



# YOU'RE SO COOL!

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE CAR

Even those of us who “hate” cars and the damage they do, have to own up to certain preferences - in my case, I have a very soft spot for the original, low lying, bumpy but surprisingly roomy little Mini of yesteryear (not of course the bastardised models of today), and the tinny but oh so sweet Volkswagon Beetle, both of which I lovingly owned whilst in the prime of my youth. Now, I’m rather partial to electric cars.

Anyone with half a brain can deduce what kind of person I am.....

Which goes to show, whether we like it or not, a car is far more than just a vehicle which gets us from A to B.

According to authors, Peter Marsh and Peter Collett,<sup>1</sup> the car is “*the most psychologically expressive object that has so far been devised*”. They believe that the driver of the rusty Beetle (oops, me) and the one in the gleaming turbo-charged Porsche (definitely not me or anyone I know) both make equally powerful statements about themselves. Their choice of car shows them to be particular kinds of people, and defines them socially. We are what we drive. Marsh and Collett say that it is this single psychological principle which allows us to understand how the car has pervaded every nook and cranny of our everyday lives. And presumably, this is also why the environmental message of “drive less” hasn’t quite caught on.

In their infancy, cars symbolised two things; wealth and speed. Because cars were expensive, their owners were seen as being part of the elite - wealthy daredevils, separated from the riff raff by their ability to pay for this risky pastime.

Before the invention of the car, the rich displayed their position in society by building stately homes, running large estates, wearing expensive clothes and jewellery, by owning beautifully crafted carriages and stables of fine horses, and then by cycling in public places. Once the chain driven bicycle had spread to the masses, the elite needed another means through which to show off their exclusivity. Automobiles filled the breach and initially were used almost exclusively for recreation and pleasure, for outings to the countryside or trips to the theatre or opera. Those who sported a new car were more interested in image and status than expediency.

By the turn of the century, the car was moving in to displace the horse and carriage, but early motorcars were not the sleek, smooth running vehicles we have today. And road surfaces were primitive. Driving speeds were initially slow, so the more practical form of transport was still the horse and carriage, or for longer distances, the train.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Marsh & Peter Collett (1986) *Driving Passion-the psychology of the car*; p.26

Then, in 1908, the Irish American Henry Ford introduced the Model T with the main aim of providing a cheap car accessible to everyone. With it came the assembly line and mass production and before long car ownership had become democratic moving through the general population. Standardised production allowed the Ford Company to double the wages of their workers, and to reduce the sale price of the car. Functionality and practicality was the order of the day, and Ford's approach was reflected in his famous remark that he was willing to offer his customers any colour they wanted provided it was black. Therein lay the demise of the Model T.

Henry Ford failed to understand the psychology of the car owner. He never envisaged that people would want to use their car (if even sub-consciously) as a vehicle for individual expression. Price and practicality were all very well, but if everyone had the same car, how could you show where you stood on the social ladder, how could you display who you really were?

In the US, people turned to General Motors, headed by the dapper Alfred Sloan. Henry Ford was a nuts and bolts manufacturer who didn't give a toss for art or history. Sloan was an instinctive salesman who understood the power of outward appearances. He was interested, not in low-cost transport, but in mass-producing automobiles that would be as beautiful as the custom made cars of the period. He and his sales executives decided to produce new models each year rather than update existing designs – whereby marking the point at which mass-produced cars became fashion items.

Harley Earl was in charge of styling at GM from 1929 to 1959 – during which time he completely transformed the basic shape of the American car and the way that Americans thought of themselves. He lengthened and lowered, added wraparound windscreens, rocket exhaust tail lights and enormous fins that made the cars look as though they would have been more at home on an air force runway than a residential driveway.

