



### ARTICLE

# Vehicle of the Self

The social and cultural work of the H2 Hummer

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*Abstract.* In this article I draw on material from in-depth interviews with car owners and dealers to investigate the meanings and uses of a new luxury SUV, the Hummer H2, for affluent California hyper-consumers. The study identifies several distinct orientations towards the H2, considered both as a status symbol and a branded commodity. The mediating roles played by the vehicle in the personal and impersonal relationships of Hummer owners, enthusiasts and observers are examined. Competing theories of social differentiation and conformity pressures are analyzed in light of the data regarding the responses of owners and non-owners towards the vehicle.

### *Key words*

conspicuous consumption • coolness • distinction • free agent • luxury SUV • status

### INTRODUCTION

In the view of social psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, humanized objects orient, dramatize and represent the power to control 'selfing possibilities', the physical environment, and the relationship between individuals and the various social environments in which they operate (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 28–32). Once given human meaning and purpose, tangible goods can shape the identities of 'bearers' and the many different varieties of social interaction between bearers and other persons. Such goods can play roles in all sorts of interactions, ranging from interaction between intimates to 'brief

metropolitan contacts' taking place in the anonymous spaces of the city (Simmel, 1950: 421).

Anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists have long sought to account for the relationships between people and tangible goods and the consequences of these linkages for social relationships. In recent years, sociologically minded analysts have identified pressures deriving either from social differentiation or social conformity as the sources of individuals' dispositions and orientations towards these goods. While Veblen's theses about pecuniary emulation and Bourdieu's propositions about the class-inscribed habitus<sup>1</sup> both emphasize the ways in which individuals are oriented to the strategies, habits and dispositions of those above or below them in a stratified social world, much of the more recent theorizing about hyper-consumerism stresses the horizontal elements of collective alignment and conformity.

In Veblen's theory, there is a simple and direct relationship between the bearer's global status<sup>2</sup> and her possession of expensive goods. The 'invidious distinction' sought by Veblen's elites comes automatically to those able to afford the goods and services out of reach for most of their social milieu (Campbell, 1995; Veblen, 1925 [1970]). When the conspicuous consumer makes it known that she can afford outrageously expensive goods, she can expect her social circles to automatically grant her greater social standing. In acquiring commodities judged extravagant by her social milieu, a conspicuous consumer automatically always enhances her status, whatever her personal character or accomplishments (see Campbell, 1995). Her social milieu may neither esteem her as a person nor think highly of her possessions. Nevertheless, they will envy her for her pecuniary resources, her possession of the abstract, impersonal, and 'purely instrumental' medium of exchange known as money (Simmel, 1978 [1907]: 211).

Objects symbolizing wealth can also enhance their bearer's status in Bourdieu's theory, but they operate in an indirect way. Such goods can signal a secure and easy relationship with money. The experiences of economically advantaged individuals are remote from both the material deprivation of the working classes and the tense frugality of the middle classes striving to climb their way upwards on the social ladder (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 350). But the connection between money and distinction is heavily mediated in Bourdieu's theory. Not every exhibition of wealth or purchasing power arouses awe, admiration and envy because playing the game of 'legitimate taste' (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 16, 56–7; Holt, 1998,) requires one to choose the right kinds of objects and 'appropriate' them in the right kinds of ways.

Thus, in Bourdieu's model, conspicuous consumption is not an assured route to enhanced social standing. When the conspicuous consumer uses goods to broadcast his wealth, he can find himself denigrated as someone with more 'means than taste' (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 287). Among highly cultivated audiences, displays of trophy wealth – wealth for the sake of wealth – are apt to communicate the possessor's lack of refinement rather than his command of pecuniary resources. This prejudice is what makes status 'inversion' possible (see Brooks, 2000). If the consumer spends extravagantly on the wrong kind of good and values the good for the wrong reasons, she courts contempt and disdain rather than awe. The status that comes with legitimate taste will elude the individual who cannot appreciate<sup>3</sup> culturally marked objects with the ease and naturalness befitting someone of superior station.

