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Doing Gender: Cars and Culture in the United States

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Abstract

This qualitative research study aims to define and describe gender stereotypes and car culture. It will also explain how these stereotypes influence car culture and vice versa. This paper aims to explain how the mass media uses car culture in the United States and imposes gender stereotypes. The mass media I will be discussing includes but is not limited to commercials and magazine adverts. This paper asserts that by portraying what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman, car companies build car culture and use pre-existing constructs of gender for marketing it. According to mainstream media and culture, the car people buy indicates how they perform gender. The commercials, culture, and even the dealerships are all designed to guide people to buy the right car for their gender.

Gender is something that someone does or performs; it is not innately linked to our biological sex. Men do not behave a certain way or say certain things because they are men, and women do not behave a certain way or talk a certain way just because they are women. Our society has built and replicated a link between sex and gender. I remember my Dad driving the family car to church while my Mom sat in the passenger seat. I would help my dad work on the cars when something went wrong while my Mom would stay in the house, cooking or cleaning. When the time came for us to buy a new car, my Dad was the one talking to the salesman, hashing out the car's technical details and the financial details of the new car. My point is this, car culture in America is gendered and thus creates gender stereotypes and binaries. The mainstream media, car dealerships, and overall car experience are linked to how people perform gender. For example, if you were to imagine a 20-year old bachelor buying a car, would he opt for the Chrysler minivan, or would he opt for the Dodge sports car? Most of us have the idea in our minds about which gender belongs in what car. By analyzing media, dealership interactions, and general sentiments surrounding car culture, I will analyze exactly how the car we buy indicates how we perform gender. His article on automobile commercials and advertisements is the first stop on our road trip to gendered car culture. When car manufacturers create advertisements for the media, there is a pronounced difference between how cars are advertised to men and advertised to women. For men, the cars being advertised are sporty, streamlined race cars or sedans. For my first piece of evidence, I will analyze Vin Diesel in the Dodge Charger and Challenger commercials appropriately dubbed the Brotherhood of Muscle. In one of the commercials, cars can be seen racing around a desolate shipping yard or on an empty street. You can only see Vin's shoulders and head. When they are racing the cars on the track, you can see a female's hand with painted nails, wearing rings, and daintily holding the start flag. This

commercial is indicative of how society expects us to see men and women. For men, we see their head and shoulders, their muscles, and sheer strength. They are typically alone in their cars, and they are racing on a dirt road. This concept alludes to the idea that men have no family ties, they should be competitive, and they should be strong and muscular. To complete the perfect man package, Dodge would like you to buy one of their sports cars so men can properly show off and replicate gender stereotypes. Vin Diesel then goes on to say, “You can win by a mile, or you can win by an inch, but winning is winning.” After unpacking the “Brotherhood of Muscle” commercials, you can see that dealerships and society expect men to drive sports cars because owning and driving a car should be primarily a competition; for society and men, it is not the fact that you got from point A to point B safely but the fact that you won the race is important.

Women in car commercials come with just as many gender stereotypes. In our society, women are praised for completing household duties, raising the children, and running errands. In the Chrysler Pacifica commercial, Kathryn Hanh is parked at a soccer field, dropping her daughter off. Kathryn has parked her car by the field, and the commercial is about her showcasing all the new family-friendly features the car has to offer. She is seen in the back-seat knitting, vacuuming, painting her nails, and crying to a romantic movie. These are stereotypically feminine acts. The car commercial reinforces the idea that a woman’s identity should be passive, docile, and bound to the home, even when she is in a car. Rather than showcasing the car’s mechanical or useful specifications, the car company directs this ad to women by showing off all the features a homemaker might need. There is even a vacuum cleaner loaded into the car in case you need to pick up the messes made by the kids. Kathryn is reading the user manual and reads, in a seductive voice, I might add, “do not pour mineral oil in the engine or damage may result.” This statement insinuates that a woman may mistake “mineral oil” for motor oil, pour it in the

engine and damage the car. Alluding to the gender stereotype that women know nothing about automobile maintenance or repair. In a peer-reviewed journal, Margaret Walsh explains how car companies advertised to women. She states that “Automobile manufacturers and their advertising agents recognized that female consumers were undertaking more of their household functions by car, but they also identified those female drivers were interested in cars that could symbolize their particular style and beauty” (Walsh 2011, p. 61-62). The fact that advertising agents are using women’s interest to sell them cars is smart but unethical. Walsh explains that these advertising agents are essentially just selling cars to women because the car could exemplify the perfect lifestyle for “a modern woman” when in reality, these advertising agents are just replicating gender stereotypes and are alluding that women should buy cars to make themselves seem more feminine. Walsh goes on to explain that “If the homemaker had “her” car, she could both manage her domestic tasks and maintain her standing among her peers. Some families started to believe that two cars were essential.” (Walsh 2011, p.61). To maintain her life doing domestic tasks and keeping up with her female friends in society, buying a car was a requirement for the domestic woman. Not because it was an easy and convenient way of getting around town, but rather because the car company primarily sold cars to women as a symbol of “the traveling housewife.” This idea of women buying and using cars just for domestic tasks does not end at the media, however. Rather, this idea of women buying cars superficially has spilled over into the dealerships. Now dealerships are a place in which gender stereotypes and performance are a part of the car buying experience.

