



The Birth of the Automotive Self

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Abstract

The problems raised by the excessive use of automobiles justify the effort to approach the automotive phenomenon from the perspective of the individual. Previous studies have not explored car use as a process of the social construction of the automotive self. I have defined automobilism as the individual's orientation toward the use and purchase of cars. This is an exploratory and descriptive study aiming to reveal the stages in which the factors that transform an individual into a driver emerge and operate. I use the concept of social career described by Erving Goffman (1961), later developed by David Matza (1969). I assume that the initiation process into a driving career begins in childhood through an exploratory exposure phase to the performative narrative of car culture and vehicles. This career develops along with the cognitive, emotional, and socio-cultural growth of children and adolescents. I assume that this early process makes automobilism deeply embedded in the value system of most teenagers, being already formed before the age at which they can legally obtain a driver's license. The research is conducted using a self-administered questionnaire distributed on Facebook. The questionnaire contains two sections: one addressed to parents and another addressed to their minor children aged between 8 and 17. I argue that the ineffectiveness of awareness programs targeting car overuse stems from their late intervention, as automobilism is already incorporated into the individual's value system. This explanatory approach may therefore have valuable practical implications.

Keywords: Automobilism, Automotive Self, Psychomoral Development, Social Career

1. Introduction

This study describes the relationship between parents and children as a specific source through which automobilism is promoted in Romania. Why this topic? Because automobility still does not seem to be properly researched (Sheller & Urry, 2000), although it is a social phenomenon with a significant impact on daily life, being identified as a long-term aggression factor on the environment. As also highlighted by the paradox evoked by Anthony Giddens (2009), who emphasizes the awareness of dangers to which future generations are exposed due to climate change caused by environmental pollution. Although these dangers are known by members of the current generation, they are ignored merely so that today's people can enjoy insignificant benefits. One example is the excessive use of personal cars (Giddens, 2009). In the Romanian

education system, there are no organized courses dedicated to automobilism, although a large number of today's children will be the drivers of tomorrow. They learn only informally about car culture. The Romanian education system only provides road safety courses, which are very rarely available and only cover recognition of the main traffic rules to increase children's physical safety. Apparently, no one believes that today's youth are tomorrow's drivers. Obviously, political decision-makers also lack proper education in the field of automobility, regardless of whether they decide education programs and policies or transport policies. I consider that precisely this lack of concern for knowledge and understanding of automobilism is an explanation for the apparent disinterest noted by Anthony Giddens (2009), but also for the inefficiency of environmental protection actions.

Giddens (2009) refers to the current generation, but by this term he targets the punctual behavior of each of us. Recalling personal memories, I realized that the adults around us played an important role in shaping attachment to automobiles; therefore, within this article, I considered that our attitude, that of the current generation, toward personal cars was formed since childhood. I realized, thus, that we become automobilists long before buying a car or obtaining a driver's license, these being only the moments when these attributes are socially and officially, administratively recognized. This study proposes a new approach in the descriptive and exploratory analysis of the debut process of the automobilist. In this research, I define automobilism as a succession of internal processes, developed over time starting from childhood, which result in the mental, cognitive, cultural, axiological, and behavioral orientation of individuals toward the use and purchase of cars.

This perspective on automobilism proposes assuming this concept as autonomous and different in relation to automobility. Automobilism belongs to an individual, subjective dimension of car culture and acts at the level of perception, impacting the formation of self-identity in children and adolescents in Romania. Automobility belongs to the social, structural, institutional, economic, and politico-administrative dimension and is defined for the purpose of this research as a structured system at the macrosocial level, globalized at the social, economic, political, administrative, cultural, and educational levels. This vision of automobility is inspired by the socio-technical system described by Brand (2008), Urry's (2004) view, as well as the analysis by Böhm et al. (2006) on the automobility system: "The notion of system tends to minimize collective human agency in the production of automobility and to avoid political questions about shaping the 'automobile system'" (Böhm et al., 2006, p. 5).

The concept of automobility serves this research to highlight the difference in the approach level of the automobile phenomenon analysis and to delimit the levels of analysis of social morphogenesis (Archer, 1995). Automobility represents the macro, structural level, and automobilism, respectively the automotive self, represents the micro, agential level. Automobilism concerns the individual level and refers categorically to the internal processes that generally shape self-development (Goffman, 1961) and, in particular, the automotive self. By comparison, the automotive self addresses the psychosocial, cognitive, and axiological characteristics of a particular person. Consequently, automobilism can be seen as a concept that embraces certain generally valid characteristics, while the automotive self varies from person to person in intensity, cultural and axiological foundation, as well as in the interval of generation, amplification, and consolidation.

