority attributes (Verplanken and Roy, 2015). For instance, Verplanken and Holland (2002) found that in multi-attribute choice tasks sustainable alternatives were only chosen if environmental values were central to an individual's self-concept and were cognitively activated, which cannot be expected to be a prevalent condition. Another potential explanation of the gap between stated and actual choice processes stems from the fact that people may reveal views they perceive as being more socially desirable in a survey. Specifically, if a person perceives 'being green' as a socially acceptable behaviour, they may be more likely to state this is an important concern when directly asked by an experimenter, whilst in reality it may not reflect their genuine values. This suggestion is supported by Griskevicius et al. (2010), who found that people were more likely to make pro-environmental choices in social settings than when the same decisions were made in private. Similarly, Donaldson and Grant-Vallone (2002) demonstrated how behavioural research may be subject to biased responses due to a desire to present oneself in a favourable manner (see also Arnold and Feldman, 1981; Arnold et al., 1985).

Relatedly, because a substantial amount of previous research in this area has been quantitative survey work (e.g., Furse et al., 1984; Clark, 2009; Choo and Mokhtarian, 2004; Coad et al., 2009), the discrepancy between this research and actual low-carbon sales figures may also be attributable to the nature of the survey questions themselves. Specifically, asking participants to rate the importance of a list of pre-selected features may have prompted people to state they consider environmental issues in a way they might not have done spontaneously, calling the validity of this approach into question and raising the possibility that the responses to such survey questions do not accurately reflect real-world decision processes when buying cars.

Given all the above issues, the aim of the current research was to investigate this apparent misalignment between the findings of previous quantitative research, which has placed an emphasis on environmental concern, and actual UK 'low carbon' car sales figures. This was done by conducting a series of qualitative focus group sessions (Study 1), and detailed one-on-one interview sessions (Study 2), where recent car buyers were invited to discuss the factors which were most important to them when making their choice. Crucially, participants were not prompted to discuss environmental issues, but rather were free to talk about any aspects of how they chose to buy their car. As such, we aimed to explore whether the same types of responses would spontaneously occur in conversation between group members (Study 1), or between participant and

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