

## CAR MOTIVATIONS IN THE YOUNG TARGET GROUP: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Globally, there are many profound changes going on within the automotive sector. There are new technological developments like e-mobility and autonomous cars, as well as new business models such as car sharing that may make purchasing a car obsolete for the younger, international target group. The intention of this paper is to identify the role and importance of cars in the young target group internationally and to explore current motives for buying an automobile. To this end, the authors conducted a psychological research study on a diverse group of upper division undergraduate and master's degree level students originating from more than twenty different nations. Research methods used include structured one-on-one interviews and in-depth focus groups. The study's results are useful for international marketing practitioners as they contribute to understanding the relevance and importance of automobiles for the international youth target market as well as identification of motives regarding car purchase across various countries. The results have implications for international managers within the automotive industry for the development of new mobility concepts as well as for international marketing communications within the automotive sector.

**Keywords:** international marketing; international cross cultural research; motivational research; international consumer behavior; automotive marketing

**JEL classification:** M31, M16

### 1. Introduction

There are many fundamental changes currently going on in the automotive sector. Thus, there are many pressures within the car industry to make technological advances within the domains of e-mobility, autonomous driving as well as new mobility and car sharing concepts (Sprick, 2016). Is there simply an obligation within the industry to change or is it based on an evidential demand from consumers? The purpose of the article is to identify and investigate the relevance of new developments within the automotive market, particularly within the youth generation internationally. The authors are especially focused on variations that may exist in attitudes across cultures. There are hypotheses in several

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articles that, for the younger target group, the importance of automobiles is diminishing (Belgiawan et al., 2014) but there is only limited research, known to the authors, focused on an in-depth understanding of the role of automobiles in the international young target group and their holistic motivations towards cars. Therefore, the authors focused on the following areas within the conducted research: attitudes of the international youth segment toward cars in general and specifically with regard to the emerging technologies within the automotive sector; the importance of various facets related to cars; the relevance of cars for daily life and if/how they are used. In particular, the authors focused on whether there are international differences in these areas.

## 2. Theoretical Background

The automotive industry has been experiencing a variety of contradictory trends in recent times; these present both opportunities and challenges. For example, in 2015, U.S. auto sales experienced record growth. Despite this fact, there are indications that automobile ownership among young Americans has dramatically declined, and researchers such as Klein and Smart (2017) have focused on who might be foregoing cars and why this is happening. At the same time, in other markets – particularly in developing countries – sales were flat or declined. Meanwhile automotive companies are investing a lot of time and money in new technologies and ideas that are or have the potential to change the industry. Examples include the connected car, a fully WiFi capable machine which may enable infotainment, apps, car to car communication, location and traffic services and also diagnostics and repair; the intelligent car, many of whose features are already present in today's cars, e.g. self-parking, self-breaking, engine and throttle controls, automatic accident avoidance features and adjustment of speed based on road conditions; and the intelligent car leads us to the emerging concept of a fully autonomous vehicles (PwC, 2016).

There are many external variables and trends which are currently affecting the automotive industry. One very important entity to consider is the consumer, i.e. the product user or driver. It has long been critical for automotive experts and those in transport in general to understand when, how and why cars are used, or not. Traditionally, a car has been thought of as a means of transport; however, over time the situation has developed and the needs and wants of consumers have become more diverse. Naturally, marketers and researchers alike would like to have a comprehensive understanding related to automobile ownership and use.

The majority of studies that have been previously published have concentrated on either economic variables or demographic ones, along with their associated influences. For example, the impact of purchase price, age and number of household occupants on car selection was studied by Lave and Train (1979). In 1985, Mannering and Winston did an empirical analysis of household car ownership and utilization, and looked into the influence of purchase price and operating expenses. In a 2009 study, Bhat, Sen and Eluru examined the impacts of household demographics and vehicle characteristics, and gasoline prices on car ownership and use.

Steg et al. (2001; 2004) differentiate between three types of motives: instrumental, symbolic (or social) and affective.

- *Instrumental motives* relate to the convenience or lack thereof caused by using the car, i.e. things such as speed, safety, flexibility, etc.

