

Autonomous driving: consumer vs investment perspective

Many consumers regard skydiving and swimming with sharks as safer than riding in an AV, writes Megan Lampinen

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Industry excitement for autonomous vehicles (AVs) continues to build as companies step up pilot projects and launch commercial deployments. In California alone, more than 60 companies hold an active permit allowing them to test AVs, with a safety driver, in the state. Others are offering services to members of the public. Lyft claims to be the largest public self-driving commercial platform in the US and at the end of 2020 marked more than 100,000 paid rider trips. GM's self-driving car service Cruise has similar ambitions and was just given the green light to offer driverless ride services to members of the public in California.

The feedback from players like Cruise and Lyft has been overwhelmingly positive. Lyft says that 96% of riders want to ride again once they've taken a self-driving trip and 98% rated their self-driving ride 5 star. But other surveys highlight concerns.

An American Automobile Association (AAA) survey conducted in January 2021 found just 14% of drivers trust a car to do all the driving. A notable 85% of respondents were either too afraid to even try an AV (54%) or unsure (32%). Similar hesitancy was uncovered in a more recent survey of American consumers by Lynx Software Technologies, conducted in May this year. Among the more notable findings was the fact that 80% of people trust a human pilot over a self-driving vehicle, but more than 50% of the respondents admit to breaking the laws of the road on at least a weekly basis.

These surveys, which corroborate trust issues flagged in other more in-depth studies, serve as a pivotal reminder for industry players on what needs to be prioritised within AV development strategies. "The future of self-driving automobiles on the roads and flying taxis in the sky might be further out than we once thought, but it is inspiring to learn about consumer sentiment toward these technological advancements," comments Arun Subbarao, Vice President of Engineering and Technology at Lynx. "It is critical that we listen to their concerns as well while these are being developed so that we can teach consumers about the safety that is being integrated and ensure the proof is in the testing and the results."



Lyft believes that self-driving vehicles are ready for broader adoption

Survey highlights

For a sizeable percentage of respondents in the Lynx survey, the perceived risks of riding in an AV are high: 49% of respondents would rather go skydiving and 34% would rather swim with sharks than ride in a self-driven automobile. "Clearly the education around what the technology can deliver needs to be more articulately delivered and, indeed, believed," observes Ian Ferguson, Vice President of Marketing and Strategic Alliances at Lynx. 35% of respondents do not believe AVs are safe today, with 65% pointing to insufficient testing as an obstacle to adoption.

Views on autonomous cars differ noticeably from views on other forms of self-driving vehicles. For example, just 36% of respondents said they were eager to give up full control when behind the wheel of a car. On public transit, however, 57% of consumers would use an autonomously operated train, bus or taxi.

In the long-term, acceptance should grow, but it may never be universal. 72% of respondents expect that a majority of people would regularly use some type of AV by 2041 and more than half of respondents said they expected to own an AV. Another 26% said they would consider owning one. For 58%, the key motivation behind the planned purchase is the ability to work while driving. Other top reasons were the ability to travel farther without a break (53%) and to eat while driving (47%).

"On some level, I think this survey corroborates the hesitancy towards AVs," Ferguson tells *Automotive World*. "Even 20 years from now just three-quarters of folks are comfortable with using them. It's interesting especially if we compare that to technology that didn't exist 20 years ago and is now commonplace."

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Shaping future product

Both the AAA and the Lynx surveys were small, with about 1,000 respondents each and only touching on a single market. While the results are revealing, they shouldn't necessarily encourage players in this space to adjust their R&D. The primary value lies elsewhere, as Ferguson explains: "Here in the Bay Area, it is easy for technology companies to get caught up in our bubble." He points to predictions that AVs would be commonplace by now, and how there are still "plenty of people around here talking about the joys of taking flying taxis from San Jose to San Francisco. We like surveys like this to keep us grounded and learn more about what people are really worried about—as opposed to what high tech and investment firms are saying we should worry about. They also help us get beyond the tech itself and look for other insights that may help shape our product."

