A Primer on Automobile Semiotics

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Abstract

This report provides an introduction to semiotics: the study of symbols and symbol systems. In particular, the report focuses on the symbolic meaning of automobiles, and explores why this meaning is important to consumers. Section 1 defines what a *symbol* is, identifies the types of symbols, and discusses how consumer goods (such as automobiles) can serve as symbols. Section 2 investigates how individuals use the meaning in their automobiles to form and maintain their self-identities. Several theoretical approaches (including conspicuous consumption, self-congruity theory, and symbolic interactionism) are examined and contrasted with a more comprehensive approach, called *products as self-creation*, which is based on the theories of Anthony Giddens, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, and Grant McCracken. Section 3 explores how automobiles acquire their meaning, and how this meaning is transferred to the consumer. Finally, Section 4 examines how consumers evaluate the benefits from symbolic meaning relative to other types benefits vehicles provide, such as mobility. This report concludes that symbols matter in vehicle purchases, and that the adoption of new types of vehicles (including hybrid-electric and fuel-cell vehicles) depends partly on the symbolic value these vehicles deliver to buyers.

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Introduction

During an interview in 2004 with a household that had purchased a hybrid-electric vehicle (HEV), the male head-of-household insisted that he would never be caught driving a pickup truck. The participant was a middle-aged music teacher, the father of two young children, and a proud owner of a new, highly-efficient Honda Civic Hybrid. He dismissed pickup trucks not because of their price, performance, or styling, but because of what these vehicles meant to him. Sport-utility vehicles (SUVs) and pickup trucks, he explained, were unacceptable vehicle choices because they made the wrong type of statement. For him, the act of owning and driving a light truck communicated something to others, and the message was wholly negative. A pickup truck would tell the world that he didn't care about conserving precious energy resources or the natural environment, that he supported the conflict in Iraq and the administration that initiated it, and that he placed the gratification of his own ego above the welfare of society. In short, a pickup truck symbolized a set of views that were in direct opposition with his own, and with the meanings he believed were conveyed by his HEV.

This example illustrates how our vehicles can serve as symbols. Symbolic meaning is perhaps most obvious in automobiles that are recognized as status goods, such as a Rolls-Royce, which defines its owner as wealthy and sophisticated. But just as a luxury car reveals something about its owner, can't other vehicles do the same? Does a low-rider El Camino make any less of a statement about its owner than a Rolls-Royce does? Different vehicles may send radically different messages, and these messages may be about far more than just socio-economic status. In fact, an automobile can symbolize nearly any aspect of its owner's identity, and can reflect who the owner is as well as who he aspires to be.

While symbolic meaning isn't the only reason people buy cars and trucks, it does impact consumers' buying decisions. In 2004, the American car-buyer had over 300 different make/model combinations to choose from, an extensive selection that ballooned to well over 1000 combinations if trim levels were considered (Automotive News, 2005). With so many different vehicles available in the U.S. market, functional differentiation becomes almost impossible; for almost every vehicle, there are other vehicles that offer similar size, body style, performance, and price. Thus, automakers attempt to distinguish their vehicles through less-tangible qualities, including brand. In other words, manufacturers attach symbols to their vehicles, positioning their offerings as "lifestyle choices" rather than mere means of transport.

Consumers' enthusiastic response to the symbolic meaning of sport-utility vehicles and pickup trucks during the past two decades is at least partly responsible for the widespread adoption of these vehicles (Garnar, 2000; Bradsher, 2002). Light trucks now account for half of all new vehicle sales in the United States, a major alteration in buying patterns that has had significant consequences for the country's petroleum consumption as well as its emissions of criteria pollutants and greenhouse gases. Symbolic meaning may also be fueling the popularity of new types of automobiles, including hybrid-electric vehicles. Past research shows that HEV owners see their vehicles as "socially responsible," as projecting a "green image," and as symbolizing "environmental stewardship" (OEC, 2003. p. 7); in another study, owners characterize the HEV as "the right vehicle for society" (Kurani and Turrentine, 2004. p. 30). These findings suggest

that many HEV purchases are motivated by the symbolic meaning of HEVs and the desire to use this meaning in communication with others.

This report focuses on semiotics (the study of symbols and symbol systems) as it relates to motor vehicles. It explores how automobiles serve as symbols, and the effects symbolic meaning has on consumer behavior. Symbolic meaning in automobiles has been observed by numerous researchers, but has been deeply explored only by a few. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) note, "In our own culture the enormous symbolic significance of vehicles is so obvious that it is too easily taken for granted" (p. 27). In Section 1 of this report, we define what a *symbol* is, identify the types of symbols, and discuss how consumer goods (such as automobiles) can serve as symbols. In Section 2, we investigate how individuals use the meaning in their automobiles to form and maintain their self-identities. Several theoretical approaches (including conspicuous consumption, self-congruity theory, and symbolic interactionism) are examined and contrasted with a more comprehensive approach, called *products as self-creation*, which is based on the theories of Anthony Giddens, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, and Grant McCracken. Section 3 explores how automobiles acquire their meaning, and how this meaning is transferred to the consumer. Finally, in Section 4 we examine how consumers evaluate the benefits from symbolic meaning relative to other types benefits vehicles provide, such as mobility.

1. Defining Symbols

What exactly are symbols? Simply defined, a *symbol* is something that stands for or represents something else, and *symbolism* is the use of symbols. We are surrounded by symbols, and they serve as essential tools in examining the world and communicating with others. The spoken language we use is really just a set of symbols (also known as words) that are used to convey the meaning of things we see or feel. Thus, among American English-speakers, the word "car" means automobile, although to speakers of other languages the word "car" may have no meaning or an entirely different significance. That language is a shared system of symbols quickly becomes evident when we travel overseas, or when corporations attempt to market their products across cultures. In a recent case of symbolic misinterpretation, General Motors was forced to rename one of its models (the Buick LaCrosse) in the Canadian market after it was discovered that the word "LaCrosse" carried strong sexual meaning to French Canadians (Automotive News Europe, 2003). This episode demonstrates an important aspect of symbols: they are so integral to our lives, that we often forget they exist. It is only when their meaning is contested that we become fully aware of them.

Although words are symbols, language is not the only symbol system. Objects (such as automobiles) can be highly symbolic, as can behaviors (such as religious rituals); in fact, virtually anything can serve as a symbol. Like language, objects and behaviors may be interpreted differently by different groups, particularly by members of different cultures. Technically, symbols are part of a larger concept known as a *sign*, which is composed of two parts (Palmer, 1997). The first part is the symbol, or *signifier*, a word, object, or other entity that stands for something else. The second part is the *signified*: the "something else" that supplies the meaning. For example, a pickup truck can be viewed as a symbol of traditional, working-class values. The truck is the signifier, and working-class values is the signified concept; together,

they form a sign that connects a tangible object and an intangible idea. In this paper, the words *symbol* and *signifier* will be used to refer to signifiers, and *meaning* or *signified concept* will be used to refer to the signified ideas.

Symbols are powerful because they are at the root of how we interpret the world around us. Symbols form the basis for communicating *culture* which, loosely defined, is "a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behavior" (Hebdige, 1979. p. 6). Embedded within culture is a certain way of viewing the world, and symbols are essential to this process.

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1979) defines a symbol as a "vehicle for cultural meaning" and identifies two types of key symbols: summarizing symbols and elaborating symbols (p. 94). A *summarizing symbol* distills a wider, more complicated set of concepts into a unified, generalized whole. For example, a hybrid vehicle may stand for environmental preservation; it is a simple statement about a very complex set of technical issues relating to criteria pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions. In contrast, an *elaborating symbol* addresses specific rather than generalized concepts. An elaborating symbol serves as "a source of categories for conceptualizing the order of the world" or provides value by "implying mechanisms for successful social action" (Ortner, 1979. p. 94). In other words, an elaborating symbol provides more detailed information on how to interpret one's environment and how to behave. For example, automobiles can be used as a means to divide a diverse population. Some consumers identify themselves based on the type of vehicle they drive, and view themselves as different from those that drive another type of vehicle. To declare oneself as "not a minivan person" or someone else as "a pickup truck guy" is to use the automobile as an elaborating symbol, as a tool to categorize elements (in this case, people) in one's environment. Ortner notes that this is an essential function of culture: to help us order and make sense of the world, and determine how to behave within it (Ortner, 1979. p. 95). Symbols are important tools in this ordering process.

Not only does our culture give us a symbolic structure that defines the world; our own cognitive processes also rely on symbols. According to structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure, the ability to link concepts through signs is essential to human thought. An individual's culture provides the underlying structure for seeing the world; culture establishes a set of rules, a symbolic framework that defines some ideas as connected and others as separate. The mind internalizes this structure, functioning as a "system of operations that generate structures of similarity and differentiation" (Palmer, 1997. p. 24). Thought, therefore, is much like looking up symbolic meanings in a sort of "cultural dictionary" within the mind.

Within the field of anthropology, there has been significant criticism of the rigidity and inalterability of Saussure's symbolic framework.[1] One contrasting view is presented by sociologist Gerald Zaltman, who agrees that people use culturally-imparted symbolic frameworks to process information, but sees symbolic frameworks as a starting point for thought rather than a system that rigidly directs cognition. Zaltman, who describes signs as *metaphors*, proposes that people possess "metaphorical schemes reflecting basic dimensions of culture such as time, information flows, primary modes of activity, assumptions about relationships between people, and so on" (Zaltman, 1995. p. 292). Like Saussure, Zaltman proposes that symbolism

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[1] For a critique of structuralist approaches, see Desmond, 2003.

lies at the root of thought, that "thought is ultimately and irreducibly metaphorical" (Zaltman, 1995. p. 292). However, Zaltman sees thought as more than simply accessing existing meanings in a symbolic framework; the individual can also modify symbolic frameworks and create new meanings. The process of imagining new ideas takes place through metaphors. By linking concepts together in unique ways, we develop new ideas and ways of seeing the world (Zaltman, 1995). Thus, signs can be given to us by culture, or developed by the individual. In both cases, they serve as essential tools in the interpretation of one's environment.

In a consumer society, products are important carriers of meaning. The rules and classification schemes embedded in culture are abstract concepts, as are the thoughts and ideas that originate in our own minds. Anthropologist Grant McCracken (1988) has observed that goods make these intangible concepts more visible, and therefore more real. According to McCracken, "material culture makes culture material" (p. 132). Thus, physical objects "bring to life" the beliefs, values, and behaviors that are practiced within a culture. It is tempting to assume that only certain types of objects are culturally important, and therefore that only specific categories of goods can serve as symbols. While the symbolic properties of some objects, such as religious icons or national flags, are more apparent and deliberate, this does not mean that they are the only goods that are signifiers. Common, mass-produced consumer goods like automobiles can also carry cultural meaning. In fact, as Western culture abandons many of its ethnic and religious traditions, consumer goods assume an increasingly important role in defining ourselves and our culture. As cultural historian Judith Williamson (1986) notes, "Every society has some kind of map, a grid of the terms available to think in at any given time. In ours, consumer goods are some of the chief landmarks which define the natural categories we are accustomed to." (p. 227).