No need to offer real advantages in engineering – just give people an illusion, a semblance of improvement - produce models that simply looked different from those they were designed to replace, add a new colour, and then bombard the public with advertising which promised the prospect of upward mobility and which played on their fears of being left behind in the fashion stakes. The driver of a Chevrolet could always aspire to a Pontiac, the Pontiac owner could always think of an Oldsmobile...and so on up the ladder to the Cadillac, which apparently at one stage was lusted after by one out of every two American men.

In the early 1920s, Henry Ford was producing every second car in America and GM had 25% of the market. By the early 1930's the situation was totally reversed, with GM holding half the market and Ford only a quarter.<sup>2</sup>

While we didn't quite go for the same excesses in Europe – our cars were always more demure and restrained – there is no doubt that we fell into the same psychological trap. Just reflect back on the Irish Celtic Tiger and remember how many people rushed out to buy the latest sports car or SUV (again I hasten to add, none of my tribe). The compulsory NCT (National Car Test) was introduced into Ireland in the year 2000 without a whimper. We expected the hard pressed farmers of West Cork to rise up in protest, but no, secretly everyone seemed happy to have an excuse to buy a new car.

And cars are not just about image and status. They are also about freedom - who will forget the feeling of independence when you first learn to drive. At last you can go places without asking parents for a lift, you can head off at will, come and go as you want.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Marsh & Peter Collett (1986) *Driving Passion-the psychology of the car*; p. 37-40

A car gives you privacy, it allows you to sing heartily despite your abilities, to eat those treats alone, to pick your nose if you want and for young lovers it's a godsend. Apparently, so cocooned are we in our cars we often forget that people can see in the windows or hear through the steel.

We women feel safe in our cars, able to make night-time forays into unknown territories alone. The car gives us an illusion of physical equality.

For the young at heart (and male) the car conjures up images of speed, excitement and vitality. Its potential deadliness gives it an air of aggression while its power and shape endow it with a sense of sexual potency.

Lest we think otherwise, cars are as much an object of attachment and passion for women as for men. According to research in the US, women buy more than half of all new cars and trucks and influence 80% of all automotive purchases. If the woman doesn't like it the couple walks out of the dealership empty handed.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, women make many judgements about men on the basis of the cars they drive.<sup>4</sup>

Cars are cool, and they play a big part in our musical world - *Cars* (Gary Newman); *Cars and Girls* (Prefab Sprout); *Cars and Guitars* (Tori Amos); *Car Trouble* (Adam and the Ants); *Chasing Cars* (Snow Patrol); *Daddy's Gonna Pay For Your Crashed Car* (U2); *Don't Drive My Car* (Status Quo); *Drive my Car* (The Beatles); *Driving in my Car* (Madness); *Fast Car* (Tracy Chapman); *Get in My Car* (50 Cent); *Used Cars* (Bruce Springsteen), etc, etc.

And then there's the brands: *Little Red Corvette* (Prince); *Look At That Cadillac* (Stray Cats); *Mercedes Benz* (Janis Joplin); *Mustang Sally* (Wilson Pickett); *My Mustang Ford* (Chuck Berry); *Brand New Cadillac* (The Clash); *Cadillac* (The Kinks), etc, etc.

There are quite a few songs about trains and occasional references to bicycles, jet planes and ocean liners. Few people sing about buses.

And the allure of cars even made it through the Iron Curtain. Despite the fact that the Soviet leaders had traditionally set themselves against mass car ownership, they had long been fond of foreign cars. Lenin was the proud owner of a Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost. Stalin gratefully accepted a Mercedes from Hitler. Leonid Brezhnev drove around in a Cadillac Eldorado that Richard Nixon brought as a gift during his visit to the Soviet Union in 1972. A few years later, Brezhnev took special delight in parading the streets of Moscow in a Mercedes convertible presented to him by the West German leader Willie Brandt – much to the consternation of his secret service which had trouble keeping up in their sluggish Volgas.<sup>5</sup>

