

“Cool Prius! – Nobody”: The Discarding of the Toyota Prius by American Millennials

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Research Question

While the Prius is among one of the most popular cars on the American market, it has become a subject of mockery among young adults aged 18-30. I conducted this ethnographic study to uncover the reasons for this disdain. How do American millennials perceive the Toyota Prius, and how does that view reflect the evolving American car culture?

Abstract

Although the millennials I interviewed were split down the middle in regards to their opinions of the Toyota Prius, with half liking and half disliking the car, most agree that it has simply gone out of fashion due to the rise of newer technology and a wider variety of choices. Upon the Prius' release as the first mass-produced hybrid car, its technology was considered cutting edge, but since the emergence of an entire breed of cars centered around environmentally progressive technology, the Prius has become the Model T of the 21st century; it may have been the first of its type, but recent innovation has rendered it a thing of the past. As a whole, young buyers gravitate toward the trendy and luxurious Tesla, while indifferently disregarding the Prius as an antique representative of an ancient time before electric cars. This research shows that while young adults emphasize the importance of energy-saving cars, they are unwilling to sacrifice style and status for green tech. They embody a changing market of buyers who must reconcile the disparity between clean energy and style when considering how their desired car reflects their identity.

Methods

- 10 short formal interviews with non-Prius owning millennials
- two lengthy semi-formal interviews with Prius owners
- I asked individuals of differing genders, ages, socio-economic backgrounds, etc. in order to accurately represent the larger population of American millennials. I then compared the answers of the two groups to evaluate how opinions on the Prius differ when owning one or just seeing them around.
- I asked questions relating to:
 - opinions on the cars they drive
 - what car they'd like or dislike to drive
 - opinions on environmentally friendly cars
 - perceptions of the Prius
 - reasons to buy a Prius
 - experiences with Priuses

Identity and Cars



Actor Tom Hanks with his Prius. Credit: Tom Hanks

- While buyers can be picky with cars they want, they nevertheless like the car they drive—even if their dream car is completely different or if they had no say in choosing their vehicle.
- All interviewees reported enjoying the car they drive, including Prius owners.
- Young adults who drove their parents' cars report their satisfaction as equal to those who bought their own cars.
- After driving a car for a while, the driver seems to form a bond with it and consider the car to reflect their identity, even if they wouldn't have chosen to buy the car they drive.
- Nonetheless, most informants dreamt of a car that displayed a higher status or sleek look, even though that luxury might sacrifice the environmental consciousness they claim to be concerned about.

“If I could have any car? Man...a Lambo. Yeah, definitely a Lambo.”

Why?

“I don't know. Because that's what the rich people drive. It's like a status symbol, you know?” - Cole

The Prius Experience

“My friend used to call my car a tampon car. And he was very against driving it--he has a truck. Until one day him and I were driving in my car to The OC fair--he was driving my car--and he said that he takes everything back about it being a tampon car and that he actually enjoyed it. But at first he was very against it.” –Rachel

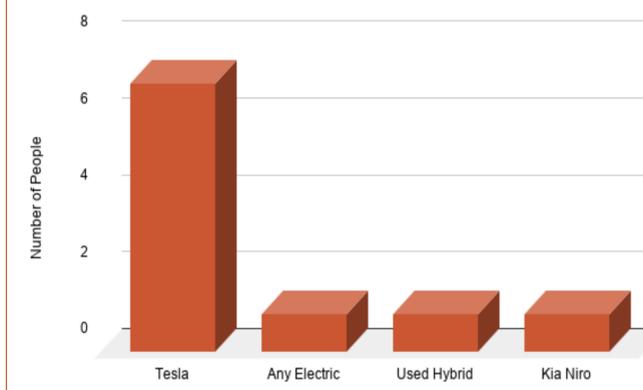
- Like the non-Prius owners, both Prius owners I interviewed reported that they loved their car.
- However, both Prius drivers experience discrimination or hostility both the road and in social circles because of the car they drive, including:
 - Derogatory names/insults, including sexist names: (i.e. “tampon car,” referring to its feminization)
 - Refusal to ride in the car
 - Vandalism, such as placing stickers on the car
 - Excessive honking
 - Excessive passing/lane changing around them
- Mocking the Prius potentially provides an outlet for millennials to assert their societal status over a perceived “lesser” to compensate for a lack of material displays of wealth and power. While they might not drive a Ferrari, at least they do not own a Prius.



A popular meme featuring the dreaded Prius.

The Hybrid as Old School

Environmentally Friendly Car Preferences



“I thought about buying [a Prius] because of the mileage, but then I thought, ‘nah, that’s too slow for me.’ I didn’t want to be seen driving it. I like sporty cars. I really want a Tesla.” –Henry

- While all interviewees expressed interest in making cars more environmentally friendly, a majority reported liking the Tesla specifically.
- Half of the respondents like and half dislike the Prius, but both parties stated that they'd rather drive an electric or a Tesla, even though the Prius comes in electric options.
- They claim that they want the look of a sports car, but with green tech, which they believe the Tesla offers.
- When the Prius was first produced, it was advertised as a “classless car” because celebrities owned it, but the layman could afford it. This is not the case with the Tesla, which my interviewees reported as “bougie” and “futuristic.”



A sticker a stranger placed on my informant Rachel's Prius.

Conclusions

- The Prius is neither overwhelmingly liked nor disliked, but is thought of as being inferior to the Tesla.
- Newer, fuel-efficient cars with designs associated with luxury (for instance, the Tesla) are current top choices for drivers, yet are out of reach for most.
- Although the environment is a concern, buyers are also concerned with the message communicated by the car they drive.
- Nonetheless, drivers are proud of whatever car they drive, even if it is the Prius, but that doesn't stop them from dreaming of owning the latest trend because of their concern of their public image.

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