American Artemis At the Wheel: Motherhood and Identity Conflict in Automobile Consumption

Diane M. Martin, Pamplin School of Business Administration, University of Portland
John W Schouten, Pamplin School of Business Administration, University of Portland
Debra Stephens, Pamplin School of Business Administration, University of Portland

ABSTRACT In the U.S. market the two most popular alternatives in the category of high-capacity passenger vehicles are the minivan and the large sport utility vehicle. For many consumers, particularly mothers, the choice presents a dilemma that pits functionality against style in the arena of social identity construction. We investigate that dilemma using ethnographic data from studies of minivan and SUV owners. We discuss the prevalence of two female archetypes, the Good Mother and Artemis, and examine how consumers fitting those archetypes respond to vehicle choice. We conclude that sociocultural trends activate certain archetypes. This may lead to social identity conflicts, which marketers may exploit to create new markets.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12516/gender/v08/GCB-08

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
American Artemis at the Wheel: 
Motherhood and Identity Conflict in Automobile Consumption

Diane M. Martin, Pamplin School of Business Administration, University of Portland 
John W Schouten, Pamplin School of Business Administration, University of Portland 
Debra Stephens*, Pamplin School of Business Administration, University of Portland

ABSTRACT

In the U.S. market the two most popular alternatives in the category of high-capacity passenger vehicles are the minivan and the large sport utility vehicle. For many consumers, particularly mothers, the choice presents a dilemma that pits functionality against style in the arena of social identity construction. We investigate that dilemma using ethnographic data from studies of minivan and SUV owners. We discuss the prevalence of two female archetypes, the Good Mother and Artemis, and examine how consumers fitting those archetypes respond to vehicle choice. We conclude that socio-cultural trends activate certain archetypes. This may lead to social identity conflicts, which marketers may exploit to create new markets.

DRIVING AS CONSUMPTION PERFORMANCE

Few people would deny the ongoing American love affair with the automobile. From the earliest utilitarian beginnings around the turn of the last century to the explosion of styles, functions and fashions we see on the road today, automobiles are part of Americana. Vehicles contribute to our social identity construction in powerful ways (Martin, Schouten and McAlexander 2006; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). No consumer purchase has been more successfully positioned as a reflection of the self in the American social landscape than the automobile. Driving one’s vehicle constitutes a public consumption performance frequently associated with self-concept.

The Family Hauler: A Concise History

A number of social forces (e.g., privileging children’s comfort and experience) and regulatory forces (e.g., child safety-seat laws) combine to render the basic sedan unsuitable as a family vehicle for many American households that regularly transport more than two children. The alternatives for vehicles with higher passenger capacity include various adaptations of the station wagon, the van, and the so-called sport utility vehicle.

When post-war American parents hit the road with their baby-boom children for a family vacation they did so in a large sedan or station wagon. The Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser with its skylight trim windows was the quintessential family touring coach. In this era Dad was typically a sole provider, Mom was a queen of domesticity, and airplane travel was an adventure and a luxury. By the time baby-boomers started having their own children the American station wagon was
passé. It had gone the way of sock hops, soda fountains, and drive-in theaters. In its place a revolutionary new vehicle, the minivan, became the stylish conveyance for families. It offered levels of space and utility never before seen in a passenger vehicle. What’s more, for image-conscious dads the early minivan could almost be said to evoke the counterculture vans of their youth.

As minivans proliferated throughout suburbia their symbolic associations changed. For a generation of women who valued career and equality, the minivan became a rolling cliché of one-dimensional motherhood. The feminization of the minivan made it especially unpopular with baby-boom dads whose own masculinity arguably was increasingly threatened by women’s workplace gains. The answer to the minivan dilemma was the cultural invention of the sport utility vehicle. By tapping into the rugged tradition of off-road vehicles, car designers were able to infuse high-capacity passenger vehicles with an aura of masculine leisure pursuit.

Initially SUVs were the purview and prerogative of auto makers with experience in trucks and off-road vehicles. Before long however, everyone was getting into the SUV act. Many companies had full stables of SUVs, with something for every size need. We knew the product had matured completely when luxury makers like Cadillac, Lexus, and even Porsche relied on SUVs to bolster sagging sales. Now, for the first time, the sales trajectories of large SUVs appear to be in decline. Unprecedented fuel prices and an unsteady economy are causing American families to rethink their automotive decisions.