Teenagers of the early 1960s were completely obsessed with cars. Those of the late 1960s were quite different. For them, Dylan, Vietnam, protest songs, long hair and sexual liberation were all the rage. They were also the first counter-car culture. It was now necessary to show that material possessions, cars included, were not important. What mattered instead was how people related to each other. However, the hippie culture was still forced to make their statement through the medium of the automobile. To demonstrate that you were not interested in cars you still had to drive a certain kind of car, say a Volkswagen Beetle or a beat-up old van. To make your social statement you would rather leave the paintwork untouched or give your car a crazy make-over. In a society dominated by the car, nobody, not even the members of a counter-car culture could escape.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Bridget Brennan (2009/11) Why She Buys-the new strategy for reaching the world's most powerful consumers; p. 3*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid; p. 15*

<sup>5</sup> *Peter Marsh & Peter Collett (1986) Driving Passion-the psychology of the car; p. 23*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.; p. 99*

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## SO WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR THE CAR?

As oil prices continue to rise, and attitudes to gas guzzlers change, will we gravitate back to the bike or the bus?

Marsh and Collett refer to the attempt by mensa rated Clive Sinclair<sup>7</sup> (who made his fortune, with inventions such as the Executive, the world's first pocket calculator and the ZX range of computers) to introduce an electric car in 1985 which resulted in a dramatic commercial failure. The Sinclair C5 was a battery electric vehicle steered by handles on each side of the driver's seat. Its top speed of 15 miles per hour (24 km/h), was the fastest allowed in the UK without a driving licence. It sold for only £400 but sadly became an object of popular ridicule. The much-publicized launch was an unqualified disaster. It was held in the middle of winter and the C5's body skated on the snow. The press was merciless. Safety and Advertising Standards organizations got involved. Sales and production nosedived, and the company was wound up in October of the same year, with an unfazed Sir Clive out of pocket some 8.6 million pounds.

The C5 was admittedly very crude, but it was cheap and was fine for local urban use and more comfortable than a motor cycle. It was also in keeping with the futuristic view of the car that had been championed for years, a future in which pollution and the privations of oil shortages would be a thing of the past. So why did it fail? Marsh and Collett, writing in the mid 1980s, dismiss as paranoia the suggestion by some people that a conspiracy between the large oil companies and the car manufacturers lay at the root of the problem. They reckon the C5 failed so dramatically because Sinclair didn't take into account the psychology of the car owner.

Electric motors and internal combustion engines have quite different inherent symbolism. The former are associated primarily with domestic machinery, such as refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and home tools. It is not that they are women's motors – although they have a less than masculine image – it is the air of homely domesticity which makes them quite unacceptable as the motive force for a car. The internal combustion engine, in contrast, has absolutely no associations with everyday household activity. It belongs to the automobile and has quite different symbolic characteristics. Its mechanical action conjures up images of sexuality and power, and the associations are with personal freedom and escape from the humdrum of domestic life.

Sinclair's disaster was caused by his failure to recognise the imagery of electric motors. Worse still, the motor of the C5 was manufactured by Hoover, best known for its washing machines.

*"Other would-be producers of electric cars will face similar problems. The Utopian dream of the ecologists and planners fails to take into account the fundamental reasons why people buy cars in the first place. In the same way that the early automobile manufacturers were forced to put the engine at the front of the car, to symbolise the power of the horse which the internal combustion engine replaced, a viable electric car will have to communicate messages similar to those conveyed by conventionally powered vehicles. That, however, requires a fundamental contradiction to be overcome, and even the most persuasive of advertising copywriters will find that an uphill task."*<sup>8</sup>

In 2010, Sir Clive Sinclair said he was poised to make a comeback with a new plan that could finally see his dream of a successful electric vehicle become a reality.<sup>9</sup> So far no further news has surfaced on the web.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Marsh & Peter Collett (1986) *Driving Passion-the psychology of the car*; p. 208/9

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; p.209

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/sir-clive-sinclair-down-but-never-out-the-eternal-optimist-is-back-1863277.html>

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## IS THERE HOPE FOR THE ELECTRIC CAR?