In terms of product, Lynx's contribution to mobility is on the software front. For the past couple of decades its software has been deployed in mission critical systems, primarily in military and commercial aircraft and helicopters. More recently this has broadened to use cases including drones and satellites. Lynx believes that autonomous driving, whether in the sky or on the ground, represents a natural adjacent market. "The reality is that this is a problem that is simply too challenging to solve in the very near term in a way that is economical, power effective and accurate enough for deployment," cautions Ferguson. How Lynx progresses its efforts and collaborations with partners will be guided in part by regular feedback on consumer sentiment and expectation.

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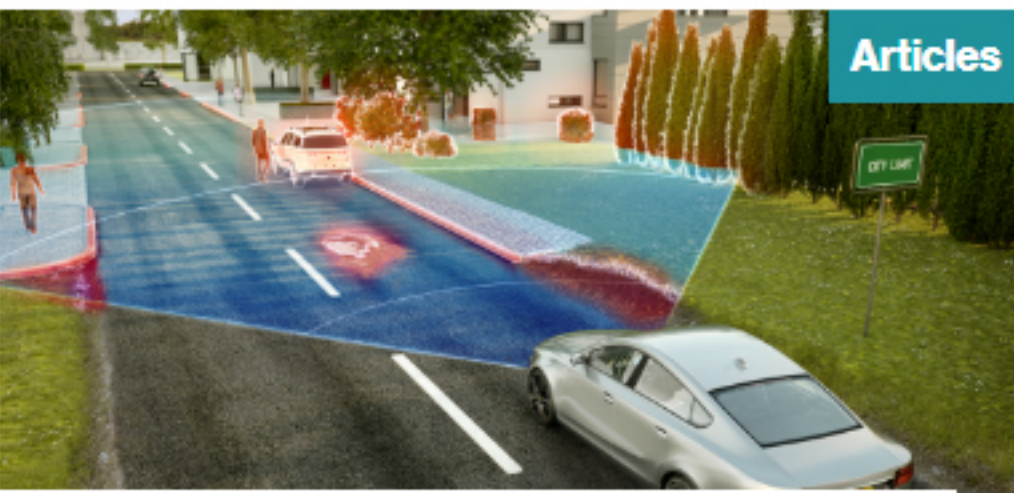
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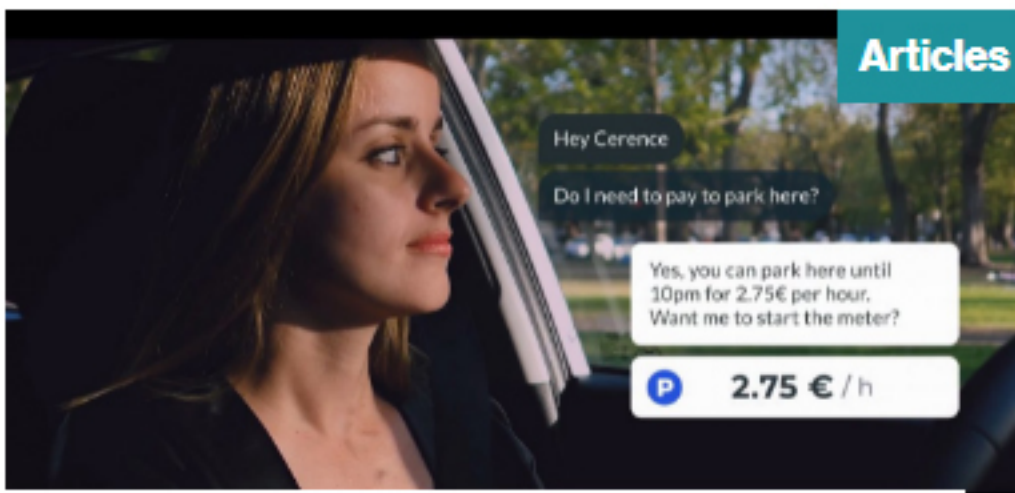
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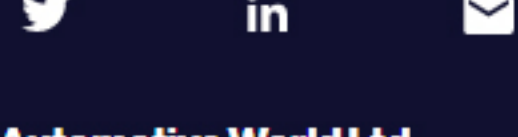
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