The Conundrum

In the consumer choice between minivan and SUV emerges a conundrum. In short, minivans surpass SUVs in nearly all objective measures of functionality (i.e., safety, purchase price, operating costs, space utility, and ride comfort), and yet SUVs for years gobbled up share in the high-capacity passenger vehicle market. The only utilitarian advantage of an SUV is its suitability for off-road use, but the actual incidence of off-road use among SUV owners is miniscule. The obvious reason that so many consumers choose SUVs over minivans is that symbolic and expressive considerations override those of functionality. However, in the context of oil politics and global warming we could argue that said symbolic benefits are purchased at a heavy cost. This article looks beneath the minivan/SUV conundrum to reveal insights into the nature of American orientations to gender in consumption.

METHODOLOGY

For more than a decade the authors and our colleagues have been steeped in consumer research in the automotive industry. Relevant to this essay we conducted many dozens of two hour, in-home interviews with women who were the primary drivers of either minivans or SUVs. Informants spanned the economic spectrum from working class to affluent in all regions of the continental United States. They ranged in age from 20 to 50 years. Most were mothers with at least two children; however we also interviewed childless women who planned to have children. We augmented all interviews with tours of homes, cars, and garages. On several occasions we accompanied families on drive-along experiences or outings to such places as a water park, a softball game, or a shopping mall. The research objectives included the exploration of purchase and consumption motivations. We delved into functional, symbolic/expressive, and experiential dimensions of automobile
consumption with a particular focus on contextualizing the consumption within the larger picture of individual and household values and lifestyles.

We captured data with a combination of videotape and field notes. Our analysis began with field debriefs among the research team and progressed to intensive interpretive analyses of the recorded data. We identified emergent themes as well as exploring *a priori* hypotheses (Schouten 1991). We prepared qualitative data matrices to explore similarities and differences along thematic lines. One of the most strongly recurring themes, and the impetus for this article, is twofold. First, many parents of young children buy and drive minivans with strong reservations tied to resistance to the image of the vehicle. Second, parents who buy SUVs commonly acknowledge that minivans would be more suitable for their needs, but that they simply couldn’t reconcile themselves to purchase them.

The epistemological stance of this essay is probably best described as interpretive with critical implications. Feminist scholars have long called for research by, for, and about women to counter the dominance of male-centric literature in consumer behavior (e.g., Bristor and Fisher 1993) While placing women consumers at the center of this study is insufficient to constitute feminist scholarship, it does offer an important opportunity to address consumption behaviors particular to women. Rather than taking a critical feminist lens to phenomena of automobile consumption, this article probes consumption behaviors at the heart of certain social-identity and role conflicts that are limited by the sex of the consumer. The role at issue is motherhood.

**FINDINGS**

**Focusing on Mothers**

As a highly public form of consumption behavior, owning and driving a vehicle suggests important implications for social identity construction. Social identity is a conceptualization that derives from acknowledging oneself as a member of a social group and all the meanings and values associated with that membership (Tajfel 1981). Reed (2002) argues that such a “theory can encompass various kinds of motives that would lead a consumer to adopt a social identity either for impression-management purposes or intrapsychic motivations.” Motherhood has long been held as the dominant, expected and glorified marker of adulthood in a woman’s life. Considered to be an essential task or stage of women's development, the stance toward motherhood is a crucial part of a woman's social identity (Phoenix, Wollett and Lloyd 1991). In America, the baby boom following WW II signaled “an era of virulent pronatalism” (Lisle 1996, p. 9) which continues today. In everyday parlance and in the academic literature few writers have drawn the distinction between “woman” and “mother.” Searches for academic inquiry and interest into the lives of women who are not mothers is noticeable by its absence. Landa (1990) notes there is “no comprehensive theory of human reproduction to place voluntary childlessness in a theoretical context” (p. 140). Motherhood is celebrated as the essential female experience and women are just expected to be mothers. The social prevalence of motherhood as the quintessential marker of female adulthood underscores the rationale to focus on American mothers. Women’s role transitions associated with motherhood are dramatic, public and rife with conflicting expectations.
American Myths of the Good Mother (1980 to present)

In general society expects women to be mothers and asks them to be good mothers. What constitutes a good mother, however, is a matter of shifting popular opinion. In a matter of only about three decades multiple models of ideal motherhood have surfaced in America.

