Consuming the car: anticipation, use and meaning in contemporary youth culture

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Abstract

Drawing on evidence from a recently conducted study of the everyday lives of young people in Manchester, UK, this article considers the place of cars in contemporary youth culture. The article acknowledges the recent beginnings of sociological and social science discussion of cars but concurs with the view that this topic has been much neglected. More specifically the study of young people and personal mobility has been constrained by approaches that emphasise the problematic nature of this phenomena or locate it within a theory of subculture. Taking its cue from recent studies of consumption, this paper offers an alternative theorisation. Refinement of the work on television consumption by Roger Silverstone leads to a discussion of more affluent young people’s relationships to cars under three heads: anticipation, use and meaning. It is suggested that car use must be seen in the framework of sociability and networks and that it also critically and suggestively mediates ordinary consumption with imaginative possibilities.

Introduction: the car and sociology

Few technologies developed in the twentieth century exercise a greater sway over the popular imagination, whilst simultaneously threatening the viability of global existence in the twenty-first century, than the triumph of the car over cultural sensibilities. Yet until recently this significance has been little registered in sociology. Of course, we are aware that one of the more predictable ways of introducing an argument is to begin in dismay and alarm over the poverty of research in the particular area. Nevertheless there is some truth in the claim that sociology has barely noticed the car, which is somewhat surprising given its impact on social life. This would include such issues as: the resource depletion, climatic change and environmental degradation involved in the manufacture and use of cars; the global political economy of their production and distribution; and the intense local problems, anxieties and pleasures sustained by car consumption. Which is to say nothing about the cultural significance of the car, for it can be no coincidence that the United States is home to both the ‘freedom’ of the ‘road movie’ and the ‘conservatism’ of the suburb. These are just two of the ways in which the car speaks to and
comments on an audience, which finds various testimonies in the advertise-
ments that litter the Sunday supplements of ‘quality’ newspapers.

In many ways therefore, we are indebted to John Urry (2000: 58–9) for
arguing that there are three sub-disciplines in sociology that should have paid
more attention to the car. First, there is industrial sociology that has much to
say on how Fordist and post-Fordist methods of capitalist enterprise have
impacted on social relations, without any thorough corresponding examina-
tion of how the exemplar (the car) has transformed and organised social life.
Second, urban sociology has tended to concentrate on the pedestrian, or
flâneur, as the key point of entry into understanding the maze of city living at
the expense of considering how the car physically intrudes, systematically per-
vades and organises the routines of daily life. The third domain is the sociol-
ogy of consumption, where slight attention has been paid to, ‘the use-value of
cars in permitting extraordinary modes of mobility, new ways of dwelling in
movement and the car culture to develop. The main question for the sociol-
yogy of consumption has concerned sign-values, with the ways that car owner-
ship in general or the ownership of particular models does or does not
enhance people’s status position. The car as the locus of consumption remains
on the drive of the house’ (Urry, 2000: 58). What we take Urry (2000) to
mean here is that the reader familiar with the literature on the sociology of
consumption would be able make a pronouncement on symbolic displays of
taste, but would struggle to find anything meaningful to say on the use-value
of cars.

More recently other writers have echoed Urry’s concern about the relative
absence of the car from social scientific attention (for example, Miller, 2001a;
Dant and Martin, 2001). Miller offers a resume of the extant literature on
the car that provides an alternative to Urry’s, including for example: ‘the con-
ventions of car history as a story of production and destruction, car social
history (see also, most importantly for Britain, O’Connell, 1998) and the
car as a trope in generalizations about modernity’ (Miller, 2001a: 12). For
Miller, these variations on the dominant approach to the study of the car are
lacking as they, in effect, downplay the complexities of the everyday con-
sumption of the car, in relation to the negative consequences of car owner-
ship. Drawing on the economics’ literature on ‘externalities’, Miller’s (2001b)
edited collection therefore offers numerous insights into different aspects of
the sociology and anthropology of the car. However, despite these benefits,
many of the contributions to his volume can be seen as operating within exist-
ing frameworks for the study of the car in relation to young people (see
below).

