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The Role of Technology & AI in the Modern Car Buying Process 2025 Survey Report

June 2025

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Introduction and Key Findings

Introduction & Methodology

The way people shop and make purchasing decisions has radically changed in recent years, but the car buying process has remained largely unchanged. Consumers have come to expect similar levels of digital ease and personalization from every brand they interact with, whether they're ordering takeout, buying groceries, or researching their next vehicle.

This survey set out to understand how this shift in consumer expectations is playing out in the car buying experience. What do modern car buyers expect online? What brings them into the showroom? How do these expectations vary across generations, especially as Gen Z emerges as a defining force in the market?

Additionally, the survey explored the growing role of AI in the car buying journey. With tools like ChatGPT deeply influencing how consumers gather information and make purchasing decisions, dealers and OEMs alike are reaching a turning point. Adapting to these new behaviors will be key to staying competitive in the years ahead.

The findings in this report are designed to help automotive leaders understand the expectations of the modern car buyer to help close the gap between how people want to shop and how cars are being sold.

Methodology

To gain insights into evolving car buyer behavior, we conducted a survey of 1,000 US -based consumers in collaboration with Global Surveyz, an independent survey company. All respondents had either purchased or leased a vehicle within the past 24 months and identified themselves as primary decision-makers in that process.

Participants were evenly distributed across three key generational cohorts: Gen Z (ages 18–27), Millennials (28–43), and Gen X (44–59), all with a reported annual household income of $80,000 or more. This targeting ensured that responses reflected the perspectives of active, qualified car buyers with significant purchasing power.

The survey was conducted between April and May 2025 and focused on uncovering how generational preferences, digital habits, and the growing use of AI tools are shaping the automotive shopping journey.

Key Findings

01 | **Only 5% of car shoppers complete the entire purchase process online.**

While digital engagement plays a growing role in car buying, the vast majority of shoppers still follow a hybrid path. Just 5% of respondents completed their most recent purchase entirely online, while most completed between 26%-50% of the process digitally. This suggests that dealers should prioritize optimizing the early digital experiences they offer while ensuring a smooth in-store close, rather than focusing on a fully online sales model.

02 | **62% of shoppers are comfortable using AI for car purchase advice, and 17% of younger shoppers already do.**

Consumers are increasingly open to using AI tools like ChatGPT during the car buying journey, with 62% expressing comfort in leveraging them for purchasing advice and 23% feeling very comfortable. While only 12% of Gen X respondents currently use AI for research, usage rises to 17% among shoppers aged 18 to 43, signaling a clear generational trend. Dealers that begin integrating AI thoughtfully now will be better positioned to meet future buyer expectations.

03 | **75% of shoppers expect car buying to feel like any other online shopping experience in 2025.**

Shoppers are not necessarily looking to complete a car purchase entirely online, but they do expect the digital portion of the journey to match the standards set by leading brands like Apple, Nike, or Amazon. Nearly half of respondents (49%) strongly agree with this expectation. For dealerships, this means investing in personalization, consistency across platforms, and modern marketing systems to create a retail-grade experience that leads to an in-person sale.

04 | **93% of shoppers prefer a seamless, personalized journey, and 85% view tailored communication as key to their overall satisfaction.**

Today's car shoppers not only expect a personalized experience; they want it to carry through every stage of the buying journey. Ninety percent (90%) say the transition from online research to in-person purchase should be seamless, and 93% prefer dealerships that offer that kind of connected experience. Personalized communication plays a critical role in customer satisfaction, with 85% of shoppers saying timely, relevant messages, including tailored offers and follow-ups, are helpful throughout the car buying process. Personalizing touchpoints across the shopper journey is essential for dealers in meeting expectations and building long-term loyalty.

Survey Report Findings

Digital Tool Usage and Purchasing Behavior

Modern consumers are immersed in digital experiences. The vast majority are highly active online, frequently using digital tools across a range of categories that influence how they expect to interact with brands and businesses, including car dealerships.

A striking 94% of respondents use social media platforms on a weekly basis. Nearly half (48%) shop on e-commerce sites weekly, and another 19% do so every other week. Even when it comes to food purchases, digital convenience is a norm, with 27% ordering dine-in takeaway online weekly and 22% biweekly, while grocery delivery sees the same weekly usage (27%), with 19% engaging biweekly.

These behaviors establish a clear baseline. Consumers are already accustomed to fast, intuitive, and personalized digital experiences and they bring those expectations with them into the car buying process, even if the final transaction itself still happens offline.
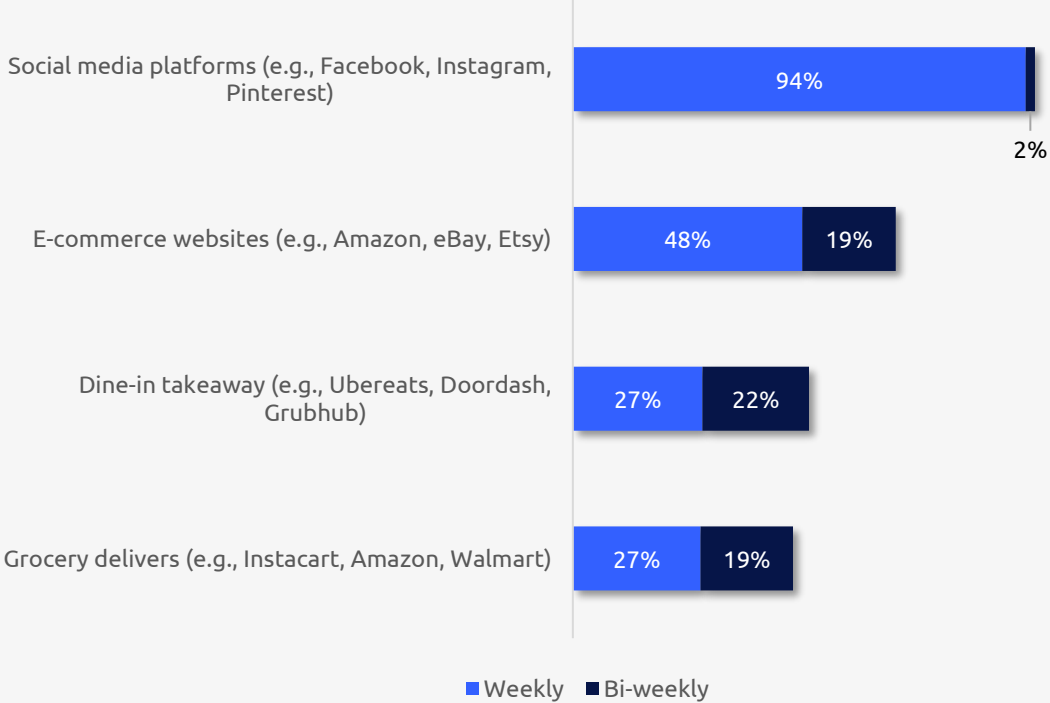

Figure 1: Digital Tool Usage and Purchasing Behavior

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Car Purchasing Process Preferences

Despite living highly digital lives, most car shoppers do not complete their vehicle purchase entirely online. In fact, only 5% of respondents said their last purchase was fully digital. This contrasts sharply with behaviors in other categories like grocery shopping or food delivery, where full online purchase completion is far more common.