In Bourdieu's vertically oriented status game, the pecuniary standing gained by the conspicuous consumer may itself be worthless when measured against the losses in those forms of status more highly valued by her social milieu. The cultivated and refined sensibilities of those with 'legitimate taste' (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 25–32) will recoil at the sight of overt displays of wealth. To these sensibilities, the exhibition of brute purchasing power for its own sake signals an unwelcome 'vulgarity', an affectation of the bourgeois anxious to prove their status to anyone who crosses their path. To the secure possessors of legitimate taste and the self-denying petit bourgeoisie alike, the nouveau riche appetite for ostentation and abundance smacks of the working classes' struggle against material deprivation and therefore comes off as illegitimate (see Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 185, 275). A taste for common pleasures accessible to everyone will always connote a middle-class habitus, no matter how much spending power is mobilized on its behalf.

Douglas Holt's study of orientations towards consumption among residents of a college town in the Northeastern USA bears out this proposition. Those residents without higher education, whether or not they earned enough to acquire expensive goods, yearned for the 'material abundance' (Holt, 1998: 10–11) represented by luxury cars, large houses and extravagant food. Their more educated and cultivated neighbors, all working in professional occupations, countered the 'materialism' of their working-class neighbors with an anti-materialism of their own. They chose goods and services with an eye to authenticity and aesthetic pleasures, rather than the sensory pleasures so salient to their less culturally endowed counterparts. Objects which seemed appetizingly luxurious to their relatively uneducated peers appeared tasteless and 'showy' to them (Holt, 1998: 20).

The class differentiation framework shared by Veblen and Bourdieu has its detractors. Herbert Blumer, perhaps the first to abandon it, argued that in a world of mass-produced commodities,<sup>4</sup> the 'fashion mechanism' that propels the cycle of innovation, diffusion and emulation is not driven by the need for 'class differentiation'. Rather, what governs this mechanism is the desire to align oneself with the preferences that have been anointed as the ones to best capture the zeitgeist (Blumer, 1969: 289). Some analysts have followed Blumer in asserting that the increasingly democratized hyper-consumption of the contemporary era is not fueled by vertically oriented processes such as the Veblenian quest for pecuniary standing, or the Bourdieuan search for distinction. When affluent overconsumers go on spending sprees, or substitute more expensive goods for cheaper goods, they are trying to join the crowd, not establish their remoteness from the masses. The relentless upscaling feeding the consumerist binges of recent years has to do with wealthy consumers' desire to possess whatever is deemed the product of the moment. Even members of the elite buy branded commodities in order to demonstrate their commonality with the modal consumer (Ritzer, 2005: 204). Commodity consumption has ceded its role as a mechanism of class differentiation to other realms of activity and social life such as the workplace and the political sphere. In these accounts of contemporary brand-oriented consumerism what matters is the consumers' image in the eyes of other 'with it' consumers, rather than their relative rank in a hierarchical ordering of social classes defined apart from consumption practices.<sup>5</sup> Distinction yields to coolness and pecuniary strength gives way to conformity. Once branded commodities displace cultural goods as the primary objects of consumption, the socially differentiating function of goods yields to their 'homogenizing function' (Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]: 57).

To see how well these strains of theorizing hold up under the light of an empirical inquiry into object-mediated consumption, I have singled out a particular brand of car for study.

Historical studies have shown that ever since their first appearance, cars have eclipsed most other objects as a means of making oneself known to oneself and others (see Marsh and Collett, 1986).<sup>6</sup> Any working vehicle, no matter how humble, has a special symbolic status as a signifier of what Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton call 'auto-mobility', the capacity to move under one's own power and to take control of one's fate (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: 27). In the USA, the aspirations of independence and freedom from want, both of which cars symbolize, resonate with particular force. In the United States the physical movement

represented by the automobile is metaphorically linked to the promise of social mobility and ever-growing material abundance – expectations central to American life (Robertson, 1980: 191).

The Hummer H2, the subject of my study, is more than a mere car. Even compared to other luxury SUVs, the Hummer H2 is uniquely powerful in its mechanical powers and its symbolism.<sup>7</sup> The Hummer H2 SUV operates as both a status symbol and a branded commodity, and it is something that individuals can mobilize when they relate both to themselves and to their physical and social environments. It mediates social relationships indirectly, through its symbolizing, materializing and dramatizing capabilities, and directly, through its capacity to serve as a common focal point of attention for separate individuals and groups (see Collins, 2000). An inquiry into the role played by the car in individuals' private and social lives can reveal a lot about the bonds between members of the consumerist classes and their most prized possessions.