The Super Mom. As increasing numbers of women entered the workforce in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Super Mom ideal took hold. Baby Boomer women were told they could – and should – do it all: build a successful career, bear and rear healthy, well-adjusted children, foster emotionally intimate and sexually satisfying relationships with their husbands, and of course keep the house spotless and cook tasty, nutritious dinners to be consumed by the whole family at once (Villani and Ryan 1997). This particular myth of the Good Mother was soon followed by a backlash that originated from several sources with conflicting views of women and motherhood. Religious conservatives touted full time motherhood as a moral imperative (Villani and Ryan 1997) while parenting experts portrayed it as a psychological one (Holcomb 1998). Popular media vilified working mothers for their selfishness, materialism, and ambition (Holcomb 1998), and in response to this backlash, feminist scholars defended them, arguing that children can benefit from seeing their mothers working (Shreve 1987) and that working women could cope effectively with the demands of career, motherhood and marriage (Crosby 1991; Glenn, Chang and Forcey 1994). As West (2002) observes, these attempts to defend Super Mom only served to perpetuate the myth.

The Soccer Mom. The term “soccer mom” may have been used as early as 1976, during the decade women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers (Safire 1996). The soccer mom achieved mythic status through widespread media portrayals of her as the swing voter in the 1996 U.S. presidential election. She was the quintessential American middle-class mother: white, married, between the ages of 32 and 50, with children under 18, and residing in the suburbs (MacFarquhar 1996). While media pundits of the time disagreed about her employment status (MacFarquhar 1996; Safire 1996; West 2002), there was a consensus that what set her apart was that her children were her first priority, and she was willing to make significant sacrifices in order to fulfill their wants and needs. In her minivan she would carry drinks and snacks for them, and she would juggle her work schedule in order to attend all their games and other such events. Unlike the June Cleaver mother of the 1950s and 60s, whose roles as wife and homemaker were equally important as motherhood, the soccer mom defined herself primarily as a mother, relegating her other roles, including that of employee, to minor status (West 2002; Chira 1998). The current incarnation of the soccer mom is a stay-at-home mother by choice and privilege, and the role (along with the vehicle) is so stigmatized that in the popular media, “soccer mom” and “minivan mom” are used pejoratively with no elaboration or justification offered.

The Mommy Wars. The continuing debate about whether mothers should stay at home or seek employment has been dubbed the “Mommy Wars” by the popular media. Johnston and Swanson (2004) observe: It is as if at-home and employed mothers are pitted against each other in a crazed cultural contest for “Worst Mother of the Year.” We imagine the at-home mother, toxic with Prozac and smiling a beatific smile that suggests she’s one day shy of
institutionalization, freezing organic vegetables in ice cube trays for baby, constructing life-size geodesic forts out of rolled newspaper for toddler, and baking welcome-home brownies for her kindergartner. We imagine the employed mother, frazzled, yelling at her children to hurry up, dragging screaming kids and diaper bags to the minivan to drop off children in substandard daycare, while clearly preoccupied with concluding a big business deal on her cell phone. (p. 497)

In an effort to determine if mothers in the two categories have internalized the “war rhetoric,” Johnston and Swanson (2004) interviewed 98 married mothers of preschool children, self-defined as employed full-time (39), employed part-time (29), and at-home full-time (30). Part-time employed and at-home mothers characterized full-time employed mothers in terms of the trappings of an affluent business woman (suit, brief case, Land Rover), attention to her physical appearance (thin, regularly trimmed hair), and her stressed responses to her children (yelling, screaming, falling apart), but also as organized, efficient, and conflicted. Full-time employed mothers described at-home mothers as isolated and dependent on their relationship with their children, but also as relaxed, flexible, and very involved with their children. At-home mothers perceived the culture as more supportive of employed mothers, while full-time employed mothers viewed it as supporting at-home mothers. Both groups reported feeling at odds with and devalued by the culture.

ARCHETYPES OF MOTHERING

Cultural archetypes can be useful tools for identifying gendered default behaviors. At a macro level, archetypes also provide convenient mythic associations for multiple expressions of self. Thompson’s (2004) work with archetypes in consumer behavior theory conceptually parallels Slotkin's (1973) notion of a national mythology (the wild west in this case) and develops a “theoretical formulation that offers a critical logic for exploring how cultural myths are leveraged to create distinctive marketplace mythologies that, in turn, serve diverse, and often competing, ideological interests.” (Thompson 2004, p. 163) Thompson’s (2004) theory addresses the “interrelationships between cultural mythologies, marketplace structures, and the interpretive predilections of key consumer constituencies.” (p.163) Slotkin argues that “the ultimate archetypical questions of human existence are spoken to by the myth; but the success of the myth depends on the creation of a distinctive cultural tradition in the selection and use of metaphor” (1973, p. 14).