Thirty five percent (35%) of respondents reported completing between 26%-50% of their most recent car purchase online, while 23% engaged in light digital research. Smaller segments said they completed most (14%) or nearly all (8%) of the process online.

These results challenge the common assumption that the future of car buying is fully digital. While platforms like Carvana and Vroom generate headlines, they are still the exception.

For most shoppers, car buying remains a hybrid journey. By delivering seamless digital experiences early in the process, and supporting smooth, continuous transitions to the offline experience, car dealers can meet modern shopper expectations more effectively.
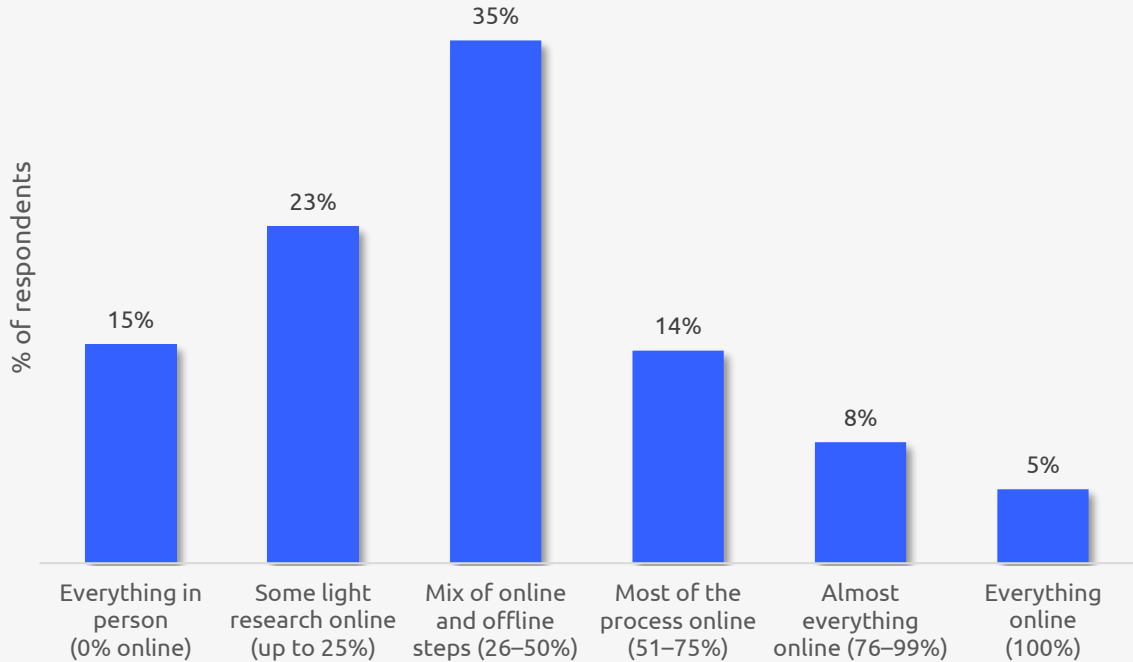

Figure 2: Car Purchasing Process Preferences

Digital Tools Used for Car Shopping

When it comes to researching and shopping for a car, today's consumers rely on a broad mix of digital platforms. Dealership websites are the most commonly used, with 77% of car shoppers visiting a dealer website as part of their purchasing journey. Search engines follow closely behind with 73%. Additionally, 65% of shoppers report consulting car review websites and 55% of shoppers report using online marketplaces like CarGurus and Autotrader in their purchasing process.

AI usage has become more regular and is especially prevalent among younger shoppers. A small but noteworthy segment of respondents reported using AI-driven platforms such as ChatGPT in their buying process (16%). Seventeen percent (17%) of respondents aged 18 to 43 said they used AI tools during their car search, compared to 12% of those aged 44 to 59. While still emerging, this signals a shift in purchasing behavior dealers should not ignore as digital-native generations become the dominant car buying market.
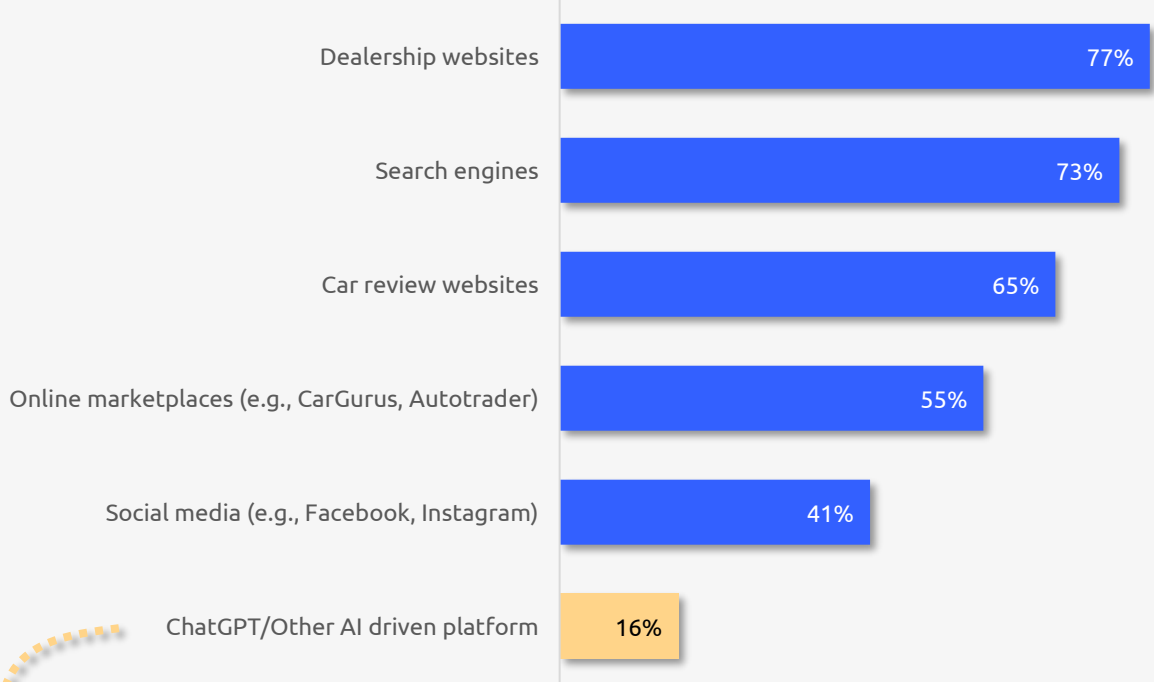
Dealership websites — 77%
Search engines — 73%
Car review websites — 65%
Online marketplaces (e.g., CarGurus, Autotrader) — 55%
Social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) — 41%
ChatGPT/Other AI driven platform — 16%