### THE HUMMER H2 SUV

Many car dealers describe the Hummer H2 luxury SUV, with its muscular and hulking exterior, as the most recognizable vehicle on the road. For many people, Range Rovers, Tahoes, Escalades, Suburbans and other standard luxury SUVs look bloated and bland next to it. The Hummer H2's grille recalls the lines of various battlefield vehicles built for survival in a hostile environment. One of the designers of the Hummer H2, a French depth psychologist by the name of Clotaire Rapaille, traced his inspiration to armored cars and other battlefield vehicles.<sup>8</sup> It comes as little surprise that it was the action hero Arnold Schwarzenegger (now Governor of California) who persuaded GM to undertake the development of the Hummer H2 following the success of the H2's direct ancestor, the H1. The H1 created a huge stir when it was first introduced in 1992 because it was actually a civilian version of the military Humvee now serving in Iraq, complete with reinflating run-flat tires and a vertical windshield (see Bradsher, 2002: 362–3). However, because the car was so difficult to drive on city streets and retailed at the hefty price of US\$110,000, it failed to break through into the mass market. Thus, the stage was set for Schwarzenegger and GM to produce a toned-down version more appealing to the general public.

Because the Sun Belt in general and Southern California in particular have always been the biggest markets for luxury cars (see Marsh and Collett, 1986), I traveled to Los Angeles to interview owners and dealers of the Hummer H2. In order to gain access to a more varied slice of the owner

and dealer populations, I also conducted interviews in the San Francisco Bay Area. I made contact with a total of six dealers and 28 H2 owners in the two metropolitan areas.<sup>9</sup> The data in the study are drawn from these interviews, as well as newspaper articles regarding the Hummer H2 and other SUVs. My pool includes informants (the dealers who sold the car) and respondents (the owners and prospective owners who had either purchased or considered purchasing the car). Because it was impossible to secure lists of clients from either the dealerships or any other source, I could not obtain anything like a true sampling frame. Thus, I had no choice but to build a non-probabilistic sample composed of individuals I recruited through three different channels: through face-to-face meetings with customers at H2 dealerships; through individual dealers; and through snowball procedures (see Maxwell, 1996). The geographic origins of this small-scale sample means that it cannot be considered to be representative of the total universe of H2 buyers and enthusiasts, many of whom come from small towns and less affluent parts of the country.<sup>10</sup> However, as a sample of H2 owners from the two metropolitan areas, there is no reason to believe that it is biased.

I started out by contacting H2 dealerships and asking for customers' contact information. While personnel from all four dealerships denied this initial request, they granted me access to the dealerships themselves. Further, they gave me permission to visit the dealerships and conduct fieldwork. Thus, in order to make contact with H2 owners, I carried out impromptu interviews with customers who were either perusing cars in the dealerships' showrooms or waiting to get their cars serviced in the dealerships' service areas. These impromptu interviews accounted for the vast majority of H2 owner interviews. I completed some 18 interviews in this manner in spite of the many distractions and interruptions. On many occasions I was able to stake out a quiet corner of the dealership and engage the owner or prospective owner in an extended conversation about her reasons for buying the car and her experiences with the car. The interviews generally lasted between 15 and 45 minutes, depending on the owner's schedule. Given the context and the spontaneity of the interviews with the owners, I did not feel comfortable broaching emotionally charged topics unrelated to the explicit topic of the interview.

Six of the H2 dealers were very helpful in supplying valuable information about H2 owners, both as a group and as individuals. One dealer in particular invited me to his office for a series of enlightening interviews. Although they were careful not to disclose the buyers' identities, the dealers supplied a substantial amount of information on owners' behavior and

preferences. These informant interviews lasted between one and two hours. On five occasions, dealers acted as intermediaries and set me up with one of their clients, but this only happened when they knew the client on a personal level. In these cases I could count on more privacy and time, so the interviews often exceeded a full hour. In addition to the interviews, I also attended two H2 social gatherings for San Francisco Bay Area owners. At these gathering I conducted more impromptu interviews with owners and dealers. In the end, I managed to interview six dealers/salespeople and 28 H2 owners from the two metropolitan areas.<sup>11</sup> I did attempt to gather more systematic information on the dealerships' clienteles from dealers; however, they could not divulge this information because it was protected under federal privacy laws.