As of October 2011, the number of electric vehicles in the UK stood at just 1,107, a tiny chunk of the country's 28.5m cars, despite a generous grant scheme.<sup>10</sup>

However, electric car sales rapidly picked up speed in 2012, with numbers almost doubling in the first nine months. The acceleration hugely outstripped growth in the wider car industry, which saw a sales increase of just 5.4% in 2012 against 2011. The cars, which are seen as crucial to meeting the government's climate targets and tackling air pollution, however remain a fraction of the 1.9m conventional ones sold the previous year. A total of 1,419 were registered in the first three quarters under the grant scheme, up from 786 for the same period in 2011.<sup>11</sup>

In the Irish republic, the number of electric cars added to roads between 2009 and October 2012, was only 192.

The Japanese car giant, Toyota, has recently renounced purely battery-powered vehicles; instead it says it will concentrate its vast research-and-development resources on plug-in hybrids with smaller battery packs that can power the car for 20km or so before a conventional engine turns on to provide power for longer journeys. They feel that customers are not yet willing to compromise on range and they don't like the time needed to recharge the batteries. But Tesla, Renault and Volkswagen are persevering with pure electric cars; they will be joined by others in the coming years, including BMW and Ford (although both of those car makers are hedging their bets with a combination of pure electric and plug-in hybrids).<sup>12</sup>

While we green enthusiasts blame the low take-up on the high cost of electric cars, the slow roll out of charging points and fast chargers, people's concerns about low mileage range and the allure of hydrogen fuel cells, there is no denying the fact that some people are frankly embarrassed to be seen driving the vehicles. In Ireland, Electric Ireland, the state sponsored power company responsible for the installation of charging points around the country has a fleet of electric cars which they loan out to their staff on the understanding that they will drive them around the place. We were approached by one such staff member locally who knew that we were interested in electric cars. He asked if we wanted to drive his as he didn't want to!

Neil Briscoe of The Irish Times echoes a now familiar theme. *"The technology that drives electric cars is, essentially, the same technology that makes a food blender spin around and around. The technology that drives hydrogen fuel cell cars is the same technology that NASA used to power the Apollo spacecraft that flew to the moon and back. Which one would you rather have in your car?"*<sup>13</sup>

However, all is not lost - Elon Musk and the team at Tesla Motors<sup>14</sup> seem to get the idea, with their cool Model S and Model X (note the symbolic names) electric cars. The cars are not cheap, but they are classy, roomy, fast, high-tech and they win awards.

*"The 2013 Motor Trend Car of the Year is one of the quickest American four-doors ever built. It drives like a sports car, eager and agile and instantly responsive. But it's also as smoothly effortless as a Rolls-Royce, can carry almost as much stuff as a Chevy Equinox, and is more efficient than a Toyota Prius. Oh, and it'll sashay up to the valet at a luxury hotel like a supermodel working a Paris catwalk. By any measure, the Tesla Model S is a truly remarkable automobile, perhaps the most accomplished all-new luxury car since the original Lexus LS 400. That's why it's our 2013 Car of the Year.*

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/oct/21/electric-car-uk-sales-sputter>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2013/jan/08/electric-car-sales-2012>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/motors/2012/1017/1224325325202.html>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/blogs/motors/2012/01/20/lets-ban-electric-cars/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.teslamotors.com/>

*Wait. No mention of the astonishing inflection point the Model S represents - that this is the first COTY winner in the 64-year history of the award not powered by an internal combustion engine? Sure, the Tesla's electric powertrain delivers the driving characteristics and packaging solutions that make the Model S stand out against many of its internal combustion engine peers. But it's only a part of the story. At its core, the Tesla Model S is simply a damned good car you happen to plug in to refuel".*

MOTOR TREND; 12TH NOVEMBER 2012

When we were together Quentin and I shared a little Citroen EV. It is not quite so eye-catching, and can look a little dumpy if viewed dispassionately, but boy, does it drive well. Everyone loves its rapid takeoff, and silent purring, but, as far as we know, we haven't yet been responsible for any copy cat sales around West Cork, despite our evangelistic efforts..... However, our son and his pals think it is really cool, so that can only bode well for the future.