The concept of the automotive self is central to this article and presents particularities that will be highlighted through reference to other theoretical approaches. The automotive self represents, in my study, the result of a process of cognitive, cultural, axiological, emotional accumulations and a specific, particular set of bodily and sensory experiences (Waskul &

Vannini, 2016). This process begins, in my view, in early childhood, develops progressively with the child's aging, and results in positioning the car as a socio-technical object in an important place within the child's value universe. Also, the automotive self implies a positioning of the child's values and the creation of mental self-projections, both as a future car user, driver, and as a car owner.

These are the attributes that shape the concept of the automotive self as used in this article and differ from apparently similar definitions used by other researchers (Randell, 2017). My definition fully agrees with the principles stated by Goffman (1959/2023), in the sense that an automotive self is an individual, socially constructed result, conditioned by the personal context in which the child grows. Although each individual has their own history and specific cultural and cognitive experiences, there are certain regularities designated in this article by the term *automobilism*. Thus, the concept of the automotive self, as used by me, is fundamentally different from the concept of the "autoself" used by Randell (2017) or from the entity conceptualized as a car-driver hybrid discussed by others (Latimer & Munro, 2006; Katz, 1999; Featherstone, 2004) or the term *cyborg* (Beckmann, 2004).

The latter refer to cars and their drivers as human-machine assemblages, representing a new type, a factual subject participating in automobility with full rights and obligations. They propose a shift in the sociological analysis of this phenomenon by abandoning concerns related to the self of the person who drives the car and instead explaining the ways and conditions under which these hybrid categories are produced. Similarly, in the literature dedicated to automobility, the question of analyzing the self of the car driver has been raised, with significantly different approaches (Urry, 2006; Dant, 2004; Sheller, 2004), especially because the driver is examined as an adult, authorized vehicle operator, and particularly through the connection made between the two entities, the driver and the car. Regarding the concept of "autoself" (Randell, 2017), some similarity can be noted in the sense that it includes the human subject, but the emergence of the autoself is conditioned by the act of using a car.

Thus, in Randell's view, the autoself appears at the moment the driver is behind the wheel and drives a car, after which the autoself enters a stasis until the driving act is resumed. The autoself is, in his opinion, a hybrid, a cyborg self, because it appears only during acts of driving and is a self constructed socially and technically, that is, through interaction with the car and exclusively through traffic relations. Both the concept of automotive self that I use and the autoself differ from the notion of the driver. In the case of the automotive self, it can overlap with the notion of driver if the person has acquired the legal right to drive, but it can also exist prior to this moment. In the case of the autoself, the notion of driver refers exclusively to a person authorized and socially certified to operate a self-propelled object, but whose self manifests autonomously; therefore, there is no overlap even during the period in which the driver performs the act of driving.

Finally, the notion of automotive self differs from the emotional or affective self described by Freund and Martin (2001) and Sheller (2004), or from those who experience certain categories of sensations in the context of driving cars, such as race car drivers. Considering that *automobilism* involves a succession of elements that appear and develop over time during childhood, concurrently with the cognitive, social, and moral development of children, I appreciated that this concept can be better explained with the help of the concept of social career (Goffman, 1961; Matza, 1969). The staged formation of the automotive self, if it takes place during childhood, coincides with the stages of psycho-moral development (Kohlberg, 1971), which explain the evolution of children's behavior based on cognitive and moral growth.

During this formative process, Erik Erikson (1963) affirms the role of the child's interaction with those close to him (especially with parents) which specifically stimulates the development

of social identity, and Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1967) emphasize the effects that imitation and play have on the child's deciphering of the mechanisms of the social world, as well as on the understanding and application of social and legal norms. At the same time, I consider that in the case of the automotive self, arguments related to the concept of "identity in becoming" (Holland et al., 2001) can be used, which place identity construction as a dynamic process, continuously built and negotiated, influenced by social, cultural, and material contexts (Wortham, 2006). In this sense, the car acts as a symbolic agent in the process of identity (Erikson, 1963) becoming, through which a child imagines how a possible future self, as a driver, is projected in the present, even through imaginative acts or sensory experiences (Wenger, 1999).