Dealers confirmed that the respondents I met were typical of what they termed their first- and second-wave clienteles. The dissimilar profiles of first- and 'second-wavers' was apparent to all the dealers. One of the Northern California dealers differentiated the first wave from the second wave on the basis of income and 'trendiness'. She indicated that the monthly income of first-wave buyers – those who snapped up the car within the first five–six months after its introduction – exceeded the monthly income of the second- wave buyers by a multiple of anywhere between 3 and 10. Many of the first-wave buyers reported monthly incomes in excess of US\$30,000 and a large proportion of them owned their own firms or worked as freelance professionals. Many of the first-wave buyers hunted down H2s with a feverish avidity equaled by zealous sports fans. In LA and San Francisco, first-wave buyers made every effort to get their hands on an H2 before other consumers could beat them to the punch. It was not enough for many of the wealthy clients to get their hands on a US\$55,000 Hummer H2, they wanted to beat the other customers. Several customers burst in on a Los Angeles dealer demanding to know why they couldn't take possession of their H2s immediately. Apparently, in spite of their high positions on the waiting list, they had been pushed backwards in the queue and people behind them had gotten their cars first. The dealer's narrative was full of titillating details about the fevered buying frenzy of the first two months:

It was like a dogfight to be number one . . . people would come in to see where they were on the list and brag about their spot on it . . . and then people would get so angry if their vehicles didn't come in before other vehicles that were behind them on the list . . . I had a customer stand here [indicates] and his vehicle

was probably the fourth one that I sold . . . and he was just beyond anger because his car wasn't the first one [to be delivered to the dealership] . . . and I said 'you didn't want the pewter one and the first one I got was the pewter one' . . . and he replied 'yeah, but it wasn't supposed to happen that way . . . you should have held on to that [other] vehicle and stashed it in the back until mine came in. (Interview 24 April 2003)

Some of these customers went so far as to offer him substantial bribes, sometimes in excess of US\$5000 cash. One of the San Francisco area dealers recalled tense exchanges between rival customers vying for the same car. According to the dealer, the more desperate customers would plead with other customers who were unable to make up their minds. They would say things like:

If you can't decide, please let me know because I'll buy it right now . . . I'll take it right now . . . if you're trying to buy it somewhere else do it. I want this one . . . the next one's not for another month, can you let me know in five minutes whether you're going to buy it . . . (Interview 2 July 2003)

This entreaty was usually counterproductive, because it had the effect of erasing any doubts the other customer had about the purchase. Suddenly, his mind was made up and he was happy to put down US\$60,000 for a vehicle which had given him doubts a few minutes earlier.

The second-wave buyers tended to come from the ranks of mid- to high-level managers in larger organizations and had monthly incomes closer to US\$8000. The gender ratio also changed during this debut year, according to my dealer informants. Whereas men outnumbered women in the initial wave of buyers on the order of 8 or 9 to 1, the second wave quickly approached gender parity. As one of my San Francisco area dealers reported:

[the first buyers] were predominantly male, and then very quickly it shifted after two months, maybe a month and a half . . . it shifted to where the drivers are buyers . . . we reached a point at which we were almost fifty-fifty split between men and women . . . it was their primary vehicle . . . (Interview 21 May 2003)

Dealers from the Los Angeles area also noticed that the proportion of women buyers increased over time, albeit more slowly. However, with two exceptions, the only women to express any interest in the Hummer H2



were married women. Moreover, among couples, the encouragement of a wife or girlfriend was instrumental in getting a man to purchase the H2. Several dealers confirmed that the wife of a prominent Beverly Hills plastic surgeon had bought his H2 in response to his wife's ultimatum. She had threatened a divorce unless he came home with an H2 for her. Two of the female H2 owners from Northern California estimated that some 75 percent–80 percent of the H2 drivers were women and that most of the men who had bought one did so because they wanted to please their wives or girlfriends. A man's purchase of an H2, as I discovered through my interviews with both dealers and owners, was often spurred directly or indirectly by the preferences of the women most important to him. Single or professional women, on the other hand, almost invariably passed over the H2 in favor of something less ostentatious. Salesmen lamented the fact that the H2's unique virtues failed to win over such women, who usually preferred other luxury SUVs like Range Rovers or ordinary luxury passenger vehicles such as BMWs.