In this paper we wish to address a particular instance of the neglect iden-
tified by writers such as Urry and Miller, through examining how young
people interact with cars (see also Maxwell, 2001). As will become clear, our
respondents consistently spoke to us of the pleasures and complexities of
driving in their everyday lives, and it is this centrality of auto-mobility that we
seek to make sense of in this paper. Many had only recently passed their
driving test, or were taking lessons, whilst they all knew friends who could drive, so the twin experiences of ‘quasi-private mobility’ (Urry, 2000: 58), and extended sociability networks afforded by the car were particularly salient and, more importantly, in desperate need of sociological reasoning. We should emphasise in these opening remarks that the research on which we have based the following arguments was not driven by a theoretical desire to move the car to a more central place in the sociological imagination. Nevertheless, we have come to precisely that conclusion, even though our primary concern was, and remains, the cultural lives of young people in two contrasting areas of Manchester. Consequently, the paper begins with a consideration of the more specific literature on youth, consumption and the car before we identify the key themes in our research on youth culture and their implications for sociology of the car.

Young people, the car and mobility

Two main approaches to the question of young people and the car can be identified. One tends to focus on this as a problem (echoing Miller’s (2001a) characterisation of the dominant approach to the study of the car); the other examines the subcultural significance of various kinds of personal transport (see also with reference to other groups: Young, 2001; Gilroy, 2001 and Verrips and Meyer, 2001). Perhaps the most well known example of the former approach is Campbell’s (1993) *Goliath*, which concentrates on the problems raised by joyriding on Britain’s council estates (see similarly, for Sweden, O’Dell, 2001). Campbell understands joyriding as an expression of a particularly troubling form of masculinity, which terrorises these abandoned communities. She argues that the young men stole and drove the cars ‘purely for pleasure’ (1993: 259) and states that ‘the joyrider shares the mainstream fantasies that animate the typical motorway speeder and lays bare the principle of driving as a dialogue with danger’ (1993: 262). Of course, these fantasies are reinforced through car advertising, which celebrates danger, irresponsibility, excitement and the gendered control of space. More recent work has developed these insights through examining the relationships between young working class men and car accidents (Walker, Butland and Connell, 2000) and the close correspondence between forms of masculinity and ‘road rage’ (Groombridge, 1998).

These are important arguments, which recognise the salience of gender to understanding the destructive consequences of automobility, and need to be incorporated into any account that seeks to understand the relationships between the car and society. Yet it is also the case that we need to appreciate that a focus on ‘problems’ does not exhaust consideration of the relationships that young people have with cars, which we discuss shortly. Nevertheless, we would also strongly emphasise here that a concentration on gender difference could underestimate key similarities in experience that characterise young
people’s use of cars. For whilst the majority of our sample were middle class young women their views did not differ significantly from those articulated by the young men. In other words, the point is that other structuring dimensions of social practice (like age, class and ethnicity), might be more relevant than an exclusive preoccupation with gender. For instance, the difficulties of ‘driving while black’ (Gilroy, 2001) are a combination of age, gender and ethnicity – which tends to cut through class, particularly in the likelihood of being stopped by the police for young black men driving in cities. Similarly, the central place of the car in the ‘mundane’ tasks of women (shopping, school and care) is, as we will demonstrate below, crucially mediated by age (see also Maxwell, 2001).