When consumer goods serve as symbols, function and meaning coexist and often blend together. In Saussure's view, the relationship between signifier and signified concept is completely arbitrary and is independent of the signifier's physical characteristics. Using Saussure's logic, a pickup truck need not signify working-class values: it could signify whatever meaning a culture chooses to assign to it. While this may be theoretically possible, products such as automobiles generally display some relationship between their physical properties and their meanings. McCracken describes a product that displays this relationship as an *icon:* a "sign that reproduces some of the qualities of the thing it signifies" (McCracken, 1988. p. 37). For example, an SUV may be seen as masculine because of its powerful engine or rugged off-road capabilities. The meaning of the vehicle, masculinity, is directly related to physical attributes, power and ruggedness. Vehicle designers are aware of this connection, and create vehicle designs that project meanings which are appropriate to their particular car and truck models.

This blending of function and meaning can complicate our understanding of consumer behavior. Is a buyer of a truck-based SUV attracted to the vehicle's off-road capability because of the utilitarian benefits it provides or because the off-road features are signifiers for other concepts? As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) observe, "it is extremely difficult to disentangle the use-related function from the symbolic meanings in even the most practical objects" (p. 21). In the case of truck-based SUVs, clearly something other than utilitarian needs is at work since fewer than 15% of owners ever drive their vehicles off the road (Bradsher, 2002). Like the Kabyle house in which anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu observed a "loci where

symbolic or social necessity is articulated with technical necessity" (Bourdieu, 1979. p. 135), an automobile simultaneously provides practical benefits and serves as a symbol of larger ideas.

Marketers are aware of this dual function of consumer goods. Much of modern marketing is about the creation and management of signs, although few practitioners use this language. Instead, marketers generally refer to the *image* and *identity* of a product or a brand. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) define *image* as the "current associations" that are linked to a product or brand name (p. 40); this contrasts with *identity*, which is also a set of associations, but associations that are aspired to rather than actually embodied in a brand or good. Both image and identity cast the product as a symbol with a set of associated meanings. In the case of image, these meanings are assigned by consumers; in the case of identity, they are the meanings that the marketer actively attempts to assign through advertising and brand development. Marketing's focus is generally on understanding how the meaning of a particular product is interpreted by consumers, and how that meaning can be adjusted to align with the desired identity. In general, market researchers give relatively little consideration to the question of why consumers seek meaning at all in the goods they buy. In other words, why do consumers value the signified concepts that are embedded within products such as automobiles?

2. Consuming Symbols

Products embody signified concepts that can be used to interpret, express, and define ourselves. Thus, product meaning is tied to individual identity. This section considers two categories of approaches to the connection between people's identities and products' meanings. The first category, termed *products as self-expression*, involves the use of product meanings to enact or portray one's own identity. In general, approaches in this category assume people exist within fairly defined systems of meaning. Individuals use signified concepts associated with products to portray themselves in different ways, but have little or no influence to alter the overall system of meanings. Self-concepts must fit pre-defined roles or stereotypes, and products can only possess socially-defined meanings. In the second category of approaches, called *products as self-creation*, individuals have much greater freedom to manipulate their own identities and the meanings of products. Rather than simply expressing who they are, people have the capability to invent and re-invent themselves. Self-definition becomes an ongoing, creative project in which the individual constructs a unique self that is capable of viewing product meaning in novel ways. The two categories (and the four approaches that compose them) are shown in Figure 2:

	Approach	Meaning of Individual (Identity)		Meaning of Goods	
		Scope	**Actor**	**Scope**	**Actor**
Product as Self-Expression	**CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION**	**LIMITED** Identity defined by position in class hierarchy	**INDIVIDUAL** Individual acts on product	**LIMITED** Goods only symbolize status; meaning accessed through ownership	**SOCIAL** Social system defines product meaning
	SELF-CONGRUITY	**MEDIUM** Identity defined by stereotypes	**INDIVIDUAL** Individual acts on product	**MEDIUM** Goods have wider meanings; meaning accessed by matching with self-concept	**SOCIAL** Social system defines product meaning
	SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM	**MEDIUM** Identity defined by roles	**INDIVIDUAL & PRODUCT** Individual acts on product, product acts on individual	**MEDIUM** Goods have wider meanings; meaning accessed by matching with desired role	**SOCIAL** Social system defines product meaning
Product as Self-Creation	**LIFESTYLES AND CULTIVATION**	**EXTENSIVE** Identity defined by unique efforts of individual	**INDIVIDUAL & PRODUCT** Individual acts on product, product acts on individual	**EXTENSIVE** Goods have unlimited, individualized meanings; meaning accessed after interpretation of product	**SOCIAL & INDIVIDUAL** Social system or individual defines product meaning

Figure 2

Products as Self-Expression

This section examines three approaches to self-expression through products. Each has its origins in a distinct field: conspicuous consumption from economics, self-congruity theory from social psychology, and symbolic interactionism from sociology. All three approaches assume that predefined systems of meaning exist, and that individuals define products and themselves within the boundaries of these systems. However, there are important differences in the approaches, mainly in the scope of meanings that can be assigned to individuals and products. This section begins by considering the narrow meanings of conspicuous consumption, then progresses to broader meanings encompassed by the theories of self-congruity theory and symbolic interactionism.

Conspicuous Consumption: Expressing Class

Early analysis of product meaning by economist Thorstein Veblen assumes a strict social hierarchy stratified by wealth, in which affluent members enjoy greater status than less-affluent members. *Status* can be defined as "the position or rank in a society or group awarded to an individual by others" (Eastman, et. al., 1999). Veblen's analysis centers around status, and on the ability of products to impart enhanced status on their owners. In Veblen's view, a person's status forms the basis for his worth, both in his own eyes and in the opinions of others. Goods serve as proof of social status, which generates respect and admiration from other people; "property…therefore becomes the conventional basis of esteem" (Veblen, 1899. p. 28-29). The meaning Veblen sees in goods is fairly simple: they can signify wealth. The greater the wealth that is symbolized, the higher the status category of the owner, and the higher his value as a

person. Thus, wealthy consumers purchase goods simply because the goods demonstrate affluence and lead to greater status and self-worth, a phenomenon Veblen labels "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen, 1899. p. 75). Conspicuous consumption by wealthy consumers spawns a competition among consumers at all income levels as they attempt to elevate themselves within the status hierarchy. The result is a system in which ownership of products is used to conduct "a valuation of persons" (Veblen, 1899. p. 34).

As Bagwell and Bernheim (1996) note, Veblen's seminal work has led to a wide body of research on the consumption of "prestige" or "status" goods. Certainly there is validity in Veblen's theories; even a century after they were first published, they seem to apply well to consumer behavior. Indeed goods like automobiles are perceived by many as status goods. For example, a 1987 Roper Research report revealed that nearly half of Americans viewed an expensive automobile as a status symbol (Waldrop, 1989). Status consumption in the automobile market has been observed in past research (Eastman, et. al., 1999), and may account for the rapid growth in luxury vehicle offerings in the U.S. market during the past decade.[2] In addition, studies have demonstrated that people's perception of status symbolized in a particular automobile can affect their behavior toward its owner; the higher the perceived status of the vehicle, the more favorable people's response to the driver (Doob and Gross, 1968; Solomon and Herman, 1977).

Yet viewing all consumer behavior as status-driven and all meanings of goods as status-related is far too narrow a perspective. The analysis of conspicuous consumption conducted by Veblen and others is valuable because it alerts us to the meaning in products and the impact this meaning can have on purchase behavior. Yet Veblen's approach is limiting because it renders products as capable of carrying just one type of signified concept. For many of us, "status" may be the first idea that comes to mind when considering consumer goods as symbols, but this is not the only meaning present in consumer goods. In fact, certain automobiles have been successful precisely because they represent an obvious *rejection* of status and affluence (Meenaghan, 1995). This observation, therefore, runs directly counter to Veblen's view of acquisition as the pursuit of social status. In short, while Veblen's theories have merit, they do not tell the whole story. Consumers desire more than just status, and therefore status is not the only signified concept that appears in consumer goods such as automobiles.

Veblen's approach is also limiting because it assumes people have a fairly superficial understanding of product meanings. Even authors who agree with Veblen on the importance of social status disagree with him on the richness of signified concepts embedded in goods. Bourdieu dismisses conspicuous consumption as "naïve exhibitionism, which seeks distinction in the crude display of ill-mastered luxury" (Bourdieu, 1984. p. 31). According to Bourdieu, status cannot be attained simply by purchasing and exhibiting expensive possessions. The symbolic system that defines class hierarchy is far more complicated and subtle, and understanding it requires a "cultivated habitus" (Bourdieu, 1984. p. 66) that cannot be easily attained. Individuals who wish to climb within the class hierarchy can develop "a (more or less adequate) symbolic mastery of the practical principles of taste" but will never truly acquire high-class taste, which Bourdieu describes as a "natural gift" (Bourdieu, 1984. pp. 67-68). Like Veblen, Bourdieu sees

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[2] Ward's data shows 108 luxury vehicle offerings planned for the American market in 2008, double the number of models available in 1993 (Zoia, 2003).

the meanings of goods as providing demarcation between class boundaries. But Bourdieu identifies a far deeper significance in goods: meaning which cannot be accessed simply through purchase, but which must be comprehended and, by a select few, truly appreciated.

Self-Congruity: Expressing Stereotypes

A second approach is self congruity theory,[3] which examines self-expression through objects using a wider set of meanings than just status. Rooted in psychology, self-congruity theory focuses on the individual's *self-image* (or *self-concept*), which is defined as "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Sirgy, 1982. p. 287). Self-congruity begins with evaluation of oneself, and the development of a self-concept as a result of this introspection. Like Veblen, supporters of self-image congruity theory argue that the desire for increased self-esteem is an important source of behavioral motivation; however, they also recognize the importance of a second motive, namely the tendency for an individual to behave in ways that are consistent with his self-concept (Sirgy, 1982). This goal of consistency is complicated by the fact that the self-concept contains not just one idea of who the individual is, but multiple "possible selves" (Myers, 2005). Most authors agree that at a minimum, the self-concept includes an actual self-concept (an image of who one currently is) as well as an ideal self-concept (an image of the way one would like to be). Sirgy notes that many researchers include other selves within the self concept, including the social self-concept (an image that one believes others have of him) and the ideal social self-concept (an image that one would like others to have of him) (Sirgy, 1982). Regardless on the number of selves that are included within the self-concept, self-congruity theory implies that individuals make assessments of who they are and who they would like to be. Behavior is motivated by the desire to enhance one's self-concept by acting in ways that are consistent with one or more of the various selves.

In self-congruity theory, an individual's self-image interacts with product image (or product meaning) and drives purchase behavior. A consumer assesses the meaning of a product and compares that meaning to the person he believes he is or would like to be. The closer the match between product meaning and self-concept, the more likely that a purchase is made. While self-congruity theory permits products to have a range of meanings, the main "associations" in a product's image involve "stereotypes of the generalized or typical user" (Sirgy, 1982. p. 287). By purchasing a product, individuals infuse themselves with the qualities possessed by a stereotyped user of that product. So if the generalized user of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle is a rough and wild Hells Angel, then a balding, middle-aged accountant can assume these same qualities by purchasing a Harley for himself (assuming, of course, that this purchase is congruent with at least one aspect of the accountant's self-image).

