

**The Automobile's Contribution to Identity in America:
Nostalgia, Nationalism and Status**

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Introduction

Over one billion cars have been manufactured world-wide in the past century, with nearly 700 million on the road today (Urry, 2006). As important as flight, computers, and mass communication, the automobile has been a key contributor to the growth and globalization of our world (Sheller, 2000). While the automobile is rarely the topic of sociological discussion and cultural study, this article will discuss the iconicism of the automobile and how it contributes to an individual's identity.

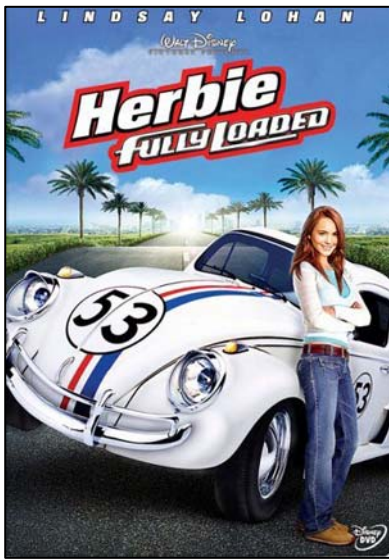
For some this is the Volkswagen Beetle – a car that embodies nostalgia and the by-gone era of the 60's (Wilson, 2005). For others, the identity is the nationalism and pride invoked by owning a car that typifies a true red-blooded American (Edensor, 2004). And for others identity is defined by the status or image a car provides (Belk, 1988). These three aspects of identity will be used to discuss and answer my research question: “How does the automobile contribute to identity in America?”

As the owner of a vintage 1974 Volkswagen Super Beetle, I have always been curious about the bond of nostalgia that is common amongst Volkswagen owners, prior owners and admirers. This infectious enthusiasm for the Volkswagen between owners combined with a general interest in the themes of how icons are born and the perceived societal status bestowed upon their owners have prompted me to write this article.



Nostalgia

The Volkswagen Beetle is an iconic automobile that for many, imparts nostalgia (Wilson, 2005). The camaraderie and coming-of-age that is personified by the Volkswagen is a common, underlying characteristic amongst those who strongly identify with the Volkswagen Beetle (Wilson, 2005). Since its introduction to the United States in the 1940's the Beetle has come a long way from the practical, "people's car" (Jürgens, 1994). During the post World War II years, the Volkswagen beetle fulfilled the niche market of being small and affordable (Vanden Bergh, 1992). Some would say exploiting the Beetle as a marketing icon has catapulted the entire fleet of Volkswagens into popularity after a slump in sales during the 1980's and early 1990's (Kiley, 2002). Playing on American's love affair with the retro-culture, the new beetle's popularity has soared.



Not to be outdone by the popularity and retro-culture of the new beetle, the vintage automobile still holds its place in societal imagination (Wilson, 2005). The draw of the Beetle was deemed lucrative enough in today's marketplace and young movie audiences in summer, 2005, when the new release of Walt Disney Picture's film "Herbie Fully Loaded", grossed over \$60 Million in US box office receipts (IMDB, 2005).

Other businesses have recognized the power of the Volkswagen Beetle as an icon, and only the very intrepid have embraced it into their business model. In 2003 Apple, known for its individuality and cutting-edge, alternative computers, worked hand in hand with

Volkswagen to create a powerful media image and ad campaign to sell both the new Beetle and iPods to a younger, newer crowd. Today's youthful generation not only demands the latest technology, but also enjoys the nostalgia of the past that the Volkswagen incites.

"Apple's audience is a lot like our audience," said Karen Marderosian, Volkswagen Marketing Director. "a group that embraces something different, simple and unconventional. We think this initiative represents a natural alliance of two like-minded brands." (Macworld, 2003).