- *Symbolic motives* relate to people's expressing themselves via their car, for example their personality, or social status.
- *Affective motives* refer to expression of emotions related to the car or its use, for example, the joy of driving.

Though there are authors who have previously stressed the significance of affective and social motives, (e.g. Flink, 1975; Sachs, 1983; Marsh & Collett, 1986), there was not a lot of empirical evidence available on these types of motives up to the last decade, as they were not explicitly studied (Steg et al., 2004). A 2001 study by Steg et al. found that symbolic and affective motives are expressed more clearly when the aim of the research task has not been too clearly identified to the study participants. Thus, people may sometimes be unwilling to admit such things when questioned directly.

In recent years, there have been several studies focused on symbolic and affective motivations associated with cars; for example, the following have been examined: psycho-social benefits associated with vehicle transport (Ellaway et al., 2003); teenagers and prestige gained through clothes and car ownership (Suitor et al., 2003); various instrumental and affective motives associated with commuting to work and also for leisure driving trips, and identification of various positive emotions such as excitement, a sense of freedom and lack of stress associated with the latter (Anable & Gatersleben, 2005); personality stereotypes being associated with particular automotive brands (Fischer, 2009); effect of premium versus common car ownership on attractiveness of both genders (Dunn & Searle, 2010); materialistic individuals being uninterested in purchasing energy efficient automobiles (Gatersleben, 2011); big and powerful automobiles perceived as success symbols and their owners enjoying a sense of enthusiasm and pride in the driving experience (Garling et al., 2013), among others (Sefara et al., 2015).

If we consider the present situation from the broader perspective, one can say that "Today's economies are dramatically changing, triggered by development in emerging markets, the accelerated rise of new technologies, sustainability policies, and changing consumer preferences around ownership. Digitization, increasing automation, and new business models have revolutionized other industries, and automotive will be no exception. These forces are giving rise to four disruptive technology-driven trends in the automotive sector: diverse mobility, autonomous driving, electrification, and connectivity (Gao et al., 2016). While there is wide agreement that the automotive industry has been experiencing dramatic changes and is currently ready for major innovation, there is still no common view on what that will be or include, or how the situation will look in the next decade. Given the potential for significant industry change in the near future, the large size of the Millennial generation and their entrance into the workforce, as well as the conflicting trends on car use across the globe, the authors see a need to better understand the younger generation's current attitudes and motivations with respect to automobiles on a global basis.

Therefore, there were two main research questions the authors focused on during the conducted research:

1. What are the attitudes internationally of young Millennials toward automobiles and new technologies in this sector?
2. What are the motivations for having and using a car among this young, international target group?

### 3. Methods

The authors elected to conduct qualitative research focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the overall importance of cars in the younger target group internationally, and to find the fundamental motives for having an automobile. To this end, they utilized both focus-groups and one-on-one interviews as their research collection methods; the average length of each type of session was 1.5 hours in duration. The authors documented the research sessions by taking notes of the structured interviews. The research was conducted over the course of approximately three years, between November 2013 and January 2017. Overall, eight focus groups and five one-on-one interviews were conducted (n = 50).

The authors elected to use a diverse group of young, international university students enrolled in business-oriented bachelor's and master's degree programs as they represent a subset of the Millennial cohort that will soon be entering the workforce. Thus, they will shortly be acquiring the financial means to make a car purchase (in the near future). The research was conducted at the University of Economics, Prague in the Czech Republic. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 26 years; they were equally female and male. Students originated from both urban and suburban areas. It was the intention of the authors to focus on a very diverse sample, thus they placed a strong emphasis on including participants from different geographic locations around the world. This was done so that insights gained as a result of the research would be reflective of various cultures and thus relevant for international marketers doing business across multiple country markets. Therefore, study participants from 21 different nations were included in the research. They originated from the following nations: Canada, China, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, India, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, USA, and Vietnam. Thus, the sample is very diverse in terms of nationality; however, it is homogenous in that participants are Millennials currently enrolled in business-oriented bachelor's and master's degree programs.

