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Driving over the life course: The automobility of Canada's Millennial, Generation X, Baby Boomer and Greatest Generations

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ABSTRACT

Mercado et al. (2010) called for greater recognition of the diversity of Canada's demographic structure with respect to automobility. For instance, recent anecdotal evidence suggests that Millennials (individuals born following Generation X and between the early 1980s and early 2000s) are less likely to have a driver's license and less likely to drive than their older counterparts. On the other hand, older generations, including aging baby boomers and those who have already retired, grew up with the automobile, and having a license was a rite of passage into adulthood. Not surprisingly, Canada's old have some of the highest rates of automobility (Scott et al. 2009).

Based on data from Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) 'Time Use' cycles, this paper evaluates differences in automobility by generational cohort (i.e., Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Greatest Generation). Descriptive statistics are used to measure whether different generations are more (less) likely to hold a driver's license, and the characteristics of trips (i.e., number of trips, trip mode, and duration). While Millennials are more likely to use public or active transit options, the results suggest that they are 'catching up' with other generations, characterized by a growth in the proportion holding a valid driver's license and increasing trips by car. We conclude that Canadian Millennials will likely share the same automobility profile as older generations.

1. Introduction

There is broad diversity in the automobility behaviours of Canada's population. Limited data and/or anecdotal evidence, for example, suggests that Millennials (individuals born following Generation X and between the early 1980 s and the early 2000 s) are less likely to have a driver's license and are less likely to drive than their older counterparts (Dutzik et al., 2014; McDonald, 2015). On the other hand, older generations, including baby boomers and those already retired, grew up with the automobile and have had a long and close relationship with the personal automobile. At the same time, Canada's population is aging, meaning that in the coming decades there will be a significant increase in both the number and percentage of older adults, implying differential travel behaviour and demands for mobility. Recent research has shown, for example, that as the populations of the United States, Australia, and some European nations have aged, they have become increasingly dependent on the automobile with limited use of public transit (Collia et al., 2003; Turcotte, 2012). Furthermore, the old tend to take more trips, a greater variety of trips, and longer trips, and many are working beyond age 65 (Statistics Canada, 2011). Older Canadians generally, but not consistently, follow the same trends (Newbold et al., 2005; Páez et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2009). But, as Canadian society continues to age, an increasing number and proportion will be less likely to drive or will cease driving completely due to health or other concerns (Kim, 2011; Waldorf, 2001).

The diversity of automobility behaviours within Canada's population has profound, yet poorly understood, implications, particularly given the sprawling structure of many of Canada's metropolitan areas and the required dependency on the personal automobile. For Millennials, automobility behaviour, along with licensure rates and trip generation may ultimately equal that observed in older generations as they age into adulthood. Can insight into the future automobility behaviour of Millennials be derived from other generations such as Generation X? From the perspective of the old, it is less clear how travel behaviour and characteristics of the old will change to reflect their changing needs and demographics. Moreover, the automobility needs and behaviours of the old are likely to be more diverse than currently revealed in the literature, which has typically focused on the old as individuals aged 65 or over. Instead, the old are more heterogeneous, with changing life course needs and abilities related to

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driving needs. Indeed, Mercado et al. (2010) called for greater recognition of the diversity of Canada's aging population with respect to automobility. For instance, the growing proportion of the elderly that continue to work past age 65 (Statistics Canada, 2011) may result in different commuting patterns as these older workers adjust their residential and employment patterns. However, there is little insight in the Canadian literature with respect to these specific issues across the different generations.

Using data from Statistics Canada's General Social Surveys (GSS) 'time use' cycles, the purpose of this paper is to provide a detailed picture of automobility behaviour across the life course. It will explore potential differences in automobility by generation, with the choice of generations inspired by broad social convention, including Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Greatest Generation. Analysis includes whether different generations are more (less) likely to hold a driver's license, and the characteristics of trips (i.e., number of trips, trip mode, and duration).

