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## 2005 Synovate Quality Awards

### SA CAR OWNERS SEE NOISE LEVELS AS BIGGEST PROBLEM

Are we rational and logical in our evaluation of our cars or is the relationship just too emotional? And just how fussy are South Africans when it comes to their cars? Leading global market research company Synovate recently revealed some insights into these issues.

“Different groups of customers have diverse expectations and different factors which will ultimately drive their satisfaction – or drive them crazy,” said Albert McLean, Synovate’s Chief Operating Officer for the Middle East and Africa.

“Vehicles have come a long way in terms of quality, but the complexity of today’s cars, plus the human element of production, means that the ideal ‘zero-defect’ car is not a reality.”

So how do these expectations differ by profile or demographic group? Are older people more rational than those newer to the market? Are women too emotional or is it the men who find their emotions more strongly tied up with their vehicle? How does this comparison look along racial lines?

“The results of Synovate’s Quality Awards indicate not only which vehicle owners experience the least or most problems after buying their new car, but they also tell us where these problems were located,” explains McLean. “The survey, measured between two to four months after a new car was bought, includes a rating of the owner’s overall satisfaction with their purchase, and in addition, by using various statistical techniques, reveals some very interesting facts about which problems are the ones that irk car owners the most.”

McLean points out that as a whole, the South African population is perhaps not as rational as one might think. Brakes are a major safety issue – surely one could expect quality problems here to be the main penaliser in satisfaction? Or could it be the engine, the gearbox, or perhaps the steering and handling?

“Although these issues are indeed factors which impact on satisfaction, they do not have as much power to displease as something far less pivotal to performance, or safety: An annoying little squeak or rattle,” said McLean. “Consider that, even in the event of vehicles being perfect in every other way,

a persistent, irritating squeak results in the fact that three out of every ten owners will quite frankly never be satisfied with their new vehicle.”

Since problems in this category are not crucial to the performance of the vehicle, it could be surmised that our decisions are perhaps less rational or detached than we think. But is this true of all new car buyers?

Focusing on age first, the overall problem count immediately suggests that age does make a difference. Clearly, although it could be argued that a problem count is a clear-cut issue, what constitutes a problem is dependent on the eye of the beholder – or in this case, on the age of the eye of the beholder.

Overall, the problem count diminishes with each consecutive age category, with the oldest (50 years plus) reporting half the number of problems tallied up for the youngest group (18 to 24 years old).

There is one factor that definitely does impact on this – age is also linked to the category of vehicle driven. “The luxury segments tend to attract a higher proportion of older drivers, with affordability obviously an issue for many younger buyers,” said McLean. “Since the luxury segments report lower problem counts than their smaller siblings, we can’t ignore that this would affect the lower count for older drivers.”

Nevertheless, there are younger buyers driving top of the range models, and older buyers downsizing to smaller models, so this effect would be diluted. And rather than being a diluted picture of the vehicle segment differences, the age comparison shows itself to be more accentuated. Thus, according to Synovate, we can conclusively say that younger drivers are exacting, while older buyers appear to let some problems slip by as not worth mentioning.

In the rational versus emotional stakes, the younger buyers, perhaps more impassioned and involved with their vehicles and less experienced with new cars, appeared to be quite emotional. They reported three times as many squeaks and rattles, and also reported substantially more appearance-related problems. On the ‘more rational’ issues, such as the engine and steering, the differences were far less significant.

According to McLean, the gender comparison proved very interesting. Problem categories relating to the vehicle’s functioning – both static (i.e., functional aspects not directly related to the actual drive, such as window wipers and ventilation) and dynamic (the engine, brakes, steering, etc) showed remarkably few differences. Similarly, appearance did not differentiate men from women. But the overall counts did differ somewhat – and it was noise issues that proved to be the differentiator. This included not only squeaks and rattles but also wind and road noise, which annoyed men more than women.

So, does this suggest that men are more emotionally tied to their vehicles than women? McLean said it is impossible to be sure, although the higher number of squeaks and rattles reported by male drivers does seem to support this. “This is particularly true if you consider that old habits die hard in conjunction with the fact that the purchasing of luxury models (with their lower squeak and rattle count) are still dominated by men.”

Another factor that may be impacting on the higher noise reporting by men is related to application. According to the survey, men reported higher wind and road noise incidence. “While the vehicle driven does affect this, speed and acceleration are also factors. Perhaps not academic proof that men drive faster and harder, but it certainly seems very likely!” said McLean.

Next, ignoring age and gender, the owners surveyed were compared based on their population group. While not all respondents were willing to answer this question, it does shed some insight into the perceptions and needs of each group. This is particularly important, as the new car market has been slower to reflect the change as the new middle class emerges.

So, is it the new black buyers who are proving to be demanding customers, or can the established white sector lay claim to be being the fussiest? The differences between these two groups were not that pronounced, although the white drivers did report a higher overall problem incidence.

“Marketers and manufacturers may have the white market sussed, but this knowledge needs to be extended to other emerging segments if they are to remain competitive,” said McLean.

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### **About Synovate**

Synovate, the market research arm of Aegis Group plc, generates consumer insights that drive competitive marketing solutions. The network provides clients with cohesive global support and a comprehensive suite of research solutions. Synovate employs almost 5,000 staff in 46 countries. Synovate in South Africa was formerly known as Proactive Insight. More information on Synovate can be found at [www.synovate.com](http://www.synovate.com) and [www.synovate.co.za](http://www.synovate.co.za)

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