The second approach focuses on the subcultural significance of consuming personal transport. The classic work is of course that of the Birmingham School, where Willis (1978) studied ‘motor-bike boys’, McRobbie and Garber (1976) pointed to the roles of women as passengers and Hebdige (1979) discussed how the Mods transformed the scooter from an ultra-respectable means of transport into a menacing symbol of group solidarity (see also Arvidsson, 2001). Hebdige’s point is that what marks the spectacular subcultural groups off from other cultural formations is the way in which commodities are used. They are all cultures of conspicuous consumption and the concept of bricolage is used to explain the ways in which subcultural styles are used oppositionally through processes of innovation and improvisation. This focus on bricolage is still evident in more recent work. For instance, George Lipsitz (1997) describes how the Chicano car customising subculture of Los Angeles deploys acts of bricolage. He argues that they ‘juxtapose seemingly inappropriate realities’, such as, ‘fast cars designed to go slowly, “improvements” that flaunt their impracticality, like chandeliers instead of inside overhead lights’ (1997: 358). Moorhouse (1991) takes a different approach in his work on the American hot-rod enthusiasm, where he demonstrates how the owners used their vehicles as a means of personal self-expression and creativity (see also Verrips and Meyer, 2001). However, this study is based on the correspondence found in hot-rod magazines, which means that a highly selective sense of how individuals interact with objects is conveyed. Nevertheless his emphasis on the meaning and use of consumption is important, though still remaining within a neo-subcultural paradigm as it remains wedded to a cultural formation unified through their commitment to particular objects and the ways of life organised around this enthusiasm. We now outline the ways in which, and the reasons why, our research differs from these approaches.

The research in context

Our research arises from dissatisfaction with the ways in which the condition of being young has been characterised by recent, and not so recent, pro-
nouncements in the disciplines of cultural studies, geography and sociology. In particular, we are concerned with how the relationships between the cultural and social dimensions of existence should be understood in relation to the complexities of time and space. The key concept normally used to define these relationships is that of subculture, which implies a way of life that is distinct from other, usually dominant, social formations. It is important to recognise from the outset that we are not arguing that the concept of subculture is bankrupt, rather that it has been worn out through over use and is burdened under a weight of connotation, when deployed in the service of making sense of what it is to be young. Despite its limitations, the literature associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in the 1970s in its classic work on youth subcultures, remains an important influence as it aspired to theoretically informed accounts of social practice. As is well known their work emphasised the oppositional nature of the spectacular youth subcultures that emerged in post-war Britain, through combining a Gramscian understanding of class domination and resistance with semiotic readings of the subversion contained in the various styles generated by fractions of the young.

We do not wish to rehearse the now extensive battery of criticisms levelled against the CCCS, not least because they are too familiar to bear repeating here (see Baldwin et al., 1999: 348–51 for an overview) instead what we want to argue is that whilst much recent work seeks to claim a theoretical distance from the Birmingham tradition and often uses a conceptual vocabulary alien to the 1970s there are, nevertheless, important continuities that limit the purchase of these accounts. We need only to draw attention to the proliferation of writing on rave culture in the 1990s to make the related points that the exceptional dimensions of youth consumption remain at the forefront of analysis, and continue as the means of commenting on the situation of young people in general. For instance, Melechi (1993: 36–7) claims that the club culture in Ibiza represents the ‘death of youth culture’ as it is a ‘lost . . . world of bacchanalian pleasures’. For many commentators, rave is characterised as a way of life that celebrates hedonistic individualism in the context of a decline of subcultural authenticity and rise of commercial formalisation and exploitation (see Miles, 2000, for an overview). Yet, and we want to emphasise this point, rave culture is only one space that young people may inhabit (and mainly at weekends) to the extent that generalising from one specific instance of social practice is a fundamentally flawed activity, for at best it can only produce partial and selective accounts. Partial, in the sense that not every young person engages in such activities for a variety of cultural, economic, ethnic and social reasons. Selective, in that for those who do participate in these activities, they represent only elements of the individual’s cultural life. Of course, these elements may be of some significance to the individual (as so ably demonstrated in the frenetic 1999 film Human Traffic) yet this can only be fully understood when they are located in the overall cultural life of the person.
Instead what is required is a nuanced and detailed account of the everyday lives of young people to understand the pressures, pleasures and versatile ways in which they interact with social and cultural formations. Moreover, such an account will necessarily suspend judgement on the extent to which young people’s activities are oppositional or resistant to dominant cultural forms. As Carrabine and Longhurst (1999: 140) have argued, on the basis of a modified Benjaminian position, ‘it is necessary to examine the micro processes of inclusion and exclusion in everyday social networks, the performance of self in such networks and the connection of these social processes to wider cultural shifts’ (see also Bennett, 1999; DeNora, 1999; Williams, 2001). Consequently, our research was designed to gain some insights into the cultural lives of 15–18 year olds in two contrasting areas of Greater Manchester (suburbia and the city). In order to capture the consumption practices of these young people four different approaches in schools and colleges in the research localities were used between 1997 and 1998.