Archetypes are deeply seated in social consciousness and effect public performance behavior. Barthes (1972) explains that formulaic interpretations – or myths – act ideologically, invoking taken-for-granted interpretations about a society that seem “natural” rather than as defined by historical, social and economic circumstances (Barthes 1972; Slotkin 1992). Thompson concurs and underscores the fact that mythic archetypes have long permeated consumer culture. When archetypes are considered from a gendered perspective, sex-based differences are evident. Overarching archetypes for men are generally situated in the heroic, the warrior defending the nation, the community and the family with brawn, wit, and power. But for women, there is no dominant female archetype. In the broadest terms, women are offered the Good Mother or the heroic non-mother exemplified by Artemis, the virgin huntress. In exploring the relationship between these two female archetypes and their contrasting ideological agendas we find evidence of gendered double-binds in mothers’ public performance of identity.
construction, exemplified by material metaphors inherent in automotive purchasing behavior.

The Good Mother Archetype

The myth of the Good Mother is one of the most ideologically pervasive myths. The Good Mother represents kindness and gentleness, while offering comfort and protection. She wants to nurture and grow everything in sight. The Good Mother focuses all her energy on her offspring. She wants to feed you, make sure you are warm and look after you. Her job is to make sure you grow up properly, safely and happily.

The informants in our studies perceive mothering as an essential part of a full life. For some of them it was a life dream now realized. For some it is a calling from God. These women clearly enjoy spending time with their kids and find fulfillment as parents. A few informants fit the Good Mother archetype fairly well. They were stay-home moms, comfortable with traditional gender roles and divisions of labor. They tended to supervise play dates for their children, provide transportation to various child-centered activities throughout the week, volunteer in children’s schools, and otherwise live their lives in support of their children’s growth and success. The few women who drove minivans and expressed no reservations about the class of vehicle or its public image also were most centrally invested in motherhood for their social identities.

The Artemis Archetype

Artemis is the ultimate sportswoman: outdoorsy, truly present and reveling in her body, pushing her body to its physical limits. She displays an intensity of focus, can be competitive and enjoys the thrill of the hunt. Artemis savors her independence, freedom and autonomy. She enjoys being alone in her own company and yet is also profoundly connected to the Sisterhood. In her role as protector of women and children, Artemis gains her worth from who she is and what she does more than from who she is connected to or partnered with. As the Goddess of the Moon, Artemis is familiar with charting the wilderness within human souls and navigating her way around the inner darkness. She does not scare easily and is compassionate and empathetic. The Artemis archetype has an affinity for nature and is found anywhere women love being with nature, enjoying their physicality, and confronting some wild new frontier. In comparison to the Good Mother, the Artemis displays qualities often associated with heroic male archetypes: competition, freedom and autonomy. Rather than bearing and nurturing her own children, the Artemis takes on the role of protector without giving up her independence and sense of adventure.

The Artemis archetype is arguably the dominant role model for young American women. Heroic characters dominate public consciousness of women in virtually every popular medium from sports to television and movies to video games. Girl power, whether exemplified by Mia Hamm kicking a ball into the net or by Charlie’s Angels kicking bad-guy butt, means excelling in traditionally masculine and physical pursuits. Unfortunately for the majority of women the modern Artemis also features a nearly unattainable physique that pairs boyishly slim hips and a board-flat abdomen with decidedly robust breasts and delicate, if not sensuously feminine, facial features.

The Paradox: Artemis as the Good Mother

Role conflict arises when Artemis types become mothers. Although they defend the
decision to have children, they readily admit that they give up a lot in the bargain. They perceive motherhood to mean surrendering, to varying degrees, youth, freedom, friends, indulgences, careers, and selfish pursuits. While being a father dovetails with the overarching male archetype of protector and provider for others, being a mother invites women to experience the inherent contradictions of ideologies between the Good Mother and the Artemis.