This transfer of meaning occurs due to *consumption stereotyping*, a process in which people judge another individual based on the symbolic meaning of a product that the individual owns or uses. Consumption stereotyping is complementary to self-congruence; self-congruence determines product selection in anticipation of consumption stereotyping later assigning that product's meaning to its owner. However, theorists disagree about this transfer process and whether it occurs based on an individual's own perceptions or is rooted exclusively in the perceptions of others. In other words, if an individual purchases a Harley-Davidson and applies

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[3] Also called *self-image congruity theory* or *image congruence hypothesis* by some authors.

the Hells Angel stereotype to himself, does it matter what others think? Sirgy notes that this distinction may be irrelevant since "consumers may not be able to distinguish between their 'own' feelings about a product and their beliefs about how they are viewed by others" (Sirgy, 1982. p. 288). Thus, if an individual applies a stereotype to himself, he assumes that others are doing the same.

Numerous studies have applied self-congruity theory to automobiles. Past research demonstrates that individuals recognize a 'fit' (or lack thereof) between themselves and their vehicles, and between other people and their vehicles (Grubb and Stern, 1971), indicating some conscious awareness of self-congruity among consumers. Studies of automobiles also show that consumers' actual and ideal self-images influence their attitude toward particular vehicle models (Sirgy, 1985), affect purchase intent (Sirgy, 1985; Ericksen, 1996), and correlate with ownership of particular cars (Grubb and Stern, 1971; Heath and Scott, 1998). Studies of automobiles also provide evidence of consumption stereotyping. Research indicates individuals stereotype themselves based on the vehicle they own, and view themselves as similar to those who own the same vehicle (Grubb and Hupp, 1968). In addition, individuals stereotype others based on their automobiles (Grubb and Hupp, 1968). This stereotyping is evident in both adults and children, and often goes beyond simple generalizations. For example, research of consumption stereotyping by Belk, Bahn, and Mayer (1982) shows that individuals are willing to make fairly significant deductions about a person based on the automobile he owns, drawing conclusions about the subject in areas such as intelligence, life satisfaction, and behavioral inclinations. Based on these studies, it appears that self-congruity theory applies well to the automobile market.

Like Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, self-congruity theory provides a useful model of consumer behavior, but it has some limitations. As social psychologist Helga Dittmar (1992) notes, self-congruity represents a departure from earlier studies which viewed product choice as simply a result of the consumer's personality traits. One study of automobile consumers conducted in the 1950s, for example, examined whether "typical" owners of Fords and Chevrolets had different personalities (Evans, 1959). Instead of seeing purchase behavior as passive choices driven by consumers' inherent personality characteristics, self-congruity theorists viewed product selection as a process in which the consumer deliberately selects products that match his self-concept. While earlier studies focused on who the consumer *is*, self-congruity research emphasized who the customer *thinks he is*. This implies much more active involvement by the consumer, who formulates impressions of his current self and acts on this self-perception rather than simply being blindly driven by pre-determined personality traits. More importantly, the consumer has freedom to change his image through the creation of other possible selves. Thus, self-congruity theory grants the individual greater freedom in using products as a means of self-expression.

However, self-congruity theory has its drawbacks. First, self-congruity theory offers few guidelines as to which self is most relevant in a given situation, and acknowledges that inconsistencies may arise. As Sirgy points out, a consumer's preferences may change depending on which self is at the fore: "Consumption of a brand may be highly congruent with self-image in one situation and not at all congruent with it in another" (Sirgy, 1982. p.289). The middle-aged father of two who is shopping for a new car knows he should buy the minivan, but can't

resist looking at a sports car; the first vehicle matches his actual self, the second his ideal self. Yet if consumers are constantly switching between selves and there is no way to tell which is active in a given situation, self-congruity theory loses much of its value as a predictor of consumer behavior. While some studies have attempted to isolate which self is operating in a given scenario[4], it is not clear that the same self is always active under the same conditions.

A second issue in self-congruity theory is that it assumes individuals work within a framework of predefined product meanings. Dittmar criticizes self-congruity theory for its focus on the individual and individually-defined product meaning "neglects the socially-defined meanings of consumer goods" (Dittmar, 1992. p. 61). Yet self-congruity theory assumes that a user stereotype exists for a given product, and that this stereotype is generally understood by many (if not all) consumers. User stereotypes, therefore, are socially-shared, and may even be socially-defined. This leads us to make a criticism that is opposite of Dittmar's, namely that self-congruity theory gives individuals relatively little freedom to interpret product meaning, which must remain rooted in user stereotypes. Consumers simply work with existing product images, selecting those that fit with their self-concepts and discarding those that do not. Redefinition of the stereotypes associated with a particular product does not appear to be possible, at least not for the individual. These fixed stereotypes are limiting; individuals can express themselves through goods, but only in ways that are permitted by existing definitions.

Symbolic Interactionism: Expressing Roles

A third approach, symbolic interactionism, expands the relationship between consumers and products they use. First defined by sociologist Herbert Blumer (1937), the symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes social interaction as the central activity in the development of self-identity. Like self-congruity theory, symbolic interactionism views the individual as composed of numerous selves. Each self corresponds to a *role*, which is defined as a "set of related meanings that directs the individual's behavior in a social setting" (Solomon, 1983. p. 321). An individual has numerous roles, and behavior consists selecting an appropriate role for a given situation and acting according to the role's guidelines. Over the course of a single day, one individual may play the roles of mother, executive, coach, and wife; in each role, she exposes a different self. The various selves together compose the individual's self concept, which is formed through interaction with others. This interaction involves "taking the perspective of the other" and analyzing oneself from another's point of view (Dittmar, 1992. p. 77). Thus, symbolic interactionism emphasizes the social nature of self-concept; an individual forms his self-concept by imagining how others see him. The idea of a "looking glass self," of seeing oneself through another's eyes, it is a key component in the symbolic interactionist perspective. In Blumer's words, "the individual derives his conception of himself largely from the way in which he is conceived by others" (Blumer, 1937). In fact, this version of the self has been adopted by some self-congruity theorists, who have melded it together with the self-congruity approach.[5]

The most distinctive characteristic of symbolic interactionism is how products are used by the consumer. Like in self-congruity theory, products can be used to express one's self-concept. In his analysis of symbolic interactionist theory, social psychologist Michael Solomon (1983)

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[4] For example, see Sirgy, 1985.
[5] For example, see Sirgy, 1985, and Jamal and Goode, 2001.

observes that one function of products is as tools which are used to reinforce the individual's performance of a particular role. In this case of *product as response*, purchase or use of a product is the result of a consumer's desire to perform a role effectively. For example, a consumer who wishes to enact the role of "environmentalist" purchases an HEV because he sees this type of vehicle as enhancing the environmentalist role. But symbolic interactionism views products not just as results of behavior, but also as causes. In a major departure from self-congruity theory, symbolic interactionism allows a product to serve as a catalyst which alters the individual's self-concept and changes his behavior. In this *product as stimuli* case, a consumer purchases an HEV without explicit knowledge or intentions regarding the environmentalist role, and the product causes him to perform the role. Anyone who has tried on a piece of clothing and unexpectedly felt different as a result can relate to this phenomenon. Products can influence our self-concepts, even if we don't intend for them to do so. Thus symbolic interactionism establishes our relationship with goods as bi-directional: product purchase can result from an individual's role intentions, or can be the cause of those role intentions.

According to Solomon, whether a product serves as response or as stimuli is determined by an individual's level of role knowledge. *Role knowledge* reflects a person's understanding and mastery of the behaviors associated with the successful performance of a particular role (Solomon, 1983). For example, a recent college graduate is likely to have little knowledge about the "business executive" role, while a seasoned corporate manager understands this role well and can play it effortlessly. Solomon suggests that when individuals face situations which require unfamiliar roles, they look to product meaning for assistance in fulfilling the new role (Solomon, 1983). Products serve as stimuli; they shape the individual's portrayal of himself, compensating for his lack of role knowledge. The recent graduate may purchase a luxury sedan, and the signified concepts in this vehicle facilitate his understanding and enactment of his new role. Once his role knowledge has increased, he may continue to purchase symbolic goods, but these goods will be *responses* to his self-concept rather than *stimuli* that alter it. According to Solomon, this occurs because when the required role is understood, an individual uses products to validate his role performance rather than to define it (Solomon, 1983). Thus, a consumer's use of product meaning changes depending on his level of role knowledge. At low levels of role knowledge, products are stimuli that help define roles; at high levels of role knowledge, products act as responses that reinforce roles.

Other researchers have examined these two uses of product meaning further, seeking to identify segments of consumers that consistently emphasize one use of product meaning over another. For example, Leigh and Gabel (1992) propose that products serve as stimuli for consumers in role transitions (such as starting a new job or entering a new school) or consumers "who place high levels of importance on social group membership and advancement" (p. 7). In both cases, role knowledge tends to be limited, and new roles must be learned and enacted. Leigh and Gabel's discussion of social group membership is reminiscent of Veblen's theories, particularly since "social group" can easily be interpreted as a euphemism for "social class." Yet Leigh and Gabel repeatedly stress the importance of *reference groups*, which can be defined generally as any groups an individual identifies with (Myers, 2005). Social group membership, therefore, refers to entry into *all* types of groups, not just those delineated by class. The important element, according to symbolic interactionism, is the role: social groups expect a new member to enact a

certain role in order to gain entry, and expect current members to continue role performances to maintain membership.

Symbolic interactionist theory makes a bold assertion about the relationship between consumers and the products they buy. Product acquisition is not merely the result of consumer self-concept; purchasing a good (and the meaning within it) also can shape the individual's self-concept and behavior. Although it expands the relationship between product and consumer, symbolic interactionist theory has limitations in other areas. In particular, it does not extend the boundaries of the individual's self-concept. In symbolic interactionism, the self exists only within predefined roles, and life consists merely of role-playing. Identity-development, therefore, is not a creative process as much as a selection of the self from established options. So while products can have significant symbolic meaning that stimulates behavior, individual identity remains fairly shallow.

Products as Self-Creation

The previous three self-expression approaches outline a relationship between product meaning and self-concept in which the self must be defined within existing categories. Products are used by an individual to act out a pre-scripted part according to class categories, social stereotypes, or social roles. This leaves relatively little room for creative self-definition, since the idea of developing a new stereotype or social role is not discussed. A fourth approach, *products as self-creation*, views goods and their signified concepts as essential elements in the crafting and maintenance of a unique individual identity. Individuals in modern societies have unprecedented freedom to define who they are, and possessions like automobiles are frequently used as tools in the process of identity-formation. In the words of automotive market analyst G. Clotaire Rapaille, Americans are in "a permanent search of an identity" (Rapaille, 2004. p. 144) and "cars are very key…maybe the best way for Americans to express themselves" (CBS, 2003. p. 2). The following section interprets the works of Anthony Giddens, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, and Grant McCracken and examines the role of products not just in self-expression, but in self-creation.

The Project of the Self

If our self-concepts are more than just stereotypes and roles, what are they? Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) provides one important viewpoint, describing self-identity as "the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography" (p. 53). Giddens frames the self as a continuous project and emphasizes the *reflexive* nature of self-development; *reflexivity* refers an ongoing reexamination and redefinition of who one is. At the core of an individual's identity is his biography, an "ongoing 'story' of the self" (Giddens, 1991. p. 54). According to Giddens, individuals develop biographies that connect their past experiences and actions with their present circumstances, as well as outlining paths for their futures. This is not a biography in the traditional sense; that is, it does not simply provide a factual account of past events. Instead, it is an interpretation of the past in light of the present and an anticipated future. It is an individual's attempt to connect who he was with who he is currently and who he believes he will be. According to Giddens, identity-creation is an active development process rather than just passive adherence to assigned cultural roles. "Self-identity, in other words, is not something that is just given…but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens, 1991. p. 52).

