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Using discussion forums to explore attitudes toward cars and licensing among young Australians

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ABSTRACT

Young people are becoming increasingly less likely to acquire a car license in North America, Australia and much of Europe. Emerging research is beginning to explore the structural and demographic explanations for these trends. However little research explains how attitudes may be shaping the decisions young people make about cars and driving. Popular hypotheses are the (i) changing social status of the car, (ii) role of electronic communications and (iii) environmental awareness, but little academic research has directly explored these issues.

This paper uses innovative online research tools to explore these issues with young people. Three discussion forums were run with participants from across the state of Victoria, Australia. 33 People aged 17–23 contributed across the course of one week's discussion.

Discussions suggest that among young Australians the car itself may not be a symbol of status and luxury, but instead a symbol of adulthood and maturity. Electronic communications were seen as a supplement to face-to-face contact, not a replacement for car travel. Not one person in the sample spontaneously mentioned that environmental concerns shaped their travel choices; even when prompted these concerns were far removed from travel decisions.

The paper follows with a commentary on the use of discussion forums for qualitative research. It closes with a discussion of the new hypotheses that these findings generate and uncovers many areas for future research.

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1. Introduction

Reliance on the car has serious negative consequences for society. On-road transport contributes 17% of global carbon dioxide emissions (Chapman, 2007) and the World Health Organization estimates that globally more than 1 million people are killed and 20–50 million are injured by road collisions each year (Nantulya et al., 2003). Against this backdrop there is a remarkable emerging trend which is not well understood: young people in much of the developed world are less likely to initiate car-driving, and if they can drive, they are driving less (Raimond and Milthorpe, 2010; Kuhnimhof et al., 2011; Sivak and Schoettle, 2012a, 2012b).

There is a large body of research on understanding mode choice and car ownership more generally (e.g. Scheiner and Holz-Rau, 2007). However the downward trend in car travel amongst the young has only recently been recognised (Delbosc and Currie, 2013). Researchers, government bodies and even the car industry

are beginning to question why this is occurring. Some initial research has focused on economic and socio-demographic influences on car licensing (e.g. McDonald and Trowbridge, 2009; Raimond and Milthorpe, 2010; Kuhnimhof et al., 2012b; Delbosc and Currie, in press). Three key attitude shifts are also hypothesised but lack a strong empirical basis: (i) the changing social status of the car, (ii) the growing role of electronic communications and (iii) a growing environmental awareness amongst young people.

This paper uses innovative online recruitment and research tools to explore how young people talk about transport and travel as a means of providing input to this debate. It reports on qualitative discussions conducted with young people in Victoria, Australia, to better understand their thoughts and feelings about car travel, getting a license and owning a car with a focus on the three hypothesised attitudes noted above. The purpose of the research is to illustrate broad themes that can be explored in further research. The paper also provides an assessment of the new online research tools adopted.

The paper takes the following structure; the next section contains a review of past literature on young people and travel, focusing on the three proposed hypotheses for reduced use of cars

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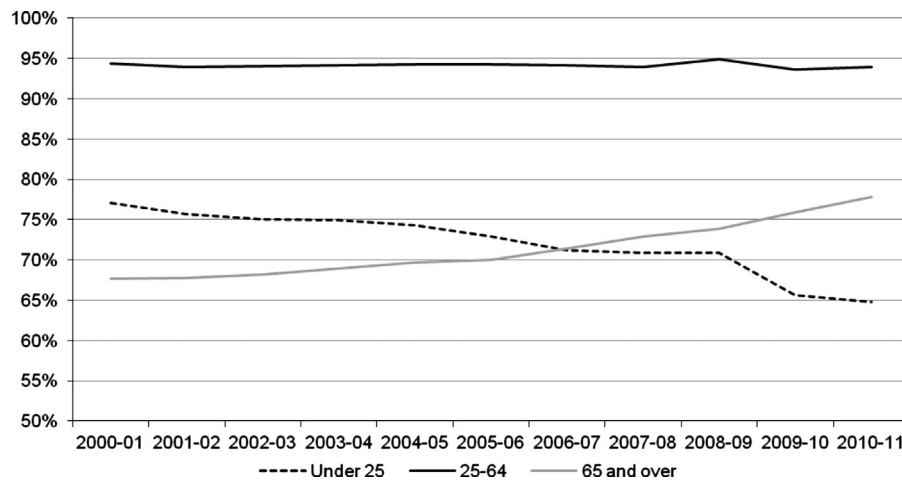


Fig. 1. Licensed drivers as percent of age group, 2000–2011, Victoria. Note: data sourced by Australian financial year (July–June). Source: licensing data supplied by VicRoads (VicRoads, 2012) and compared to population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

by young people (items i–iii noted above). This is followed by a description of the research method and the online research tools adopted. The results of the discussions are then presented. A short reflection on effectiveness of the online research tools follows. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion highlighting areas for future research.