We do not mean to imply that Artemis types cannot be good mothers. The women in our studies with clear Artemis tendencies not only saw themselves as good mothers, but they could hardly imagine themselves mothering any other way. One of our informants regularly takes her young sons fishing or shooting and routinely dives into major home-improvement projects. Her first gift from her husband was a tool box of her own and a roll of red caution tape that says “danger.” Another informant plays professional tackle football and works from home in her own business while raising two preschool daughters. Another wakes at five-thirty every morning to get in a run and some personal time before dealing with children. Yet another was revealed (by her proud husband) to have punched her daughter’s male coach for what she perceived as verbal abusiveness to her daughter and insolence to herself in the course of a girls’ rugby game.

The paradox between the Good Mother and Artemis archetypes surfaces in the context of social identity. Even in motherhood they cling to role-identities that underscore their independence, their youthfulness, and their physicality. What Artemis moms find distasteful, even impossible to swallow, is the notion that someone might regard them as one-dimensional or “just moms.” Hence the resistance to driving minivans.

FROM ARCHETYPES TO MARKETS

The Good Mother and the Minivan

The primacy of children in “minivan families” was evident in the extension of children’s things throughout many of their households. To a noticeably greater degree than in “SUV households” we observed toys, children’s games, and other child paraphernalia inhabiting traditionally pro-adult spaces such as living rooms and dining areas. This may have been attributable in part to the somewhat lower socio-economic skewing of minivan owners, which may indicate smaller houses and greater difficulty of maintaining primarily adult spaces. In one case parents had given up the master bedroom to their children to better accommodate an abundance of children’s stuff.

Within Good Mother peer groups, a social hierarchy appears to evolve in ways that place emphasis on providing for and protecting the family. Children’s activities come first. Children’s accomplishments are the first order of conversation. Owning the “best minivan” for the family becomes a badge of honor within this social group. Said one stay-home mother of her upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood, “[Our model of minivan] is definitely the most popular in this neighborhood. You see a lot of them. Of course, for most of those families it’s like the second or third car. Ours happens to be our ‘good car.’”

Minivans, most often driven by mothers, are undeniably the vehicle that best projects the ethos of the Good Mother archetype. The mothers we interviewed who choose to drive minivans do so because of the splendid ways in which they meet the utilitarian needs of families. The minivan signals to the world
the primacy of children as the center of identity for the Good Mother. As symbolic consumption, the minivan makes the statement of motherhood unambiguous. It is perhaps appropriate that minivans are essentially egg-shaped. As a symbol of ultimate protection for the children in a dangerous world, the minivan-as-egg serves as a material metaphor of all-consuming motherhood. The protective, round body styling, unobtrusive color choices, and cradling interior appointment are indicative of the egg with its hard, round shell, limited natural color spectrum and nurturing internal fluid that is the source of life.

Artemis Moms and the Minivan Conundrum

For a large number of women in our studies the feelings that accompanied the purchase of a minivan would be best described as resistance mixed with resignation. As one informant put it, “No one grows up saying I want to own a minivan.” Another woman noted that “friends love me enough to say, man, you’ve caved... you fell into the mommy trap.” Yet another informant, a classic Artemis mom, summed up a common sentiment referring to her husband and herself: “Neither one of us would have touched a minivan ever. Everybody I know has one, we’re not minivan people. We’re truck people. We like the Jeeps, SUVs. We hated [minivans].”

Ultimately practicality and finances won the day, and the couple purchased a new minivan. They justify the purchase with the claim that their minivan is “different.... It looks more like an SUV than other minivans.” They also maintain that as soon as their kids are driving they will lose the minivan in favor of a Jeep or a truck.

Styling is the number one complaint about minivans among our informants. The egg symbolism that contributes to the maternal image of minivans is a problem for some Artemis moms. One informant, expressing her distaste for minivans proclaimed with a wrinkled up nose, “Eww! They just look like eggs! Especially the white ones. I swear, white minivans should be against the law.” Another negative minivan image for Artemis types is the box. Several women said their main problem with minivan styling is their boxiness. While the egg metaphor suggests maternity, the box is the ultimate symbol of categorization and confinement. A box is what they put you in when you’re dead.

Artemis moms are particularly sensitive to what they think of as the minivan stigma. When they buy the minivan their peers may make them pay a social price. One woman noted:

In fact, when I got this car, a guy I worked with was giving me a hard time, and sent out an email to the entire office with a picture of the car and a picture of a soccer-mom kind of cartoon. “Look who just bought a minivan!” Just giving me a hard time about it. I get so much so much grief about it. Another informant reported:

I work at a place where there are a lot of people just out of college or younger, so when I got the van I suffered for it for a really long time. And then I was just like, you people will be here one day, so shut up. And now I don’t really care if they see it or not. There was a time when I entertained a few clients, and I actually did ask to drive [my husband’s] truck instead of the van.