2. Materials and Methods

I began this study inspired by personal experiences and those of close acquaintances. I developed the topic through conversations with known individuals about their first experiences with cars and about how they interact with their own children regarding cars and the observed effects on these children's attitudes and behaviors in relation to the aspiration to drive automobiles. I chose a qualitative approach, considering the methodological perspective of Margaret Archer's (1995) social morphogenesis theory, which involves the separate analysis of the institutional structure - in this case, automobility and of human agency - in this case, the automotive self and automobilism - given that social actors on these two levels interact over time through a dynamic process of co-production between structure and agency. Given the hypothesis that this process of constructing the automobilistic identity begins in the early years of life and continues throughout childhood and adolescence, narrative methodology appeared to be most suitable for observing, describing, and explaining common attitudinal developments in children. Dobusch and Kapeller (2013) support the usefulness of the ideographic approach, alongside other authors (Schreyögg et al., 2011), within the methodological hypothesis of social morphogenesis theory.

Furthermore, Greener (2005) proposes applying complementary methods in researching these social processes that unfold and consolidate over time under conditions of interdependence with other social processes. I considered that a fundamental basis for understanding subjective processes is ensured only through initially using a narrative approach, which can create opportunities to capture early attachments to the automobile both in their implicit symbolic dimension and in the narrative-reflective dimension. Thus, alongside ethnographic methods such as observation and conversations with people from the targeted group, the study was supplemented in October 2024 with a self-administered questionnaire addressed to both parents and children.

The Google Forms questionnaire was distributed by the snowball method on Facebook, thus collecting responses from 172 participants - 86 parents and 86 children aged between 8 and 17 years. For the construction of the questionnaire with which I tested the working hypotheses, I developed a semantic differential scale (Osgood et al., 1957), taking into account the cognitive development level of the child respondents. I chose this technical procedure to capture the affective images of the automobile in the child's mind without requiring explicit verbalizations, considering their age. This instrument measured the intensity of the child's bodily, emotional, and symbolic closeness as a result of their interaction with a real automobile or similar objects and marked the implicit attachment and early affective relationships of children with the automobile universe in a measurable form.

2.1. Hypotheses

I summarized the study objectives through two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that the automotive self is the result of a staged process of social learning, which begins in childhood, continues in adolescence, and culminates in the shaping of an automobilistic identity. Through this assumption, I envisaged the existence of a pathway with many similarities that can be associated with the concept of automobilism described above. The second hypothesis is that the automotive self is a stable model of automobilistic identity formation, complementary to the self, realized in the same manner by most individuals regardless of gender or area of residence. This presupposes the existence of similarities in the phenomena of cultural and value transfer, independent of the child's gender or the area where the family lives. The article aims to present the child's relationship with the car, taking into account the cognitive and psycho-moral development level of children aged between 8 and 17 years. To understand the child's symbolic attachment to the automobile, I believe it is necessary to listen to how children narrate their relationship with cars, as a narrative method can show how these attitudes are formed: through what experiences they go, family influences, and cultural symbols characteristic of them. Nevertheless, the questionnaire proved to be useful for this research. Automobilism is a product of social, cultural, and educational discourses, which is, however, complemented by a very important physical component: the bodily experiences of children with cars or objects similar to them (Waskul & Vannini, 2016). Personal experience, conversations with other people, and observation of the social environment in Romania indicated the active social role of parents in facilitating these experiences. Through the aforementioned research methods, I investigated both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of children to understand the child's rational as well as symbolic attachment to automobiles.

2.2. Questions

Regarding the cognitive dimension, I asked questions such as: What does the child know about environmental issues, about the responsibility of driving? What is their perception of the cost/benefit ratio in automobilism? What does the child know about parking issues? Regarding the emotional and social dimension, I investigated: What does the child feel about cars and driving? What are their attitudes and intentions concerning obtaining a driving license? How strong is their desire and confidence in fulfilling the act of driving? How much social pressure is felt in this regard? What are the main beliefs about cars perceived from the social environment?

3. Results

According to the children's responses to the questionnaire, the car is perceived as a functional tool (54.9% – for needs), a pleasure object (40%), a symbol of freedom (23.9%) and as an element of equal opportunity (7%).

3.1. The Cognitive Dimension of Children's Relationship with the Car

Children display a relatively high level of awareness regarding the social and ecological implications of automobilism. 69.8% of children stated they know that cars pollute and expressed concern about this, indicating receptiveness to ecological discourse. 23.3% mentioned “green” solutions (such as electric cars), demonstrating forward-thinking and an understanding of collective responsibility in pollution matters. For 54% of them, the desire to own a car is correlated with utility, with the opportunity to fulfill needs, reflecting a functional understanding of the role of the car in everyday life.

