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Turning Green: How American Car Culture Is Influenced By Advertising Campaigns That Market The Appeal Of Sustainable Transportation By Targeting Diverse Demographic Sectors

Case Study: The Chevy Volt-- Legacy of the Past or the Ride of the Future?

Introduction

Since the first assembly line created by the Ford Motor Company in 1908, American automobiles have dominated the car market. When the oil life-line was restricted to a trickle by international geopolitics of the 1970’s, a rupture in the American dream also occurred. When our Big Three automobile manufacturers were threatened by reduced demand for high octane cars, there was a trickle-down effect: jobs were lost, Detroit, the “Motor City,” produced more crimes and foreclosures than cars, and the Big Three essentially were overthrown from their preeminence, in an increasingly international car market. The Japanese emerged as the successor leader in the auto industry and have dominated the car market since, due to their fuel efficient car models that rivaled the “American dream boat.” Ironically, in the 21st century the American car industry has made a U-turn, and is reviving with a vengeance-- coded in the color green. To rival the Toyota Prius, the Japanese hybrid innovation, Ford and Chevy have produced their own models of hybrids. In this paper, I will examine the 2011 Chevy Volt, and its introduction into the American car market through a media blitz launched by Madison Avenue in a quest to maintain the current base of automobile aficionados, otherwise known in American Culture as the “muscle car” consumers, while building a new base of consumers who seek efficiency and environmentally-friendly engineering. At stake is more than the success of an automobile. The environmental and economic impact in terms of new fuel alternatives and associated jobs in the
production of an innovative automobile such as the Volt, makes the issue of marketing to a culture defined as much by its freedom of choice as its freedom to move, not only relevant, but critical to future change in cultural mindset from the present to the future. Questions addressed in this paper will revolve around the new marketing techniques used by Chevy. Specifically, how does the 2011 advertising campaigns of the Chevy Volt use reconstructed images of strength, weakness, lifestyle, and utopianism in the text and subtext of the print or broadcast images to target a specific consumer demographic? How does the media-based marketing of the Chevy Volt project American exceptionalism through strategic advertisement? Lastly, what is the historical context of the Chevy Volt marketing campaign, and how does it address socio-economic issues in America? In this paper I will argue that the 2011 Chevy Volt marketing relies upon reconstructed images of the progressive and modern car driver, while at the same time evokes nostalgic ideologies and images of the car, in order to appeal to a consumer who appreciates past American know-how, and future ingenuity to adapt to new historical circumstances. This case study integrates scholarly commentary with a review of the authentic advertisements of the Chevy Volt, a car which was selected as a subject of this paper because it represents a innovative response by an American car company otherwise identified as a leader in high-octane, middle-American, blue-collar-based products, rather than for its eco-friendly, small-scale designs.

Methodology 1: Analysis of Authentic Artifacts: What’s in a Message?