Students were first asked to fill in a cultural inventory, which provided a map of each individual’s cultural life. For instance, it asked about the use and significance of such things as television, music, cinema, sport, magazines and so forth. Second, focus group discussions were used to examine the salience of a number of issues, in particular music. Third, 45 semi-structured interviews were employed to examine in greater detail the experience of consumption across a range of activities, which is where the significance of the car arose. Finally, a small amount of participant observation has been undertaken at the sites, which reveal themselves to be of importance from the interviews. Taken together this research strategy permits an understanding of the complexities of young people’s lives and their consumption practices. In this paper we will focus on the interviews carried out with 17–18 year olds in Suburbia (S) as these are particularly significant in representing the key age range for initial consumption of the car and for illustrating the place of the car in suburban life (on suburbia more generally, see for example, Silverstone, 1997).

Consuming the car

Before we discuss the key aspects of our findings we want to locate our discussion in a recent characterisation of media consumption, which has adapted and developed some of the earlier approaches to consumption more generally (see most importantly, Miller, 1987 and for accounts of the state of the art in consumption studies see, for example: Corrigan, 1998; Lury, 1996; Miles, 1998; Slater, 1997; Gronow and Warde, 2001a, 2001b). Silverstone’s (1994) important argument that television, has relatively quickly in Western societies become integrated into the routines of everyday life and, what is more, that our sense of security is maintained by the familiar routines of everyday life, we want to argue has some significance for how we should understand car consumption (see also Silverstone, 1999). An important part of this consists
of rituals and symbols of which we are largely unaware, but in which television has a large part to play. For instance, it provides an object in the room giving us a focus of conversation, as a medium it locates us in local, national and global relationships and it has a role as an entertainer and informer. But crucially it also organizes time, and our sense of security is given by routines that occur at more or less fixed times, like going to bed, getting up and meal times. Television has a major part to play in this fixing of events in time. For instance, routines develop around soap operas, so that they become integrated with teatime or children’s bedtime. In this way the domestic and the televisual revolve around each other (see also Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Morley, 2000).

It is Silverstone’s (1994: 123–31) characterisation of the dynamics of consumption that has particularly influenced our thinking, as he identifies six facets in the process of consumption which can be used to understand the transactions between the public, formal economy and the private, domestic sphere. It is important to recognise that these moments are not isolated moments, nor are they necessarily evenly present in all acts of consumption. The first, commodification, is the core process in the establishment and maintenance of capitalism and it refers to the industrial and commercial processes that turns artifacts into commodities sold in the economy. It also refers to the ideological processes inscribed in the artifacts, which defines them as products and as expressions of the dominant values of the societies that produce them. It is important to view this whole process as a cycle, in which the various moments influence and feedback into the pattern of commodification itself. To see consumption as a cycle challenges both the overdetermination of the culture industry, as characterised most influentially by the Frankfurt School and the celebratory populism of some postmodern authors who romanticise the power of the consumer. Instead the notion of cycle implies that objects not only move in and out of commodification, but that their status is constantly in flux as they move through the various moments of consumption.

