



Can environmental awareness explain declining preference for car-based mobility amongst generation Y? A qualitative examination of learn to drive behaviours



Debbie Hopkins

Transport Studies Unit, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 December 2015
Received in revised form 10 July 2016
Accepted 31 August 2016

Keywords:

Automobility
Environmental consciousness
Generation Y
Young adults
Emerging adults
Mobility
Modality

ABSTRACT

Preference for private, motorised transportation grew substantially throughout the global North, during the 20th Century. Through this time rates of licencing, and car ownership, and vehicle kilometres travelled (VKT) rose across age groups. This had a range of environmental and social equity implications, and ignited a priority for investment in road infrastructure. The system of automobility was cemented by lock-in through the assemblage of infrastructure, technologies, policies and behaviours supporting, and frequently requiring, car based mobility. Yet recent evidence has shown that generation Y (18–35 year olds) are practicing mobility in different ways to earlier generations. Stabilising and declining rates of VKT, licencing and vehicle ownership have been identified in a range of industrialised countries. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this paper draws from theories of social practice and the theory of planned behaviour, as two traditions to examine what people 'do', focusing on the social and the individual respectively. It examines the motivations to learn to drive (LTD), and the preference for driving in New Zealand, a highly car-dependent country, empirically drawing from 51 qualitative interviews. A series of meta-themes are presented and used to explain intended and actual behaviour relating to driving practices. The empirical research finds a diversity of highly nuanced interpretations of LTD, some of which reflect individual characteristics, whilst other interpretations are best understood grounded in a wider societal reading of contemporary trends and meanings. Frequently, justification for learning to drive goes beyond the competency and capacity to drive independently. Implications for policy and planning are detailed.

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1. Introduction

Throughout the 20th Century, global demand for private motorised vehicular transport grew rapidly (Urry, 2004). While there is evidence that this growth may have peaked in some industrialised countries (Goodwin and van Dender, 2013; Lyons and Goodwin, 2014a), private vehicles are still the hegemonic mode of private transport, and demand is continuing to grow, particularly in developing and emerging economies (Jetin, 2015). This demand, combined with policy, planning and infrastructure prioritising road-based transport modes, has resulted in a system of automobility that both supports and demands car based transport (Paterson, 2007).

E-mail address: debbie.hopkins@ouce.ox.ac.uk

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2016.08.028>

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Recognition of the urgent need to reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions to prevent global mean temperature rise above 2 °C, along with a host of other biophysical and associated socio-economic impacts, focuses increasing attention on high-emitting countries, industries and sectors (Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), 2014). By CO₂ emissions, private vehicles are amongst the highest intensity transport modes, contributing to both global climate change and local air pollution (Bristow et al., 2004; Sims et al., 2014). While emissions vary significantly depending on factors including number of passengers, types of vehicles, and distance (Sims et al., 2014), the high usage of private motorised vehicles in industrialised countries, and the rising popularity in emerging economies, mean that total contributions to carbon emissions are substantial, and outweighing mitigation efforts (Sims et al., 2014).

The research presented in this paper responds to increasing evidence of changing aspirations and expectations of mobility for people born between 1980 and 2000, also referred to as 'generation Y' (Hopkins, 2014; Hopkins and Stephenson, 2014; Hopkins and Stephenson, in press; Institute for Mobility Research, 2013; Delbosc and Currie, 2013). Reports of stabilising or declining vehicle kilometres travelled (VKT) and car ownership, and declining licencing amongst the 18–35 age group have emerged from a range of industrialised countries. This trend fits within the broader phenomena of 'Peak Car' (Goodwin, 2012; Newman and Kenworthy, 2011) or 'Peak Travel' (van Wee, 2015), which identifies a decline in car use in many countries of the global North (e.g. France, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, USA, Japan and Australia). These changes vary by the degree of intensity, from stabilisation in vehicle kilometres travelled, to declines (Metz, 2013; Kuhnimhof et al., 2013; Lyons and Goodwin, 2014b), often with sub-national variability (Headicar, 2013) and age-specific variations (Kuhnimhof et al., 2013). A number of studies have explored the factors which may be contributing to these changes (Delbosc and Currie, 2013; Hopkins and Stephenson, 2014, in press), however the heterogeneous meanings of learning to drive for young adults have been largely overlooked.