**Table 1 | International research sample – an Overview**

Sample Source	Age Range	Gender	Residence	Country of Origin
Bachelor's and master's degree students	19-26	50% male 50% female	70% urban 30% suburban	CA, CN, CZ, DE, FI, IN, IT, MX, NL, PE, PL, PT, RU, SK, SW, TK, TW, UA, UK, US, VN

The research concept behind this qualitative research was the psychological theory of “morphology”. This is a psychological concept founded at the University of Cologne in the tradition of in-depth psychology; it incorporates aspects of Gestalt psychology, phenomenology and psychoanalysis (Ziems, 2008; Fitzek, 2008). The theory is based on psychological tensions that work together to influence and direct human experience and behavior (Black, 2017). These psychological tensions are uncovered through morphological intensive interviews (one-on-ones and focus groups), a unique qualitative methodology that encourages open and flexible discussions within the context of a closed conceptual framework (Lönneker, 2007; Dammer & Szymkowiak, 1998).

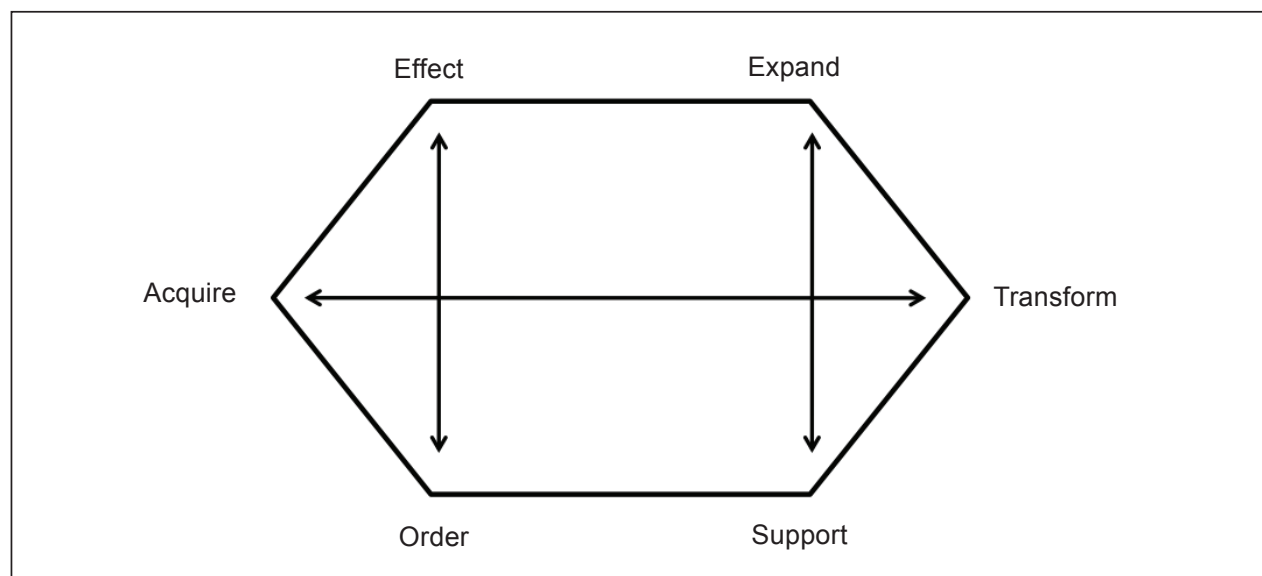
The aim of this psychological approach is to go as deep as possible in the qualitative research in order to thoroughly understand the actual motivation concerning a certain

topic, such as a product or a brand, for example. This psychological approach is less about measuring (statistical representativeness) than understanding the researched topic thoroughly and on an in-depth basis (psychological representativeness) (Grünewald, 1998; Lönneker, 2007).

Similar to other qualitative research methodologies, interpretative analysis involves an iterative process to distil data into a common set of psychological themes or tensions (Dammer & Szymkowiak, 1998). When combined, these psychological tensions provide a framework for systematically understanding fundamental human needs (Melchers, 1997).

The morphological approach uses a so-called “hexagram” of six key dimensions to holistically describe fundamental human needs; thus morphological research results are summarized within this conceptual framework. Within our conducted research, this model was used to show the international psychological motivations for having a car in the young age group.