Of the 10 respondents who disclosed their financial information, with one exception every single person reported individual annual incomes of over US\$100,000 and, if they were married, household incomes of over US\$200,000.<sup>12</sup> Three men claimed they earned more than US\$200,000 and one, a hip-hop celebrity, indicated that his income was US\$1.2 million before taxes. These findings jibe with the results of GM's marketing surveys. According to these surveys, the average first-wave buyer could claim a household income of US\$220,000.<sup>13</sup> Dealers surmised that the H2 owners were a more racially and ethnically diverse group than the constituencies for Tahoes, Suburban and most other SUVs. In Los Angeles the Hummer H2 was very popular with African-Americans and in the San Francisco area it was favored by many Asian-Americans. Many of the H2 buyers in Los Angeles I met were first or second generation immigrants from South Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. From an occupational standpoint, the H2 constituencies specific to the Los Angeles and San Francisco dealerships differed. The entertainment industry employed a large proportion of the H2 owners I encountered in the Los Angeles area, while the H2 owners from Northern California worked predominantly in fields such as high-tech, finance and banking, and construction. However, insofar as they either worked for themselves or owned their own firms, a surprisingly large proportion of the H2 owners from both metropolitan areas belonged to the general category of the 'free agent' (Pink, 2001).<sup>14</sup> I spoke with a woman who made her living trading on the internet, several men who owned their own professional services firms, a freelance bodyguard,

and many other independent contractors and business owners. Indeed, the dealers guessed that between a third and a half of the buyers either owned their own business or worked on a contractual basis for self-chosen clients.

### POWER AND SECURITY

Along with its intimidating bulk, the sheer mass and height of the H2 gave owners and drivers a sense of security and power they found deeply gratifying. One New York H2 owner told a reporter 'God forbid, something happens and somebody runs into you . . . I'd rather be in my Hummer and so would you . . .'<sup>15</sup> The car's connotations of combat and survival are not lost on owners and buyers. Both men and women find the car attractive because, in the words of one female driver from LA, 'no matter what happens in this town [LA] – earthquake, fire, civil unrest, flood, I can get through it, under it or over it.'<sup>16</sup> Another LA resident, a Malibu-based photographer, ordered an H2 because it was the 'toughest truck on the road', and the GM Vice-Chairman Robert Lutz sees the H2 as the 'antidote to SUVs that are becoming like minivans or station wagons'.<sup>17</sup> Women owners tended to cite safety fairly often as an important reason for purchasing the 6,400 pound vehicle. One attorney from Los Angeles no longer feared for her life the way she did when she was driving 'small cars'. But it was not simply a question of fear. There were undertones of aggression in some of the owners' effusions about the physical presence of the vehicle. One of my Los Angeles respondents felt as if he were 'on top of the world . . . 'cuz I'm up there pretty high . . . and the other cars can't really hurt you because they're smaller . . .' Many of my suburban respondents relished the car's capacity to redefine its owner as someone powerful. The only working-class respondent, a policeman from a Los Angeles suburb, told me that the H2 appealed to him because it had a 'mean aggressive look'. In his words:

It looks like it's all steel and it's going to take some punishment and it makes you feel that way when you drive it . . . I don't have a wimpy personality so I don't drive a wimpy car . . .  
(Interview 21 August 2003)

Another Los Angeles respondent gleefully declared that the Hummer H2 made 'other cars look like nothing'. When he was cocooned inside his fortress-like car, he became invulnerable and other cars were rendered invisible. These sentiments were not confined to men. To a woman owner from Northern California, 'you can't top [the H2]'. She enthused about the car's ability to cut other contenders down to size:

. . . I can go and get a BMW roadster and next to it a Porsche will look like nothing . . . by the same token I can get a Mercedes and a Jaguar makes it look like nothing . . . but nothing makes the HUMMER look like nothing . . . don't cheapen the car . . . some things are meant to be in a class of their own . . . like the Jaguar . . . have you seen the new Jaguar . . . or the Porsche or a Ferrari . . . but next to the HUMMER, these other cars disappear . . . (Interview 1 May 2003)

She said this in the same pleased tone the other owners used when rhapsodizing about the car.