2. Literature review: differences across the lifecourse

Multiple generations can be identified within the Canadian population, including Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Greatest Generation. While there are no precise start and end dates associated with each group, the particular environment for any generation affects individuals in ways that are observable as broad tendencies. Born between approximately 1980 and 2000, Millennials (also known as Generation Y) number about 8.5 million or approximately one-quarter of the Canadian population. The 'Facebook generation', Millennials are diverse in their spending and consumer habits and preferences and attitudes toward work and leisure. Anecdotal, along with some limited evidence, suggests that Millennials are less likely to hold a drivers license and are less likely to drive (Coletto and Morrison, 2012; Dutzik et al., 2014). Slightly older, Generation X includes individuals born immediately after the Baby Boom and between 1965 and 1980. Further along the age spectrum, Canada's Baby Boom generation, born between 1946 and 1964, started to enter retirement in 2011, with the proportion of Canadians aged greater than 65 increasing. In 1983, about 9.9% of the Canadian population was aged 65 years and older, a proportion which had grown to 15.3% (or 5.379 million Canadians) by 2013 (Statistics Canada, 2014). By 2036, the proportion aged 65 or greater is estimated to represent between 23% and 25% of the population, representing more than 10 million people and driven largely by the aging of the baby boom (Statistics Canada, 2010). Even within the Baby Boom generation, there is tremendous heterogeneity, with differences in socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics (Bouvier and Devita, 1991; Longino, 2005). Rounding out these generational groups, the Greatest Generation includes individuals who grew up during the Great Depression and early 1940s.

Given differences in their characteristics and the environment in which they grew up, each of these generations has potentially different automobility behaviours. For older generations, including the Greatest Generation and boomers, the personal automobile remains the preferred travel mode choice, with public transit options typically less preferred (Kim and Ulfarsson, 2004; Newbold et al. 2005; Páez et al., 2007). The fact that the automobile is the preferred travel mode choice is not surprising: today's seniors and Canada's aging baby boomers were raised in an automobile culture. For them, the car meant personal freedom and social interaction, enabling day-to-day mobility and social and economic freedom and accessibility (Dahan-Oliel et al., 2010; van den Berg et al., 2011). Given that most seniors want to grow old in their own homes ('aging in place') and actively participate in society, driving and having access to a personal automobile remains an important aspect of quality of life, with research suggesting that aging populations have become more dependent on the automobile (Hjorthol et al., 2010; Newbold et al., 2005; Rosenbloom, 2001). Indeed, most Canadians travel by personal car and public transport does not offer an alternative to the car (Schwanen et al., 2004), meaning that dependency on the automobile and the spatial structure of metropolitan areas challenges the mobility and accessibility of the old. Moreover, aging in place becomes difficult for individuals who are no longer able to drive if a car is their only available means of transportation, limiting their social interaction. In particular, older females typically face greater transportation barriers and mobility problems than males given that they are more likely to live longer, more likely to live alone, and are less affluent than their male counterparts (Kim, 2011).

Amongst younger generations, and particularly within the Millennial generation, there is some evidence that automobility behaviour diverges from older generations, with Millennials seemingly less likely to have a driver's license. When they do drive, they typically take fewer and shorter trips than older generations. Conversely, they are more likely to use active transportation such as bicycling or walking, or to take public transit as compared to older generations (Dutzik et al., 2014). Overall, Millennials appear to be less car-centered than older generations, prompting suggestions to rethink transportation policies and funding.

While some critics and commentators alike have taken such generational differences as signs that Millennials have very different travel behaviours, the lower rate of holding a valid driver's license and differential trip characteristics may simply reflect short-term issues, including delayed entry into the labour market, preferences for living in large urban areas amongst young professionals, greater use of alternative transportation modes, and a greater likelihood of living with parents, all of which may reduce the need for driving and a driver's license (Dutzik et al., 2014). With increasing age, it may be expected that the rate of licensure, along with other characteristics such as frequency of trips, trip length, and trip duration, increase and approach rates seen in older generations, an expectation that is supported by the priority that Millennials place on career and home ownership (Dutzik et al., 2014).

To date, there is limited research considering the impact of the life course and the specific automobility behaviours of these different population groups in the Canadian context. Given potential differences in the automobility behaviours of the various generational cohorts, additional, detailed insights into the automobility behaviours of these different cohorts are required.

3. Data and methods

This research seeks to better understand the differences in automobility behaviour within Canada's population and how it changes according to their specific needs, relative location and generation. Data used in the analysis are drawn from Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) 'Time Use' Cycles. First implemented in 1985, the GSS represents a cross-sectional sample of the Canadian population that collects data via telephone surveys on a standard set of socio-demographic questions, along with questions pertaining to a core topic or focus that have included health, time use, and social support and aging. Four cycles of the GSS, each of which collected data on time use, are used in the current analysis: cycles 7 (1992), 12 (1998), 19 (2005) and 24 (2010), with data collected from 8996, 10,749, 19,597, and 15,390 respondents aged 15 years and older across all ten provinces, respectively. Each of these surveys collected data on time use in diary form, with the data almost equally distributed over all 7 days and over all 12 months in each case.