**Figure 1 | Fundamental psychological dimensions in the “hexagram”**



Source: Black, 2014.

The six psychological dimensions are described by Black (2014) as follows:

- *Acquire*: The human need for safety, continuity and the desire to hold on to what has been acquired.
- *Transform*: The human need for change, dynamics and the desire to abandon safety for movement.
- *Effect*: The human need for individual intent, personal preference and the desire to influence through action.
- *Order*: The human need for rules, regularity and the desire to adapt social expectations and structures.
- *Expand*: The human need for achievement, ideals and the desire to attain new levels of accomplishment.
- *Support*: The human need for skills, resources and understanding of our individual limits and limitations.



## 4. Results

The following section will describe the overall results of the conducted qualitative research about the general importance and role of cars in the study's young, international target group and the particular motives for having a car in this age cohort as well as their thoughts about the new technologies being introduced into the automotive sector. An overview of the particular motivational dimensions for having a car will be provided using the conceptual model of the "hexagram" and they are then described in more detail.

### 4.1 Overall description of the research and the role of cars

The atmosphere during the focus groups and interviews was very relaxed and harmonic. There was neither great excitement about the topic, nor a negative attitude or criticism. Everybody could easily participate in the topic, though the knowledge about cars differed. Thus, cars seem to be (still) an all-around and present topic, and have a reason to exist in the young, international target group (*"Cars still have a primary role society."*; *"Cars are still important for many people."*; *"I like my car a lot."*). But particular knowledge about cars was not very existent, i.e. it was less than one might think of young people normally knowing about recent technological developments and trends (*"I don't know much about cars."*). Most of the students had a driver's license in all the 21 explored countries, but not everybody actually drives regularly, especially if they live in a bigger city (*"I have a driving license but I do not drive much. In the city, the public transport is sufficient."*). For most participants, a car no longer seems to be the most important product to have (*"I thought to buy a car but then I spent it [my money] on a trip to Australia to do Work & Travel."*).

But there were certain international differences about the role and the importance of cars. In Northern Europe such as in Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia, cars now seem to be less important and fascinating (*"It's not a big deal for our generation."*; *"It's not so important like 10 to 20 years ago."*). In Italy, on the other hand, or other South European countries as well as Latin America and Central Eastern Europe, a car has still a great importance for practical reasons but it is also significant for other reasons too. In these regions especially, a car represents one of the most important products you can own (as a possession itself) and is thus a social status symbol (*"In Italy, a car is still very important. It shows what you have achieved."*; *"You can impress with a car."*).

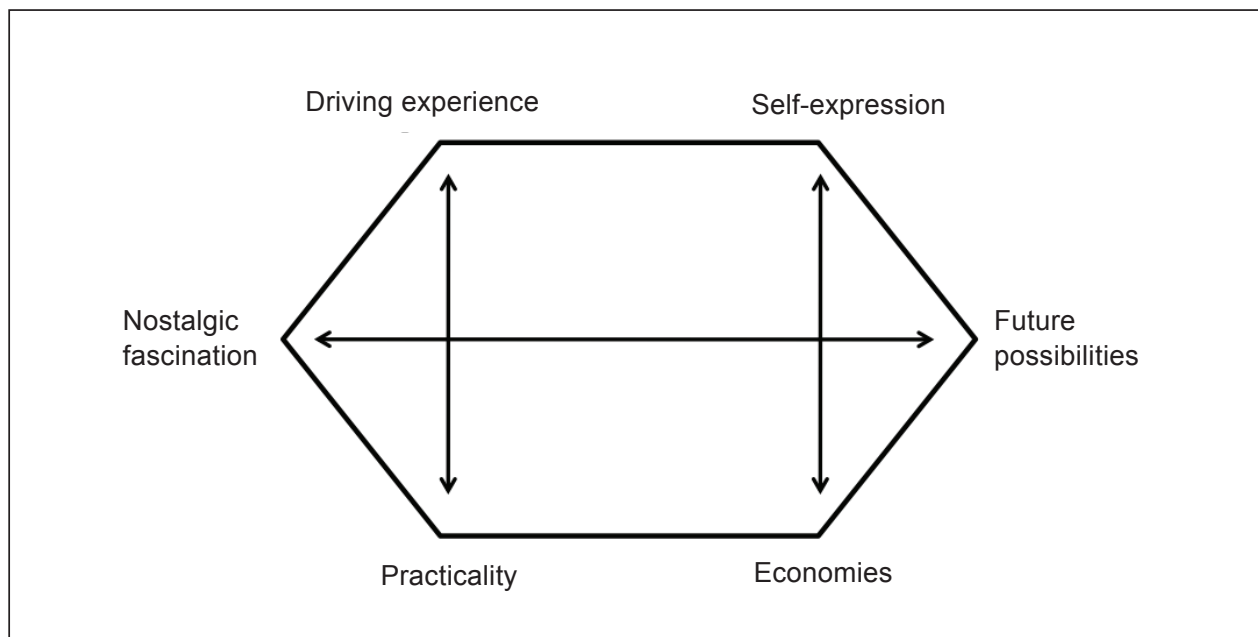
After the identification of the overall relevance of cars in the young target group, the particular motives for having a car were explored and analyzed. The overall motivational dimensions can be summarized in the holistic research model of the hexagram.