When navigating the Chevy Volt’s home page, the consumer is inundated with the words, “IT’S MORE CAR THAN ELECTRIC”, and when scrolling past a statement that the Volt has just been awarded the most prestigious auto title of, “Motor Trend Car of the Year”, more bold words appear, “THE FUTURE IS HERE AND AMERICA IS BACK IN THE GAME” (Chevy).
The first bold statement reflects the marketers’ concern that consumers perceive the car to be something “less” or a weakening of the traditional Chevy often known best for its line of “muscle cars.” Because it is not the typical combustion engine, the Volt is a new direction for the traditional Chevy consumers. Although the web-based advertisement addresses the eco-friendly component of the car, the electricity that powers the engine, the text clearly addresses that it is quite “more” than just electric, “IT’S MORE CAR” (Chevy). The advertisements that I have examined redefine the traditional image of the electric car consumer, and define the characteristics valued by such a consumer in terms more appropriate to a by-gone era of car conscious, rather than eco-conscious consumers. In one of the broadcasted advertisements that I examined that compares the Chevy Volt to the competitor’s Nissan Leaf, the Chevy Volt is marketed as an alternative to the “regular” hybrid driver who might feel “range anxiety,” when nearing the end of the electrical charge of the car. Alternatively, the Chevy consumer is portrayed as worry free, because the car is engineered to depend on its small 4 cylinder gas engine, which uses limited premium gasoline to the generate the onboard generator, which generates the electricity to keep the power of the battery charging. Even when the small internal combustion engine is on it emits few emissions. In keeping with the Chevy tradition of exalting the machine, the advertisements of the Volt, release specific automotive details that associate this product with its mechanical, rather than environmental strengths. The Chevy Volt differs from other electric/gas hybrids in that it uses a standard 120 volt plug which is found in homes. The convenience of plugging in the car into one’s home electrical source, privatizes the function of filling up at the gas station, and also domesticates a once public function. No more waiting in long lines with the other gas-guzzlers, one can “fill-‘er-up” in the domestic confines of suburbia—a new and yet highly valued commodity to the American consumer. In order to
highlight the appeal of this new mindset of a privatized energy source, the advertisements target a new demographic to the Chevy brand. For example, a television advertisement portrays a white, single woman in her pristine-clean garage that conveniently has a plug right next to the “gas-tank”. Her garage has zero clutter except for two bicycles, and no sign of children’s items. This advertisement portrays an independent woman on her way to make the world a better and more sustainable place because she made the right consumer choice by purchasing the Chevy Volt. She is also successful in that the house, which she drives into, is clearly an upper-middle class home, judging from the ample size of the garage. Clearly, “Chevy Runs Deep” in her veins, and therefore she is helping the American car company get “BACK IN THE GAME” (Chevy). In this way, Chevy marketing does not abandon its traditional consumer, but stretches its demographic reach by attracting the white, upper-middle class, single, professional female.

One significant Chevy Volt advertisement that aired during the broadcast of the Super Bowl, a prime marketing slot, was entitled, “Discovery” and depicts the power of electricity throughout history, starting with Benjamin Franklin, with the discovery of electricity, then into the living room with the advent of the television, on a lunch pad of the Apollo, on a stage at Woodstock with Jimmy Hendrix and the electric guitar, and then finally in the garage at the end of a power cord. If the power of electricity could help launch a space shuttle, it is powerful enough to launch the Chevy Volt into the garages of their future consumers. In the commercial, all the characters are white, even Jimmy Hendrix, the noted African-American rock guitarist of the late1960s, is represented as a white person. All the great innovators in America are therefore white, and represent the specific demographic Chevy is attempting to target or retarget. The end of the commercial depicts a shiny new Volt parked at a contemporary home, evoking images of
an affluent American-suburban culture. The subtext of the images is meant to connote strength and therefore coincide with the image of a utopian lifestyle.

The electrification of the entire car is another marketing phrase that Chevy incorporates into their advertisement in order to influence consumers who do not fit neatly into a traditional “car-lovers” demographic—male, working class, predominantly white. Rather, the marketing relies on an allusion to the power of awe in electricity that once inspired in the cities of the 19th century where, for example, Chicago was known as the “White City” glowing with electricity. The difference between the electricity of the past and the electricity of the present is that it is internalized, and privatized. Driving a car is a sign of independence and freedom, a freedom of choice. A consumer, who purchases the Chevy Volt, is portrayed by Madison Avenue as the symbol of that choice. While the eco-friendly choice is highlighted in the context of the advertisements for the Chevy Volt, a deconstruction of the advertisements reveals a vital subtext - that Americans choose to reclaim their past, in a symbolic return to a thriving car industry it had once dominated 60 years ago.

Methodology 2: Scholarly Commentary- Modernity and the Mobile Subject

According to political scientist, Matthew Paterson, car culture, especially in the United States produces not only certain images through advertisement, but produces “subjects” of the car industry. These subjects or people are linked to the notion and ideology of modernity which is: “to be modern is to be mobile” (Patterson, 121). Other scholars interpret the subject of the industry as one produced by the shortcomings of capitalism. This theory is heavily influenced by Karl Marx; the notion that people are attached to their cars produces a “‘false consciousness’” (Patterson, 121). This “false consciousness” is the notion that anyone, no matter what socio-economic status, can purchase a car, when in fact this is false. Additionally, other theorists in reference to the production of the “car subject”, state that the need to be in the modern moment
of society is what drives, and shapes consumers to become a subject of a modern and mobile “expressway world” (Patterson, 123). In the present case of the Chevy Volt, marketing of this product does not necessarily try to compensate for a “lack” of an element in this materialized world; instead it feeds into the already embedded ideologies of the American car culture. With its progressive and slick aerodynamic body, the Chevy Volt is not only compensating for government regulations requiring fewer emissions, but appealing to both current and long-standing consumer demands. Consumers in and of themselves are contradictions to the ideology of autonomy. Consumers on one hand decide their own fate, for example in their morning commute to work by deciding which road to take, and controlling the temperature of their interior regardless of outside forces. When leaving the safety of one’s own driveway though, drivers form a new sense of being, known as “drivers’ consciousness”, which affects not only the driver, but also the surroundings through which the car mobilizes. This “windshield perspective” is what ultimately shapes the car consumer who sees everything from a driver’s perspective; this leads to an alienation of all other alternatives of transportation, and lifestyle choices (Patterson).