An article in New Scientist<sup>15</sup> says that there are two opinions on the future of the car. One is that in the not too distant future electric vehicles will take over our streets. The cost of batteries will plummet due to mass production, and as oil prices continue to rise running costs will be more cost effective, so that the electric car will become economic within a decade. The effect of falling electric vehicle costs will be reinforced by strengthening fuel efficiency and emissions policies in the world's most important car markets.

The other view concludes that electric vehicles will make little headway in the next decade as improvements in the efficiency of the conventional internal combustion engine will win the day.

However, a recent survey carried out by KPMG asked 200 top executives of car companies how long they thought the traditional engine would continue to prevail over electric vehicles. Some 70% answered 1 to 10 years, only 18% thought 10 to 20 years.

But beware of the Rebound Effect. If people respond to efficiency gains from whichever engine, by using their cars more, any impact on the carbon footprint could be lost!

What about public transport, you ask?

Peter Marsh and Peter Collett make the point that cars and public transport are not really in competition with each other. People do not drive cars simply because trains and buses are perceived as being inefficient. The car is preferred primarily for its expressive function and for the spontaneity of travel that it provides. Public transport does not provide opportunities for self-expression and it requires forward planning on the part of the passenger. The car allows individuals full control of their destiny. Certain restrictions are placed upon their behaviour through speed limits, traffic signals and so on, but within these constraints drivers are free to do what they please.

Therefore, mass transit systems must be seen as serving a totally different function. Trains, buses or their futuristic equivalents can never replace the car. Their aim is to fill a role which the car has long vacated that of simply transporting people from one place to another.

*"Practical necessity will inevitably result in the growth of more sophisticated public transportation systems. It will also undoubtedly promote the development of alternative fuels and power sources. But the car will remain. The driving passion will ensure the survival of the expressive function for which it is really designed and which it so perfectly fulfils".<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Cars; New Scientist; 19th May 2012; p.34-38

<sup>16</sup> Peter Marsh & Peter Collett (1986) *Driving Passion-the psychology of the car*; p.210

## THE TOYOTA PRIUS

In the first three months of 2012, nearly a quarter of a million Priuses were sold around the world, making Toyota's Prius the world's third best-selling car - coming behind the Toyota Corolla and Ford Focus, which firmly establishes the fact that this hybrid is not a fluke or a passing trend.<sup>17</sup>

*"Hybrids allow people to feel they are doing the right thing for the planet,"* says Michael Feinstein, a Santa Monica councilman who had just bought a Prius for his mother.

However,<sup>18</sup> in a marketing case study of the Prius, Max Dunn and Rudi Halbright state that while the biggest product differentiation of the Prius is the fuel efficient, hybrid engine, most people don't buy it because it is eco-friendly. They assert that Toyota has succeeded by marketing the Prius on multiple factors including the potential for gas savings, appealing to those who desire the latest technology, crossing into multiple market segments, and keeping the car, practical, attractive and functional. If they had relied solely on the impact on the environment, they *"would have failed to generate significant market penetration"*

Toyota launched its first Prius into the Japanese market in 1997, making it the first mass produced hybrid vehicle. When they subsequently tried to introduce this model into America and other countries, they were met with complaints - the interior looked cheap, and the boot was too small to fit a buggy and the back seats wouldn't fold down. After making the necessary modifications, the first generation Prius for the US market was introduced in the year 2000. The marketing and ad campaign began two years prior to this and communicated not only the car's environmental advantages but also how desirable and practical it was for regular, everyday transportation. People were able to pre-order the car, which created pent up demand.