Each of the six identified motivational dimensions relevant to the young, international target group, as shown in the "hexagram" model above, will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

#### Practicality

A down-to-earth reasonability and sense of pragmatism dominated the tone of the interviews. Cars still have their certain practical role for being more independent and mobile, but a great excitement and fascination is somehow missing. This was especially true in the Northern European countries like Germany and Scandinavia (*"I don't need a car anymore."*; *"Public transport here is great."*; *"I have a driving license, but I don't need a car right now."*).

**Figure 2 | Overall motivational dimensions for car ownership in the young, international target group**



Source: Authors

Therefore, a car seems to be more like a functional tool that helps you in everyday life (*"In Scandinavia if you need a car, it is more like a tool to go from A to B."*). Another apparently, relevant aspect in the young age group is the necessity for the cars to be easy to drive and park. Many stated that they feel insecure about driving and especially parking because of their lack of driving experience (*"A parking assistant would be good."*).

### Driving experience

It is only if you ask openly about the general associations and images of a car that they have in mind, that topics and aspects such as "freedom, independence" and driving pleasure occur (*"I love to drive"*, *"Especially with my friends"*). That sentiment was consistent across all groups (over time, age groups and countries). The experience of driving itself gives a feeling of relaxation and enjoyment. For this, music in the car plays a crucial role (*"I listen to very loud music in the car."*; *"We sing in the car."*). Driving is also an expression of personal freedom and independence. Many students were therefore looking forward to having their own car, especially in the emerging markets (*"I was desperate to drive."*).

### Future possibilities

As previously mentioned, the knowledge about recent new technology was not that deep. Everybody is aware of the future developments like e-mobility and autonomous driving (*"The Google car"*; *"the iCar of Apple"*) but there are no individual experiences or certain information about it. It was interesting to note that the interviewed even seemed to be quite hesitant towards new technologies; this is rather unexpected given such a young sample (*"There are still safety issues."*; *"I am not sure if it is safe."*; *"It's a bit scary."*). And they want to keep the pleasure of actual driving (*"I would not buy it, I want to enjoy driving by myself."*).

New ways of being mobile, such as car sharing providers (like Uber, BlaBla Car and other car sharing applications or providers on Facebook), represent one very notable aspect discovered during the research. New mobility options seem to be very relevant in their current life stage (*“Car sharing is a great idea.”; “I use it a lot.”; “My friends and I use Uber a lot when we go out late at night and public transport has already stopped or it is very infrequent. It can save us an hour or more and it’s very cheap when we split it among us.”*).