If the Good Mother archetype represents the height of mothering, why would women who happily became parents resist the most popular vehicular symbol of motherhood? Many women we interviewed find it difficult to manage the paradox of enjoying the material attributes of the minivan while resisting the stereotype of being, as one
woman said, “just a soccer mom in a minivan.” Several informants echoed that the message a minivan proclaims to the world is “I’m just a mom.” The clear implication is that motherhood, the crown jewel of femininity, is an undervalued role. Without the more “masculine” and heroic attributes of the Artemis a woman feels second-class or less than complete.

Some Artemis moms begrudgingly join the ranks of minivan owners, all the while attempting to mitigate the disempowerment of the “just a mom” image. Some change their mindset about the minivan through reframing, choosing not to view their vehicles as minivans in some traditional sense. They look back at older minivans and observe that their van is not one of those. Said one woman of her minivan:

It seems more like a combination of an SUV and a minivan. The look of an SUV, and the use of a minivan. The back of it… the trunk. The trunk has an SUV kind of a look to it. When you’re in a parking lot, you see van, van, van, van, then you see my car and you think there’s a difference. It’s structurally different.

Some claim that their vehicles are not minivans at all. Said one informant, “I don’t even think of it as a minivan. It’s in a category of its own.” However, another owner of the same make and model, when presented with that statement, disagreed. “I think they’re in denial,” she said.

The SUV “Solution”

Many mothers privilege the Artemis by embracing the materially masculine attributes of the large SUV. They find the more masculine styling of the SUV particularly appealing, sufficiently so to override its higher costs and reduced functionality as a passenger vehicle. Styling cues that signal SUV include an angular “two box” profile suggesting a larger engine separate from the passenger compartment, marginally higher ground clearance suggesting the possibility of four-wheel drive, bigger wheels and tires, outward-swinging doors, and bolder, more aggressive-looking grills. Informants who drive big SUVs describe their vehicles as representing freedom, self-sufficiency, ruggedness, adventure, and protectiveness, all qualities at the heart of the Artemis archetype.

SUV moms also commonly describe their vehicles as “sporty,” especially when compared to a minivan. When pressed to explain how a seven passenger behemoth is sporty, many had a hard time explaining. Most explanations ultimately come down to the vehicles’ potentiality for purposes beyond hauling kids. What matters isn’t how they use their vehicles, it’s how they could be perceived to use their vehicles. She might be hauling kids to a soccer game, but to onlookers there is at least the possibility that she is on her way to a ski hill, a river trip, or a campground. The real beauty of the SUV for the Artemis mom is its image ambiguity. It doesn’t pigeonhole her as “just a mom.” As one mom rather succinctly put it, “A minivan makes family look like a chore. An SUV makes it look like fun.”

Expressing the Unconscious

Modern American women encounter conflicting models of motherhood and womanhood. Enns (1994) notes that “many Americans have adopted Jung's archetypal, mystical psychology as a way of dealing with … the fragmentation of 20th century living.” In brief, Jung identified a collective unconscious that consists of archetypes, or primordial images, myths, and evolutionary symbols that represent inborn and universal
ways of perceiving and comprehending the world (Jung 1954/1959). Jungian psychology may serve as a framework for understanding and accepting the competing premises of the Good Mother and the Artemis archetypes. Identifying with archetypes may also have its down side. Goldenberg (1976) cautioned that any female archetypes, whether new or traditional, may be more limiting than liberating to women by setting new boundaries on their experiences and behaviors. Buying wholly into the Good Mother archetype may lead to selfless and unhappy drudgery for some women. For others, clinging too strongly to the Artemis archetype may result in suboptimal decisions for themselves and for society. A modern mother who feels the pull of both the Good Mother and Artemis may find herself in paradox. Does she choose the highly functional minivan and symbolically relinquish her individuality as an independent woman? Or does she buy a large role-ambiguous SUV, preserve an image of youthful independence, and incur the associated costs to functionality and social welfare? Solomon (1983) noted that the social identity perspective is useful in analyzing consumption decision making including. Thompson (2004) states that, “when consumers use marketplace mythologies, they are positioning themselves in relationship to other normative constructions of their identity” (p. 171). Levy (1959) argued that consumer behavior responds to symbols in the marketplace. The question arises: Do limited choices in the marketplace translate to limited access to social identity constructions?

