

Who Drives 4WDs?

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Summary

Rapid growth in the number of 4WD vehicles on city roads has focused attention on the increased danger to other motorists and pedestrians, while studies have identified 4WDs as more 'aggressive' vehicles. It may be that this aggressiveness attracts some people to purchase large 4WDs for city use. The people who market these vehicles know that primarily they are bought to reflect a certain self-image associated with the outback. They are promoted as 'rugged', 'muscular', 'bold', 'tough', 'powerful' and 'supremely capable'. Yet, aware that they are mostly driven between school, work and shops in the city, the creature comforts are also emphasised with ads suggesting that such vehicles can be 'thought-provoking', 'elegant', 'stylish', 'refined' and 'cosmopolitan'.

This study investigates the demographic and attitudinal characteristics of 4WD owners using data from Roy Morgan Research. The data were collected across Australia from 24,718 respondents aged 14 and over during the period October 2003 to September 2004. The study focuses on large 4WDs (such as the Toyota LandCruiser and Nissan Patrol), rather than small and medium sized vehicles, and includes an analysis of drivers of 'luxury 4WDs' (such as the BMW X3).

In some respects, the profile of city drivers of large 4WDs differs markedly from the general population and other road users. The 'typical' city driver of a large 4WD is a male in his forties or fifties in full-time work with a higher than average income, but not in the upper reaches of the income scale. City drivers of 4WDs also tend to be more obese, with two thirds (66 per cent) being overweight or obese compared to 57 per cent of the population overall.

In their attitudes, city drivers of large 4WDs are morally more conservative and less community orientated than other drivers. They are more likely to dislike homosexuals; among male drivers of 4WDs in the city, 51 per cent believe that homosexuality is immoral compared to 43 per cent of men overall. They also have lower regard for Indigenous culture and are less sympathetic to public and charitable support for disadvantaged people. While over half (57 per cent) of all Australians agree it is the government's duty to support those who cannot find work, only 42 per cent of city drivers of large 4WDs concur.

These drivers tend to see themselves as rugged individualists who like physical activity. Perhaps with implications for how they drive, they are more inclined to say they sometimes use force to get their way. Much less likely than others to describe themselves as 'a bit of an intellectual', they see themselves as being able to fix things when they break down but also admit to being technophobes.

The characteristics and attitudes of drivers of luxury 4WDs differ markedly from those of large 4WDs. Three quarters of luxury 4WDs are driven by city dwellers, with just over half (53 per cent) being women and just under half (46 per cent) aged between 35 and 49 years. A quarter of this group earns more than \$100,000 per year compared with less than four per cent for the population as a whole.

Perhaps reflecting their greater wealth, the members of this group are more than twice as likely as the general population to say 'I was born to shop' (33 per cent). And two-thirds (65 per cent) say they would normally buy their favourite brand regardless of price, compared with 43 per cent of the population. Although less likely than the overall population to be obese, they are a third more likely to be constantly watching their weight.

There are shades of the same moral conservatism apparent amongst city drivers of large 4WDs. Well over half (57 per cent) of all Australians agree it is the government's duty to support those who can't find work, but only 44 per cent of city owners of luxury 4WDs agree, a figure comparable to their large 4WD counterparts (42 per cent). Luxury 4WD owners go against the trend as to whether the gap between rich and poor is growing. While a large majority (88 per cent) of the general population believe it is so (including 86 per cent of large 4WD owners in the city), only 66 per cent of this predominantly wealthier group believe the gap is widening.

Where owners of large 4WDs prefer beer (Australian rather than imported), city drivers of luxury 4WDs prefer wine and spirits. Nearly half (46 per cent) of this group say they like to drink wine with their meals compared to only 28 per cent of the general population.

There is a widespread view that the 'aggressiveness' of large 4WDs is reflected in the selfishness and belligerent attitudes of those who drive them, at least in the cities. Large 4WDs are less safe, less fuel efficient and less welcome on the roads than many other vehicles. For many other road users, their tough and rugged image is out of touch with the reality of the city streets where many are now driven.

The analysis in this paper indicates that owners of large 4WDs are less concerned than most about the impact of their decisions on other members of the community. Thus, although it is widely understood that 4WDs are more dangerous than other vehicles, they are driven in more aggressive ways placing other road users at greater risk. But the individualism of city drivers of large 4WDs suggests that relying on their social conscience to change to safer, less aggressive vehicles may be less effective than mandatory measures such as special licences and high taxes.