### VISIBILITY, RECOGNITION AND APPEARANCE

Almost every individual I met mentioned the car's appearance in one way or another. Several women owners were swept away by the 'prettiness' of the car while the male owners delighted in its ability to subvert normal aesthetic standards with its immense and boxy exterior. But the exterior sometimes took a back seat to the raw mechanical power it housed. One of my female informants from the San Francisco Bay Area made a point of telling me that the car's outward appearance did not count for much. Rather, this appearance only became meaningful when viewed as a sign of its vigor and mechanical prowess:<sup>18</sup>

No, it actually wasn't the look of the car at all, it was the capability of it . . . ahm . . . I take that back . . . it was a little bit the look of it . . . it was the massiveness of it . . . it was the presence of it . . . not the way it looked but the presence that suggested what it was capable of that appealed to me . . . the huge tires, the overbuilt proportions . . . ahm you know the sheer ability of it that you could tell from looking at it . . . I mean I owned the BMW X5 . . . that's what I traded in to buy the HUMMER . . . the BMW X5 is a beautiful truck and so is the Cadillac Escalade . . . ahm . . . this one [the H2] appealed to me for a different set of reasons, a more visceral set of reasons than the others . . . (Interview 5 May 2003)

The other SUVs were head-turners, but the Hummer H2 was more than a pretty face. The appeal of the Hummer H2, unlike these vehicles, resided in its capacity to 'drive over things'. Interestingly, it was this woman who identified the car's action-oriented potentialities as its most distinguishing and salient feature. The other respondents tended to dwell much more on

the car's aesthetic characteristics or its 'mystique' than on its actual mechanical powers. A 40-something theater company executive from Southern California confessed that the car's 'lines' were the features that really excited him:

It's like the lines just, the lines are . . . it's a kinda startling thing to say, but kinda 'in your face' . . . well, it's probably an anti-social thing . . . but I like the fact that it has different lines . . .

(Interview 14 November 2003)

Neither the car's performance nor its awe-inspiring off-road capabilities made much of an impression on this man.

The car's 'unique' appearance also enhanced its appeal for a male middle-aged attorney from Orange County: 'the design is unique . . . I thought it was a really ingenious clever design that was brilliant, you can tell because everyone loves them' (Interview 3 November 2003). Here we see that the contemplative features of objects can stand out for either men or women. The extent to which contemplative characteristics are salient depends entirely on the class background of the woman or man. Thus, the gendering of these 'grammars of evaluation' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) is not as clear-cut as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton would have us believe (1981: 113). A highly educated female software programmer from a specific milieu can mobilize the same 'utilitarian' framework of evaluation that her male counterparts would enlist. Men and women from less richly endowed social milieus slip more easily into the 'anti-utilitarian' grammar, which emphasizes appearance and styling and appears feminine in its stress on the aspects of the object that engage the contemplative faculties.

Almost every respondent talked about the effects of their 'attention-getting commodity' (Derber, 2000 [1979]) on the people who saw them or heard about their acquisition of the car. H2 owners also made observations about the reactions of socially proximate others such as friends, neighbors, colleagues and family members. Like most other owners, the corporate attorney from Los Angeles claimed that she was not actively searching for attention from onlookers and bystanders. Some ambivalence surfaced in responses to my questions about attention, however. An especially laconic respondent first told me that the attention he received didn't matter, but then admitted that 'it's kinda nice' when people looked at his 'nice vehicle'.

The paradoxical quality of this orientation was even more apparent in the comments of an agent for Los Angeles sports celebrities. Although he

denied buying the car 'for the attention', he also stated in the same breath 'of course you want people to look at your car . . .'. Only one respondent, a young male rapper from West LA, seemed comfortable confessing a weakness for strangers' attention. He recounted how people used to snap pictures of him driving his 'urban' H2 down Sunset Boulevard. The car made regular people act like 'tourists':

when we first got it we'd always follow each other down Sunset and we'd go cruising . . . [my friend] is gonna get something done in his, I'm gonna get something done in mine . . . when they saw the HUMMER they said 'oh, ah, ooh' and they'd want to come out, people taking pictures of it . . . yeah, people taking pictures of it like a lot of tourists and they'd talk about it . . .  
(Interview 9 November 2003)

This young man wanted to stand out from the crowd, but owning an H2 was not enough because his friends and associates all drove H2s. His car had to sport an unusual color so his car would be easy to tell apart from the standard black or pewter H2s crowding the streets of West Los Angeles:

. . . in LA there are an awful lot [of H2s] . . . awful lot. So that's why I bought a strange color 'cuz I know I won't see that color a lot and I see a lot of them that aren't that color . . . they're a different color . . . mine is . . . sunburst orange . . . (Interview 9 November 2003)

H2 owners noted the interest strangers took in their car. A 30-something female corporate attorney warned that H2 owners should 'be prepared' for the head-turning effects of the H2. She didn't mind if strangers indulged their curiosity by looking at the car or engaging her in conversation about it:

