



Understanding engagement and disengagement from pro-environmental behaviour: The role of neutralization and affirmation techniques in maintaining persistence in and desistance from car use



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ABSTRACT

Despite mounting evidence that car use is a prime culprit of global warming, our love affair with the car persists. General awareness of the environmental consequences of car usage is high but fails to correspond to moderated car use. This paper contributes to an understanding of how university students' environmental beliefs affect decisions to engage in continued car use (persistence) and/or to discontinue or reduce car use (desistance). The aim of the research presented here was to explore the range of neutralizations and counter-neutralizations (affirmations) employed by students and to examine the ways in which they are used to justify and maintain either persistence or desistance in car use. The research consisted of six focus group sessions with thirty-four UK-based Higher Education students. Analysis of the study's data highlights the range of neutralizations and counter-neutralizations employed by students in social settings. The article discusses the usefulness of neutralization theory in accounting for actual and/or intended non-environmentally friendly behaviour such as car use. In addition, the study's findings are discussed in relation to prior research and to potential implications for public policy interventions which favour moderating car usage.

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1. Introduction

Carbon emissions from the transport sector constitute a major source of household carbon footprint – outranked only by construction and food production (Lorek and Spangenberg, 2001; Klockner and Friedrichsmeier, 2011). It is argued that since such emissions are responsible for a high percentage of overall carbon dioxide emissions, there is a need to attain drastic reductions (World Watch Institute, 2004; Gardner and Abraham, 2007; Beirao and Cabral, 2007; IPCC, 2007; Klockner and Friedrichsmeier, 2011). Private car use is, in turn, a major contributor to overall emissions from the transport sector (Klockner and Friedrichsmeier, 2011). It constitutes the primary mode of daily commuting, especially for people living in the industrialized world (Bergstad et al., 2011). There is strong potential for reducing overall carbon emissions if individuals reduce use of the car; the persistent use of cars by individuals jeopardizes the attainment of maximal carbon reductions from the overall transport sector (Steg and Tertoolen, 1999; Thornton et al., 2011). However, car use as a specific travel behaviour is very resistant to change (Thorgesen, 2004).

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Numerous studies have found that people are generally aware of the environmental externalities associated with dependency and overreliance on the use of private cars (Gardner and Abraham, 2007). However, few are willing to switch to alternative modes of transport and/or reduce the number of trips they make (Scottish Executive, 2003; King et al., 2009). Policy makers recognize that more needs to be done. Investments into transport infrastructure, petrol taxes, R&D subsidies, congestion charges and bus/taxi lanes are all part of the set of regulatory tools that have been used in attempts to change the behaviour of car users. The aim is not to eradicate car usage but to reduce its environmental impact to levels that are acceptable and compatible with a sustainable economy (Wright and Curtis, 2005). However, due to the limited efficacy of these measures, there is a growing realization that more profound changes in the way individuals think about the car must be explored. In particular, it is argued that a deeper level of understanding of the complex dynamics underpinning car use by individuals and specific traveller segments is necessary for the design of effective interventions in favour of more sustainable commuting (Anable, 2005; Bamberg and Moser, 2007; Axsen and Kurani, 2012; Uba, 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of the reasoning techniques employed by car users and non-users when opposing normative expectations are made salient. Section 2 summarises relevant literature in the area and defines the specific focus of the study. Section 3 presents our theoretical framework, which builds on the existing theory of neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1957). The research methods used in the study are discussed in Section 4, and the study's results are presented and analyzed in Section 5. Section 6 discusses our theoretical contribution(s) vis-à-vis prior literature as well as potential policy implications.

2. Literature review and focus of study

Current literature highlights that individuals' car user behaviour is neither mechanistic nor solely dependent on utility, i.e. getting from point A to point B. Rather, decisions to use the car are largely dependent on a complex range of factors (Bamberg et al., 2011; Uba, 2013). These include: instrumental or utilitarian reasons for commuting by car (Guiver, 2007) such as travel time and travel costs (Zahavi and Ryan, 1980); the import of the built environment and accessibility measures (Reutter and Reutter, 1996; Manaugh and El-Geneidy, 2013); affective motivations such as the pleasures of driving, or feelings of power or superiority over others (Steg and Tertoolen, 1999); and psychosocial benefits relating to mastery, self-esteem and feelings of autonomy, protection and prestige (Ellaway et al., 2003; Wright and Curtis, 2005). On the other hand, trip satisfaction with alternatives such as cycling may negatively affect decisions to use the car (see Willis et al., 2013) while a key role is also played by situational factors such as car availability (Dieleman et al., 2002), weather variability and strikes (Klockner and Friedrichsmeier, 2011; Uba, 2013).

Such motivations and/or arguments for car use are well-documented and comprehensively reviewed elsewhere (e.g. Gartman, 2004; Sheller, 2004; Guiver, 2007; Beirao and Cabral, 2007; Wright and Curtis, 2005). More recent studies emphasize the multiplicity of contexts and considerations that may affect commuting choices (Manaugh and El-Geneidy, 2013; Willis et al., 2013). However, as Hagman (2003) argues, the majority of existing research focuses on motivations and factors per se rather than on "how they are presented so as to make sense" (p. 5) as part of people's everyday accounts and narratives of transport dilemmas.

The few studies that have delved into individuals' accounts of car use suggest that while the advantages of car use are largely known and are deemed to be unquestionable, the negative aspects of car use – particularly the environmental damage caused by car use – are often subject to negotiation (Gartman, 2004; Thorgesen, 2004). This is consistent with findings highlighting that engagement in pro-environmental behaviour is largely determined by whether individuals perceive acting in such a manner as congruent with their sense of self and/or with their perceptions of others (including perceptions about roles, events and/or the social world) as well as how these become embedded in everyday practices (Thorgesen, 2004; Whitmarsh and O'Neill, 2010). Because such cognitive representations underpin beliefs and sense-making about the way things work or are supposed to work (Crittenden, 1983; Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Maruna and Mann, 2006), they also underpin behaviour. Furthermore, individuals may employ accounts – explanations and justifications for their behaviour – as a means to maintaining a coherent sense of themselves (Shotter, 1984; Crittenden, 1983) and/or resolving everyday dilemmas (Orbuch, 1997).

In the context of car usage, such justifications may serve to alleviate potential feelings of guilt over environmental considerations and may therefore facilitate persistence in current travel habits (Jain and Guiver, 2001; Uba, 2013). However, car usage is a context which is potentially underpinned by different sets of normative expectations, and these could point to different courses of action. As we explain below, although acknowledged as environmentally harmful, car usage for university students is also viewed as a rite of passage. There are thus strong normative pressures in favour of, rather than against, the use of cars. Focusing on the justification accounts of individuals and groups and on how these accounts serve the purpose of negotiating different normative contexts has, therefore, the potential to facilitate understanding of how individuals and traveller segments are able to either persist in or desist from car use.

The foregoing explication of the role of accounts in understanding car use behaviour underpins the initial point of departure for the current study. We argue that a good approach to understanding how individuals are able to reconcile attitude-behaviour discrepancies in car usage is by exploring the justification accounts that result in persistence and desistance in use of the car becoming the individual's chosen course of action.

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