1. Background

Despite soaring fuel prices and what has been called a ‘four-wheel-drive backlash’¹ the automotive industry reports continuing strong sales of Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs or more commonly in Australia, 4WDs). In August 2005 the Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries reported that SUV sales, in year-to-date terms, were 6.9 per cent higher than the record levels set in 2004. However, much of the growth is in the compact and medium segments. Sales of the large and luxury models of interest in this paper are falling under pressure from higher petrol prices and shifting attitudes. In August 2005, sales of large models had fallen 17.3 per cent, and those of luxury models were down slightly (1.3 per cent).

Nevertheless, the growth of 4WDs as a share of the vehicle fleet has been very rapid over the last decade. In 2004, 4WDs made up 18.1 per cent of the new car market, a 135 per cent increase in just eight years.²

The increasing number of 4WDs on the roads has been accompanied by concern about the danger presented to other motorists and pedestrians, particularly by the larger models. According to accident researchers, they are more ‘aggressive’ cars meaning they pose a greater risk to drivers of other vehicles (Newstead *et al.*, p. iv). The Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) reports that in ‘4WD crashes involving multiple vehicles, passenger car occupants accounted for the largest proportion of fatalities (64 per cent). 4WD occupants accounted for the second largest but a significantly lower proportion of fatalities (18 per cent)’ (ATSB 2002a, p.1).

4WDs have a much higher incidence of roll-overs in a fatal crash situation and in single-vehicle incidents (where, in most cases, the vehicle has been driven off the road) (ATSB 2002a). In a study of driveway deaths, where young children have been killed as a result of slow moving vehicle impacts, more than half of the passenger vehicles involved were large 4WDs (ATSB, 2002).

While 4WDs have traditionally been the preferred vehicles for primary producers and off-road enthusiasts, much of the new demand is for city drivers who have little intention of taking their vehicles off-road. Across the whole 4WD market, which includes compact, medium, large and luxury models, data from Roy Morgan Research show more than half are driven by people who live in Australia’s capital cities (56 per cent).

2. Reasons for the growth in 4WDs

What has been driving the rapid increase in purchases of 4WDs for city use? To answer this question we need to know more about the people buying these vehicles and what their motivations are.

The manufacturers of 4WDs have intimate knowledge of their market and know how to sell to it. In their recent book *Affluenza*, Hamilton and Denniss (2005) note that, despite the overwhelming evidence that large 4WDs are more dangerous for both their occupants and other road users, advertisers succeed in playing to buyers’ need for

¹ AAMI, 2005

² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2004

personal safety while at the same time extolling practical benefits such as luggage capacity, visibility for the driver, and the ability to take the family away on camping trips. The authors quote US market research into people who buy large 4WDs which shows that they tend to be 'insecure and vain':

They are frequently nervous about their marriages and uncomfortable about parenthood. They often lack confidence in their driving skills. Above all, they are apt to be self-centred and self-absorbed, with little interest in their neighbours and communities. They are more restless, more sybaritic, and less social than most Americans are. They tend to like fine restaurants a lot more than off-road driving, seldom go to church and have limited interest in doing volunteer work to help others.³

Those who market large 4WDs know that in large measure these vehicles are bought to reflect a certain self-image associated with the outback; yet marketers promote the creature comforts and luxurious extras because they know the cars are used almost exclusively for travelling between school, work and the shops. This is borne out by the marketing messages used to sell large 4WDs in Australia - see Box 1. They are promoted as 'rugged', 'muscular', 'bold', 'tough', 'powerful' and 'supremely capable'. At the same time they emphasise the creature comforts for city driving with ads suggesting they can be 'thought-provoking', 'elegant', 'stylish', 'refined' and 'cosmopolitan'. Thus the Nissan Patrol is promoted as a car:

...built tough to survive the rough and tumble of a hard day's yakka.
Engineered meticulously to deliver performance you can take pride in. Stylish enough to turn heads on the most cosmopolitan city streets.

This peculiar combination of ruggedness and elegance, power and luxury, suggests that marketers believe that those who buy large 4WDs are city softies who feel insecure on the road but who nevertheless like to think of themselves as tough outdoors men. This is summed up in the advertising slogan for the Jeep Cherokee: "An off-road legend that looks right at home in the city".

