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The symbolism of ‘eco cars’ across national cultures: Potential implications for policy formulation and transfer

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ABSTRACT

Transport choices are not merely practical decisions but steeped in cultural and societal perceptions. Understanding these latent drivers of behaviour will allow countries to develop and import policies to more successfully promote sustainable transport. Transport symbolism – what people believe their ownership or use of a mode connotes to others about their societal position – has been shown to be one such, non-trivial, hidden motivator. In the case of hybrid and electric cars (‘eco cars’), studies have demonstrated how their symbolic value varies within a society among different social groups. As yet, however, there has been scant research into comparing how the symbolism of a mode varies across national cultures, horizontally, between individuals with similar socio-demographic characteristics. Through qualitative thematic analysis, this study utilises two of Hofstede’s cross-cultural indices – power differential and individualism versus collectivism – to develop and strengthen theory on how the differing symbolism of eco cars currently varies between four cultural clusters – Anglo, Nordic, Confucian and South Asian. It also deliberates how observed symbolic qualitative differences may influence an individual or group choice to procure eco cars. Finally, it discusses how policy development, transfer and marketing, within the context of eco cars, may need to be modified by national governments, in the Confucian and South Asian cultures, so as to encourage uptake and modal shift.

1. Introduction

Two latent drivers of behavior are symbolism and national culture. Symbolism explains how people use objects and signs to signify something about themselves to third parties within the context of a society (Saussure et al., 1916). Culture can be defined as the ‘set of attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours shared by a group of people’ (Matsumoto and Juang, 2012). National culture, a subset of culture, increasingly explored over recent decades, has been defined by Hofstede (1984) as ‘the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one national group from another’.

When examining the hidden factors underpinning people’s transport choices, both symbolism and national culture have been

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shown to be important (Steg, 2005; Syam, 2014). This has ramifications for transport policy transfer. For example, much of the world's future vehicle emissions are predicted to take place in developing¹ countries where car ownership is rapidly rising (Zhou et al., 2010; Siddique et al., 2011; Dargay et al., 2007). Yet, in seeking to promote sustainable transport, if the government of developing country X attempts to import a remedial policy solution from developed country Y, the effectiveness of the proposed solution may be compromised if the policy possesses poor or no symbolic value within the new culture. In such instances tailored policies and marketing programmes may be necessary to raise the symbolic value of a mode to encourage modal shift.

The symbolic value of eco cars has already been explored in developed nations and shown to be significant among certain social groups (Heffner et al., 2007). Little research has, however, been undertaken on the symbolism of eco cars in developing countries. This paper sets out to address this absence, through qualitative analysis, to facilitate an expansion of theory for later quantitative testing among the populations of interest. Given the research straddles different epistemologies it also aims to help bridge gaps between traditional transport planning and the emerging field of mobilities (Wind et al., 2012).

The first part of this paper lays out the theoretical background. It outlines symbolism and national culture in more detail and poses the question as to how they may affect policy transfer between nations. Work carried out to date on the symbolism of eco cars in Europe and North America is then presented, before positing theory, drawing on the Hofstede (1984) indices, as to how this may differ in Confucian and South Asian cultures, such as China and India. The study method, qualitative deductive thematic analysis, is then outlined, stressing its compatibility with the goal of the expansion of theory. The penultimate section describes observed thematic differences in the symbolism of eco cars between interviewees of similar socio-demographic backgrounds, across four different national cultural clusters as defined by Hofstede (1984) – Anglo, Nordic, Confucian and South Asian. The paper concludes by placing the findings within the context of transport policy formulation, transfer and implementation.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Symbolism

Symbolism has been shown to be a latent driver of travel behaviour (Steg, 2005). In economically stratified societies the symbols that people display, serve as objective criteria to compare oneself to others (Lindemann, 2007; Festinger, 1954). To give an example, a person wearing a luxury branded watch may be demonstrating affluence, a place in the social 'pecking order', a tacit instruction to others as to how they should be treated. The manner in which groups and individuals use symbols to self-define and relate to others in society falls within the field of symbolic interactionism, a discipline predicated on the belief that humans socially interact with their fellows through the meaning of things (Blumer, 1986).

The role of symbols in social communication was first theorised by linguists and semioticians. Saussure et al. (1916) postulated that a sign, or symbol, has two meanings: a signifier or objective meaning, and a signified – what the sign may communicate to others about the displayer. Hjelmslev (1953) and Barthes (1957, 1967) took the concept of the signified a stage further by suggesting that a symbol has two implications, a denotation and a connotation, the connotation being a deeper meaning of that which is shown at the surface level. Barthes (1967) argued that it is the connotations of a symbol that drive behaviour.

The concept of symbolism in transport is widely theorised, most strongly around the meaning of the private car. Belk (1988) describes how for many young American males, the automobile is a symbol of masculinity, part of the owner's extended self and ego. Miller (2001) summarises how in the literature the car is depicted as a symbol of modernity. Pojani and Stead (2015a) state that at a collective societal level, private cars have long connoted comfort, speed, pleasure, power, protection, individuality, and superiority. Gartman (2004) believes that early automobiles conferred cultural capital on the high bourgeoisie in American society by attesting to their owners' removal from the necessity of work. Choo and Mokhtarian (2004) identified that some people bought specific makes and models of cars because they believed that their car symbolised strong aspects of their personality to others.

Symbolism as an explicit, latent variable in transport choice, was quantitatively derived only relatively recently by Steg (2005). She did not merely allude to symbolism but utilised a theoretical model of motivation – devised by Dittmar (1992) – to isolate symbolism as a proxy variable through factor analysis. This allowed it to be clearly distinguished from two other aspects of choice motivation: instrumental (practical, measurable), and affective (how a person feels emotively, arousal).

2.2. National culture

There are many conceptualisations of culture. In 1952 over 164 definitions were identified by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952). Hofstede (1984) defines culture as the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. The manifestation of culture can vary either vertically, by income or wealth (e.g. working class culture), or horizontally, across a uniform social group (e.g. car culture). While culture has long been important in fields such as anthropology and sociology, it would appear to be the advent of the study of mobilities that has led to it becoming increasingly discussed in the transport literature. For example, one of the four critical aspects of urban mobility as described by Kuhnimhof and Wulfhorst (2013) is 'perceptions and lifestyle orientation', a construct heavily influenced by cultural background. Kuhnimhof and Wulfhorst (2013) see perceptions and lifestyle orientations as being influenced by the cultural background of the decision maker, as well as their socio-

¹ Throughout this article the term 'developing countries' will be used to denote 'industrialising', 'emergent' and 'low and middle income' nations, and 'the Global South'. Deliberation of the appropriateness of the term is outside the scope of this article. For a comprehensive discussion see World Bank (2015).

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