The attitudes of young people towards transport in the context of climate change

This briefing sheet describes a 3-year PhD study, funded by the University of the West of England, Bristol and completed in May 2008. The research sought to explore and understand the factors influencing the travel behaviour intentions of young people, with specific attention given to how climate change considerations affect these. Having outlined the context of the research and the methodology used, the key findings are presented.

Background and Justification

Climate change is now regarded as the greatest problem facing the world today. Due to increasing levels of greenhouse gases the world faces more extreme weather events, loss of biodiversity, flooding, drought, starvation, and death. Providing a significant contribution to atmospheric levels of greenhouse gases is the burning of fossil fuels, including those produced via the manufacturing and running of motor vehicles, in particular the car.

The UK transport system is dominated by the car and it can bring many advantages to the modern lifestyle providing a quick, comfortable, direct, relatively cheap, and flexible form of transport, as well as a feeling of status, confidence and pride in the owner. However, if we do not reduce our reliance on the car, our behaviour is likely to adversely affect not only today's but, perhaps more importantly, future generations.

Progress in technology and good planning can mitigate some of the adverse impacts of car use, but changing attitudes towards transport is also an important step in changing our current transport behaviour, if only to understand and accept policy measures and interventions made in this light. All members of society should have a share of decision-making power in making such changes including children and young people.

However, despite the public having a general understanding of and concern about climate change, current evidence suggests that it is their travel behaviour, which is heavily reliant on the car, that they are particularly unwilling to change. With this in mind it appeared necessary to explore the degree to which the travel behaviour intentions of young people may be influenced before they develop a reliance on the car from the age of 17. Nonetheless, the literature suggests that young people (defined here as those between the ages of 11 and 18 years) are not only unwilling to change their current or intended travel behaviour (which is again dominated by the desire to continue driving or to drive and/or own a car in the future) in light of climate change, but they also express a lack of concern about this issue.

Consequently, the main aim of this research was to better understand *why* young people intend to move towards use of the car and often away from more environmentally friendly modes and why climate change considerations do not appear to act as an influence on this.

Research Aims and Methodology

There were two key aims to the research:

1) To explore (and in doing so gain a deeper understanding of) the attitudes of young people towards transport modes, their 'willingness to tackle climate change', and whether their willingness to tackle this issue acts, or has the potential to act, as an influence on their current or, more importantly, future intended travel behaviour (away from an intention to drive, towards an intention to use more 'environmentally friendly' modes).

2) To develop and implement a methodology that focuses on understanding the thoughts, feelings and (intended) actions of the young people involved in the research in their own words, reflecting both the subjective nature of attitude and the importance of engaging with this particular age group.

These aims are in the context of the changes young people experience as they age, which include those in relation to transport choices, independence, and cognitive maturity, each of which may influence their travel behaviour intentions.

It is assumed that these changes do not *just* occur at the point of licence acquisition and thus the study identified three other significant and relatively

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universal life stages in young people's lives. 11 is an important age, as most young people move to secondary/senior school. 15 is also an important age as young people to date have faced the possibility at this age of leaving formal education and entering the work force or moving to college or a sixth form at a new school. 18 is considered an important age as people have the *opportunity* to drive, may already have *experience* of driving and may have to cope with leaving education and/or home.

Successfully capturing the perceptions and attitudes of young people is methodologically challenging, but qualitative, participatory methods have been found to work effectively with young people - engaging them as participants and in discussion. Such methods thus reject the traditional objectivistic approach to social research and instead reflect the degree to which such factors are socially constructed and often expressed using very different language from individual to individual. They also allow new 'unknown' factors to be identified. Small discussion groups were chosen so as to investigate the influence of peer pressure in addition to this.

The participants were recruited from schools, a hockey club and scout group and the study was divided into two waves, both consisting of six discussion groups which were split by age and gender. The groups in Wave 1 were provided with predetermined images, chosen by the researcher. The participants in Wave 2 were asked to gather their own images through the use of photography, drawing or collection of already-printed images that they felt capture their opinions of, perceptions of and attitudes towards cars and the same in response to "any other form of transport". This was done while engaging with transport (for example taking a photo through a bus or car window) or reflecting on it (for example collecting a car-related advertisement).