However the perception of parking problems is significant, 68.6% consider parking to be a very big problem, and 19.8% identified the excessive number of cars as the main cause. This

awareness of urban space limitations indicates that the everyday experiences of parents or other adults directly influence children's perceptions of automobilism realities. Thus, the cognitive dimension highlighted a dual trend: on one hand, children are receptive to messages about social responsibility and the ecological impact of cars (Kopnina, 2011); on the other hand, they associate the car with practical utility and personal comfort. This combination reflects the internalization process of adult norms and values regarding automobility.

3.2. The Emotional and Attitudinal Dimension

Children's motivations are both affective (42.3% say they really like cars) and symbolic (23.9% see the car as a symbol of freedom). 58.1% of children stated they "really want" to drive a car, and 30.2% said they "are waiting to be old enough," indicating positive anticipation and an early desire for autonomy. 37.5% are aware they will have to take responsibility for driving, including the risk of accidents, revealing a certain maturation in their thinking. Bodily and sensory experiences related to driving (from amusement parks to assisted driving on roads) show early familiarization with the act of driving, in play or simulated conditions, which reinforces the affective and aspirational connection to cars (Waskul & Vannini, 2016). The emotional dimension of the relationship with the car is strongly marked by symbols of autonomy, pleasure, and status, as others have also shown (Barker, 2009). Children do not see the car solely as useful, they associate it with maturity and freedom. This shows that the car becomes part of their future identity project (Erikson, 1963).

3.3. Motivations for Obtaining a Driving License and Purchasing a Car

The data highlight a dual trend: on the one hand, children are receptive to messages about social responsibility and the ecological impact of the car, and on the other hand, they associate the car with practical utility and personal comfort. 80.8% of children offered rational arguments related to utility, 40% added an affective dimension ("they like cars") and 36% associated car ownership with freedom, independence, and adult status. This reflects the internalization process of adult norms and values regarding automobile, as well as automobility.

3.4. Gender and the Car Self: Aspirational and Symbolic Socialization Differences

The collected data reveal that the desire to own a car and obtain a driver's license is strongly present among both girls and boys, with a slight predominance among girls in both cases. Both girls (85.7%) and boys (80.4%) predominantly express the desire to own a car, the desire to obtain a driving license being stated by 88.6% of girls and 86.3% of boys. Regarding girls' desire to own a car, 85.7% want a car, 8.5% don't want one, and 5.8% are undecided, while 80.4% of boys want a car, 5.9% don't want one, and 13.7% are undecided. Also, 88.6% of girls want a driver's license, 5.7% do not want one, and 5.7% are undecided, meanwhile, 86.3% of boys want a driver's license, 7.8% do not want one, and 5.9% are still undecided. In terms of intent to obtain a license by place of residence, 100% of children living in rural areas declared they want a driving license, compared to 83% in urban areas, although 10% of urban children responded that they are still undecided. The desire to own a car and obtain a license is almost universal, as others have also shown (Fylan & Caveney, 2018; Sigurdardottir et al., 2013). Gender differences are minor but relevant in highlighting that interest in cars is relatively evenly distributed between sexes.

4. Discussion

The data support the hypothesis that the automotive self begins to form in childhood as a result of primary (within the family) and anticipatory (through self-projection and role play) socialization. For example, bodily and sensory experiences (over 40% have driven in parks, 25% have driven go-karts, etc.) can be interpreted as forms of socialization, consolidating a

projective driver identity. Also, nearly 24% of children have sat behind the wheel and imagined they were driving, attesting to symbolic behaviors that contribute to the formation of the automotive self (Goffman, 1959/2023), even in the absence of real driving that can be substituted through play (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1967).

The responses indicate a strong internalization of social discourses about the car as a desirable, useful, and identity-related object. For children, the car is not only a family's everyday object but also a vehicle of identity significance. Children imagine a future self in which they own a car (94% of child respondents), have a driver's license (approximately 88% of girls and 86% of boys) and enjoy freedom and autonomy (36% say they will feel like adults and independent). These perspectives of future drivers are projected into the present through imaginative acts (children sit behind the wheel and imagine driving) or through simulated play (driving in amusement parks or go-karts, with the permission, encouragement, and financial support of their parents). These behaviors are interpreted symbolically by children as acts of driving and can be understood as forms of anticipation and experimentation with the automotive self. These practices, on the other hand, support the hypothesis that this specific "social career" forming automobilism involves rituals of sensory and bodily initiation (imagination, touch, interaction, handling). Direct experiences with cars or with objects highly similar to cars support the idea that the automotive self is formed through the body, senses, sensations, and emotions. Since children differentially associate meanings attached to objects and real or imagined actions (Vygotsky, 1967), the formation of the automotive self concerns both the possession of a car as an object and its use, the associated social action.