Box 1 Advertising slogans for 4WDs

Going to the outback or taking the kids to school... (Mitsubishi)

...you'll look good no matter how ugly it gets (Toyota)

Only one 4WD possesses the power, pedigree, and physical presence of a born leader. Only one delivers dignified determination. Only one offers indomitable elegance (Toyota)

Conquer any surface (Jeep)

They dominate the sand dunes as easily as the city streets (Nissan)

It's not a feeling you can get every day. Or is it? (BMW)

³ Bradsher, 2002

3. Demographic characteristics of city drivers of large 4WDs

This study investigates the demographic and attitudinal characteristics of 4WD owners using data from Roy Morgan Research. The data were collected across Australia from 24,718 respondents aged 14 and over during the period October 2003 to September 2004. The study focuses on large 4WDs (such as the Toyota LandCruiser and Nissan Patrol), rather than small and medium sized vehicles and includes an analysis of those who drive vehicles classified as 'luxury 4WDs' (such as the BMW X3). It transpires that the profiles of the two categories of driver differ markedly.

Almost half (46 per cent) of large 4WDs are now driven by people who live in capital cities with nearly two thirds of city drivers being men (61 per cent). Four out of five are over 35 years of age; two in five are over fifty. More than half these drivers are in full-time work and they are split evenly between professionals/managers, white collar workers and skilled workers. They are generally earning higher incomes: 31 per cent of city-based drivers of large 4WDs earn more than \$50,000 per year compared with 19 per cent across Australia.

Thus the 'typical' city driver of a large 4WD is a male in his forties or fifties in full-time work with a higher than average income, but not in the upper reaches of the income scale. These drivers also tend to be more obese. Two thirds (66 per cent) are overweight or obese compared with 57 per cent of the population and 62 per cent of the total male population. Overweight and obesity peaks among men in the 50 to 64 year age group (73 per cent).

4. Attitudes of owners of large 4WDs

Looking across the range of social attitudes covered by the Roy Morgan Research data, it is apparent that city drivers of large 4WDs are morally more conservative than other drivers - see Figure 1.⁴ For instance 40 per cent of city drivers of large 4WDs agree with the proposition that homosexuality is immoral, compared with just over a third (35 per cent) of Australians in general. Previous research by the Australia Institute makes it clear that men are more likely to agree with this statement than women (Flood & Hamilton, 2005). Among male drivers of 4WDs in the city, 51 per cent agree with the statement that homosexuality is immoral (compared to 43 per cent of men overall). Similarly, only 20 per cent of male drivers of large 4WDs in the city agree that homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children compared with 37 per cent of the general population.

More than two thirds (68 per cent) of the population believe that 'Aboriginal culture is an essential component of Australian society'. But city drivers of large 4WDs are 14 per cent less likely to agree, although the proportion is still more than half (54 per cent). Again there is a marked difference between men and women: of those city drivers of large 4WDs, 49 per cent of men agree compared with 63 per cent of women.

⁴ In this section we compare attitudes of city drivers of large 4WDs to those of the population as a whole. We could have compared them with all city drivers or all city drivers other than those who drive large 4WDs. A statistical comparison between these groups for a range of responses to attitudinal questions shows that choosing either of the two alternative reference groups makes no appreciable difference to the results.

The conservatism of these drivers is also marked by a strong dose of individualism. Over half (57 per cent) of all Australians agree it is the government's duty to support those who cannot find work. However, only 42 per cent of city drivers of large 4WDs concur. And while 21 per cent of Australians agree that a percentage of everyone's incomes should go to charities, about half that proportion (12 per cent) of large 4WD owners concur. They are also less likely to attend a church or other place of worship than the general population (11 per cent compared with 18 per cent).

There is a stronger feeling of 'ruggedness' amongst this group of city drivers. They are 14 per cent more likely than the general population to say they are a 'Mr Fix It' type of person (57 per cent compared with 43 per cent generally). Among male city 4WD owners 68 per cent describe themselves as a 'Mr Fix It' type of person, compared to 62 per cent of men overall. They also say they like tough physical activity: 41 per cent compared with 32 per cent of the total population. And, perhaps with worrying implications for on-road behaviour, they are more likely to agree that they sometimes use force to get things done - 28 per cent compared to 23 per cent of the overall population.