The second aspect is that of imagination. Imagination is above all else contradictory work. For, on the one hand, commodities are constructed as objects of desire in advertising and marketing, yet on the other hand, it is also a source of frustration as consumption is based on an insatiable desire for objects, but it is a desire that can never be satisfied. This is because consumption is not based on a desire for objects to fulfil specific functions, but on a desire for difference, a desire for ‘social meaning’. This is an important part of the argument for what Silverstone is getting at is the way in which goods are imagined and dreamed about before they are purchased. This point is also recognised by Campbell (1995: 118) who argues that the ‘essential activity of consumption...is not the actual selection, purchase or use of products but rather the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which this product image lends itself, real consumption is largely a result of this mentalistic hedonism’ (see also Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). We develop these insights in our discussion of the significance of anticipation.
The third moment in the cycle, *appropriation*, refers to the point at which an object is sold and is taken possession by an individual or household and owned. It is the moment at which an object crosses the threshold between the formal and the moral economies. It also embodies the tension at the centre of consumption, which is that in our daily acts of consumption we are expressing our dependence on the material and symbolic objects of mass production, and at the same time, we are expressing our freedom as creative participants in mass culture. So appropriation is expressed in possession and ownership, whilst *objectification* reveals itself in display and expresses the principles that inform a household’s sense of itself and its place in the world. Objectification refers not primarily to the use of objects, but to how they are spatially arranged in the home to indicate such matters as status, taste and so forth.

It is through the idea of *incorporation* that Silverstone focuses on the ways in which technologies and objects are used, and this is very different from the way the term was used by the Birmingham Centre, as his argument is that technologies and objects are functional. What he means by this is that they may be used in ways far removed from the intentions of designers and marketers. Functions may change or disappear. For example, home computers might have been originally bought for educational purposes but soon become games machines or relegated to the bottom of wardrobes. To become functional an object or technology must, for Silverstone, find a place within the moral economy of the household in terms of its incorporation into the routines of everyday life.

Whilst objectification is primarily concerned with the spatial aspects of the household organisation, incorporation is more attuned to the temporal aspects of the internal structure of the household, *conversion*, defines the relationship between the home and the outside world. The metaphor used here is quite deliberately a monetary one, as the argument is that meanings are like currencies. Some meanings are convertible, others, like private and personal meanings are not. Television provides a very good example of this, because it is the source of much of the talk and gossip of everyday life. Similarly, computer games or music have much the same status for particular groups. But what conversion is doing is indicating a membership and competence in a public culture.

What we find particularly useful in Silverstone’s characterisation of the cycle of consumption is that it emphasises the dynamic interchange between the production of popular culture and the ways in which audiences use the objects produced by capitalist enterprise, in the context of raising some very important, but neglected aspects of consumption (see also Johnson, 1986). One way in which this characterisation can be used, and not just with reference to youth culture, is the way in which it gets at both the fantasy and mundanity of much consumption (see also Gronow and Warde, 2001a, 2001b). As Silverstone (1999: 5) suggests: ‘Hence the starting point. Experience. Mine and yours. And its ordinariness’. We shall have more to say on this theme below.
However, Silverstone’s characterisation can be simplified. For instance, we take it as read that any account of consumption must be aware of the significance of commodification in the manufacture, distribution and purchase of objects that saturate the ideological processes involved in the political economy of production. We would go further and argue that commodification is implicit in all the moments of consumption Silverstone identifies, to the extent that it is misleading to have this as a separate moment in the cycle of consumption. As it permeates (though not necessarily determines) the remaining moments which we argue can be simplified to the three dimensions of anticipation, use and meaning of the car by young people without harming his central point that commodities are constantly in flux and occupy shifting positions for consumers. Our fundamental point is that it is the interaction between ordinary and extraordinary consumption that is of sociological significance in connecting together personal meanings with social routines and networks of obligation.

Anticipation

We want to begin with the comments made by those in our sample that could not yet drive, and their anticipation of the benefits that this could bring. For instance,

Because I’ll be more mobile I’ll be able to go and see my friends and go out for a quick drink and things, whereas at the moment I’ve got to get to get a lift here, or, I’ve got to go and walk there and it’s quite difficult to see each other.