Also worth mentioning is the fact that the topic of environmental aspects was not mentioned directly. If you come to talk about it, it is of course called an important aspect but apparently it is not top of mind in the young, international target group. Nevertheless, all participants of the research were impressed by the car manufacturer and brand Tesla (*“What Tesla does is impressive.”*). It can stand for the future concept of an attractive car: dynamic design, perceived as cool, and electronic mobility. However, for the moment, it is not accessible for the young group because of its price (*“At the moment they are too expensive.”; “In China, rich people have more and more a Tesla.”*).

The aspect of future possibilities also has an impact on car marketing communications. Indeed, classical television is becoming less relevant in the young age group. It was stated that TV shows were mostly viewed online. Therefore, communication channels that can reach the target group for car marketing communications are online ads, also online video ads, for example on YouTube and on social media in general or car blogs in particular (*“I know car commercials mostly from YouTube.”; “I check about products on comparison sites and blogs.”*).

### **Nostalgic fascination**

In contrast to the described future changes, there is still some certain fascination about cars and having “your own car” (*“My dream car is an Aston Martin.”; “A Lamborghini would be still a dream.”*). These kinds of cars impressed via their beautiful and classical designs and their heritage (*“These are cars with a soul.”; “I like Mini and Land Rover.”*).

Respondents stated that having their own car would more likely be the case when they have the personal income and budget for buying it by themselves. First, this was because many said that driving a car is great fun (especially with friends). And later in life, a car can (still) indicate what you have achieved (especially in Central and Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America). The known car brands give security and confidence in the decision to purchase a car.

### **Self-expression**

In this context, a car can also be an expression of oneself, also in order to impress. The car should represent you and your lifestyle (*“My car is an expression of my personality.”; “My car is a part of me.”*). The car should suit you and your style. Therefore, the look and the design of the car is very important (*“The design of the car is most important to me.”; “The car needs to have a great appearance.”*). In this context, the car should be as unique and individual as possible. Then, you can have an emotional bond with your car (*“I gave my car a name.”*).

Concerning the dimension of self-expression, the role of brands has some certain importance. There are particular brands that are preferred and are seen as attractive: BMW,



Audi, Mercedes, Volvo and Lexus. Overall, German cars seem to be of good reputation and the country-of-origin of the car plays a certain role (*“German cars are very good.”*; *“People in my country like German cars.”*). These brands give a feeling of confidence in having made the right decision because, in many countries, it is important what others think and say about the car (*“If in China others say that you bought the wrong car, you become very depressed.”*).

### **Economies**

Nonetheless, right now, there are certain financial limitations (*“It’s too expensive to have a car.”*; *“My first association with cars is that they are expensive.”*). Therefore, current aspects concerning a car are economical ones like the absolute price for a car, fuel consumption/fuel efficiency and maintenance costs (*“Fuel consumption is very important!”*; *“Gas is expensive.”*).

A car needs to be durable and reliable for the young age group. Overall, they want and need the maximum value for the invested money. This also expresses again the pragmatic and down-to-earth attitude towards cars in the young, international age group.

Based on the results of the research, the authors suggest that the identified factors – practicality, driving experience, self-expression, economies, nostalgic fascination and future possibilities – are major motivational dimensions for owning a car in the international young consumer group. The following subsection will focus in more detail upon the differences identified among the internationally diverse group of respondents.

## **4.2 International differences identified by the research**

In comparison to Western Europe or North America, the fact of actually owning a car takes on more significance in terms that it also has psychological attributes – i.e. it has a greater role than just transport – in Southern and Central/Eastern Europe as well as Latin America and Asia. In particular, car ownership is something of a status symbol. Furthermore, it is often considered as an indication of what you have personally achieved and what you can afford.

Given the status symbol implication mentioned above, the country-of-origin of the car as well as the particular brand also play a more important role in Southern and Central/Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the authors noted this pertained also to participants originating from Latin America and Asia.

The role of cars is becoming gradually less important in Western and Northern Europe. Emerging mobility concepts (especially car sharing models) are very much relevant and used on a regular basis. Interestingly, the environmental aspects of owning a car were mentioned only by participants from Northern Europe, and then only when prompted.

The authors also noted differences in the practical aspects of owning a car among the participants. For example, it was considered more important by North American as well as Latin American participants to have a car due to the lack of public transport alternatives (in comparison to participants from other world regions).