According to Patterson in his book, *Automobile Politics*, this perspective is what has shaped government policy, most clearly demonstrated by the Bush administration reluctance to sign the Kyoto Protocol under the terms that it violates consumers’ freedom of choice by establishing set limits on the car industry as well as the consumer. The fact that it is a “human right” to drive a car, and who has access to the freedom of the car may not and cannot be violated by the environment, which affects everyone, is a neoconservative ideology that has plagued car politics and economy for the past decade.

The subject of the auto industry is one who is independent but who must be relied upon to be responsible at the same time. This statement is contradictory due to the many fatal
automobile accidents each year in the U.S. So from the “windshield perspective” the driver must focus on his or her own consciousness and relate every part of that thought to the power of the car; for the car has a life of its own, and this machine combined with petroleum can be, if not operated in a full state of consciousness, turned into a lethal weapon (Patterson). The subject in order to achieve full concentration of the dynamics of the road has to, therefore, be alone, and away from any distraction that might inhibit the driver’s ability to perform the proper act of motoring. This claim is evident in the statistic, “that about three quarters of commuters travel alone to work” (Freund and Martin, 22). The subjects are culturally conditioned to be alone, and are therefore isolationist, jeopardizing all other elements of life. Therefore, the individualized perspective of a car consumer or operator intensifies the need of marketers to address global needs in terms of a smaller unit—the purchaser of an automobile. American culture is so embedded with the concept of the individual that attempts to dethrone the sanctity of the individual is rejected outright, making an attempt to influence future generations through responsible environmental policies a most difficult proposition. Marketing of automobiles must influence not only the individual to purchase a car, but to purchase a new thought process of social-responsibility as a key component in the success of environmental policy.

An American Study: Mystification, Exceptionalism and Historical Trends

An auto identity has shaped American consumers ever since the inception of the invention of the internal combustion engine. Once viewed as a luxury item, cars are now manufactured and advertised to the masses with massive effects on the surrounding environment, and layout of the city. The move from high density cities to low density suburbs marks the age of the automotive suburbs. The notion of moving out is moving up in society and class ranks, is marked by the mystification of the car industry marketing strategy. For example in the book,
The Ecology of the Automobile, authors Peter Freud and George Martin examine a Nissan Sentra commercial that deliberately plays into the myth that is intertwined with the American Dream. The commercial is called “Go Bob”, and it depicts a man on a crowded interstate, then the character “Bob” states if only he had a, “sport sedan the road would belong to me” (Freud and Martin 88). Then with his new sport car, Bob is able to pass all the congestion on the interstate via his own lane with his name indicating that this lane is only for him. At the end of the commercial, a voiceover is heard stating that, “. . . because rich guys shouldn’t have all the fun” (Freud and Martin 88). This notion of the everyday man able to “transcend the limits of time, space, and traffic rules” leads to the notion that purchasing a commodity such as the car, is one that anyone can achieve, but this contradiction is clearly shown in the commercial as the authors point out that this type of thinking from the ultimate consumer, is undemocratic (Freud and Martin, 88). Consequently people who do not have access or the means of purchasing a car are bid out of the market, and prevented from achieving the falsely promised American Dream of upward mobility through the mobilization of the automobile. By examining the Chevy Volt advertisements, looking beyond the content of the commercial, and examining the targeted demographic audience of the advertisements, this methodology exposes the underlying ideologies behind the Chevy Volt.