Figure 3: Digital Tools Used for Car Shopping

All respondents — 16%
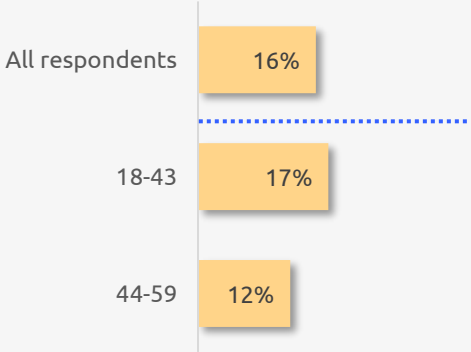18-43 — 17%
44-59 — 12%

Figure 4: "ChatGPT/Other AI driven platform" by Age

*Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%

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Comfort Level with Using AI Platforms for Car Purchase Advice

When asked about their comfort level using AI platforms like ChatGPT for car purchase advice, a clear majority of car shoppers expressed openness to the idea. In total, 62% said they feel comfortable receiving guidance from AI during the buying process, with 23% reporting feeling very comfortable and 39% feeling somewhat comfortable.

The overall takeaway is significant: most shoppers are willing to engage with AI for one of the largest purchases they make.

This marks a major shift in consumer behavior. While AI is not replacing human dealers, it is becoming a trusted part of the process, especially in the early research and decision-making stages. As comfort levels with AI continue to grow, dealers who thoughtfully integrate AI-driven tools into their digital touchpoints will be better positioned to meet evolving shopper expectations and build long-term trust.
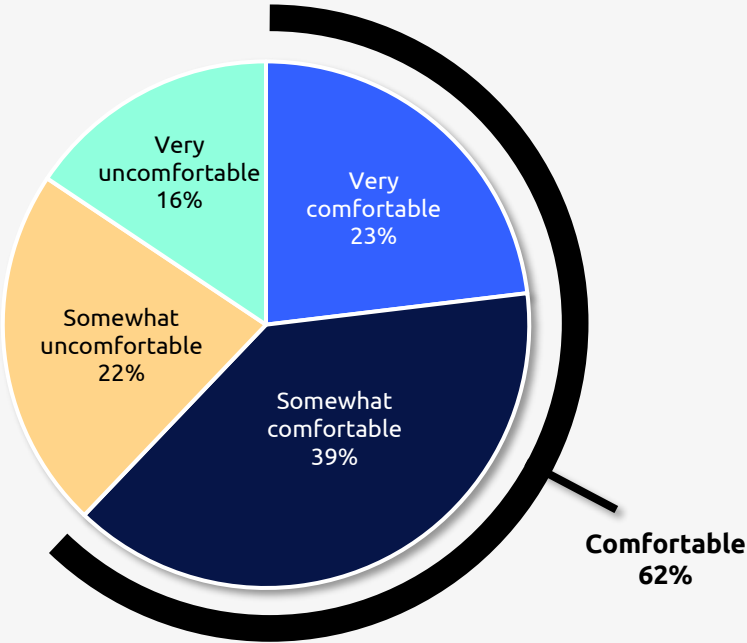

Figure 5: Comfort Level with Using AI Platforms for Car Purchase Advice

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Reasons for Not Using Dealership Websites

While dealership websites are a key digital touchpoint in the car buying process, not every car shopper chooses to use them. Among those who opted out, the leading reason was a lack of transparency, with 34% saying unclear pricing and hidden fees made them turn elsewhere. An additional 27% said they preferred third-party platforms like CarGurus or Autotrader, which they may perceive as easier to use or more trustworthy.

Limited customer reviews (21%) and excessive ads or pop-ups (16%) also contributed to avoidance. Other concerns included outdated or inaccurate inventory (13%), no online purchasing option (11%), and poor site usability (11%).