The identity described by Giddens is a much deeper and more original creation than the self outlined by the theories discussed earlier in this report. The creation and maintenance of Giddens' expanded self requires a more substantial investment by the individual. A person's ongoing development of his self-identity leads him to engage in particular *regimes*, which are personal habits or behaviors that reveal aspects of identity. Giddens cites the example of a consumer good, clothing, and explains how a consumer's choice of clothing items "relates directly to concealment/revelation in respect of personal biographies" (Giddens, 1991. p. 62). Thus, the meaning of products can be used to reflect an individual's identity. Giddens also discusses how the project of the self leads an individual to embrace a certain *lifestyle*, which is defined as a "more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991. p. 81). While Giddens does not mention the use of products specifically when discussing lifestyle, he implies that lifestyle practices (including the consumption of products) are motivated not only by functional needs but by the desire to develop one's identity.

Past research shows that the ownership and use of motor vehicles can be at the center of individuals' lifestyles. In his analysis of consumer interest in battery-electric vehicles (BEVs), Turrentine (2003) notes how households who were exploring BEV ownership saw the potential for BEVs to enhance their self-identities by enabling new lifestyle practices. In one household, a father who had little interest in environmental preservation became interested in BEV use after discovering the new technology could be an area of shared interest with his teenaged son. For this individual, it was not just the vehicle that was important, but the lifestyle that it enabled: a lifestyle that included the possibility of spending more time with his son.

Lifestyle adoption is complicated by the fact that we are exposed to many diverse lifestyles during the course of a typical day or week. Giddens frames this exposure as movement through "lifestyle sectors, which are "time-space 'slice[s]' of an individual's overall activities, within which a reasonably consistent and ordered set of practices is adopted and enacted" (Giddens, 1991. p. 83). Lifestyle sectors are obvious to anyone whose work and recreation contrast significantly. For example, an ambitious business executive who is also an avid birdwatcher moves through two distinct lifestyle sectors: the office environment during the week, and bird-watching club events on the weekends. In each sector, he faces a different set of peers as well as a distinct standard of acceptable behavior, requisite equipment, and shared signs.

At first glance, Giddens' concept of lifestyle seems to resemble roles or stereotypes, but there are important distinctions. Giddens points out that there is a significant difference between simply playing a part and actually committing oneself to a particular lifestyle. He observes that "All human beings, in all cultures, preserve division between self-identities and 'performances' they put on in specific social contexts" (Giddens, 1991. p. 58). The adoption of a lifestyle involves more analysis and commitment than the enactment of the symbolic interactionist's "role." In symbolic interactionist theory, individuals can switch from role to role; the only barrier to new role enactment is role knowledge, which can be attained through product acquisition. In Giddens' reflexively-constructed self, new lifestyles that are adopted must fit with the individual's self-concept and underlying biography. The business executive/birdwatcher must

weave together his two diverse lifestyles into a coherent self-concept that is compatible with his past and his future. This is a more complex and demanding exercise, which makes adding new lifestyles a more significant event than merely casting oneself temporarily in a new role.

The reason new lifestyles must be woven into an individual's self-narrative points out another important distinction between Giddens' theories and symbolic interactionism. While symbolic interactionism stresses the importance of others in defining an individual's self-concept, Giddens emphasizes the role of the individual in defining himself. According to Giddens, one must have "confidence in the integrity and value of [his] narrative of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991. p. 66) in order to have a healthy sense of self-worth. Because an individual's self-esteem is rooted in the quality of his self-narrative, he is motivated to carefully examine lifestyles and adopt only those that are truly compatible with his self-concept. Symbolic interactionism, in contrast, suggests that individuals are more flexible, exploring new roles and adopting whichever yield the most favorable response from others.

Giddens goes on to place development of the self-concept within a broad social context. Self-congruity and symbolic interactionism attribute the expression of one's identity to forces within the individual, namely the simultaneous desires to increase self-esteem and to maintain self-consistency. Giddens looks outside the individual, to the unique conditions of modern social, political, and economic systems. According to Giddens, the conditions of modernity have led to a replacement of tradition with reflexivity. Culture no longer provides a well-defined prescription for how to live one's life; instead, the individual now faces an "indefinite range of potential courses of action" (Giddens, 1991. p. 29). Whether they find this liberating or frightening, individuals have little choice but to press on with the process of self-definition. Giddens notes that at the center of modernity lie two important conditions: a network of industries that produces goods, and a capitalist economy that exposes consumers to them. Thus, although Giddens does not make product meaning a primary focus in his work, his portrayal of modern society makes clear the integral position of goods. In the modern industrialized capitalist system, consumer goods (and the meanings attached to them) are an important element in the process of self-definition. The question of "who am I?" is answered "in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat – and many other things" (Giddens, 1991. p. 14) including, we would add, decisions about the purchase and use of products like automobiles.

Cultivation and Creation of Meaning

Like Giddens, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and sociologist Eugene Rochberg-Halton examine the individual's creation of his identity, but include a more detailed examination of the role of goods in the self-definition process. These authors view self-development in much the same way Giddens does, although their terminology differs. What Giddens called "the reflexive project of the self," Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton refer to as *cultivation*. They define cultivation as "the process of investing psychic energy so that one becomes conscious of the goals operating in oneself, among and between other persons, and in the environment. It [cultivation] refers also to the process of channeling one's attention in order to realize such

Cultivation Process

GOAL

INTENTION
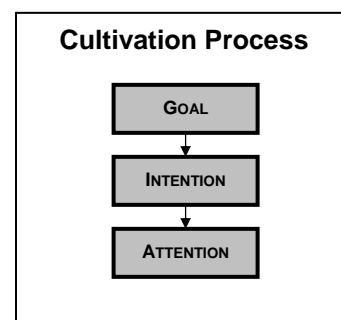
ATTENTION

Source: Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981

Figure 3

goals." (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981. p. 13). An individual has goals that drive his intentions, and his intentions serve to focus his attention (also called psychic energy) on objects and actions that bring him closer to realizing his goals. Since individuals' goals are unique, the ways they focus attention in their cultivation processes and the identities that result are also highly individuated.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton extend the theories of product meaning discussed previously in this report. They agree with symbolic interactionists that goods serve as both responses and stimuli: "this symbolic meaning…of any other expressive object, is not simply to reflect an already existing actuality. It also helps bring that actuality about" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981. p. 27). However, according to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, product meaning is created not just by social forces, but also by the individual himself. This represents a significant departure from structuralism and other theories which view a product's symbolic meaning as constructed entirely outside of any single individual. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton do not deny that a culture can assign signified concepts to an object, or that a product's signified concepts can become widely understood among members of that culture. However, they recognize a second route of meaning creation in which the main agent is the individual rather than society. They call this process *perception*; it occurs "when we experience a thing and realize its own inherent character" rather than its culturally-assigned meaning (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981. p. 44) Since each of us may come to distinct conclusions when exposed to the "inherent character" of a particular object, this leads to unique perceptions of product meaning. Perception, therefore, is a process in which the individual can "create new insights" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981. p. 45) and attach his own signified concepts to an object. Perception stands in contrast to *recognition*, which occurs "when we experience a thing and interpret it only as something we already know" based on socially-shared meanings (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981. p. 44). Therefore, an individual can either recognize or perceive the meaning of a given product, depending on the level of attention he devotes to it.

The idea that individuals can develop their own symbolic meanings for products has been observed by other authors as well, especially among anthropologists studying social change. In his analysis of style among English youth subcultures, Hebdige (1979) discusses the process of *bricolage*, which involves the appropriation of a recognized sign and the replacement of its socially-assigned meaning with an alternative meaning. The alternative meaning generally comes from a subcultural group that aims to communicate not only its identity, but its desire for social change. Hebdige describes how "the motor scooter, originally an ultra-respectable means of transport, was turned into a menacing symbol of group solidarity" by one group of youths known as the "mods" (Hebdige, 1979. p. 104). Like Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's perception process, bricolage leaves a sign's signifier in place, but changes its signified concepts to a more individualized meaning. This implies that an individual, or at least a group of individuals, can redefine a product's meaning.

Automobiles also can be the subjects of bricolage. O'Dell (2001) describes how a subculture of Swedish youth called the "raggare" assigned unique meanings to American-made automobiles, and how these new meanings then were adopted by the larger Swedish society. O'Dell explains "The cars became a forum for self-expression, and raggare developed their own aesthetic code

which was at least partially a reaction against the dominant and normative Swedish preference for the practical and rational" (O'Dell, 2001. p. 114). The American automobile, which for the Swedish once had socially-assigned meanings of "the beauty and potential of things to come" and a "better standard of living" (O'Dell, 2001. p. 110) was transformed by the raggare into "a signifier of potential danger" (O'Dell, 2001. p. 122) and rebellion.

In addition to allowing individuals to assign their own meaning to products, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's work differs from the theories discussed earlier in another important way. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton see an important role for signifiers in referencing abstract signified concepts. Signifiers do not simply "stand for" something else, but embody the signified concept and make it real. This is important for intangible concepts like thoughts, feelings, and desires which have no presence in the physical world. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, symbols grant abstract ideas "an objective existence outside immediate situations" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981. p. 21).

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's analysis raises an existential question. Do abstract concepts like love, freedom, or religious beliefs *really* exist if we cannot touch or see them? In other words, do we need proof of physical existence in order to recognize that something is real? Perhaps not, but Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton suggest that it helps to have physical evidence to objectify an abstract concept. This may be especially important given our limited understanding of many abstract ideas. For example, all of us recognize love, but do we really understand it? With only a limited comprehension of what love is, it may be easier to consider the concept generally; this generalized concept is then accessed through a summarizing symbol. The symbol, rather than a detailed understanding of the concept, now makes the concept "real." In this case, the signifier and the signified concepts merge. In other words, the symbol *becomes* its meaning. This explains why, as Ortner notes, many summarizing symbols become "sacred symbols" (Ortner, 1979. p. 94). For example, many Americans view desecration of the U.S. flag as desecration of the ideals for which it stands. In this sacred summarizing symbol, the piece of fabric that serves as signifier cannot be separated from the its underlying signified concepts. The sign and signifier merge due partly to our limited understanding of the complex set of abstract ideas embodied within the sign.

In his analysis of consumer behavior, McCracken (1988) observes the same merging of signifier and signified concept noted by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton. However, McCracken proposes another explanation for why this merging occurs. In his *displaced meaning strategy*, McCracken examines "cultural meaning that has been deliberately removed from the daily life of a community and relocated into a distant cultural domain" (McCracken, 1988. p. 104). Displaced meaning is a method for individuals to cope with the discrepancy between their abstract ideals and the world around them. For example, although we may believe in utopian ideas such as peace, equality, and kindness toward others, life often exposes us to the opposite. According to McCracken, people respond to this type of incongruity between reality and ideals by relocating their ideals to any of an "almost infinite number of locations on the continua of time and place" (McCracken, 1988. p. 106), virtually anywhere except current reality. The future is a popular choice: individuals often look forward to a time in the future when their utopian vision will be realized. The past can also be used; McCracken notes that the idea of a

"golden age" in which life was better is also a common location for displaced meaning (McCracken, 1988. p. 106).