The 2011 Chevy Volt “Thanks” commercial depicts the car, on an empty road, without any visible boundaries confining it except the exterior of the car. Also the fact that the car is electric clearly does not inhibit the driver from pursuing unnecessary road trips, as the voiceover states that the driver, “can plug into any socket and were not giving up road trips to get it” signifying a selfishness that is produced through this isolationist mentality of the car driver, the “windshield perspective” (Chevy Volt, Thanks). Even though the commercial seems to have a
universal quality about it, when the voiceover states that, “you can plug it in anywhere” it reveals a significant myth. It all leads back to the question of who has access, and who has the means of taking luxury road trips, and plugging the car in one’s home. This personal responsibility of plugging in the car, and being self reliant on finding a plug anywhere can be linked to the neoconservative agenda of self help and personal responsibility. This concept of not giving up road trips solidifies the inflexibility of the embedded car ideology of the car consumer and the car industry. The commercial concludes with a casual “thanks” and then the Volt is seen accelerating into the endless frontier without any traffic or pollution to prevent the road trip. These notions of, “freedom: the freedom to drive without gas and the freedom to drive wherever you want whenever you want”, are the underlying ideologies surrounding the campaign ads of the Chevy Volt (Nick Chambers).

Chevy’s most notable and iconic advertising campaigns, emerging in the mid-1950’s, have ultimately transformed the driving experience into a commoditized lifestyle. Initially the campaign advertisements of the 50’s depicted the car as a luxury item with personified characteristics, almost like the third wheel to the family. The notion of American exceptionalism and the American frontier, influenced by Fredrick Jackson’s Frontier Thesis, can be seen in these advertisements and through the advertising strategy of Chevy. The iconic Dinah Shore truly launched Chevrolet into the headlines of the mainstream media. Shore’s television showcase series, the *Dinah Shore Chevy Show*, beginning in 1957, featured an epic serenade to the one and only, Chevy. The song, “See the USA in your Chevrolet” helped Chevy become not only part of American pop culture, but also “helped make Chevy the unchallenged leader in America” (The Pop History Dig). One line in the song that epitomizes American exceptionalism in the car market is the line, “America is the greatest land of all . . . Drive your Chevrolet through the
USA” (The Pop Culture Dig). This call to the American car consumer depicts the true sign of patriotism as displaying it through a material item, Chevrolet. In the song, Shore proceeds with the description of the limitless boundaries made possible by the advent of the highway system, where Americans are free to drive leisurely among the vast landscapes of the “Rockies out in the West” and up “North and Down South” (The Pop History Dig). Chevy essentially launched an “American Revolution” in the advertisement industry; with Chevy spending up to, “$100 million annually (in 1960’s dollars) on TV ads and sponsorship” starting in the 1960’s; today Chevy spends an estimated, “$600 million to $700 million each year on advertising” (Elliot).

The ultimate historic shift in the marketing strategy for Chevy occurred when marketing strategists changed from the advertising agency, Campbell-Ewald based in Detroit, whose slogans “Chevy, Like a Rock”, “See the USA in your Chevrolet”, and “Chevy, the Heart Beat of America”, reflected the nationalistic ideologies displayed in post-World War II era, and representative of a Soviet back lash during the Cold War era. As the advertising agency for Chevy since 1919, this dismissal is representative of the changing consumer market. In today’s globalized consumer market domestically and internationally, Joel Ewanick, the new marketing consultant of GM, made the shift from domestically located advertising firm to an internationally renowned marketing firm, Good By, Silverstein, and Partners, whose headquarters range from various locations in North America as well as abroad. The shift occurred as a result of the bailout of the Big Three Auto companies in April, 2010. In hopes of an increase in sales, the decision was based on the advertising agency’s success in advertisements of other car companies like Germany’s Porsche. The new marketing strategy by Chevy encapsulates the older ideologies of the previous commercials like, “An American Revolution”, but with a technological twist coded in green. The new catch phrase “Chevy Runs Deep” is a less overt way of displaying the
nationalistic notions so prevalently displayed in the older commercials. The new Chevy commercials features the voice of the comedian Tim Allen, and each of the commercials emphasizes Chevy’s innovative past, present and future- recognizing a continuum that alienates neither end of the consumer-spectrum. In the *Chevy Runs Deep* commercial, the theme of a company “(pulling themselves) by the bootstrap” is prevalent as the voiceover of Tim Allen looms over the iconic images of what it means to be American, and images iconic of the American Dream. The words “ingenuity, integrity, and optimism” are heard, while images of young white men are building the frame of a house in what is to be a developed suburb with multiple single family homes. Each historical moment from Chevy’s inception in the auto plant to a couple, representative of the 50’s, driving in their dream “boat”, and then images of today’s consumers, are all linked by the American-characteristic and cultural icon of personal power-- the Chevy. This commercial’s essential target audience represents the upper-middle class, young, educated, and white demographic. The people who built Chevy and therefore Americans today have no less character, and are “no less strong” as they are picking up where the generation before has left off. This is the characteristic of the Chevy consumer which is also conveniently white. Images of white America and what it means to be patriotic via the purchase of a Chevy are being reconstructed, and re-imaged through technological innovations in green design as featured in the Chevy Volt commercials and images of the Volt. The concept of nature is described as one that the Volt can “get around”, and overcome the challenges posed by nature. The Chevy Volt makes driving a guilt free and limitless adventure, “that goes far really far” because we are “nomads” (Chevy).