In all countries and international regions, certain cars can still be considered to have “fascinating” properties. Classical models and cars with a special design can still very much impress. The authors noted that this was expressed especially by participants from Southern Europe.

The hesitation regarding new car technologies existed across all international regions. Nevertheless, the connectivity of the car was of great importance to all participants involved in this international research group, regardless of their country of origin.

Due to the diverse levels of economic development and income, it is not surprising that the authors noted international differences in the amount participants could afford to spend on buying a car. International differences in how they would finance the purchase of an automobile were also noted, for example, purchased or financed by the family, financed on their own, preference for leasing models, etc.

It was also interesting to note that there was no obvious direct impact between coming from a country with a higher income level (e.g. Western and Northern Europeans) and the tendency to purchase a more expensive automobile. Rather, the authors noted that participants from Southern and Central/Eastern European countries as well as those from Latin American and Asian countries were apparently willing to spend more.

## 5. Conclusions and Managerial Implications

The research conducted identified certain motivational aspects and dimensions for cars in the young target group in the international context. These findings can offer possibilities to position a car brand, emphasizing certain aspects in the marketing communication or for the development of new product features and new mobility offerings, i.e. concepts.

For instance, if we consider **economical aspects**, the following are relevant: Offering cars at a lower absolute price (below 10,000 €) as well as offering alternative methods of financing (low leasing and financing rates), i.e. rather similar to a contract from a mobile communications provider. In addition, low fuel consumption is important – with a hybrid engine or an electronic car in the future. Car brands have a certain importance as they indicate reliability and trustworthiness.

With regard to **practicality**: Offering a solid and safe car concept that is simple and affordable but is also good quality and reliable (offering low maintenance costs) is desired. It is important to have enough space but less for transportation than to drive with friends and enjoy the experience.

Within the element of **driving experience**, the car should be fun to drive. Therefore, a solid engine is important; the car must also be big enough to drive in with friends. A contemporary music and entertainment system is also important. For this, there is a high demand for connectivity with a mobile device and having access to one's personal music. Also, having an easy to use navigation and car control system (i.e. it should be more digital like mobile devices and be like using an app) is desired.

Pertaining to **future possibilities**, connectivity with mobiles devices and the Internet (despite safety concerns) are important. The car should be seamlessly connected with the youths' lives, especially with their mobile device, i.e. extension of the mobile device to use popular apps and social media also in the car. It would be interesting for the young, international target group to control the car by just talking to it (e.g. a simple voice control). Also, for marketing communications, brands and manufacturers should use new media possibilities. In particular, YouTube is a very important communication channel for online video ads (that can go viral) as well as social media like Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. It was indicated that Facebook is losing relevance.

Considering **self-expression**, simple connection of mobile apps with the car is important. This will also support the aspect of "self-expression" and individual styles.

Therefore, possibilities of individualization are of interest: the car as an accessory, expressing one's personal style and life-concept. To enable this, the following are of interest: more variability of colors, features and additional personal "little" features relevant for the young life context (e.g. more drink holders and mobile connections in the back of the car).

Within the element of **nostalgic fascination**, the following were noted: Together with the new possibilities and technical features, a car has to look authentic and have a beautiful and timeless car design like Mini or Fiat 500. The motto could be to transfer the great past into the future! The country-of-origin of the car brand also plays a role with the young target group, especially in certain countries.

As with any research, this particular study also has some limitations, which also provide opportunity for potential future research. One potential option is to measure the importance and identified motivational dimensions with quantitative research as validation of the relevant motivations for having and using a car. Another option is to extend the sample size with the goal of focusing on international differences more in-depth. While this study was very diverse in its international inclusion of over twenty countries of origin, participants were all similar in that they were university educated individuals. It would also be interesting in the future to include other social groups (non-university educated) of the same age. In addition, the authors are particularly interested in including a variety of other respondents from different socioeconomic and cultural environments. One option might be to work with a larger sample size, including several monocultural groups, which could then be compared. As technologies continue to revolutionize the automotive industry, continued research on the impacts of these emerging changes will continue to be relevant.

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