Wherever individuals choose to relocate their ideals, they need a method to access them so they are not lost. McCracken suggests that consumer goods serve as this link: "Consumer goods are bridges to these hopes and ideals" (McCracken, 1988. p. 104). Since the ideals are not compatible with current reality, consumer goods serve as their surrogate: they serve as signifiers for ideals without removing the ideals from their displaced locations. For example, displaced meaning may be evident among some automobile buyers. Owners of HEVs view the purchase of a hybrid vehicle as "the right thing to do" and look forward to a world in which "everyone drives hybrids" (Heffner, et. al., 2005). Their idealistic vision is far from the current reality of a car-dependent, heavily-polluting society, so they relocate it to the future. Their automobiles serve as a bridge between today's unpleasant reality and their ideals of environmental harmony. For these individuals, HEVs serve as important symbols: they are "real" things that link to ideas that their owners recognize cannot be "real" in the current version of the world.

The Project of Culture

As reviewed above, much of the analysis of people's relationships with goods focuses on the role of product meaning in the formation of individual identity. Yet goods can have a broader impact: their meaning contributes not only to the definition of individuals, but also to the definition of their surrounding culture. In his discussion of *life politics*, Giddens suggests that the development of the self is closely linked to changes in larger social systems. Giddens observes that a consequence of the individual's process of identity-creation is *life politics,* "political issues which flow from processes of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts" (Giddens, 1991. p. 214). In other words, "the 'personal is political'" (Giddens, 1991. p. 215); a person's lifestyle decisions have an inevitable impact on those around him. In modern globalized society, one's lifestyle can have far-reaching effects. Automobile use by American consumers, for example, generates greenhouse gas emissions that threaten the entire world's ecosystem. Individuals who become aware of the politics of their lifestyles may choose to modify them, like owners of HEVs who purchase their vehicles in order to minimize their contribution to global warming and world resource depletion (Heffner, et. al., 2005).

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton agree that "identity" can transcend the individual. They suggest that an individual's goals, which are the driving force behind his behavior, exist at several levels. In addition to personal goals, an individual possesses larger *social goals* that are shared with others within his network of social groups (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). The individual also has a even broader set of *cosmic goals* that connect him with people and things far larger than his immediate social network, creating a "portion of the self whose ultimate goal is the larger harmony of things" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981. p. 192). Thus, people are interested not just in forming their own selves, but in shaping their societies and influencing conditions at the global level. Therefore, when an individual accesses product meaning, he may be attempting to cultivate himself, or he may wish to cultivate the cultural system(s) around him.

Other authors have noted how product meaning is used to evoke social change in areas such as gender, race, and class in addition to eliciting changes in individual identity. McCracken (1988)

outlines how American feminists manipulated the meaning of selected clothing items to confront gender politics they faced in the professional workplace. McCracken explains "The authoritative look for women's business wear is an attempt to isolate certain of the properties of male business clothing and incorporate them into female fashion. The object of this undertaking is to give businesswomen new credibility, presence, and authority in the business world" (McCracken, 1988. p. 97). While individual identity-definition may be partly responsible for this manipulation of product meaning, the women who redefined these signs also were motivated by the desire to change the collective identity of *all* women. Product meaning was an important instrument in the redefinition of culture and the female role within it.

Gilroy (2001) observes a similar use of product meaning to confront another cultural issue: racial stereotypes. Gilroy outlines the link between the automobile's signified concepts and the individual identities of African Americans: "cars seem to have conferred or rather suggested dimensions of citizenship and status that were blocked by formal politics and violently inhibited by informal codes" (Gilroy, 2001. p. 94). For the African Americans observed by Gilroy, racial stereotypes complicated the project of individual identity by blocking access to certain narrative elements. By using the meaning in automobiles, African Americans were able to re-access these elements, including the idea that they had the same rights and social status as other members of society. As these African American car-owners redefined themselves, they also altered society's racial prejudices. Thus, for African-Americans, the automobile's meaning was used to evoke changes in both individual identity and cultural categories.

The Swedish raggare mentioned earlier confronted a third set of cultural categories: social class. The raggare's appropriation of the American-made car as a signifier and their redefinition of its meaning represents both a statement about individual identity and a demand for social change. O'Dell notes that the raggare's interest is not just in self-definition, but in "the agitation of the middle class" (O'Dell, 2001. p. 126); the working-class youth that compose the raggare subculture are demanding a reevaluation of their society's class structure and their own place within it. Their use of the automobile's meaning is not simply about developing their own identities; in fact, the signified concepts they choose are deliberately "defined in contrast to those of the middle class" (O'Dell, 2001. p. 126). Their statement about themselves is simultaneously a statement about another group, and a declaration about the politics of class.

3. Mechanics of Meaning

The previous section considered the relationship between product meaning and individual consumers' identities. This section will examine where the signified concepts in products originate, and how a product's meaning is "transferred" to the consumer. While advertisers are perhaps the best-known sources of product meaning, this section considers numerous actors who can assign meaning to products, including journalists, public leaders, and academics. This section begins by discussing Williamson's three stages of product meaning and the "levels" of meaning that can be present in a product. It then examines McCracken's assessment of where meaning is located and how it moves into and out of products.

As discussed earlier, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) identify two processes that assign meaning to products. The first, recognition, occurs when others define meaning in a

product and we "recognize" those meanings. In its purest form, recognition is a passive acceptance of socially-shared meanings with little or no analysis on the part of the individual. The second way a product receives meaning is through perception, a process in which an individual constructs a novel interpretation of a product's meaning. Perception involves a more intensive evaluation in which an individual actively considers socially-shared meanings in light of his own experience.

An example of the two processes is evident in the various meanings American consumers see in vehicles such as pickup trucks. Dan Neil, automotive critic for the Los Angeles Times, notes that pickup trucks have a strong, socially-shared meaning that has contributed to their growing popularity: "pickups as a type [of vehicle] have meaning: a rootsy, red-state nobility, a mild scolding of sophistication and efette urbanism" (Neil, 2004). Yet individuals also can have their own interpretations of the pickup truck. One participant in a 2004 study of hybrid vehicle owners (Heffner, et. al. 2005) characterized large pickup trucks as symbolizing aggressive hostility, arrogance, and a desire to dominate others. This individual is perceiving rather than simply recognizing meaning: the signified concepts he saw in pickup trucks were the result of personal interaction with pickup drivers in his own community, negative encounters which led him to reevaluate these vehicles and the concepts they signified.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton point out that recognition and perception are not really two distinct processes, but rather represent two extreme points on a continuum. The more analysis conducted by the individual on a product's meaning, the more his product interaction moves toward perception and away from recognition. It is important to note that both perception and recognition begin with socially-shared meaning: in recognition, this meaning is accepted without question, while in perception it is evaluated and modified. But where does socially-shared meaning originate, and how does it become associated with a specific product like automobiles?

Stages of Product Meaning

Advertising is an obvious starting point in the analysis of how products receive their meaning. In 2004, the automobile industry spent over $20 billion (Advertising Age, 2005) to infuse its products with meanings designed to attract consumers. In her analysis of how advertisements function, Williamson (1978) has developed a three-stage model to describe the level of symbolic meaning associated with products. When a new product is introduced into the marketplace, it begins in the first stage, called *product as signified*. In this initial stage, a product has no meaning attached to it; because it is new, it has no reputation or standing with consumers. In order for the
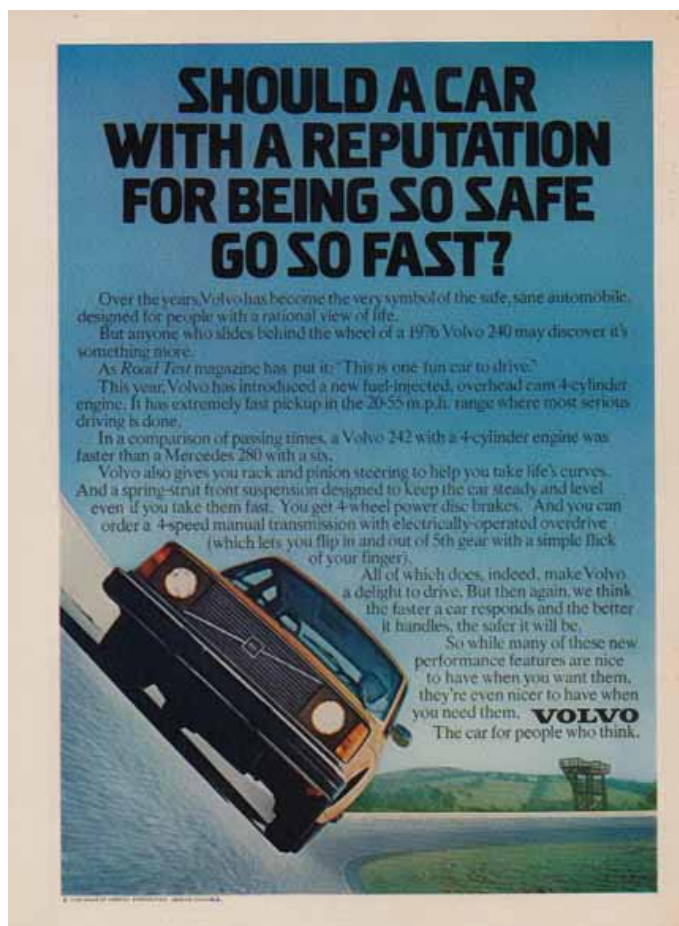

Source: Volvo (1962)

Figure 4

product to acquire meaning, it must borrow signified concepts from another object or person. Thus, in addition to showing the product they are selling, advertisements often include a company founder, celebrity endorser, or significant object with which the viewer is already familiar.

An example is presented in the print advertisement for Volvo automobiles shown in Figure 4, which depicts a Volvo P-1800 coupe next to a Viking sailing ship (Volvo, 1962). While the advertisement does not directly discuss the similarities between the car and the ship, it aims to access characteristics the audience recognizes in the Viking vessel: its durability, practical design, and advanced engineering (for its time). Since Volvo vehicles were not well-known in the United States in the early 1960s, the advertisement was designed to transfer signified concepts from a known object, giving the new Volvo model meaning that did not exist previously in the minds of American drivers. The advertisement's title and supporting text assists in this transfer, stating that there is a "centuries-old Swedish flair for beautiful, practical design" (Volvo, 1962). The advertisement implies that two-thousand years ago, this particular Swedish skill led to the development of advanced sailing ships; today, it is embodied in a unique automobile.

In the second of Williamson's product meaning stages, a product comes to signify certain concepts. Called *product as signifier*, this stage is reached when the product can communicate its signified concepts without assistance from another object or person. Advertising attempts to condition consumers to form this strong association between product and signified concepts, but it takes time and consistent messaging for products to reach the *product as signifier* phase. A second Volvo print advertisement (shown in Figure 5) provides an example. The advertisement states that "over the years, Volvo has become the very symbol of the safe, sane automobile" (Volvo, 1976). At some point after the 1962 Viking ship advertisement, Volvo changed the meaning it wanted to attach to its vehicles and began associating them with safety. By 1976, safety had become part of the vehicles' "reputation" (Volvo, 1976), a reputation that persists to this day (Jewett, 2002). As this advertisement demonstrates, Volvo was so confident that its 240 model was *product as signifier* for safety, the company began attempting to attach other meanings to its product in


Source: Volvo (1976)

Figure 5

addition to safety. Thus, the racetrack setting (as well as the text discussing the car's acceleration, handling, and braking) is designed to suggest that the 240 is "one fun car to drive" (Volvo, 1976) in addition to being a safe vehicle.