The Feminized Product

The minivan market stagnated years ago and gave way to a boom in the sales of large SUVs. Current sales declines now indicate the possibility of a backlash against SUVs as well. Working on the assumption that the increasing resistance to SUVs is rooted in their poor fuel economy, manufactures are working to blend the functionality of the minivan with SUV-like styling in so-called crossover vehicles.

There is an alternative explanation for the decline in SUV sales. Like the minivan it has become feminized. More and more, the large SUV has become the mommy vehicle. Observers note that an occupation’s salaries and prestige decline as its ranks begin to fill with women. It may be that product categories lose their cachet through the same kind of association. The fear many mothers express of being perceived as “just moms” certainly speaks to the devaluation of women’s roles, no matter how important or sacred society deems them to be. In recent research with men who drive heavy-duty trucks one informant bemoaned that the heavy-duty pickup truck will be the next male bastion to be invaded by women. He reviled the day he saw “some woman driving it to Thriftway and throwing a couple bags of groceries in the back.”

The Yoga Mama: Motherhood as Personal Statement

Meanwhile, according to Palmeri and Kiley (2005) resistance to the “just a mom” label has taken the form of a new social identity, construction: the Yoga Mama. (Palmeri and Kiley 2005). While the Mommy Wars continue, marketers are pursuing this third type of mother, not identified by her employment status, but rather by her affluence, by her fashion-consciousness, by her willingness to buy premium baby products, and by her focus on her own and her children’s fitness and overall well-being. The Yoga Mama is better educated and has more disposable income than previous generations of mothers, and she flaunts her
pregnancy, showing off her belly with cropped tops and low-cut pants (Palmeri and Kiley 2005). She wants baby products that reflect her own sense of fashion and quality, even extending to the diaper bag she carries and the expensive baby lotion and organic food she stocks. Whether employed or not, she is too busy to be reachable with traditional media. Instead, Yoga Mama trusts and seeks product information and advice from other mothers with similar lifestyles, with whom she is well-networked (Palmeri and Kiley 2005). The Yoga Mama takes her role as a mother seriously, but also has fun with it. She loves her pregnant body enough to flaunt it, and buys kelp as well as Italian leather shoes for her toddler. Her affluence is her power. Her response to the conflict between the Good Mother and the Artemis archetypes is to address the paradox head on, demanding the movement of the market. She will demand a new kind of family vehicle, sporty, functional, and unambiguously upscale. Maybe it’s already here. Yoga Mama, meet the Mercedes-Benz R 500:

The R-Class six-passenger wagon comes in two trims: base R350 and high-end R500. Standard equipment on the R350 includes 17-inch alloy wheels, leather seating, power front seats, dual-zone automatic climate control full power accessories, bird's eye maple wood trim and CD player with an auxiliary MP3 jack. The R500 offers all this plus 18-inch wheels, driver seat memory, heated front seats, burl walnut wood trim, TeleAid and a glovebox-mounted six-CD changer. Options include HID headlights with corner-adaptive lighting, two different sunroof designs, heated rear seats, satellite radio, a rear-seat entertainment system, a power liftgate, a navigation system, Keyless Go and Airmatic air suspension.

CONCLUSION

Our interpretation of the Mommy Wars and the minivan conundrum leads us to venture several conclusions, none of which may be particularly novel. However, taken together they enrich our understanding of the emergence of markets. Socio-cultural trends appear to activate certain myths and archetypes in consumer consciousness (or unconscious). Those archetypes shape consumer demand for certain benefits, in some cases by generating social identity conflicts. Marketers respond with products to satisfy the demand and with messaging to reinforce the myths that drive it. Holt (2004) describes a similar process in the creation of iconic brands. We believe entire markets may grow from these forces.

In examining female archetypes and social identity conflicts we find further support for the notion of masculine hegemony in the marketplace and the devaluation or subordination of the feminine and female roles.

We acknowledge many limitations of the study. We originally conducted our studies for purposes other than the investigation of cultural archetypes. All our informants were married and the majority were white. It seems unlikely that specific findings would resonate far outside the boundaries of the United States circa 2005 AD.

REFERENCES


Further Correspondence: Debra Stephens, Associate Professor of Marketing, Pamplin School of Business Administration, University of Portland, 5000 N. Willamette Blvd., Portland, OR 97231. stephens@up.edu