Apparently, the more extreme environmentalists were turned off by the high tech aspects of the car.

Toyota only succeeded in selling this early model to early adopters and an audience of innovators. 15,000 were sold in 2001 and then 20,000 in 2002.

The 2004 model was larger, had a more efficient drivetrain yielding improved mileage, and more luggage space. The marketing campaign focused more on the car's larger size and higher power and only in passing mentioned its positive impact on the environment.

By 2007, it had become cool to drive a Prius with its distinctive body design and identity. This was no doubt assisted by the fact that Toyota offered celebs discount hybrids in the hopes that their star power would help sway other early adopters. Soon Hollywood A-listers like Cameron Diaz, Steven Spielberg and Leonardo DiCaprio were seen driving the cars. People began to feel that driving a Prius said something about themselves.

The Toyota Prius now holds 50% of the hybrid market in the US. While other companies ask customers to choose between a standard engine and a more expensive hybrid version, both look identical. Dunn and Halbright feel the Toyota Prius has been successful because it has a distinctive look. They also say that you can't design an inferior product and expect to make up for it by being eco-friendly. And marketing to eco-friendly and early adopter segments is all very well, but sales won't take off until there is a compelling message for the mass market.

By meeting a wide range of customer needs and creating a broad appeal, coupled with strong branding, it is possible to cross over and successfully sell a product in multiple market segments.

In July 2007, The New York Times published an article using data from CNW Marketing Research finding that 57% of Prius buyers said their main reason for buying was that "it makes a statement about me", while just 37% cited fuel economy as a prime motivator.<sup>19</sup> Shortly afterwards, *Washington Post* columnist Robert Samuelson coined the term "Prius politics". The Prius, he thinks, is *"a parable for the broader politics of global warming. Prius politics is mostly about showing off, not curbing greenhouse gas emissions. Politicians pander to "green" constituents who want to feel good about themselves. Grandiose goals are declared. But measures to achieve*

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,998718-2,00.html>

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.academia.edu/239996/Prius\\_Marketing\\_Case\\_Study](http://www.academia.edu/239996/Prius_Marketing_Case_Study)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/04/business/04hybrid.html>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/24/AR2007072401855.html>

*them are deferred - or don't exist* ".<sup>20</sup>

## A FICKLE BUSINESS

The 2012 Oscars ceremony was light on hybrid vehicles, as fewer stars opted to arrive in eco-friendly style.

Matt Petersen, CEO of Global Green, a company that provided hybrids to celebrities for past Academy Awards, told the Hollywood Reporter that times have changed. It is no longer *"a novelty to offer [a Prius] so we decided to put our resources in other areas,"* he said. *"It's not a sign of failure; I think it is a sign of success."*

Instead of hybrids, most of the 2012 celebrities whose representatives were contacted by the industry newspaper planned to arrive in more luxurious style, being chauffeured in Lincoln Town Cars or SUVs. But that didn't mean that all big vehicles used on Oscar night were gas guzzlers: the car-service firm Econation deployed 25 hybrid or alternative-fuel vehicles to the awards ceremony.

And this sea change didn't mean that Oscar night was hybrid-free. Mercedes-Benz premiered ads for its new S400 Hybrid during the telecast, and the company reported that many celebs drove Mercedes hybrids or clean diesel vehicles to the Oscar ceremony and related parties: *"Hollywood's most notable talent who choose Mercedes-Benz for their green transportation include Golden Globe winner and Academy Award nominee Michelle Williams, Golden Globe nominees Sofia Vergara and Bryan Cranston, 2011 Academy Award Best Actress Winner Natalie Portman, among others including Courteney Cox, Renee Zellweger, Diane Kruger, Freida Pinto and Dev Patel."*<sup>21</sup>



<sup>21</sup> <http://www.mnn.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/stories/has-hollywood-abandoned-the-prius-and-other-green-vehicles>