The final stage of product meaning is called *product as generator.* In this phase, a product merges with its signified concepts: the product doesn't just stand for an abstract idea, it *becomes* that idea. Using the Volvo example, this means that Volvo doesn't just represent the concept of safety, but Volvo *is* safety. Safety becomes defined by whether the car is a Volvo or not, and therefore no other brand of vehicle really can be considered to be safe. This merging of signifier and signified concept is the same phenomenon described earlier in the discussion of Ortner's summarizing symbols; in the product as generator phase, the product becomes a summarizing symbol.

The *product as generator* phase may explain why some consumers conduct little or no information search when purchasing a new vehicle: they select one brand or vehicle type because they perceive only one choice which can deliver the signified concepts they seek. For example, research on early buyers of hybrid vehicles shows these vehicles tend to be perceived as environmentally-friendly, and many consumers see HEVs as the only commercially-available vehicles that convey the concept of environmental friendliness (Heffner, et. al. 2005). Therefore, for many consumers, hybrid vehicles don't just signify environmental preservation: they actually have merged with that concept. Environmental friendliness *is* owning an HEV, even though other types of vehicles (such as compact gasoline vehicles with a partial-zero emissions vehicle or PZEV emissions rating) deliver similar levels of low fuel consumption and emissions.

Meaning Chains

Williamson's analysis of advertisements also yields a method for dissecting the meaning attached to a given product. Utilizing terminology from philosopher Roland Barthes, Williamson explores the levels of meaning attached to products through two processes. The first, *denotation*, is a basic and direct connection between signifier and signified concept. The second, *connotation*, is a deeper, indirect association. A simple example illustrates these processes:

<div align="center">

Photo of Volvo

‖

(1) Volvo Automobile

‖

(2) Safety

</div>
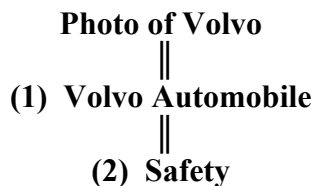
The advertisement in Figure 5 includes a photo of a Volvo sedan. In this advertisement's first layer of meaning, the sign is composed of the photo (signifier) that signifies the actual vehicle (signified concept). This is *denotation*: a basic association between an object and an idea that can be understood with little or no external knowledge. However, a photo of a Volvo automobile symbolizes more than just the real vehicle: there is an additional layer of meaning that is less obvious. In the second layer, the photo of the Volvo (signifier) signifies safety (signified concept). This deeper meaning is an example of *connotation*, and its interpretation in the manner the advertiser intended requires additional knowledge on the part of the viewer.

It is the use of this additional knowledge, which Williamson calls "referent systems," that separates denotation from connotation and makes deeper meaning in products possible. In the 1976 Volvo advertisement, the referent system that must be understood is a system of automobile brands and a system of vehicle characteristics. This does not mean that the viewer needs to be an expert on cars, but he must comprehend, for example, that Volvo and BMW are two distinct automobile brands, and that safety and performance are two different vehicle capabilities. This relationship is shown in the following example:

$$\text{Volvo Automobile} \quad \neq \quad \text{BMW Automobile}$$
$$\|\qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad\|$$
$$\text{Safe} \quad \neq \quad \text{High-Performance}$$

In Williamson's view, a Volvo automobile only can have meaning when placed within a larger system of meaning; that is, when it is contrasted with another vehicle that also has significance. Therefore, an individual who has never heard of Volvo or any other brand of automobile may understand that a photo of a Volvo car signifies the actual car (denotation), but he lacks the referent systems necessary to determine as the manufacturer intended that Volvo symbolizes safety (connotation).

The examples provided above are simplified: in reality, meaning chains often have numerous links that separate the signifier from the signified concept it connotes. Saying that a Volvo symbolizes safety may be correct, but it does not tell us much about why safety is important to Volvo buyers. A more complete meaning chain connotes something about the user's identity, linking the product and person. For example, research of HEV owners (Heffner, et. al., 2005) yielded the following meaning chain for one owner of the Toyota Prius:
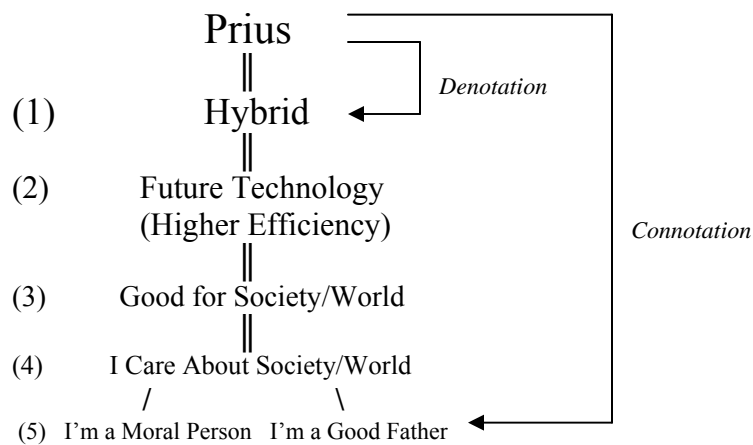
We interpret that this individual's automobile held five layers of meaning. Driving a Toyota Prius meant that he was driving a special type of vehicle called a hybrid (1), and this vehicle type symbolized high efficiency and future technology (2). Using a high-efficiency vehicle signified doing something good for society and the world (3), an act that identified the Prius owner as a person who cared about the people and world around him (4). Caring about others signified that

he was a moral individual, and a father who loved his children (5). Thus, his Toyota Prius connoted that he was a good father and a moral individual, symbolic meaning that related directly to his own identity. In addition, as Williamson suggests, this individual perceived the meaning of his own vehicle not in isolation, but within a system of vehicle meanings. One example the subject provided contrasted his Toyota Prius with a Hummer H2, a large sport-utility vehicle. Our interpretation of the two vehicles' distinct meanings is shown below:

	Prius	≠	Hummer
	‖		‖
(1)	Hybrid	≠	Large Truck
	‖		‖
(2)	Future Technology (Higher Efficiency)	≠	Past Technology (Lower Efficiency)
	‖		‖
(3)	Good for Society/World	≠	Good for Me
	‖		‖
(4)	I Care About Society/World	≠	I Care About Myself
	/ \		|
(5)	I'm a Moral Person I'm a Good Father/Mother	≠	I'm an Immoral Person

This comparison contrasts two vehicle models, associating each with a different vehicle type (1), level of technology and efficiency (2), group receiving benefits from vehicle use (3), focus of owner's concerns (4), and finally ethics of the owner (5). For this Prius driver, the Prius and Hummer were not just vehicles with different levels of fuel efficiency and environmental impact: they were vehicles that symbolized their owner's morality (or lack thereof.)

It is important to note that the meaning chains shown in the example above may be shared by others, but do not necessarily capture the views of all consumers. For example, buyers of large SUVs probably have very different opinions about the meanings of these two types of vehicles, and it's doubtful that they see themselves as immoral people simply because they drive trucks. The fact that different groups within society can assign distinct meaning to the same product complicates the process of dissecting the meanings in products. It also adds complexity to the advertiser's mission, since it cannot be assumed that every member of a society will interpret an advertisement in the way its creators intended. Ultimately, understanding the meanings an individual sees in a product means understanding the interpretation process. Is he recognizing socially-shared meanings assigned by the cultural and sub-cultural groups to which he belongs? Is he adding his own meanings to the product by perceiving it in a unique way? Both of these questions must be investigated in order to comprehend the meanings associated with a given product by a particular consumer.

Meaning Locations and Transfers
Like Williamson, McCracken recognizes the importance of advertising in the transfer of meaning to consumer goods. However, in his analysis of the movement of meaning, McCracken (1988) identifies additional actors that affect what products signify and how they receive their meanings. McCracken views meaning as highly dynamic: signified concepts are constantly evolving and migrating from one "location" to another. The first location, where all meaning

originates, is called the *culturally-constituted world.* This is the world around us, as we perceive it through the lens of culture. As discussed earlier, culture gives us a symbolic framework within which we interpret the world. Culture helps us to make sense of the things and people in our surroundings, and instructs us on how to interact with them. As McCracken notes, culture functions by providing "cultural categories" in key areas such as "time, space, nature, and person"; using these categories to interpret their surroundings gives members of a culture their "own special vision of the world" (McCracken, 1988. p. 73). It is these cultural categories that provide the underlying meaning that eventually resides in products. For example, in order for an automobile to define someone as "youthful," the cultural category of "young person" must first exist. While this may seem obvious, it is worth noting that categories and definitions can vary significantly between cultures and subcultures.

From cultural categories, meaning then can move into the second location, the *consumer good.* McCracken notes that goods are important because they symbolize elements of culture and make these elements more tangible: "they give cultural meaning a concreteness for the individual that it would not otherwise have" (McCracken, 1988. p. 72). For example, automobiles available in the U.S. range from the $10,000 Chevrolet Aveo to the $440,000 Porsche Carrera GT. Such a large disparity in vehicles and vehicle prices may seem natural in a free market, but it reveals something about our culture: namely, that we are willing to tolerate and exhibit sizable differences in personal wealth. The consumer that purchases an expensive vehicle thus makes a statement about his position within the economic hierarchy, a cultural category that is important for Americans in classifying others. In order for this classification to occur, however, the meaning of the vehicle must be transferred to its owner. This reveals the third location for meaning: the *individual consumer* himself.
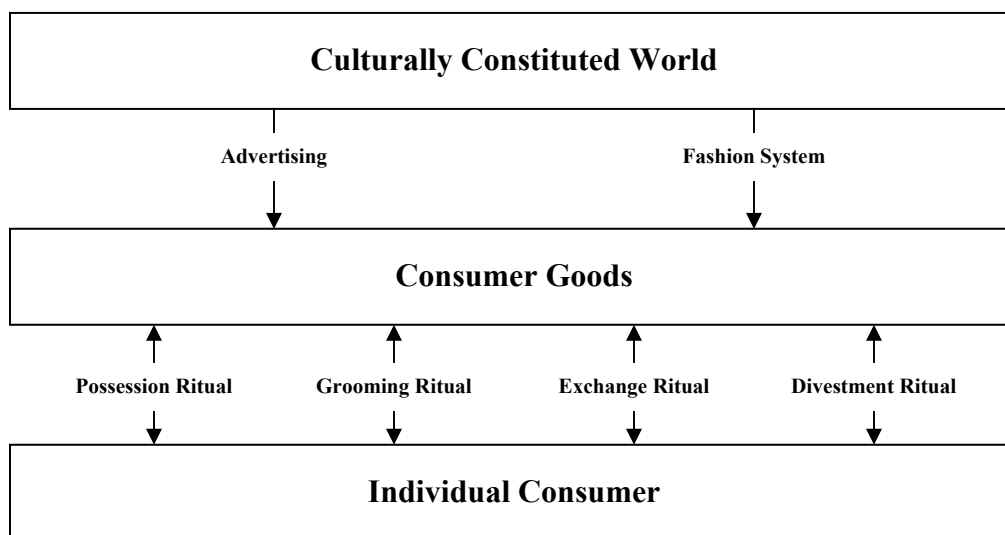
Source: Adapted from McCracken (1988)

Figure 6

McCracken's three locations of meaning are shown in Figure 6, along with the two major types of meaning movement. The first flow of meaning is from the culturally-constituted world into consumer goods. Like Williamson, McCracken sees advertisers and marketers as important

actors in this process, since they create media that connects products with signified concepts. In an advertisement, this connection is established by showing both the product and elements of the culturally-constituted world that have meaning, and by portraying these elements and the product as similar. Thus, the Volvo automobile receives some of the meanings present in the Viking ship, an element from the culturally-constituted world. But McCracken also identifies a second set of actors that also infuse products with meaning: members of the *fashion system*. McCracken's fashion system does not refer simply to the clothing industry. It includes designers of all types of products, journalists, social observers, market researchers, and opinion leaders: virtually anyone who recognizes relevant meaning in the culturally-constituted world and can "gather this meaning up and accomplish its transfer to consumer goods" (McCracken, 1988. p. 81).