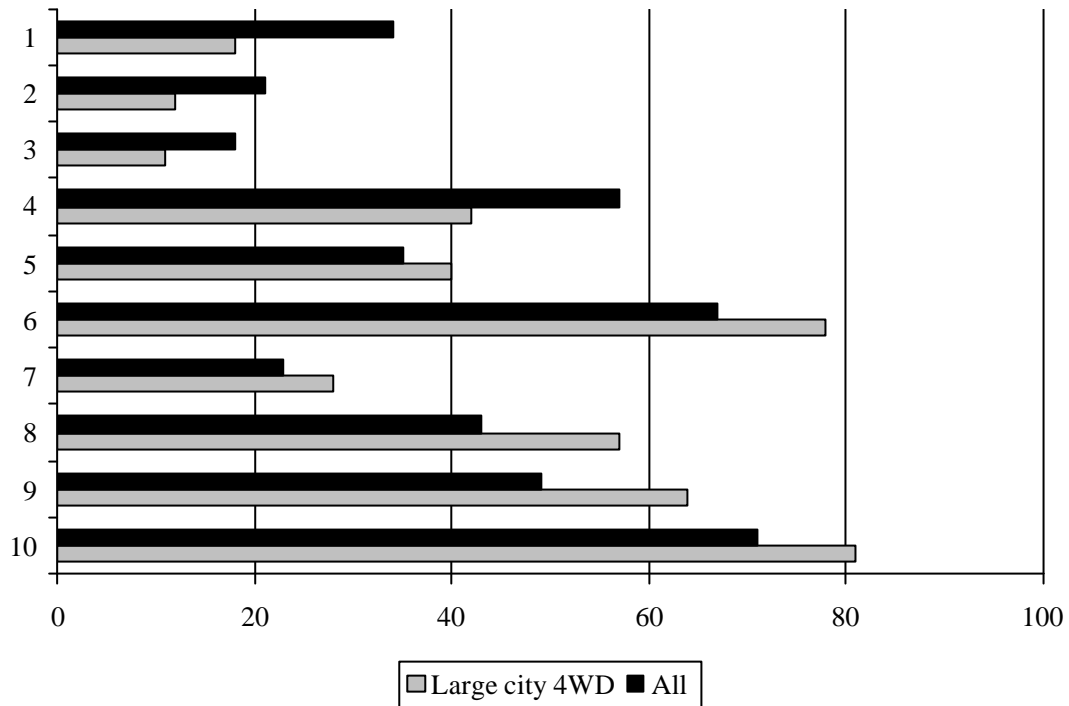
Unsurprisingly, the men in this group are not inclined to agree that 'they like to look stylish': only 29 per cent agree. However, 70 per cent of the women in large 4WDs in the city agree with this statement.

These results capture some of the paradoxes in the marketing of 4WDs. Consider this from Lexus: 'This handsomely crafted steering wheel will probably be in stark contrast with the rugged places you'll explore'. Only 12 per cent of this group of drivers agree that they choose a car mainly for its looks (one in five people of the population as a whole admits they do).

Despite the 'Mr Fix It' approach, city drivers of large 4WDs appear in general to be wary of technology. Two thirds of the general population (67 per cent) agree that technology is changing so fast it is difficult to keep up with it. This compares with 78 per cent of city-based large 4WD owners who are also slightly more likely than the whole population to agree they would like to use the internet but are intimidated by the complexity of it all. Large 4WD owners in the city are about half as likely as the rest of the population to agree they are 'a bit of an intellectual'.

Two-thirds of city drivers of large 4WDs agree they like to go away at the weekend compared with 50 per cent of the population overall. While it is not clear how often they do get out of town, they also express a strong preference for a holiday where they can see nature or be in a natural setting (84 per cent compared with 71 per cent of the population). They also like to be away from crowds.

Figure 1 Agreement with selected issues, city-based large 4WD owners and the Australian population (%)



Statement

1. I'm a bit of an intellectual
2. I believe a percentage of everyone's income should go to charities
3. I regularly go to church or my place of worship
4. I think it is the government's duty to support those who can't find work
5. I believe homosexuality is immoral
6. I find technology is changing so fast, it's difficult to keep up with
7. I sometimes use force to get things done
8. I'm a 'Mr Fix It' type of person
9. I like to go away on weekends
10. I like to take my holidays away from crowds

Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

In summary, city drivers of large 4WDs are morally more conservative and less community orientated than other drivers. They are more likely to dislike homosexuals, have less regard for Indigenous culture and are less sympathetic to public and charitable support for disadvantaged people. They are also more likely to see themselves as rugged individualists who like physical activity and use force to get their way. They see themselves as being able to fix things when they break down but also admit to being technophobes.

5. Luxury 4WD owners who live in the city

The data reveal that the characteristics and attitudes of drivers of luxury 4WDs differ markedly from those of large 4WDs. Three quarters of luxury 4WDs are driven by city dwellers. Just over half (53 per cent) are women and just under half (46 per cent)

are aged between 35 and 49 years. A quarter of this group earns more than \$100,000 per year compared with less than four per cent of the population. Four in ten (42 per cent) earn more than \$60,000 compared with 14 per cent of the population.

