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Manual or automatic? The Motor Ombudsman advises which transmission type is most popular today

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A recent Motor Ombudsman survey has shown that car buyers in the U.K. prefer manual transmission...

They tell us:

(All words and image from The Motor Ombudsman).

- With the arrival of the new "73" vehicle registration on 01st September, a Motor Ombudsman-commissioned YouGov poll of over 1,700 UK driving licence holders has revealed that just over half (53%) would choose a manual gearbox ahead of an automatic if they were to buy a new car within the next 12 months, showing a near-even split in preference
- The primary reason stated by respondents for liking a manual transmission, was because it was how they learned to drive
- From those who would opt for an automatic (47%), having a less tiring driving experience, especially in stop-start traffic, was the main driver for respondents choosing this type of transmission



London, 05 September 2023: As the new “73” vehicle registration arrives in England, Scotland and Wales, a YouGov poll of 1,755 UK driving licence holders commissioned by The Motor Ombudsman has revealed that just over half (53%) of motorists would opt for a manual gearbox if they were to buy a new car within the next 12 months. The remainder, a slightly lower proportion at 47%, showing a near-even split in opinion, said they would prefer to purchase an automatic model – now synonymous with electric vehicles (EVs) and hybrids.

Out of the 934 individuals in the research who stated a preference for driving with a traditional stick shift, the most cited reason for manual having the upper hand over automatic by nearly three-quarters (72%) of these respondents, was because this was how they learned to drive. This has thereby possibly made them more hesitant to make the shift to a gearbox that does everything for them, or to try technology that they may have not experienced before.

Over a third (39%) of manual fans also stated that being in control of their own gear shifts can offer a greater level of driving enjoyment for the “purists” than an auto box, especially in a high performance car, and that this type of transmission makes it easier to change gears in anticipation of the volume of traffic ahead (34%). Furthermore, for nearly one in three people (28%), price would also sway respondents to go manual, as models can be sometimes be cheaper than those with an automatic gearbox.

For the 47% of people who stated that they would like to to buy a new automatic car in the coming year with a transmission where gear ratios are already pre-determined, the majority i.e. close to two-thirds of respondents in this group (62%), explained that the primary benefit of an automatic over a manual was that it can be less tiring to drive a vehicle of this kind, especially in urban areas or when in stop-start traffic. Similarly, 37% of people said that, without the need to change gears themselves, they can concentrate more on the road ahead without having to worry about shifting up or down the gearbox, avoid the risk of stalling and riding the clutch (32%), and keep both hands on the steering wheel (21%), thereby promoting a greater feeling of safety.

In addition, for respondents who would opt for an automatic gearbox for a new car, this would be influenced by the fact that that their next purchase would likely be an EV (26%), where models are only sold with this type of transmission. This percentage rises to 34% amongst Generation Z i.e. 18- to 24- year-olds, and to 35% for those aged between 35 to 44, encompassing Millennials and Generation X.



When looking at the findings of the latest research conducted by the Ombudsman for the automotive sector in terms of the regional variances when it comes to manual and automatic preferences, motorists in Wales and the North would be most likely to purchase a new vehicle with a stick shift at 67% and 59% of individuals respectively. In contrast, nearly two-thirds (62%) of Londoners would do the opposite and go for an automatic, reflecting the use of a car in a predominantly urban setting.

Bill Fennell, Chief Ombudsman and Managing Director at The Motor Ombudsman said: “The manual gearbox has been a part of the automotive landscape for over a century, and for many drivers, this has always been their transmission of choice. However, as traditional petrol and diesel models are gradually phased out on the road to 2030, coupled with electric vehicles seeing ever-increasing ownership, the shift away from the traditional manual gearbox is likely to become more prominent, and automatic will become the norm for many.”

Bill added: “What the research does show however, is that, with a near-even split in gearbox preferences amongst motorists, a place remains for both types of transmission to satisfy current consumer demand.”

To view the franchise dealerships and independent car retailers that are accredited to The Motor Ombudsman’s Vehicle Sales Code, visit The Motor Ombudsman’s Garage Finder at www.TheMotorOmbudsman.org/garage-finder.

About the YouGov survey data

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,057



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adults, of which 1,755 had a full or provisional UK driving licence. Fieldwork was undertaken between 4th – 7th August 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).