These responses reflect a different set of expectations than those applied to traditional e-commerce. Shoppers are not looking for fast checkout or coupon codes; they're looking for clarity, ease, and confidence in what comes next. For dealers, improving these foundational elements of their website is critical to winning trust online and driving foot traffic into the showroom.
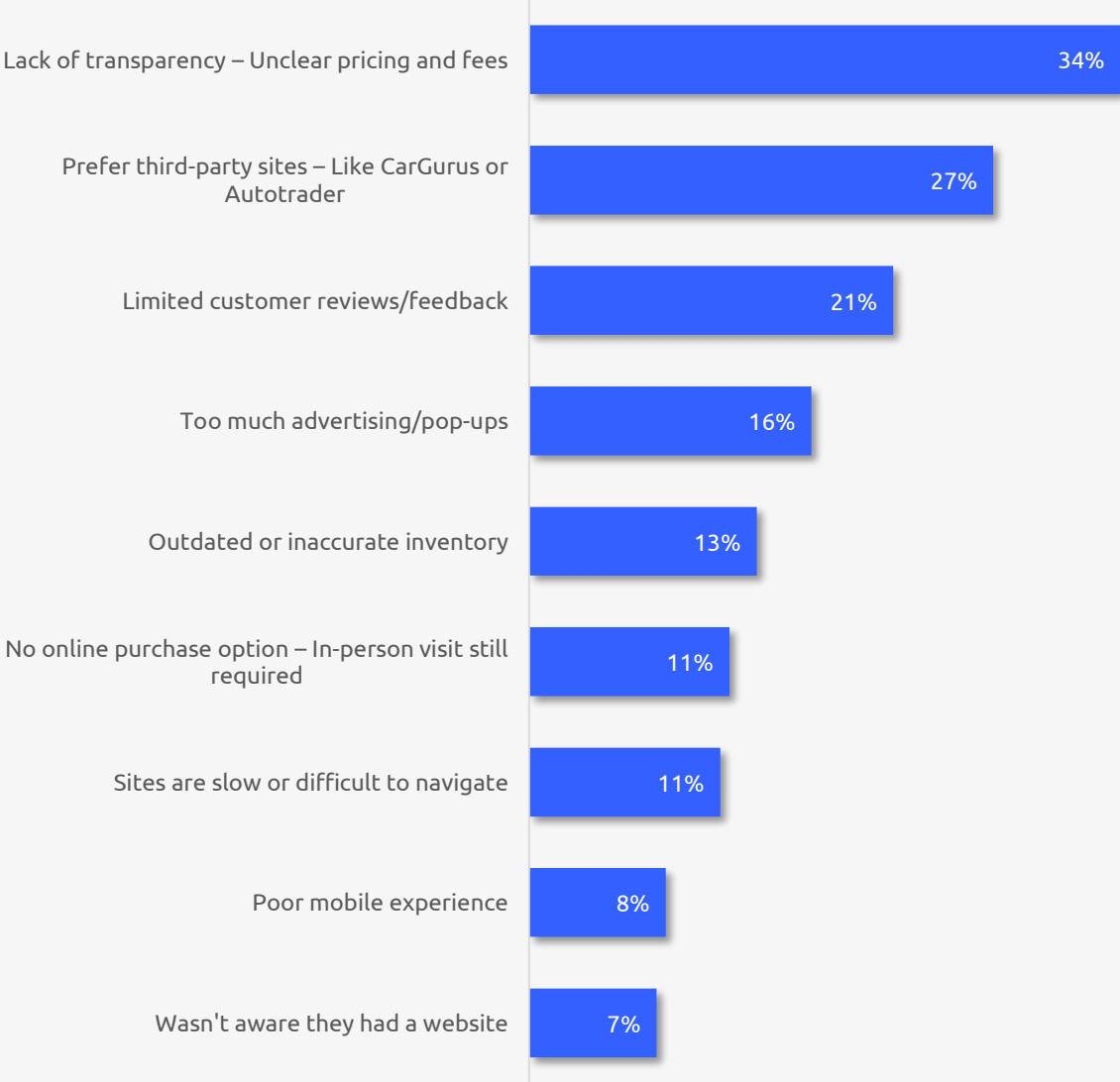

Reason	Percentage
Lack of transparency – Unclear pricing and fees	34%
Prefer third-party sites – Like CarGurus or Autotrader	27%
Limited customer reviews/feedback	21%
Too much advertising/pop-ups	16%
Outdated or inaccurate inventory	13%
No online purchase option – In-person visit still required	11%
Sites are slow or difficult to navigate	11%
Poor mobile experience	8%
Wasn't aware they had a website	7%

Figure 6: Reasons for Not Using Dealership Websites

*Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%

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Belief That Car Buying Will Become Like Other Online Purchases in 2025

Three out of four car shoppers agree that in 2025, buying a car online should feel just like any other online shopping experience. Nearly half (49%) strongly agree with this statement, while another 26% agree. Only 25% of respondents expressed disagreement, suggesting that the expectation for a streamlined, digital retail experience is rapidly becoming the norm.

This doesn't necessarily indicate that shoppers want the entire process to happen online. Most shoppers still prefer to visit a dealership to ask questions, take a test drive, and finalize their purchase. When they do interact online—whether on a dealership website, third-party platform, or AI assistant—they expect that experience to be as smooth, personalized, and cohesive as shopping with major brands.

Dealerships that invest in technologies like Customer Data Platforms (CDP) and marketing automation can bridge the gap. The goal is not to replace the showroom, but to ensure every digital touchpoint leading up to it feels modern, relevant, and connected.
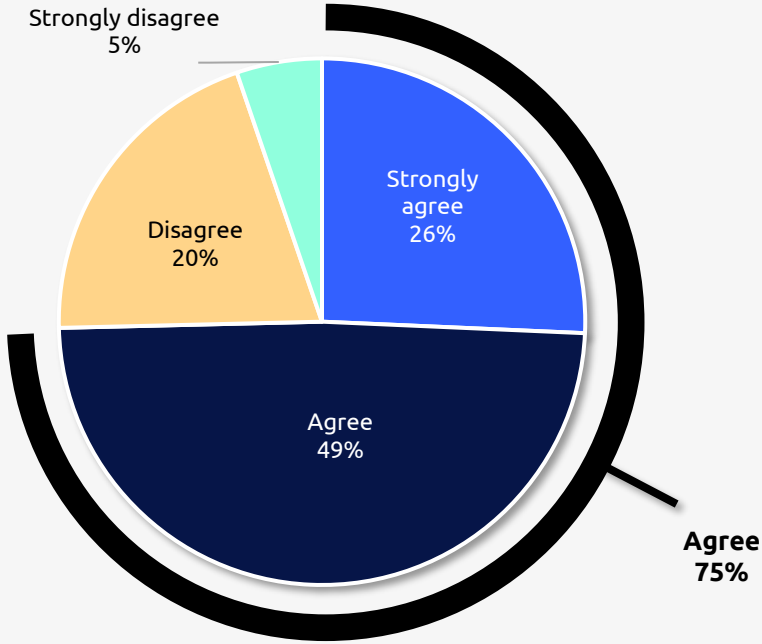

Figure 7: Belief That Car Buying Will Become Like Other Online Purchases in 2025

Importance of an In-Person Car Dealership Visit Before Purchase

Even as digital tools shape more of the car buying journey, visiting a dealership in person remains essential for most shoppers. A total of 56% of respondents said it was very important to visit a dealership before making a purchase, while 30% said it was somewhat important. Only 14% viewed in-person visits as not very important or not important at all.

Notably, younger respondents feel the strongest about this. Among respondents aged 18 to 27, 67% said an in-person dealership visit was very important, more than any other surveyed age group. In-person visits remain significant among older age groups as well, with 53% of shoppers aged 28 to 43 and 49% of shoppers aged 44 to 59 highlighting their importance.