Studies trialling interventions to support a modal shift from private cars to public or active modes have proliferated, with most arising from health-related disciplines (Ogilvie et al., 2004; Young and Caisey, 2010; Guell et al., 2012). Little is known about the motivations to learn to drive, and the role of a driver's licence as a determinant of intent to drive. This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study with 18–35 year olds in Aotearoa New Zealand (New Zealand hereafter). It examines perceptions of car-based travel and driving as social practice, and learning to drive (LTD) as an intentional, planned behaviour. In doing so, it questions whether environmental consciousness and awareness of modality and environmental impacts could explain the declining preference for LTD and car-based transport. It also considers whether LTD is a proxy for intentions to drive, by investigating the multiple meanings and purposes of licencing for generation Y.

To date, much academic and policy attention has been on technological developments and innovations to reduce the carbon intensity of private vehicle transport, and thereby achieve deep GHG emission reductions (Williams et al., 2012). For example, hybrid vehicles and electric vehicles have been posited as a low-carbon alternative to internal combustion engine vehicles (ICEVs). ICEVs are already achieving impressive efficiency gains, and increased uptake of biofuels is being touted (Gerbens-Leenes et al., 2012). The UK government, in concert with many other countries, has declared its support for the domestic development of automated vehicles, in response to a range of transport externalities including carbon emissions (Department for Transport, 2015). Yet there is a body of opinion that CO₂ reduction can only be achieved by a combination of technological innovation *and* behaviour change: "but it is in travel behaviour that the real change must take place, and this should be implemented now" (Hickman and Banister, 2007: p. 384).

In order to achieve 'radical' emissions reduction, the integration of disciplinary approaches has been advocated (Capstick et al., 2014; Whitmarsh et al., 2011). The theoretical and practical compatibilities of theories of social practice and theories of behaviour (e.g. theory of planned behaviour [TBT]) have been questioned (Shove, 2010, 2011). This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach to explore learning to drive, from both a sociological, and a social psychological, perspective. In line with Darnton et al. (2011), the aim of this approach is to draw out the insights from different ways of thinking about behaviours, in order to inform the development of interventions.

1.1. Generation Y

Since the end of the Second World War, social anthropologists have assigned attributes to generational cohorts. The Strauss–Howe generational theory (Strauss and Howe, 1991), identifies a series of recurring generational cycles. The generational cohort approach has been critiqued for overlooking subtleties within the population, and for homogenising groups based on birth date. However its premise is that people within these cohorts have been exposed to the same socio-economic and political contexts, and thus it has been suggested that this is one way that the population can be segmented to examine a particular phenomenon. Generation Y includes people born between 1980 and 2000, and regardless of these *similar characteristics*, the size of this generation merits attention: generation Y are already the largest generation in the USA and Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Lachman and Brett, 2011). Despite their size, generation Y are relatively neglected in the mobilities literature, yet the way they (intend) to practice mobility will become increasingly important in the coming decades (Delbosc and Currie, 2013).

In the US, unique features of generation Y include support for liberal policies (e.g. marriage equality and tighter gun controls), and opposition of the death penalty (Pew Research Center, 2011). Exposure to environmental catastrophes and public consciousness of environmental issues has led some to argue that generation Y will be pivotal in the environmental movement (McKay, 2010). Yet while only 32% of American generation Y perceived themselves to be an 'environmentalist', compared to 42% of baby boomer generation, they do hold traits of environmental consciousness (Pew Research Center, 2014):

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