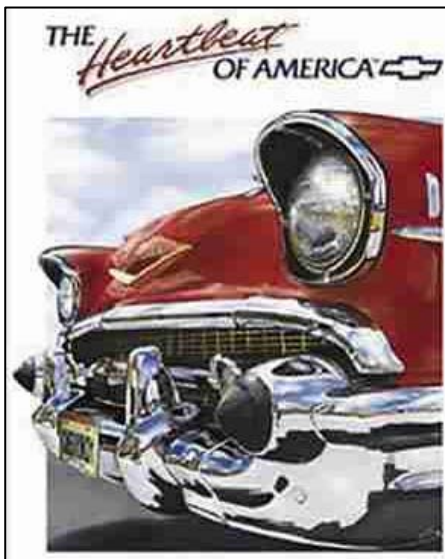
The new Beetle, and indeed the new Volkswagen line, has been successfully paired with the alternative image of Apple Computers through the iPod campaign. The message being in order to be young and hip, you should have a car as cool as your iPod. Volkswagen has not stopped there. In a recent advertising campaign they have played on the alternative cultural identity of their vehicles by featuring rock musicians, cyclists and other active role-models as the type of person who buys their vehicles.

Nationalism

The strength of the Volkswagen Beetle icon started long before the blurring of the lines between domestic and foreign (Kiley, 2002). Despite its origins from a nation which gave the world the unique horror of Nazism, the Beetle was embraced and adopted by the bohemian counter-culture of the 1960's. Perhaps partially because of its beginnings in Nazi Germany, famous alternative lifestyle gurus such as Ken Kesey adopted the Volkswagen as

not only a method of transportation that would draw a crowd, but as a subtle message to the fathers and grandfathers who fought against Germany in World War II (Kiley, 2002). A message that even though they hated the Germans, the new generation was determined to be about love, peace and acceptance (Kiley, 2002).

By adopting the icon of a foreign nation, the sub-culture was forging its own new image that would send a powerful message through the generations, making the Volkswagens of the 1960's a uniquely American identity paired with images of the '60s, peace symbols, and global acceptance. The United States was born on the premise of all people, everywhere, being able to come together to forge something new and powerful. As such, the counter-culturists of the 1960s merely embraced that spirit of cooperation and forged an icon of nationalistic integrity that has proven its durability (Wilson, 2005).



Even today these notions of nationalism and pride are identities tied to automobiles and are exhibited by the cars people drive. The car becomes the extension of an individual and provides a certain commonality of nationalism, pride and community (Edensor, 2004). This is typified by an individual's particular devotion to the American car. The everyday culture of cars, driving and driving habits all lend to one's sense of national belonging, grounding one to an everyday culture, especially if the car you drive is made in America (Edensor, 2004). The epitome of Americana is the Sunday afternoon drive; the relaxation that comes from cruising with no particular place to go (Levinson, 2004).

With a strong movement in the United States to buy American, there is a misconception that American cars wholly contribute to its own economy (Cao, 2002). With the globalization of the world marketplace, many car manufacturers build their vehicles with parts manufactured from all around the globe. Indeed, foreign car manufacturers such as Honda, Toyota, and Daimler-Chrysler even assemble their vehicles on U.S. soil, using U.S. workers, blurring the line between what car is considered “American” versus “Foreign”. Even the once American car company Chrysler is owned by a German company.

Status

Another identity commonly fashioned by the car is status, where cars are used to elevate an individual’s social ranking even when it is outside the realm of practicality or affordability (Sheller, 2004). This weakness is often exploited by aggressive marketing. The daily barrage of advertising on television, in print, and on the Internet, often ignores fiscal responsibility and



focuses on the importance of image, appearance and social acceptance, no matter the cost. This type of advertising uses sexy cars and sexy women as symbols of success, elevated social status and sexual desirability and virility, when in reality the automobile is a distinctive status symbol which overlooks the inequalities of class society (Gartman, 2004).

“Car [ownership] is never simply about rational economic choices, but is as much about aesthetic, emotional and sensory responses to driving, as well as patterns of kinship, sociability, habitation and work.” (Sheller, 2004).