This reinforces a key point: the rise of AI and digital research is not replacing the showroom experience. Instead, it is reshaping the lead-up to the visit. Shoppers may rely on tools like ChatGPT and dealership websites early in their journey, but still have a firm preference for in-person experiences to finalize their purchase, especially among those who are most digitally engaged.
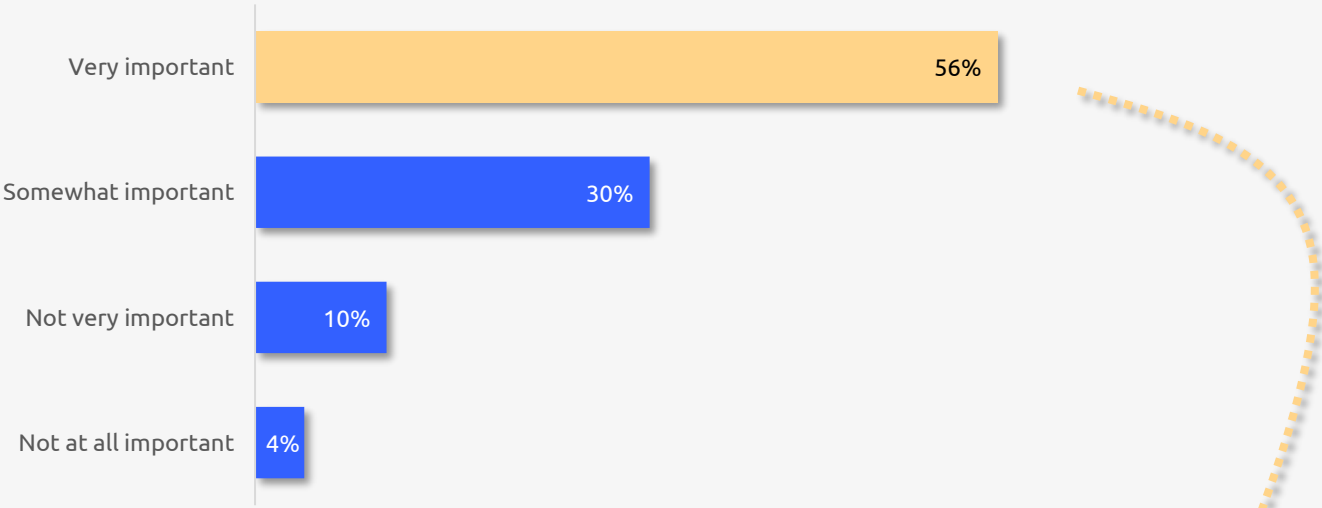

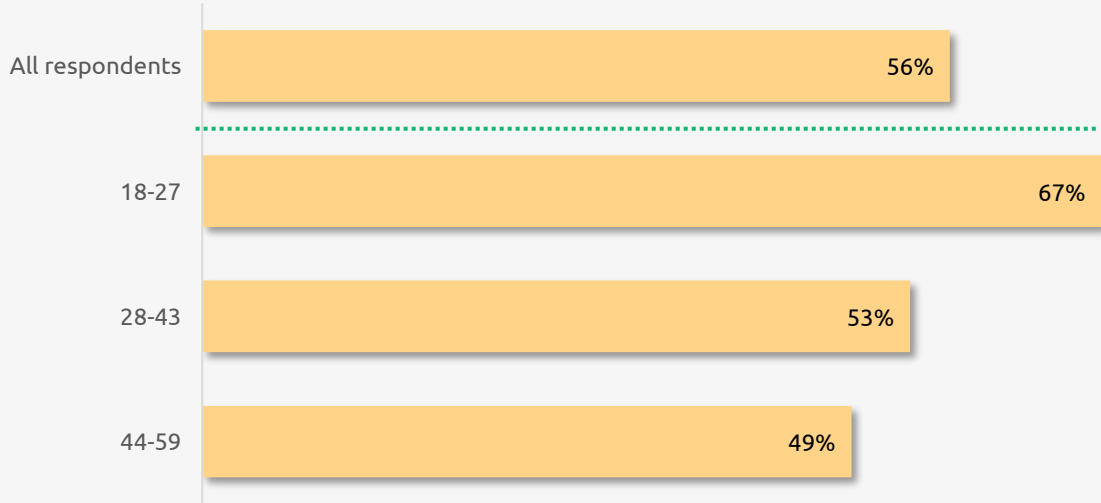**Figure 8:** Importance of an In-Person Car Dealership Visit Before Purchase

Figure 9: "Very important" by Age

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Expectation of Seamless Transition from Online Research to In-Person

Car buyers are clear about one thing: the handoff between online research and in-person dealership visits needs to be seamlessly connected. An overwhelming 90% of respondents agree that there should be a seamless transition between the two stages of their journey, with 40% strongly agreeing and 50% somewhat agreeing. Only 10% disagreed to any extent.

This expectation reflects a key difference between car shopping and traditional e-commerce: Unlike buying on Amazon, the car buying process is split between the digital research stage and a physical interaction purchasing stage, with shoppers expecting both parts to work together without friction.

For dealers, this means more than just having a good website. It means ensuring that customer data, browsing behavior, and stated preferences are carried through to the in-store experience. When systems are integrated and communication is aligned, the result is a more personalized, relevant, and satisfying experience that meets the expectations of today's digitally fluent car buyers.
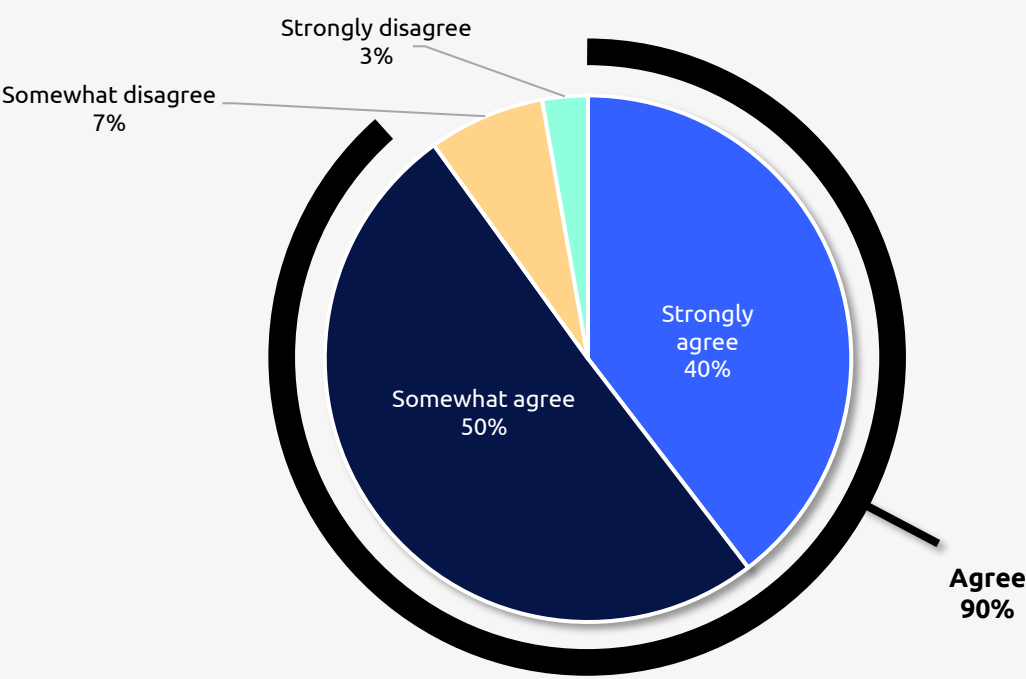