When Men walk into dealerships, the sales staff usually greets them, and both parties walk out to the car lot and decide on a car and relatively quickly discuss price and payments. In an article by Ian Ayres, a study was conducted in which “negotiations for more than 300 new

cars, Chicago car dealers offered black and female testers significantly higher prices than the white males with whom they were paired, even though all testers used identical bargaining strategies.” (Ayres, 1995, p. 7). This data shows that dealers offered female test drivers a higher mark-up than men for the same car. Regardless of an identical bargain style, when women walk into dealerships, they are often ignored, belittled, and patronized. Our culture believes women do not know much about the cars’ mechanics and can be swindled by sales staff who know more about the car. In his article on car culture and gender, Chris Lezotte writes that “Women are subject to sexist and patronizing behavior from automotive personnel, but they also often wind up paying considerably more for a vehicle than a male customer.” (Lezotte 2013). As Lezotte explains, gender stereotypes run rampant in dealerships. Because our society gives no credit to women being savvy with cars, they are taken advantage of and often patronized by car dealerships. In her study on selling cars to women, Ellen Gerl states that “In the matter of customer treatment, a large majority of dealers thought they treated women equally with men. Only 52 percent of women agreed, and most of the rest considered that they were treated unfavorably: dealers did not take them seriously, acted as if they did not know anything about cars, or avoided discussion of price. In short, these same dealers, much like advertisers, have overlooked a major market.” (Gerl et al., 2013, p. 216). Again, I reiterate this point: whether consciously or subconsciously, because of gender stereotypes and prejudices, dealers were not only disrespectful, but there were also selling cars to women for marked-up prices on the basis that women know nothing about cars. This gender inequality and issues surrounding car culture do not stop there, however.

The ideas of gendered car culture and the stereotypes that come with that must have started from somewhere. Most notably in history, women have been barred from public life, so

the idea of women owning a car and using that to pursue the freedoms of driving was often seen as a threat to masculinity and the home. Because women were often the sole homemakers and caretakers of children, husbands did not want their wives leaving home or the children to pursue things like jobs, driving, or other concepts of “freedom.” Research tells us that this barring from public life happens with young women as early as childhood and into adolescence when getting a license is common among American youth. Amy Best writes that “boys across cultural groups seemed to enjoy greater freedom and fewer restrictions when it came to driving and having cars. As suggested by many interview participants, parents seem to experience fewer safety concerns for boys than girls. This concept may be in part tied to the surprisingly persistent pressure to maintain a young woman’s sexual innocence.” (Best, 2006 p. 21). It seems that parents are more concerned with the safety of their young daughters on the road than their male children because of the daughters’ “sexual innocence.” Therefore, we can surmise that parents do not want their daughters to drive to prevent sexual experiences. However, the sons are free to learn about cars and driving from an early age. I believe that this gender inequality regarding cars and gender is why women are treated as second class citizens when it comes to knowing about, buying, and maintaining automobiles. Not only does this issue occur with teenage women: This idea of women not needing to drive usually reappears later in their lives. In her paper on why women stopped driving, Jean Wilkins quotes a woman whose husband has retired. The elderly woman says, “And see, my husband, bless his heart, he just doted over me so much, so attentive to my needs that he just simply would not let me go about driving.” (Wilkins et al., 1999, p. 2). So, because the husband had nothing to do during his free time, he never left his wife to do her driving and would rather sell her car and drive her around instead of letting her travel freely. Another interviewed woman said that “– My husband will take me [shopping] . . . and you

cannot do shopping when you know your husband is sitting there having a fit. – I feel like a prisoner in the house because I cannot get out and go. There I sit.” (Wilkins et al., 1999,p. 3). Because these husbands are not comfortable letting their wives drive, they would rather drive them around and wait for them in the cars because they would instead take away their wives driving freedoms. This gender inequality of barring women from driving at different points in their lives is severely limiting. It is another example of how women are second class citizens when it comes to car culture.

In this paper, I have laid out the specific spheres of culture in which the concept of cars and driving have come preloaded with gender-specific prejudices. I have identified that women are shown cars in advertisements in which other women use them to transport the family, complete errands, and maintain the “household.” Women are also discriminated against when trying to buy a car, being offered the same car as men and being charged significantly more. I have also identified the root of these issues. This issue is based in our culture in which women are typically not allowed to drive until long after their male counterparts, and that their driving is often more restricted. Women are systematically disadvantaged when it comes to cars—not allowing young women to be introduced to the world of vehicles and driving sets up gender inequalities and prejudices that have material effects later in their personal lives and society.

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