(S11)

My mum and dad don’t like giving me a lift, I know people whose mum and dad run them down the road but, I it’s not like they say, you can walk because they wouldn’t let me walk somewhere but then they wouldn’t give me a lift either, so you just don’t go and it’s really difficult because he lives in Marple and it’s a train to get to Marple, you’ve got to get on the train to Manchester, then you have to get on the train to Marple and it’s going to cost you about five quid, it takes ages, and you don’t want to be on Piccadilly station in the middle of the night so it’s really difficult so at the moment he has to come over to me, he can get a lift with his mum, so when I drive, yeah I can go there without having to bother anybody.

(S22)

Yeah because it’s like getting home from work late at night, my dad is out DJ-ing and I usually have to get a taxi or this lady drops me off who I work with so it would be a lot easier.

(S24)
Whilst there are several important themes raised in these passages, we want to draw attention to three. The first concerns the significance attached to the car in maintaining and developing social networks, friendship and relationships. Regardless of whether their own eventual car mobility will actually be able to fulfil these expectations, there are suggestive insights expressed here of the imaginative work deployed in thinking through these possibilities.

Second, it is clear that family relationships impact greatly on the young person’s auto-mobility and sociability. The young people studied in our project were hugely involved in the negotiation of complex networks of family obligation. For example: ‘Places like where we go with the family like to K. and stuff, just go, sometimes my mum might be off, well she’s off on a Monday and Tuesday, she works, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, so I might go out with her on a Monday and Tuesday in the car take her with me’ (S19). This complexity of organisation and negotiation was also found in other activities in the family, for example over the consumption of television: ‘my brother likes Top Gear and all them man car things, but me and my mum can’t stand them, and they like football and we like Eastenders, so we’ve all got a night now where one person watches, controls and remote control, so Monday is my step dad, Tuesday it’s my mum, Wednesday it’s my brother and Thursday is mine’ (S4). Use of a car is another way of managing the individual connection with these patterns.

Third, the assumed ‘safety’ of the car is played off against the dangers of being on ‘Piccadilly station in the middle of the night’ (S22). Cars are then useful as a protective shield in the management of the risks of going out in the city. Again, it is important to emphasise that these are imaginative processes, not just in the sense of a ‘fear of crime’ in public spaces, as private mobility is understood as part of a more generalised problem of maintaining a personal relationship. The young people clearly anticipate the value of the car in the secure maintenance and management of the complex range of activities that make up their everyday lives (see also, more generally, Maxwell, 2001).

Use

The first two themes also came through clearly when the actual use of the car is considered. The car is used as part of group activity – ‘just go out with friends, my friend has just passed her driving test so we are going out for a spin every now and then’ (S1) and the quotation from S11 above, indicate that the car is seen as facilitating sociability (an important theme in our research), and for those who can drive it does actually do this. On one level this is not an instrumental use, as the comment on ‘going out for a spin’, makes clear, nor is it mindless hedonism, nor the pursuit of danger. This common use of the car historically (see O’Donnell, 1998) is also found in our research:
Yeah round here just local down here, don’t go out of the area. But there’s a few of my friends started to drive, so we go out like for a drive and that, we usually go to T., drive round them places and things like that, gets us out of the area, it’s a little bit of a change (S12)

Moreover, cars that are available to these young people tend to be classified as mum’s car. For example, ‘My mum’s car yes, not my own car but mum’s, which I don’t know how it’s going to work out, but I’m presuming it will’ (S11), ‘I’ve been driving for about a year now, I passed in February last year, but I’ve got like, my mum is a teacher, so I’ve got access to her car quite a lot’ (S6) ‘Yeah, my mum’s car, I’d share it with her’ (S13), ‘Yeah, my mum’s car’ (S22)

use of dad’s car was rare, though some of them already own their own cars:

I was driving my mum’s car, it’s an estate car, I was driving that for about six months and it was my birthday in October and my mum had been saving some money ever since I was born and, she like, you know, put some money away each year, and she’s always said when I get to 18 you can use it on a car or you can use it for something else or something, so I said, right I’ll have a car.