2. Research context

In much of Europe, North America and Australia, licensing rates, automobile ownership and use are steadily decreasing (Kuhnimhof et al., 2012a; Sivak and Schoettle, 2012a, 2012b; Blumenberg et al., 2013; Delbosc and Currie, 2013; Smart, 2013). For example, amongst young people in the Australian State of Victoria, the percent of under-25 year olds with a driver's license dropped from 77% in the 2000–2001 financial year to 65% in 2010–2011 (see Fig. 1) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; VicRoads, 2012). Similarly in the United States, licensing of 20–24 year-olds has dropped from 92% in 1983 to 81% in 2010 (Sivak and Schoettle, 2012b).

Emerging research suggests that situational variables such as lower household incomes, residential location, parental lift-giving and household structural changes (such as a decrease in full-time youth employment and postponement of marriage and child-rearing) are contributing to these trends (McDonald and Trowbridge, 2009; Raimond and Milthorpe, 2010; Kuhnimhof et al., 2012b; Delbosc and Currie, 2013, in press). The impact of graduated license schemes, which have been introduced in many countries, is also highlighted as a possible reason (Raimond and Milthorpe, 2010) although thus far it has only been found to have a minor impact (Smart, 2013).

However in addition to these structural variables, a number of researchers have begun to consider whether the attitudes of young people have contributed to this decline in car reliance. Three overlapping attitudes have been identified by researchers and the popular media: the status of the car, the rise of electronic communications and the environmental concerns. Much of the following research is drawn from the grey literature of consulting and market research reports, which means methodological details are sometimes lacking.

2.1. Is the social status of the car changing?

Many social researchers have studied the role of the car as a status symbol, a symbol of prestige or an object of desire (Stokes

and Hallett, 1992; Hiscock et al., 2002; Steg, 2005; Redshaw, 2006). There is an emerging sense that these values are shifting amongst the younger generation as interests shift from cars to computers and electronic gadgets although research is almost exclusively cross-sectional, not longitudinal. For example a consultancy survey conducted in 2008 in Japan found that 27% of 40–59 years-old listed cars as an interest, overall ranking 7th (just ahead of computers). This was only 23% for 18–24 years old university students, ranking 17th behind such interests as personal computers, portable music players, communication devices, anime, video games and TV (Kalmbach et al., 2011).

This alleged trend is capturing much attention in popular press in Australia, North America and Germany (Kuhnimhof et al., 2012c) with newspaper headlines like 'Young people choose computers over cars' (Campbell, 2012). Car manufacturers are also concerned about young people losing interest in their products (Chozick, 2012).

However thus far much of this concern is speculative, based on the popular press rather than academic research. The academic literature has little to say on the topic and not all of it is clear-cut. For example, at least one study of Dutch people with car licenses found that younger respondents were slightly more likely than older generations to value their car for symbolic reasons (e.g. 'my car gives me prestige') and affective reasons (e.g. 'I love driving') (Steg, 2005). There is clearly disagreement within academic literature over whether young people are less likely to view cars as a status symbol.

2.2. Are electronic communications reducing the need for car travel?

The idea that the younger generations prioritise gadgets over cars is coupled with the belief that electronic communications (such as Facebook, texting or online chat) are reducing the need for young people to see their friends in person. This suspicion is somewhat supported by an academic survey in the United States that found that a small portion (5–10%) of 15–18 years olds had not started the licensing process in part because 'Facebook, texting etc. keeps me in touch with friends' (Williams, 2011); however no respondents cited this as their primary reason. A commercial survey sponsored by the car-sharing scheme Zipcar found that over 50% of young people agreed that they sometimes chose to spend time with friends online instead of driving to see them (KRC Research, 2010), although methodological details about this survey are scarce.

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