In both waves, the photos acted as effective prompts in the discussion groups, as did the images supplied by the researcher in Wave 1. The latter images were chosen on the basis that they linked with the key topics the study wished to explore during the discussions, these being 'attitudes to transport modes', 'information about transport modes', 'concern about climate change', 'willingness to tackle climate change', 'information about climate change', and 'current/intended transport behaviour'. These topics were introduced to the participants in both waves in this order as part of a deliberative approach to the research. The study firstly aimed to explore the participants' travel behaviour intentions and the reasons behind these without *prompting* them to think about specific factors. Having done so, climate change was discussed in detail, before introducing the idea of tackling climate change through voluntary or enforced travel behaviour change. This approach was reflected in a moderator guide devised for both waves, designed to allow a semi-structured approach to the discussions. Therefore, although the discussions followed this order of questioning, the groups were not restricted by these topics. The discussions in Wave 2 were also influenced by the participants examining their own images.

Findings

All of the participants stated their intention to learn to drive, or continue driving, in the future. Firstly, although it was assumed that the factors influencing the travel behaviour intentions of the participants would differ between the life stages chosen, as well as between those participants unable to (legally) drive and those able to, it was found that these influences did not differ on these bases (beyond differences in the language used and experiences referred to). At the same time, the findings were not greatly dissimilar to those of previous studies involving older age groups.

With respect to both the young people involved in this study and older participants questioned in previous studies, it is *values* that act as the underlying influence on travel behaviour intentions. Yet, although values including 'A Comfortable Life', 'Freedom', and 'Pleasure' are relevant to both age groups, it was found that the young people in this study value image, self-identity and social recognition in particular and it is this that explains their positive attitudes towards the car and driving in favour of alternative modes.

For example, the participants pointed to learning to drive as "a mile-stone in teenage life" - something that everyone does at seventeen. They also pointed to the car as a symbol of social status and the importance of their role as a driver in their friendship groups:

Limousines, they're like a really special thing for like if you're posh or you have lots of money. That's why I want to have one of them.
(11 yr-old female participant)

Me and my friends share lifts to school in the mornings. Now our friends, all of our group have actually passed, we take it in turns to drive places...we share everything.
(18 yr-old female participant)

With respect to the participants' willingness to tackle climate change (via their travel behaviour), the participants have a general understanding of the link between transport and climate change, but they place higher value on identity, self-image, and social recognition than the environment and thus the car remains their most favoured mode.

It is recognised that transport policymakers are likely to require an understanding of the degree to which these values are universally held among young people. Nevertheless it is strongly suggested on the basis of this research that such values should be accounted for when steps are taken to influence (future) behaviour (intention)., This would particularly apply to soft policy measures aimed at addressing the socio-psychological motivations for travel choice (such as marketing activities). For example, it may be appropriate to promote cycling as a signal of success and 'being cool', rather than (only) promoting the environmental benefits of this behaviour.

At the same time however, it became clear that the timing and intangibility of climate change – in that the participants consider the impacts of this issue will not be felt until far off in the future - is key to their apathy towards tackling this issue (with respect to changing their travel behaviour intentions in particular). The same is true for their lack of self-efficacy and the degree to which they feel they are unable to make a change as an individual:

There are little things you can do, but nothing that will change the world, because individually we're only little people.
(11 yr-old female participant)

I'd like to change it. But I know I wouldn't be able to, just me. If I really tried I know that I would just be wasting my life trying to do one thing I knew I couldn't change.
(11 yr-old female participant)

The participants also suggested that although they receive information about what climate change is, they lack information about what they can do to tackle it:

You don't really get told what to do. …Instead of just saying 'we're polluting the world', tell us what we can do about it.
(11 yr-old male participant)

Again these are issues that should be considered when designing softer transport policy measures, although the participants also suggested that they would welcome harder policy measures that aim to enforce travel behaviour change away from a reliance on the car towards an increased reliance on walking, cycling and use of public transport, as long as such measures meant that these 'alternative' modes were easily accessible and reliable. This acceptance was in part due to their belief that such action would empower individuals attempting to tackle climate change, as everyone would have to behave in a similar way.

I think some people may want to help the environment but they don't do anything about it but then again if they were forced to then they'd have to. …I mean eventually it's going to happen anyway. It's going to come to a point in time where there's going to be a ban on cars or something …there's just going to be no feasible way they can have all the cars on the road.
(18 yr-old male participant)

In conclusion, although it was thought that there may remain scope to influence young people away from an intention to drive, towards use of more environmentally friendly modes before they develop driving habits, it would appear that this is more questionable than expected in that 'socialisation' of these young people has already occurred - their behaviour intentions regarding transport are already well developed. It also appears that they lack the self-efficacy and knowledge to change their travel intentions in light of the impact of transport on climate change. Nonetheless, a deeper understanding of the influences on their behaviour intentions and 'willingness to tackle climate change' has been gained and it is suggested that it remains possible to challenge them through careful application of this knowledge to future research and transport policy and initiatives.

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