Figure 10: Expectation of Seamless Transition from Online Research to In-Person

The Helpfulness of Personalized Communication from Car Dealerships

When asked, "How helpful is personalized communication like relevant offers, timely texts, or emails from car dealerships when buying a car?," a strong majority of car shoppers signaled that it matters, with a total of 85% indicating it is important. Only 15% felt it was less significant, with 11% saying it is not very important and 4% saying it is not at all significant.

This finding connects directly to shopper expectations for a seamless online-to-offline experience. Personalized communication is one of the clearest ways for dealerships to stay connected with potential buyers, keep them engaged, and support their decision-making process.

Text messages with relevant updates, emails with tailored offers, and follow-ups based on prior activity all contribute to a stronger, more cohesive journey. For dealers, this kind of communication is not just helpful; it is a foundational part of meeting modern buyer expectations and building trust throughout the process.
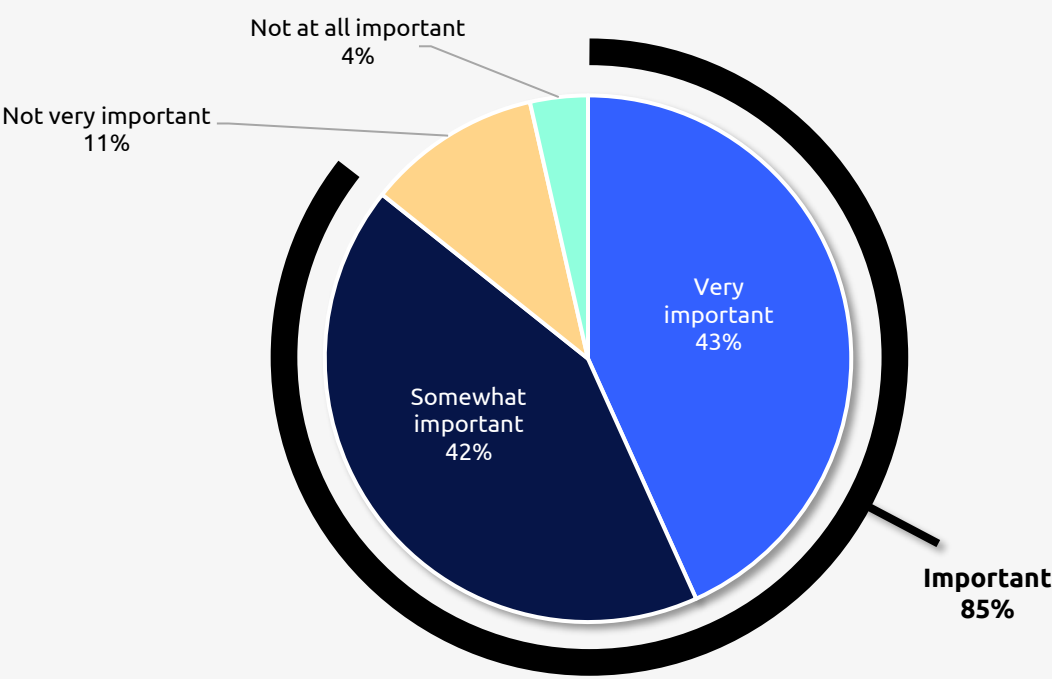

Figure 11: The Helpfulness of Personalized Communication from Car Dealerships

Preference for Dealerships Providing a Seamless, Personalized Shopping Journey

The vast majority of car shoppers are not just open to a more connected experience; they actively prefer it. When asked if they would like dealerships to provide a seamless, personalized shopping journey, 93% said yes. This finding reinforces a consistent message: Today's car buyers expect digital and in-person experiences to seamlessly work together.

Taking it a step further, the survey results also indicate that shoppers are more likely to stick with a dealership that remembers who they are, understands their needs, and picks up where they left off. Whether it's continuing a conversation started online, referencing vehicle preferences already shared, or avoiding repetitive questions, a smooth handoff from screen to showroom signals professionalism, respect, and attention to detail. Dealers who deliver that level of continuity are more likely to earn loyalty and close the deal.
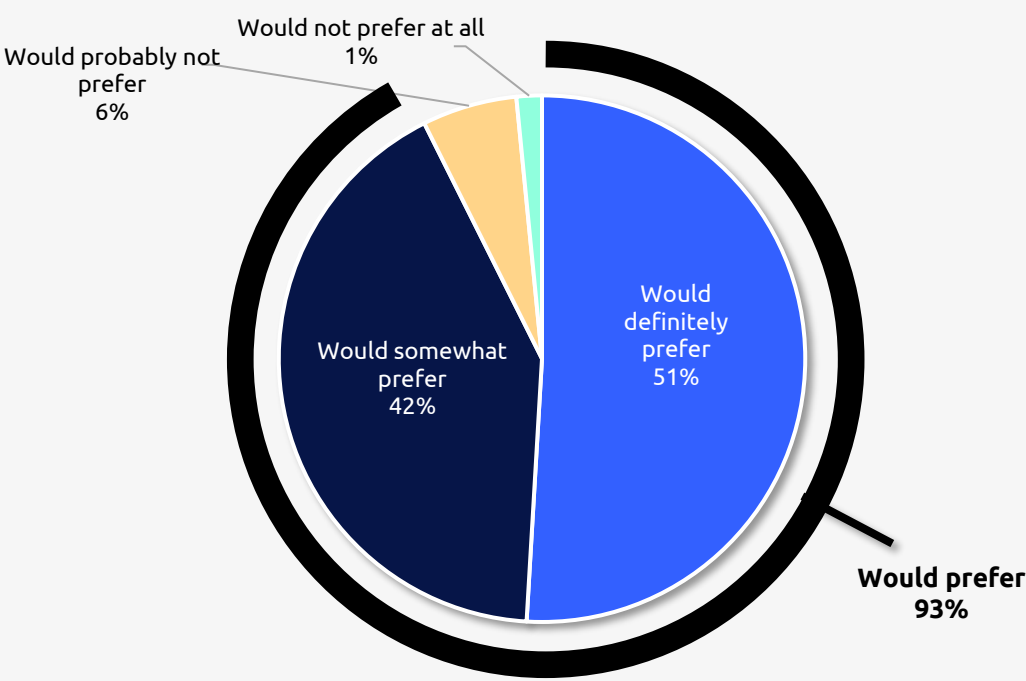