McCracken's analysis is important because it recognizes that advertising (and the producers that fund it) is just one of numerous sources of meaning for products. Equally influential are journalists, social observers, and market researchers, who observe both consumer trends and cultural changes, and communicate their findings to the public. For example, HEVs had strong meaning to many early buyers (Heffner, et al. 2005). Since there were few advertisements for these vehicles before 2004, it is likely that much of the meaning was transferred by journalists through their extensive coverage of these vehicles in popular magazines and newspapers.

Other important actors include *opinion leaders*, a group defined as "individuals who by virtue of birth, beauty, celebrity, or accomplishment are held in high esteem" by consumers (McCracken, 1988. p. 80). When actress Cameron Diaz praises her Toyota Prius on the Tonight Show (Tapper, 2002) or rap artist Snoop Dogg calls the Daimler Chrysler CEO to place his order for a Chrysler 300C (Clanton, 2004), these individuals transfer meaning to those vehicles. McCracken notes that opinion leaders not only give meaning to products; they also are able modify culture itself through redefinition of cultural categories and principles. Diaz's promotion of the Prius' environmental benefits creates two new cultural categories of people: those who choose to preserve the natural environment and those who don't. These new categories cut across existing cultural divisions, such as age, gender, and social class; they change, in a subtle way, how our culture defines and organizes people. It is worth noting that opinion leaders who drive cultural change need not be famous celebrities: this group can include anyone with influence over the views of others, even within a geographic segment or subculture of society. Leaders of community groups, political causes, and interest groups all have an audience for their views, and can evoke changes in the meaning of products and culture itself.

The second flow of meaning in McCracken's model is from consumer goods to the individual consumer. A product "says something" about its owner because other people attribute its signified concepts to the person who buys it, or because the buyer adopts those meanings. McCracken explains that this transfer occurs through one of four acts, or *rituals*. The first are *possession rituals*. In the possession ritual, an owner uses and displays his product; he also reflects on its qualities, compares it with other products, and discusses it with other people. Through this behavior, the consumer is not only asserting his ownership over physical goods, but also aims to "assume a kind of ownership of the *meaning* of his or her consumer goods" (McCracken, 1988. p.85). The act of making something his necessarily leads to an association between himself and the product, between the product's characteristics and his own. If this association does not occur, the consumer does not really "possess" the product. McCracken cites

findings from his own research in which individuals claim that a particular "car, house, article of clothing, or other meaning-carrying good 'never really seemed to belong to me'" despite having physical possession of the object (McCracken, 1988. p. 85). In McCracken's view, ownership involves accessing both the physical and the symbolic characteristics of a product.

In the possession ritual, the flow of meaning between individual consumer and consumer good can be bi-directional in certain cases. For example, an individual who personalizes a product, such as an automobile, alters its physical appearance to make it unique to himself. In other words, personalization allows the product to better reflect who the individual is. Thus, personalization imbues the product with some of the signified concepts of the individual's identity. So meaning can flow both ways: from product to consumer, and from consumer to product.

Grooming rituals involve physical maintenance of products. These rituals including cleaning, repairing, and enhancing the appearance of an object, such as an automobile. In fact, McCracken cites "the extraordinary amounts of largely redundant time and energy that are lavished on certain automobiles" as the best example of the grooming ritual (McCracken, 1988. p. 86). If a product is allowed to age and undergo changes in physical appearance, underlying changes in meaning can occur as well. A faded, twenty-year-old Cadillac with missing hubcaps does not possess quite the same symbolic meaning as it did when it appeared new on the showroom floor. Grooming rituals, then, are not only a way to maintain an object's physical appearance, but also allow the owner to continually extract meaning from a product for as long as possible. The time spent by an owner in the grooming ritual also represents an investment in the object. This investment draws him closer to the object and, like personalization in the possession ritual, allows him to put part of himself into the good.

Exchange rituals and *divestment rituals* relate to the acquisition and disposal of consumer goods. *Exchange rituals* involve the "choice, purchase, and presentation of consumer goods by one party and their receipt by another" (McCracken, 1988. p. 84). When we give a gift to someone, we provide them with both the physical object as well as the concepts it signifies. The father who purchases his daughter a Jeep for her birthday provides her with transportation, but also gives her the image of herself as the type of person who drives a Jeep: young, outdoorsy, and adventurous. Exchange rituals, therefore, let us grant symbolic properties to others for them to use in the development of their identities. Finally, *divestment rituals* are used to empty a good of its meaning. Before selling a car, most sellers clean the vehicle thoroughly and remove signs of personalization. There are practical reasons for this exercise: the owner wants to collect his possessions from the vehicle, and perhaps enhance the selling price by improving the automobile's appearance. However, cleaning and erasing signs of personalization can also be a divestment ritual. This ritual is performed to erase any personal meanings given to the vehicle by its owner, and to prepare the car for a new owner, who will assign his own personalized meanings.

4. Symbols in Perspective

Section 1 of this report discussed how products simultaneously provide meaning and useful functionality. Cars, for example, say something about us and take us where we want to go. Both

meaning and mobility are benefits to the consumer, and it is the sum total of a product's benefits that make it desirable. This section examines ways to categorize product benefits, including symbolic meaning. The goal is to better understand how consumers perceive products, and to determine how various types of benefits are considered in the purchase process. This section examines three approaches to classifying product benefits. The first approach sees products as primarily utilitarian objects: only their functional benefits matter. The second approach recognizes the importance of both functional capabilities and symbolic meaning, allowing a product to provide benefits in both areas. Finally, a third approach adds experiential benefits, the positive feelings generated by products, to symbolic and functional benefits.

Focus on Function

Nearly all products have some functional benefits; that is, they assist the user in accomplishing a specific task, "permitting control of the environment and allowing the solution of externally-imposed problems" (Fournier, 1991). In the most basic sense, an automobile moves people and cargo from one point to another. Any car that can't perform this task effectively will receive interest from few consumers, no matter how rich it is in signified concepts or other benefits. Yet the obvious importance of function has led many authors to focus exclusively on this type of benefits. Indeed, the classic definition of product concept in marketing emphasizes practical, utilitarian elements; it states that "consumers will favor those products that offer the most quality, performance, and features" (Kotler, 1984). In this view, the only real benefits from a product are functional benefits. This view underlies many marketers' and economists' assessments of consumer behavior. For example, Murphy and Enis (1986) attempt to classify products based on the distinct costs and benefits associated with different goods. While the authors conduct a detailed examination of the costs associated with products, they devote almost no attention to benefits, assuming simply that "how a product functions is usually the main reason for purchase" (Murphy and Enis, p. 34).

This is the same assumption made by many in the transportation field when analyzing vehicle choice. Analysis of eleven vehicle choice models conducted by Mokhtarian and Choo (2002) reveals that researchers typically focus on monetary costs (such as purchase price) and functional attributes (such as vehicle weight) in constructing their models. Attempts to predict the adoption of advanced-technology automobiles show the same focus on costs and functionality: a study of California consumers in the late 1990s (Brownstone, et. al., 2000) aimed to predict adoption of HEVs by analyzing consumer receptiveness to vehicle-related costs (such as purchase price and fuel cost/mile) as well as functional attributes (such as luggage space, top speed, and acceleration time). A more recent study sponsored by the California Energy Commission (Adler, et. al., 2003) used a similar approach, although a slightly different combination of costs and functional characteristics were selected for analysis.

It is tempting to emphasize functionality because it is quantifiable: vehicle characteristics such as cargo room, engine displacement, and fuel economy all can be easily measured and compared among market offerings. But attributes do not always correspond directly with benefits, nor do enhanced features necessarily mean a product is better at performing its essential functions. Is a car with 200 horsepower really better at transporting its owner to work than a car with 160 horsepower? Both provide virtually the same mobility, which is the basic function of an automobile. Of course, one of these vehicles may be more exhilarating to drive, but

"exhilaration" has no real functional value, and therefore cannot be recognized in a framework that focuses only on functional benefits. This deliberate exclusion of other types of benefits, including the feelings and meanings products generate, is a significant weakness of this approach. In addition to function, there is something more that automobiles (and other products) provide.

Function and Symbolism

That "something more" is symbolism, and it can often be difficult to identify because it can be closely coupled with a product's functionality. In her analysis of advertising and product meaning, Judith Williamson (1978) points out that aspects of automobiles that seem purely functional, such as fuel economy, actually are rich in meaning. She explains that high fuel efficiency "could be translated into terms of thriftiness, the user being a 'clever' saver, in other words, being a certain kind of person" (Williamson, 1978. p. 12). Low fuel efficiency can also be symbolic, appealing "to the 'above money pettiness,' daredevil kind of person who is too 'trendy' to be economizing" (Williamson, 1978. p. 12).

Williamson describes a translation process that occurs when consumers interpret product features. A feature such as high fuel economy has *use value*: that is, it delivers practical benefits such as lower fuel costs or less time spent in visits to the gas station. However, fuel economy also has *symbolic exchange value:* particularly at very high or low levels, it makes a statement about the vehicle owner's identity. Studies of HEVs support Williamson's functional-symbolic approach to benefits. Owners of these highly-efficient vehicles cite both use values and exchange values as reasons for their purchases of HEVs (Heffner, et. al., 2005). Thus, a vehicle attribute (in this case, a hybrid-electric powertrain) yields both functional and symbolic benefits.