Thus, the automotive self is constructed not only mentally and symbolically but also bodily (a body interacting with the car). The formation process is mediated by adults (an adult allowed them to drive - 10%), which adds a relational dimension to the corporeality of the automotive self-constitution process, as the child physically approaches the car through social interaction with adults who stimulate the child's identity development in this direction (Erikson, 1963).

Analyzed through the lens of the theory of social careers (Goffman, 1961; Matza, 1969), these data reflect the child's pathway toward becoming an "automobilist," a journey that does not appear as a sudden transition through driving school but as a gradual identity career unfolding in childhood. This path can be marked by recognizable and potentially generalizable stages, correlating the data obtained with children's psycho-moral development stages (Kohlberg, 1971). I believe this conceptual approach allows for future exploration of how automobilism becomes part of the child's moral development, not just an emotional or cultural preference. 69.8% of children say they know cars pollute and are worried about it, indicating a moral understanding through which the child begins to internalize social norms about good and bad in a gradual manner.

The responses suggest that they are not only emotionally attracted to cars but also reflective about them: nearly 70% express concern about environmental impact, and 37.5% are aware of the risks and responsibilities of driving. Therefore, one can speak not only of an emotional attachment but also of a progressive internalization of social and moral norms associated with the act of driving. Additionally, the data show the central role of parents, both through their personal example of car ownership (94%) and through facilitating direct experiences (children who were allowed or even encouraged to drive in various forms). Thus, one can speak of a staged process of intergenerational cultural transmission in which automobilistic values are adopted, reinterpreted, and perpetuated (Erikson, 1963).

The car is transmitted not only as a material object but also as automobilism - as a symbolic value and shared emotional experience (Bourdieu, 1984). The data also suggest that processes

of normativization of the car emerge early in the child's social and familial universe and that a certain type of automobilistic sensory habitus is formed (Vannini et al., 2013; Piaget, 1962).

The family implicitly transmits not only values but also a car-based lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1984). Moreover, an accentuation of the child's agency is emerging: the child is not merely a passive actor; they interpret these norms based on their own experience (for example, some children say that "there are no parking spaces because there are too many cars").

5. Conclusions

Although they are not yet drivers, children internalize early the social, emotional, and utilitarian meanings of the car through early socialization acts within car culture. This supports the hypothesis that a staged process of forming the automotive self takes place during this period. This research has considered the development of the automotive self as an integral part of children's psychomoral development, and the data confirmed the presence of symbolic behaviors and bodily actions that contribute to the formation of the automotive self (Goffman, 1959/2023; Goffman, 1961; Matza, 1969), as well as the existence of evaluative moral attitudes that support the hypothesis of the automotive self's development on both psychomoral and cognitive levels (Kohlberg, 1971).

The car is internalized by children not only as a means of transport but as a complex symbol of autonomy, maturity, and social inclusion. Their relationship with automobilism is formed very early, mediated both by direct experiences (symbolic or assisted driving) and by the family and social context. The role of the family was highlighted through the intergenerational transfer of automobilism as a symbolic value and shared emotional experience (Bourdieu, 1984). The values of automobilism are transmitted relatively similarly regardless of children's place of residence, with a predominance in rural areas.

Moreover, the data showed that the desire to own a car and obtain a driver's license is strong among both girls and boys; gender differences exist but are not significant. The concept of an emerging identity offers a solid framework for understanding how children relate to the car not only as an object but as a formative element of the automotive self. The desire to drive and own a car, as well as the assumption of future responsibility, are parts of an identity process in which the child begins to "project" themselves as an adult (Erikson, 1963).

Limitations

The sample of 86 child respondents is very small; therefore, the results of this study must be interpreted with this limitation in mind. Validation through subsequent studies is necessary.

Suggestions

This article suggests that educational and urban policies in Romania and beyond could take into account the way automobilism shapes children's identity aspirations. Even though there is a certain degree of ecological awareness, the desire to drive and own a car remains dominant (Giddens, 2009), reflecting the cultural strength of automobilism as an element of self-construction. There is a strong cultural norm transferred between generations that links the process of cognitive and moral development to the idea of car ownership and use. This anticipates the future resilience of car-buying preferences and, consequently, projects a potential persistence of the inefficacy of environmental protection policies. Because this internalization process appears in stages starting from early childhood through the family, it is necessary for messages about sustainable mobility and social responsibility to be introduced early, not only as information aimed at family education, but also as possible ways of shaping the identity of the emerging automotive self.

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