(S9)

As above, what arises from these passages is that the car use needs to be considered in relation to networks of friendship, patterns of family obligation and gender divisions. It is for these reasons that we have included Silverstone’s (1994) discussion of appropriation and objectification under the heading of use. For instance, the fact that a number of the respondents had access to ‘mum’s car’ says much about the moral economies of these households and their sense of place in the world. It also shows that cars are gendered according to their primary user, with mum having to pay the price for their daughters and sons new found mobility. These young women were in effect appropriating a car that had a particular gendered place in the world – indicating the multifaceted relationships between age, gender and class. Further complexities of status and class are highlighted in the following passage:

When we were younger I used to get the rip taken out of me because of where I lived, and a lot of people used to say, oh you live in a big house, you own two cars, you’re posh. And then when they got to know me, they said, oh well that’s not true, but that period in-between I still get flak about it and it really used to annoy me, because it used to get to the stage where I just, I didn’t tell people where I lived, and I didn’t let people pick me up because then they wouldn’t see that we had a new car.

(S8)

It is clear then that principles of classification and status are perceived in rather different ways by individual members of the household and throw into
sharp relief the dynamics of distinction, for being understood as ‘posh’ is clearly troubling for this respondent.

Use and desire of a car is often tempered with ‘realism’ about the cost of lessons and running the car itself:

I’m already learning, I did my theory test yesterday so hopefully I passed that, I’ve got a car at home but just need insurance, it will clean me out! (S14)

Because I’m only 17 and I’ve got driving to lessons to pay for. (S8)

This sense of realism emphasises the point that car use is not just an expression of hedonism, but needs to be situated in the ‘lived experience’ of the individual and the ability to participate in car culture. It is worth emphasising the interaction of realism of cost and the financial demands that have huge impacts of these young people’s lives, and the imagination that is involved in the use to which cars are put. This is not to say that imagination is unreal, rather that there is an ongoing and significant interaction between economic realities and imaginative possibilities. Various aspects of the relationships discussed in this section are captured in the following:

Well my mum said that after my holidays she wants me to drive because I haven’t got enough money at the moment, but I actually went to get a provisional licence form and filled that all in, my mum said no just wait until after your holiday, so that’s what I’m going to do. My friend is actually learning to drive very soon, so she said, well you can get lifts off her anyway. She is not very happy about that. She says she is happy but I said I’ll pay for petrol and that so (S24)

The uses discussed here are part of a complex web of social relationships and there other aspects that might be relevant in a more developed study of car use and the interaction between young people and their parents, this could include parental perceptions of how far the young person can be trusted, which in turn can be related to perceptions of driver competence. Another important dimension is public esteem, as we now illustrate.

Meaning

As the car is part of patterns of sociability, there is a danger of being ‘left out’. As S1 remarked, ‘I don’t like it when everyone else is driving and I’m not’. This tangible sense of frustration is echoed by S11, in a quotation continued from above – ‘my boyfriend doesn’t really have that problem with his friends because he’s driving so he can go wherever he wants and does this and does that so it’s, I just feel like I’m being left behind on that’. Absence of the car
can clearly lead to feelings of social exclusion, but it does not seem to function as a ‘status symbol’ in any conventional case, it is rather a comment on citizenship. It is significant that none of the respondents mentioned or drew attention to the particular make of car they were driving or aspired to drive. Of course, this might be a reflection of the fact that the majority of the sample was young women, but the important point remains that what counts is the ability to drive and participate in the extended sociability networks afforded by the car. It is also likely that negotiations over who would drive a group of people would be extensive. We found in other parts of our data that discussion over arrangements to ‘go out’, where to meet and so on, could be very time consuming.