In terms of mechanical product, the Chevy Volt is unique from other conventional and older hybrids like the Prius in that it is an extended range electric car. This means that to be
functional the Chevy Volt needs to be plugged into an electrical socket to recharge before heading out on the road because the electric motor functions as the primary source of power, and the internal combustion engine acts as the backup. The overall fuel economy of the Chevy Volt when exceeding the limit of the all electrical capacity of the car which ranges from around 25-50 miles, equivalent to 63 miles to the gallon of gasoline, but the all electrical range is estimated at 93 miles to the gallon. The lithium ion battery is the main component that makes the car more efficient, and outperforms the nickel-metal hydride cells that are found in the conventional hybrid, like the Prius. These types of batteries are lighter weight which contributes to the overall efficiency of the car, and extend the life cycle of the car (Chevy). Chevy is still in the process of designing an even more efficient design for the next generation of the Volt. Some of the technological components that are adding to the cost of the first generation Volts are the “LCD screen used to monitor the battery charge, power range to recharge or refill as well as an efficiency gage that give you real time feedback, the energy-efficient Bose speaker sound system, and air conditioning (heating, power steering and breaking) that are powered by electricity instead of the gas engine” (Chevy). Further integrating the Volt into the American lifestyle, there is a “convenient” mobile “app” for anyone who owns a smart phone. This app virtually puts the power of the car literally in the palm of the consumer’s hand; the driver will be able to view, “the battery charge level, available range, tire pressure, remote lock and unlock”, and even control the temperature of the car (Chevy). The Chevy Volt owner will also be able to set an alert system through their email to let them know when to recharge their Volt which is marketed to consumers as a truly “seamless” lifestyle (Chevy).

Comparing the Chevy Volt to other Material Items
In Carolyn De la Pena’s “The Materials of American: Studies Reading Electric Belts”, she examines advertisements for electrical belts used in the early 1900’s. De la Pena looks for the hidden clues by using different methodologies for examining the belts. By studying the belts through the lens of a cultural artifact she goes beyond the physical component of the material object, and also looks at the, “rhetorical properties of the belts” as well (De la Pena 226). One question she poses addresses, links the consumers of the past and the present. The power of electricity that captivated past consumers has now transcended through the same awe and amazement with the process of the domestication of electricity; this is correlated to today’s consumers of the Volt. The beginning of the 1900’s marked the industrial age of American society. Electricity began to encounter people in their everyday routines, and surrounded them in their homes as well. Consumers of the product, “wanted to be part of the electrification process”, and “participate physically in the electrifying process” (De la Pena, 228). This correlates to the Chevy Volt and its advertisements, but the difference in this contemporary consumer culture is that electricity is able to transcend its traditional use both in the private and publics sphere.