Would not prefer at all
1%

Would probably not prefer
6%

Would somewhat prefer
42%

Would definitely prefer
51%

Would prefer
93%

Figure 12: Preference for Dealerships Providing a Seamless, Personalized Shopping Journey

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Factors Influencing Car Dealership Choice

While pricing and financing understandably rank highest in dealership selection, the survey data reveals what other factors matter most to today's car shoppers. Beyond price, the most important factor is a faster, more convenient buying process, selected by 56% of respondents. This outpaced even inventory availability (53%), a telling insight given ongoing supply chain challenges.

Other top factors include dealership location (47%), personalized and streamlined customer service (46%), and a better online experience (33%). Taken together, these responses reinforce the importance of a dealership's ability to offer both ease and relevance across digital and in-person interactions.

Modern shoppers are not just looking for a good deal. They are looking for a dealership that understands how they want to shop: online, in person, and everywhere in between. For dealers, that means focusing on more than pricing, as speed, convenience, and thoughtful personalization are just as decisive in earning a buyer's trust and business.
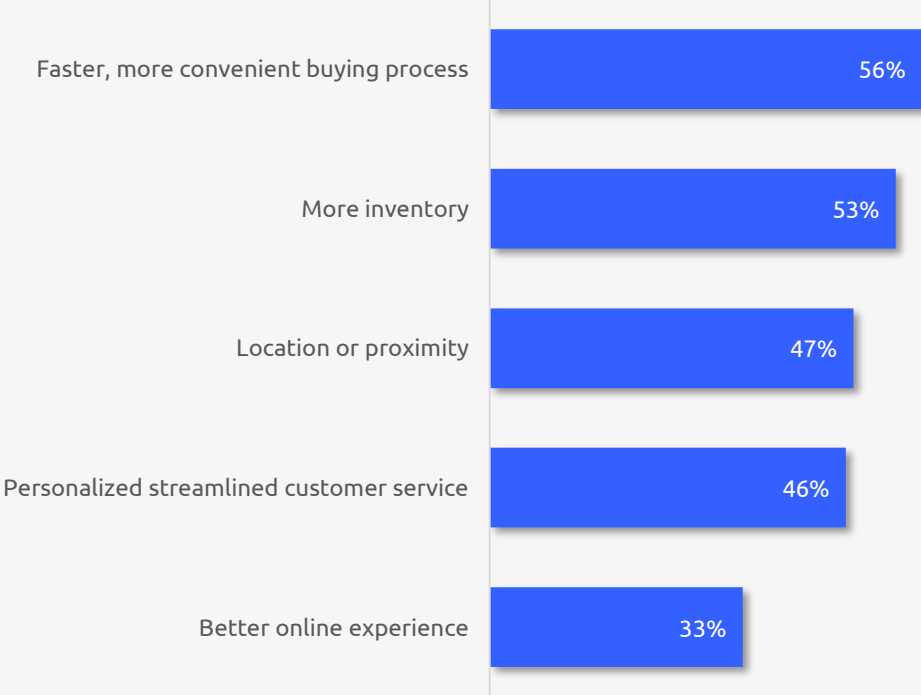

Figure 13: Factors Influencing Car Dealership Choice

*Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%

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Demographics

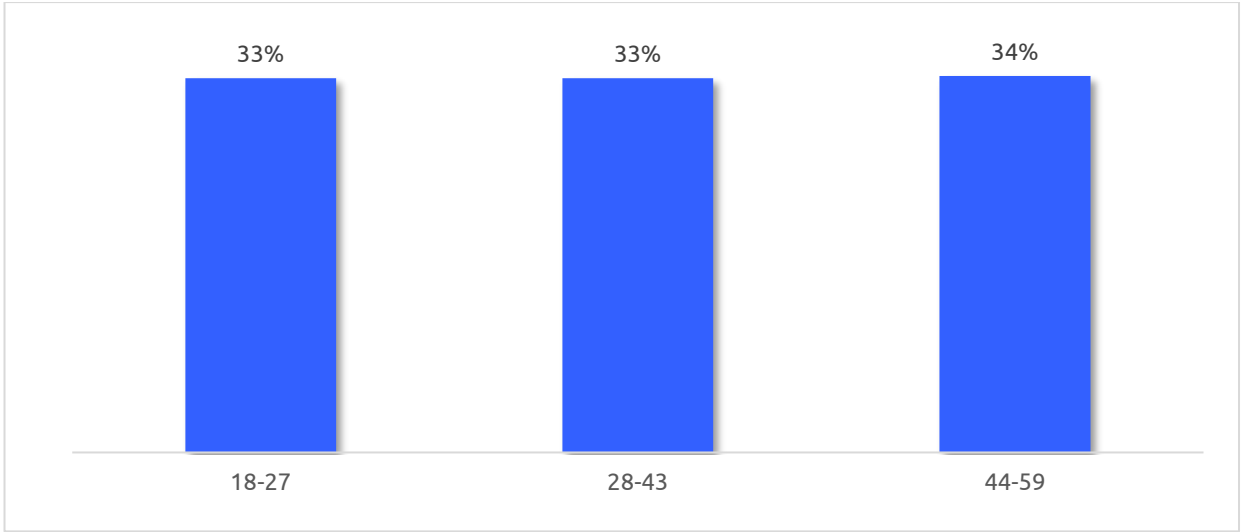# Age, Annual Household Income, Car Purchase Location, Decision Responsibility
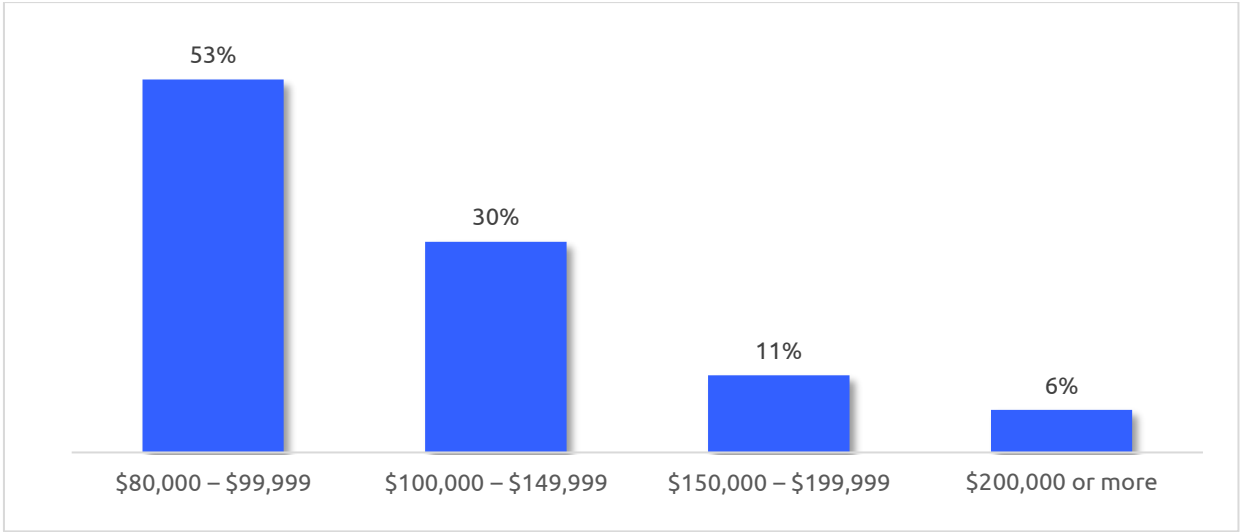