Reflecting their greater wealth, one of the first things to emerge from a profile of luxury 4WD owners relates to shopping behaviour. This group is more than twice as likely as the general population to say 'I was born to shop' (33 per cent). And two-thirds (65 per cent) say they would normally buy their favourite brand regardless of price, compared with 43 per cent of the population. They are also more likely to agree they trust well known brands rather than stores' own.

Appearance is also high on the list of attitudes that distinguish luxury 4WD owners. Over half of this group (54 per cent) keep up-to-date with new ideas to improve their homes compared with 38 per cent of Australians generally. Two in five (39 per cent) city owners of luxury 4WDs agree that it is important to look fashionable as do 31 per cent of the population.

They are a third more likely than the population to be constantly watching their weight and 80 per cent of this group (89 per cent of the women) would like to be able to lose weight, which compares with 62 per cent of the general population. However, fewer are overweight or obese (54 per cent) than the general population (57 per cent) and drivers of large 4WDs (66 per cent). They are also generally more concerned about cholesterol. Two in five of this group (38 per cent) agree they don't have time to spend cooking (compared with 22 per cent of the population) and are considerably less likely to agree that expensive restaurants are not worth the money.

Unsurprisingly, city drivers of luxury 4WDs believe they are financially stable. In fact, 82 per cent of this group hold this view, compared to 59 per cent of the population as a whole. They are also more likely to agree that the government is doing a good job of running the country (64 per cent compared to 47 per cent for the whole population).

There are shades of the same moral conservatism that is apparent amongst city drivers of large 4WDs. Well over half (57 per cent) of all Australians agree it is the government's duty to support those who can't find work, but only 44 per cent of luxury 4WD owners in the city agree, a figure comparable to their large 4WD counterparts (42 per cent).

Luxury 4WD owners think against the trend as to whether the gap between rich and poor is growing. While a large majority (88 per cent) of the general population believe this is the case (including 86 per cent of large 4WD owners in the city), only 66 per cent of this predominantly wealthier group believe the gap is widening. And, while 60 per cent of the population agree with the proposition that 'globalisation brings more problems than it solves', only 38 per cent of city drivers of luxury 4WDs are of this opinion.

While owners of large 4WDs prefer beer (Australian rather than imported), city drivers of luxury 4WDs prefer wine and spirits. Nearly half (46 per cent) of this group say they like to drink wine with their meals compared to only 28 per cent of the population. More than half (55 per cent) say they prefer to drink spirits than beer compared to a third of all Australians over 18 years of age.

6. Some implications

There is a widespread view that the ‘aggressiveness’ of large 4WDs as vehicles is reflected in the selfishness and belligerent attitudes of those who drive them, at least in the cities. Large 4WDs are less safe, less fuel efficient and less welcome on the roads than many other vehicles. For many other road users, their tough and rugged image is out of touch with the reality of the city streets where many are now driven. A 2004 survey found that six in ten drivers of regular vehicles believe 4WDs should have special licensing requirements ‘due to their different handling and safety considerations’ (AAMI, 2004). Only one in three 4WD drivers themselves agreed. The survey also reported that half of Australian drivers (48 per cent) believe that 4WDs do not belong in city areas (AAMI, 2004).

The analysis discussed in this paper indicates that owners of large 4WDs are less concerned than most about the impact of their decisions on other members of the community. Thus, although it is widely understood that 4WDs are more dangerous than other vehicles, they are driven in more aggressive ways and place other road users at greater risk. A 2004 Parliamentary Library research note on road safety and 4WDs commented that:

Poor driving attitudes may often cause disruption, carelessness and accidents. Selfish, aggressive driver behaviour on our roads is all too frequently seen. Courtesy and respect for others often appears replaced by a vengeful lust for road dominance, based on anonymity (James, 2004, p. 2).

Stuart Newstead from the Monash Accident Research Centre commented to the *Bulletin* magazine in 2004 on the increased risk large 4WDs pose to other drivers: ‘That won’t bother some people but if you’ve got any community conscience at all, the aggressivity should bother you’ (cited in Carlyon & Gliddon, 2004).

The data reported in this paper suggest that there is a self-perception of ruggedness amongst the drivers of large 4WDs in the city. They are also more inclined to a conservative, individualistic point of view. This suggests that relying on the social conscience of large 4WD owners to change to safer, less aggressive vehicles may be less effective than mandatory measures such as special licences and high taxes.

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