Equally importantly the car was also talked about in negative terms, of making its users ‘lazy’ (S6, S9). For instance, ‘it’s made me lazy to be honest, it’s like, I only work like 2 minutes away from Altrincham but I’ll drive (laughs)’ (S9). We discuss the implications of these points for a sociology of the car more fully in our conclusion, for we want to discuss some remarks that summarise many of the themes we have identified, whilst introducing insights on the process whereby the car becomes incorporated into the routines of everyday life:

It’s unbelievable, like before you are 17 you think, I'll just walk. And now, it, I don’t even walk down the road, I’ll get the car. I mean whether it’s me being lazy but . . .

(S6)

Yeah, yeah it’s, I mean the first two months you’ve just get this massive buzz everytime you go out in the car. I mean it’s great.

(S6)

We have juxtaposed these two contrasting passages from the same transcript to indicate just how quickly an extraordinary and exciting moment of consumption becomes ingrained in the routines of everyday life. For this person had been driving for a year or so and begun by saying that he used the car to ‘go to the youth club, or go, definitely go to work in, although it’s like quite near I still prefer to drive than cycle or anything like that’ (S6), and then made the above comment on how the car was now a taken for granted aspect of his being. But when asked to recall what it was like passing his test he captures the excitement, the ‘massive buzz everytime you go out in the car’, that many of the other respondents who were closer to, or anticipating, this moment felt.

The dynamics of incorporation and conversion, which Silverstone (1994) identifies, can be regarded as central elements in the meaning of car consumption. For instance, what is significant about this passage is the way in which an extraordinary moment of consumption has become incorporated into the routines of everyday life and is almost taken for granted and barely
reflected on. It is this conversion of meaning that is important, for what we want to argue is that it is the flux between the ordinary and extraordinary that animates consumption. We will now conclude with some remarks on the implications of our findings.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that if the sociology of the car is to develop, which considers its hegemony in the organisation of social life, then it must be one that recognises the excitement engendered by driving and the new horizons of sociability it seems to offer. It must also be one that is able to deal with the taken for granted and ordinariness of it in the routines of everyday life, to say nothing on how it impacts on social exclusion and citizenship. Such matters would range from the design of urban living and demotion of other modes of mobility to issues of ownership, environmental degradation and resource depletion.

One way of developing the arguments in this paper is to consider Raymond Williams’ (1983: 188–9) celebrated characterisation of ‘mobile privatisation’. Williams argues that this is a condition where ‘at most active social levels people are increasingly living as private small-family units, or, disrupting even that, as private and deliberately self-enclosed individuals, while at the same time there is a quite unprecedented mobility of such restricted privacies’ (Williams, 1983: 188). While Williams clearly captured an important trend in everyday life in contemporary capitalist democracies, anticipating is some respects some contemporary discussions of the decline of social capital (e.g. Putnam, 2000), we suggest that for the young people in our study the car offered a mechanism for the management of privacy in the context of patterns of interaction and sociability. Our view then is that an important way to characterise what we have discussed in this paper is through a concept and process of ‘mobile sociability’ that the young people in our sample aspire to and then very quickly take for granted if they are able to participate in the public culture of car use. We tend to agree with Urry (2000: 58) that car use should be thought of as ‘quasi-private’ for there are few technologies that so readily impact on the public sphere as the car, and have been so systematically ignored in sociology. Moreover, thinking of the car in this way facilitates consideration of how the car mediates between ‘two rather different types of consumption action, that geared towards impressing others and that directed at reassuring oneself’ (Longhurst and Savage, 1996: 294). The ability to drive, and the importance of not being left out show the importance of reassurance. Moreover, the car mediates imagination and the everyday world of financial limitation. It is in this arena of the ordinary and extraordinary that car consumption for the young people studied can be located in complex but highly significant ways.

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Notes

1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the Consuming Markets, Consuming Meanings Conference, at the University of Plymouth 1–3 September 1999, and we would like to thank all those who offered comment. We are also very grateful for helpful comment from the referees of Sociological Review and from Jane Hindley.

2 Whilst Silverstone’s (1994) arguments are developed in the context of the household, it is important to recognise that he is not reifying the household as the locus of consumption, as his arguments have general applicability.

References