Figure 14: Age

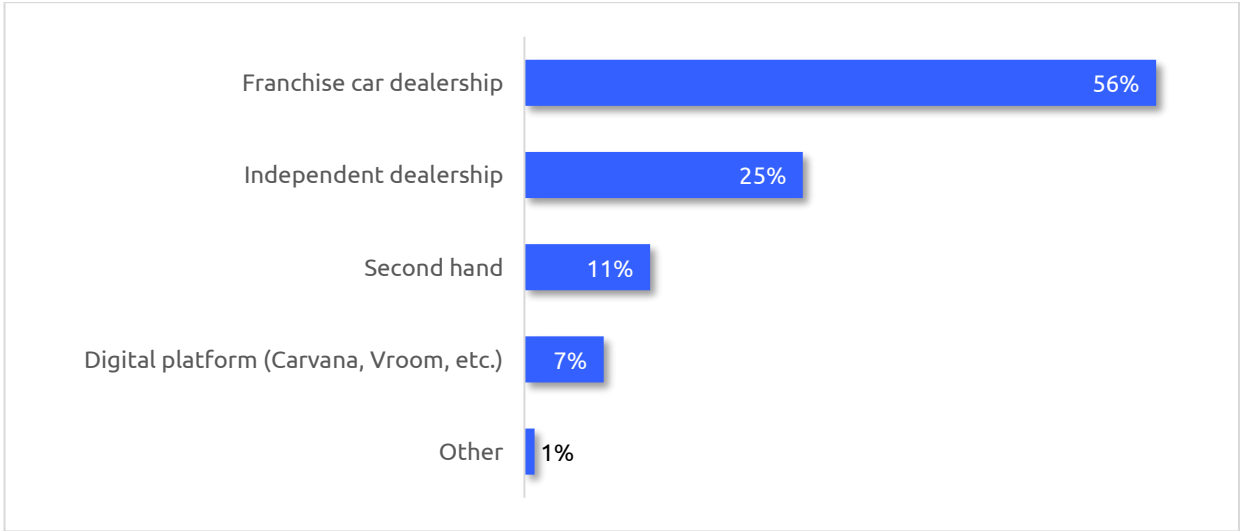
Figure 15: Annual Household Income
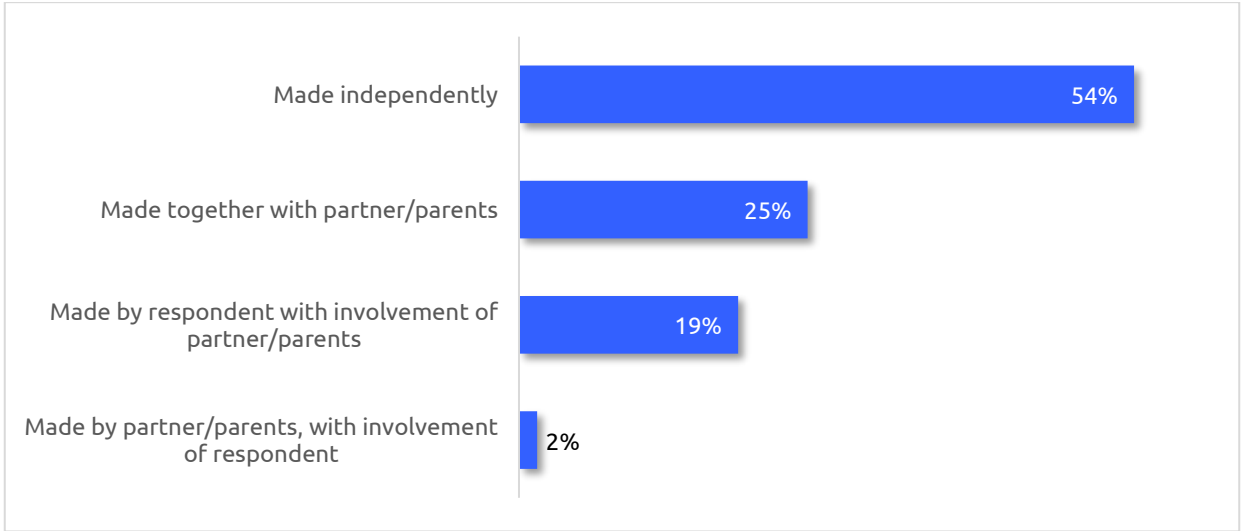

Figure 16: Car Purchase Location

Figure 17: Decision Responsibility for Car Purchase

About Fullpath

Fullpath is the automotive industry's AI-first Customer Data Platform (CDP). Fullpath unifies first-party dealership data and activates it by layering powerful AI and marketing automation on top. Dealerships that invest in the platform create exceptional, hyper-personalized customer experiences that drive loyalty and build resilient, lasting business.

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