Numerous authors have used the functional-symbolic framework in their analysis of product benefits (Levy, 1959; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Sirgy, 1985; Meenaghan, 1995). While its two categories do a better job of capturing the reasons for using a product, some authors find this framework lacking. Let's return to the example cited earlier of the 200 horsepower automobile that is exhilarating to drive. Is the exhilaration experienced by the driver directly connected to his identity? It is possible that it is. Perhaps this driver wants to define himself as young, and he believes that young people drive fast cars with powerful engines. The exhilaration that occurs while he is driving results from his interpretation of his vehicle's symbolic meaning. In other words, he is excited not by the physical sensation of moving quickly, but by the idea that his automobile shows how young he is.
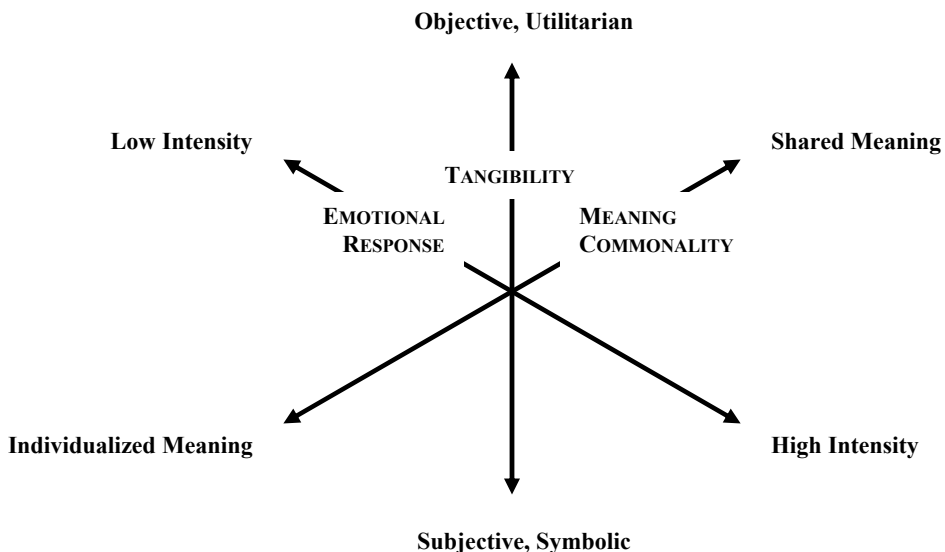
Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) would characterize this driver's experience as hedonic consumption: interaction with a product that generates emotional arousal and/or involves multisensory imagery, such as fantasies or recollection of past events. According to Hirschman and Holbrook, hedonic consumption is far more than simple sensation-seeking. The emotional responses that consumers experience in the marketplace are rooted in the meanings they assign to products and in their manipulation of these meanings. So while the driver in the example above feels exhilarated, the feeling of exhilaration is not his goal; rather, the feeling results from his successful transfer of his vehicle's meaning onto himself. This is an essential point in Hirschman and Holbrook's view: consumers do not simply use products to feel good. Instead, consumers aim to access the symbolic meaning within products, and if this meaning is

manipulated successfully, positive emotions result. Therefore, while products can evoke emotional responses in consumers, these responses are not separate benefits. They are simply the result of the consumer's reaction to a product's symbolic benefits.

Function, Symbolism, and Experience

In contrast with Hirschman and Holbrook's analysis, other researchers characterize hedonic responses as a separate category of benefits (Park, et. al., 1986; Dittmar, 1992; Keller, 1993; Ligas, 2000). Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986) describe three types of consumer needs and corresponding product benefits: functional, symbolic, and experiential. While symbolic benefits "fulfill internally generated needs for self-enhancement, role position, group membership, or ego identification," experiential benefits "provide sensory pleasure, variety, and/or cognitive stimulation" (Park, et. al., 1986. p. 136). This division between symbolic and experiential benefits implies that consumers seek experiences or feelings that do not directly relate to the maintenance of identity. It is reasonable to assume that some of an individual's feelings and actions are disconnected from the process of defining who he is, although it is difficult to determine exactly which ones. Perhaps because of the difficulty in making this distinction, some researchers consolidate symbolic and experiential benefits in practice even though they recognize they may satisfy distinct consumer needs. For example, in their analysis of automobile use, Steg, Vlek, and Slotegraaf (2001) test for participants' perception of functional benefits as well as "symbolic-affective" benefits, a combined category which captures all emotional responses, whether they are achieved through identity formation and maintenance or sought as ends in themselves. This consolidation addresses a shortcoming with the functional-symbolic-experiential approach, namely the difficulty in determining whether a particular benefit is merely experiential or whether it has deeper symbolic roots.

Susan Fournier (1991) attempts to address this issue in a product classification scheme that extends the functional-symbolic-experiential framework. In her analysis, Fournier evaluates products using three criterion: tangibility, emotional response, and commonality of meaning. As shown in Figure 7, each criteria can be seen as an axis. *Tangibility* refers to the source of a product's meaning and the degree of interpretation it requires. At one end of the tangibility axis is the purely utilitarian product, whose benefits are readily apparent from its functionality; at the other end lies an entirely symbolic product, which has benefits only to the user who can comprehend its symbolic meaning. *Emotional Response* describes the level of arousal that occurs during the consumption experience, and also refers to the consumer's level of involvement with the product. At one end of the emotional response axis lie products that generate little excitement and attachment, such as can openers or snow shovels, while at the other end are products that evoke significant emotional responses and commitment in consumers. Finally, the *Meaning Commonality* axis addresses the source of meanings within a product. This axis is similar to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's recognition-perception continuum presented earlier. At one end of the axis, product meanings are socially-shared and widely understood; at the other end, product meanings are uniquely defined by individual consumers.

Objective, Utilitarian

Low Intensity

TANGIBILITY

Shared Meaning

EMOTIONAL
RESPONSE

MEANING
COMMONALITY

Individualized Meaning

High Intensity

Subjective, Symbolic

Source: Adapted from Fournier (1991)

Figure 7

In her analysis, Fournier develops eight product categories (shown in Figure 8) using the three criteria outlined above. For a given consumer, she argues that a product such as an automobile can fit into only one category. Fournier recognizes that certain products are tightly coupled with personal identity, namely those products that are highly symbolic, evoke strong emotional responses, and possess individualized meaning. Typically, these *objects of personal identity* include items such as "tangible records of accomplishments (e.g. diplomas), reflections of goals and interests (e.g. bicycling gear), creative outlets (e.g. woodworking tools), and symbols of aspiration (e.g. books on sailing)" (Fournier, 1991. p. 740). *Objects of position/role* is a similar category, although in this model it is divorced from personal identity. Products in this category "make statements regarding self at the cultural level" and include products that serve as status symbols or characterize someone as fitting into particular cultural group (Fournier, 1991. p. 740).

SUBJECTIVE, SYMBOLIC	Objects of Appreciation	Objects of Personal Identity	HIGH EMOTION
	Objects of Position/Role	Ritual Enhancers	LOW EMOTION

OBJECTIVE, TANGIBLE	Objects of Action	Objects of Transition	HIGH EMOTION
	Objects of Utility	Objects of Childhood	LOW EMOTION

CULTURAL MEANING   PERSONALIZED MEANING

Source: Fournier (1991)

Figure 8

Fournier's framework also contains categories of products that are consumed exclusively for their experiential benefits. These include *objects of appreciation,* which are purchased "to

provide the user with a quality emotional experience" and include items such as "the performing arts, household decorative items, and fine wines" (Fournier, 1991. p. 739). Also consumed for experiential benefits are *objects of action*, in which sports cars are cited as an example. Objects of action are products with more objective meaning whose function "is to provide the user with stimulation, excitement, and arousal" (Fournier, 1991. p. 739). In Fournier's framework, both objects of appreciation and objects of action are consumed simply for the way they make their users feel; they have no effect on the creation and maintenance of individual identity.

Fournier's analysis of product categories is a useful expansion of the functional-symbolic-experiential framework. While many authors insist that a particular product be categorized the same way for all consumers, Fournier recognizes that different individuals may interpret the same product in a distinct manner. In Fournier's approach, an automobile, for example, can be classified as an *object of personal identity* by one individual and an *object of utility* by another. However, Fournier's framework has its limitations. The main concern is that she requires a product to fit into a single category for a given consumer. It seems more likely that a product like an automobile can deliver a consumer benefits in several (or all) her categories simultaneously. This is particularly true for the *object of personal identity* category: an automobile can relate to personal identity while also delivering other benefits. For example, a sports car may be an *object of action* because it can "provide escapes" (Fournier, 1991. p. 739) for consumers, but it may simultaneously define its driver as a free-spirited and risk-taking individual. A consumer who purchases the same brand of pickup truck that his father did is making his vehicle an *object of childhood*, but he may also be trying to define himself as a "Chevy truck man."

Thus, while Fournier's framework is useful to sort out the various types of benefits that products deliver, a consumer's use of a particular product does not always fit neatly into a single benefit category. This leads to the same overlap between experiential and symbolic benefits that occurs in the functional-symbolic-experiential framework. As Fournier suggests, an individual may consume a fine wine as an *object of appreciation;* that is, simply for the sensory pleasure that it brings. However, the individual's ability to consume and appreciate fine wine may also be a critical component in his overall perception of himself as a cultured, well-educated individual. In this case, experiential and symbolic benefits are closely linked and cannot be separated.

Conclusion

The basic premise of this report is that automobiles are symbols, and that the meaning in automobiles is relevant to consumers because it is used in the creation and maintenance of self-identity. In Section 2, we explored a range of theories to explain the linkage between product use and individual identity. While each of these approaches has its strengths, the view of a *product as self-creation* provides the most insight into the behavior of the modern automobile consumer. As Giddens (1981) observes, elements of culture (including social class, religion, and ethnicity) used to tell the individual who he was and who he supposed to become. Now modern culture encourages the opposite: it tells us we can, indeed must, be whoever we want to be. We are required to define and construct our identities and, as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1991) note, consumer products are essential tools in this process. Products like automobiles symbolize more than just social status, stereotypes, or social roles: they can signify any aspect of

identity. For some individuals, pickup trucks make them members of red-state nobility, minivans identify them as loving parents, and HEVs show that they are ethical people. And while socially-shared meanings are extensive, an individual does not simply have to accept a product's meaning as given. Instead, he can "perceive" the product in his own way, assigning unique significance to a vehicle or other product.

The *product as self-creation* approach also recognizes that individualized product meanings do not have to remain with the individual. This is because, as Williamson (1986) notes, consumer products are cultural elements, and it is ultimately the actors within the culture that define them. Advertising is one important source of meaning, but it hardly has the power to dictate consumer behavior. Instead, it is one voice among many that are competing to define product meaning. Consumers, along with members of the fashion system such as journalists and opinion leaders, play an active role in determining what products mean, and in sharing those meanings with others. As new product meanings are transferred from person to person, they gradually can be adopted by larger groups and even spread throughout an entire culture. Thus, the process of using products to define our own identities can lead to alterations in the cultural significance, or socially-shared meanings, of those products. In the *product as self-creation* approach, the individual has tremendous power and responsibility: he defines himself, and in doing so he can also redefine the culture in which he lives.

This report also explains how automobiles are both symbols and functional objects. Frequently function and meaning are intertwined, and it is important to remember Williamson's observation that features such as fuel economy can have both a practical *use value* as well as a *symbolic value*, a larger meaning that is relevant to personal identity. Analysis of use value alone does not yield a full understanding of an automobile's benefits to the consumer. Yet this is the approach many in the transportation field have applied in their analysis of vehicle choice. Focus on use value is also evident in the recent assessment of consumer demand for new types of vehicles. For example, some authors question the value proposition of HEVs, pointing out that consumers may wait years to recover the initial expense of their hybrid, and many will never be fully "paid back" by the new technology at all (Bedard, 2004; Isidore, 2004; Edmunds, 2005). This analysis ignores the fact that HEVs deliver substantial meaning to their owners, and symbolic meaning generates value for consumers just as use value does. Symbols matter in vehicle purchases, and whether new automotive technologies such as hybrid-electric and fuel-cell vehicles are accepted in the marketplace depends partly on the symbolic value they deliver to buyers.

It is also important to note that just as different consumers can see distinct meanings in the same vehicle, different consumers can also place varying levels of importance on either functional or symbolic benefits. While one individual may perceive a strong linkage between his vehicle and his self-identity, another may choose to define himself using other products or behaviors. Thus, the individual who claims his automobile is "just a way to get around" may be telling the truth. Although all of us are engaged in the maintenance of our self-identities, not all of us will choose to incorporate the symbolic meaning of automobiles into our self-narratives, or do so in exactly the same way. However, none of us can "opt out" of symbolic communication. We are surrounded by symbol systems, and the goods we purchase are parts of these systems. Therefore, our vehicles say something about us whether or not we intend for them to serve as signifiers.

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