



Young people's motivations to drive: expectations and realities

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ABSTRACT

Fewer young adults are choosing to learn to drive and there is a safety argument for encouraging those who do learn to delay doing so. In this study we explore what motivates young people to learn to drive and we uncover their expectations – and the reality – of the difference driving makes to their short- and longer-term futures.

We conducted 12 focus groups with 48 young people age 16–24. The discussions explored why they do or don't want to drive, the immediate life changes that driving brings as well as how driving might affect their life in the future. We analysed the data using thematic analysis using the question: what motivates young people to learn to drive?

We identified five motivations in the data, organised into two themes. The first theme relates to the benefits of maturity. Young people believe driving provides **independence** and represents the first stage of becoming an adult. Most rely on their parents for lifts, and therefore parents control and scrutinise their social life. The car as a form of **personal space** was very important for young people, as they have complete control over this environment, which can be missing in other aspects of their lives. Driving also bestows **kudos**, particularly for those amongst the first in their peer group to pass their test. Novice drivers enjoy being able to offer lifts to friends and family, although described how this rapidly becomes an imposition. The second theme is about broadening horizons. Young people believe that driving **expands their social world**, enabling them to travel further afield with their friends for day trips because driving is faster, more convenient and cheaper than public transport. In practice, few of those who drive had used their car in this way, instead using it mainly for commuting and getting fast food. Participants talked about how driving opens up **career opportunities**, allowing them to travel to more distant cities for work and study. However, driving usually made accessing work and study opportunities more convenient rather than possible. Instead, the main benefit young people actually experienced was having more time to sleep in the morning.

The qualitative nature of the study, together with the inclusion of pre-drivers, drivers and non-drivers, has provided insight into motivations for learning to drive and how the reality of driving often does not match expectations. The results could be used to inform the potential content of an intervention to encourage young people to delay learning to drive.

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1. Introduction

The percentage of young people with a full driving licence decreased in the late 90s in the UK (Le Vine & Polak, 2014) as well as internationally (Delbosc & Currie, 2013; Shults & Williams, 2013; Tefft, Williams, & Grabowski, 2013). In the UK the figure is now approximately steady at 55% (National Travel Survey, DfT, 2016). The drop in full licence holding in young adults has been attributed to economic reasons (Delbosc & Currie, 2014; Shults & Williams, 2013). In the UK, young adults are less likely to drive if they have fewer qualifications, lower incomes, live with their parents, live in London or in high density urban areas, live close to public transport, or were born outside of the UK (Le Vine & Polak, 2014). Cost is the most common deterrent to learning to drive, followed by being able to get lifts from friends and family, and other transport choices being available. Several additional reasons for choosing not to drive have also been proposed, such as the changing social status of the car, greater concern for the environment, and greater reliance on social media than face-to-face communication. Delbosc and Currie (2014) used an online qualitative approach to explore if and how these attitudes underpinned young Australian adults' decisions around driving. They found that young people saw owning a car as a symbol of maturity rather than social status. There was little evidence that electronic media are replacing face-to-face contact and reducing the need for car travel. Finally, they found young people had few concerns about the impact of driving on the environment and environmental concerns did not impact on their driving decisions.

As well as understanding why young people choose not to learn to drive, it is important to understand why they do, i.e. their motivations for driving and what benefits they anticipate driving will bring them. A quantitative study with young drivers in Australia (Scott Parker, King, & Watson, 2015) found the three reasons for driving are: to gain a sense of freedom; to see friends easily; and to feel independent. Less commonly cited reasons for driving were: to relax; to show you are now an adult; to feel powerful; and to gain status amongst friends. Interestingly, higher scores on driving to show you are now an adult predicts less risky driving. However, while young people have positive beliefs around driving enabling them to spend time with their friends, driving *with* friends is associated with greater risk-taking behaviour (Christmas, 2008; Moller & Gregersen, 2008; Moller & Sigurdardottir, 2009). Young people also drive "just for fun" (Laapotti et al., 2006) and for excitement, and the latter predicts traffic offences and injuries on the roads (Blows, Ameratunga, Ivers, Lo, & Norton, 2005).

Pre-drivers anticipate that driving will increase their independence, improve their access to further education, widen their employment opportunities, and enable them to contribute to family or household responsibilities (Audrey & Langford, 2014). The cost of learning to drive and buying and insuring a car was found to be the main deterrent to learning to drive, with lack of time and lack of confidence being less important. However, as the data collection in this research took place after an intervention to encourage young people to delay learning to drive, which included an activity on the cost of driving, the influence of cost might have been elevated. This research included a group of young people from a highly deprived area and so the results may not generalise to other communities, such young people from more affluent areas or those living in more urban or rural settings.

Research to understand decision-making around learning to drive can help inform interventions to encourage young people to delay learning to drive, which is an approach sometimes used by road safety professionals (Audrey & Langford, 2014) to try to address young people's over-representation in crash statistics in Great Britain (Department for Transport, 2016) and internationally (WHO, 2013). There is potential benefit to young people delaying learning to drive for a few years as people who learn to drive when they are older are less likely to crash (Maycock, Lockwood, & Lester, 1991). While novice drivers generally lack experience of road situations – and therefore the ability to process and anticipate hazards – young drivers can also over-estimate their driving skills, leading to a reduced safety margin (Fuller, 2011). In addition, adolescence is associated with increased impulsivity and sensation seeking (Jonah, 1997; Steinberg et al., 2008) which can lead to risk taking.

More effective young (pre-) driver interventions can be developed if we understand whether the expected benefits of driving are, in practice, realised. This requires the perspective of both young drivers and pre-drivers. This study explores young people's motivations to learn to drive, with a focus on why they want to drive (or not) and how they imagine their life as a driver will be different in the short term as well as for their long-term future. It identifies and contrasts where pre-drivers' expectations and the realities of being a new young driver diverge.

2. Materials and methods

The research took a qualitative approach, based on focus groups with young people in which they explored and discussed their motivations for driving or not driving. Focus groups provide a means of gaining in-depth interviews in a group setting where the dynamics of the group lead to young people disclosing thoughts, feelings and experiences that they may not have done so in a one-to-one interview. We developed a focus group topic guide including a series of topics related to driving: why young people want to drive; beliefs about the immediate changes to their lives that driving might bring or has already brought; and beliefs about how driving might affect their future life and opportunities. There were two additional discussion topics to explore the risks young people take on the road and messages that might reduce risk-taking but these results are not reported here. The research was reviewed and approved by the organisational ethics committee. Each focus group lasted around one hour and with permission from participants was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

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