It is often the allure of elevated social status that allows one to surrender to marketing geared towards those susceptible to the status a particular car exhibits (Belk, 1988). Car

manufacturers manipulate desire through the emotional resonance of their advertising campaigns; the *thrill* of driving, the *joy* of the road, the *passion* of the collector, the *nostalgia* for retro designs are simple vocabulary of the advertising imagination (Sheller, 2004).

As previously mentioned, cars are often extensions of self. In “The City and the Car,” Sheller describes aspects of automobile marketing that center around what she calls a “libidinal economy” where there is a sexualization of the car as an extension of the driver’s desirability and fantasy world. The car takes part in the ego-formation of the driver as competent, powerful and able (Sheller, 2004). It is this marketing coupled with individual need to form an elevated social status that makes it so successful. The subliminal messages geared towards base instincts are expertly manipulated. Scantly clad, buxom women are frequently used at car shows and in print media alongside new model debuts, sending a powerful subliminal message of desirability to the market, affecting both men and women alike.

Another aspect of perceived elevated social status with owning a particular vehicle is one of blatant consumption. To be able to purchase and to afford to drive a car with low gas mileage is seen to be akin to affluence (Sheller, 2004). Socially responsible vehicles, such as hybrids, diesels and high-mile-per-gallon economy vehicles have an added burden of competing with the American image of excess, which equates to success. A “successful” person can drive a large Sport Utility Vehicle, despite the fact that it may cost well over \$50 to fill the tank. And with more people commuting farther and longer than ever before, that is a powerful statement indeed.

Conclusion

There is little academic research on the sociological and cultural representation of the automobile. The sources for this article were gems, few and far between, but I believe the topic warrants further research. It is of interest to both academia and pop-culture. In particular the subject of stereotypes, while often the discussion amongst friends or mentioned in passing, is an aspect of the automobile that most everyone can relate to. It warrants research in relation to sociology and culture. For example, the car of a soccer mom, hippie or redneck, the chick car, the midlife crisis or even the pope, can be named without hesitation. Other stereotypes include race and particular deference to a specific brand or type of vehicle.

Studies are on-going in the UK and the United States, evaluating the automobile's contribution to globalization, commerce, identity and stereotypes. Coupled with flight, computer and mass communication the car has become a tool allowing growth in every conceivable capacity. The time it takes to get from one place to another has been drastically shortened, allowing rapid movement of goods and services.

The automobile has a powerful effect on one's identity. We have looked at three examples that portray the automobile as an icon of American identity. They are nostalgia, nationalism, and status.

Nostalgia is exemplified by the Volkswagen beetle and its iconic place in America. This car, like no other, uniquely embodies the 1960's in America. The Volkswagen Beetle has afforded this retro-culture a prominent place in pop-culture and marketing.

Nationalism and pride are also identities represented by the automobile. Homage and devotion to American-made cars propels individuals to maintain an identity of patriotism and

pride. Even the Volkswagen Beetle has its place in defining nationalism in the United States when it took on a somewhat iconic political status amongst the flower children of the 1960's.

Lastly, status and the outward image can be greatly defined by the car one drives. Social status and the desire to appear wealthy and successful are weaknesses preyed upon by slick marketing campaigns. Social status can be falsely elevated by driving a particular car – be it the uneconomic SUV or the high-priced luxury car. Living beyond one's means takes a back seat to keeping up appearances.

The significance of the automobile and its close relation to identity provides an interesting and unique perspective into many aspects of sociology, cultural anthropology and human geography. Emotion, pride and vanity can all play a role in the type of car one chooses to drive. While the world becomes more homogenized, and unique identifiers are few and far between, the car may well be one of the last outward expressions one can make. Whether you drive a Volkswagen Beetle, a gas - guzzling SUV, or a tan minivan, what you drive can have a lot to say about the person behind the wheel.

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