Electricity, usually thought of as an environmental drain, is now through the advancement of technology, used to help preserve the environment, and conserve resources that would otherwise be utilized for regular internal combustion engine automobiles. De la Pena references historian, Carolyn Marvin who asserts the claim that in the, “late nineteenth-century Americans participated in a popular ‘electric theology’ or the belief that with electricity all things were possible” (De la Pena, 229). This is “electric theology” is also the powerful underlying ideology behind the Volt and other hybrids. Electricity as a “cleaner source of power” is transformed into the idea of preserving the environment, and reducing carbon emissions that are associated with conventional automobiles. The Chevy Volt stands out from the rest of the other hybrids on the
market because of its ability to produce its own regenerative source through the smaller gas generator known as the buffer. This way the consumer does not have to be tied down to cords when driving on the road. The driver can continue a journey for another 350 miles even after the battery’s energy remains below the threshold (Mayerson). Consequently the complex design of the engine’s lithium ion battery adds to a significant amount of weight and cost to the car. The battery is built with a heating and cooling system which adds $10,000 to the price of the Volt. Also the electric motors in general are expensive because as they “rely on valuable rare earth elements like neodymium” which are only found in limited quantities in places like China (Lyle).

The total price of the Chevy Volt is $41,000, with the manufactures providing a charging cord, but for recharging to be even more efficient Chevy suggest that the customer purchase a home charging station that will cut the time of recharging in half. The cost of the home charging station is $490 plus an installation fee. The Volt customer is also, “eligible for a $7,500 federal tax credit” with additional state tax incentives, but this is only to the first 200,000 customers (Whoriskey). If the cost of the Volt proves to be too expensive to pay in full, Chevy is offering a lease at $350 for the first 36 months with $2,500 due at signing (Chevy).

In comparison the Nissan Leaf is $33,600, and also provides for a 36 month lease offered at $349 per month with $1,999 due at signing; the car is also eligible for federal and state tax credits. Many consumers do not seem to be phased by the higher price tag of the Volt compared to the Leaf. Chevy since January 2011 has seen total of 647 Volts sold compared to the Nissan Leaf that has only sold 106 (Lyle). According to the Washington Post, Deloitte’s Consulting interviews confirm that most purchasers of the Chevy Volt, and other electric cars, “will come from households making over $200,000 a year”, and therefore the government subsidizes industries to develop new green
technologies, which in fact, is essentially subsidizing the rich for more toys that they already have leading to a, “income redistribution toward the top” (Whoriskey).

Conclusion: Chevy Runs Deep

The newly designed marketing campaign of the Chevy Volt is reflective of changing consumer interests and demands. Changing environmental conditions and increasing gas prices have led Chevy to invest as of 2011, $700 million in retooling factories to meet these changing technological needs, and a $ 1 billion commitment to the Volt (Mayersohn). Even though the electric car and hybrid demand is increasing, the Chevy Volt advertisements reflect the old ideologies of the iconic Chevy driver, and the target audience of a primarily white, middle-class demographic. The advertisements of the Chevy Volt describe the car as unique but rely, too, on its iconic Chevy appeal, and it is therefore “more car than electric” (Chevy). Chevy is trying to capture a younger consumer demographic concerned about the environment while sustaining its old captive audience by keeping the unique design of the Chevy auto body. This demographic is different from the Prius target demographic in that consumers of the domestic cars tend to be less liberal, and usually are white. Although the environmental issues may appeal to a younger, and more educated demographic, Chevy still remains true to their rooted notions of what it means to be “American.”

Examples of American exceptionalism are replete in the advertisements of the Chevy Volt, as American culture is exalted relative to the product and lifestyle offered by international competitors and on an absolute scale, through a reliance of embedded notions of freedom and individuality. Through the use of all white actors or images of suburban middle-class society,
the American Dream continues to be harder for people with less money and status to attain in this increasing globalized economy. The market for automobiles is not flexible, but depends on cultural values that are intrinsically identified as American—freedom of choice and freedom to travel. Whether we are free to travel by car, is the task to which advertising agencies are enlisted, to influence the American public that they may have their proverbial cake and eat it too, in terms of retaining the power of a car while promoting the environment. Through a case study of the advertising campaign of the newest innovation in cars, the Chevy Volt, it is revealed that a shift in the cultural paradigm of the United States is required if environmental consciousness is to be a paramount concern to current purchasers of automobiles. The effectiveness of a commercial advertising campaign hinges on the ability of Madison Avenue to link the iconic past with the present needs of Americans. The success of marketing, in this way, has ramifications not only to a changing relationship with the car, but with the economic and environmental issues so dependent upon the car culture of America.

Work Cited


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