I think that for purposes of driving around town and having, you know, parking it places . . . people say 'wow, cool', you know, I think people find that it's something to look at, so I 'spose if you drive the car, you're going to be seen, if you park, if you go to valet parking, they'll put it up front, so I 'spose for that factor, if you like that, then that's kind of cool . . . people are just kinda like 'what is that?', I mean and it's a car you have to be comfortable in yourself I think if you're going to drive the car because you're going to get a lot of people looking at you, so if you don't want to be looked at don't get it [laughter] . . . I

mean, you know, but I don't drive it to be looked at . . . it's fine if I get the attention and if I don't get the attention it's fine too . . . but I think if you buy one you should be prepared for it . . . (Interview 28 May 2003)

Another H2-owning attorney from Southern California was surprised by the insatiable curiosity of motorists and pedestrians drawn to the vehicle:

I mean I've owned just about every car including Ferraris and Porsches and I never had people turn their heads and kids jumping up and down and it's bizarre . . . I thought 'why are people so infatuated with this car?' I literally had over a dozen people sit in the car at a gas station or when I pull up in a parking lot they'll come up and say 'can I look inside . . . can I come up and sit in there?' . . . and they'll question you about it . . . (Interview 28 October 2003)

But this man was a little more explicit about the fact that bystanders were drawn to the vehicle rather than him: 'I don't think I'm getting the attention [laughter] . . . I think people are attracted to the car . . .' (Interview 28 October 2003). Thus, he acknowledged that the car's charm was not rubbing off on him. Another male owner got tired of hearing his friends discussing his new H2. Eventually, he felt as though these friends saw his life as petty and empty because they would not talk about the rest of his life. After a while, he started to sense that 'these people think there's nothing going on for me except for [this car].'

As several accounts suggested, however, the admiring glances and pleasantries evoked by the sight of the H2 could easily turn into hostile stares and derisive comments. Loud yells and other obnoxious behavior greeted an Israeli-born entrepreneur and his wife when they drove their yellow H2 around Los Angeles:

I get some negative people . . . they say you guys have to be a show-off, show to people that you have money and they don't know that it doesn't cost that much . . . it's not that different from the Navigator they drive . . . the people who approach me are people with the same-priced car . . . they don't know the difference . . . (Interview 20 June 2003)

Much of the disparagement H2 drivers and owners faced from strangers had to do with a combination of envy and a misperception of the vehicle's

cost. Interestingly, several respondents reported that the hostile comments they had experienced had come from other SUV drivers, not drivers of passenger vehicles.

Four of the male respondents were surprised and gratified to discover that women responded very favorably to their romantic overtures when they were driving the H2. The rapper had actually exchanged phone numbers with two women strangers he had met while driving his sunburst orange H2 around Los Angeles, a feat which had eluded him in his Porsches. His most recent romantic liaison began at a stoplight when he engaged the female driver of a Mercedes in conversation. This woman confessed that she might have rebuffed his overture had he driven a less impressive vehicle:

. . . like the girl I'm dating now I met at a stoplight . . . she was in a Mercedes . . . actually, later we talked about [the way we met] and she said she wouldn't have talked to me if I were driving a Toyota . . . she was being honest, she said she probably wouldn't have . . . but [then] she was driving a Mercedes herself . . . (Interview 26 November 2003)

Another H2 owner, a self-described 'ugly' man, snared a date with a 'beautiful woman' while stuck in gridlock on the notorious Pasadena Freeway in Los Angeles. The woman rolled down her window and ogled his Hummer. When he engaged her in conversation, she responded that she was calling her friend in New York to tell her about the car. After her phone conversation, he initiated the following exchange:

she hung up her phone and put the window down and she had an accent and I asked her if she was Italian and she said 'no – Russian' and I asked her 'are you single?' and she goes 'yeah' . . . and then I asked her 'can I take you out to dinner?' and she goes 'I'm leaving from Long Beach and flying home to New York' and she goes 'pull over, I'll give you my number' and in a couple weeks she's gonna have a photo shoot either in LA or in Vegas and we're hopefully gonna go out for dinner when she comes back . . . (26 November 2003)

Several other single men declared that the H2 had enlivened their romantic lives, while one married dealer had ceased driving around in the dealership's H2 because he wanted to 'stay married'. The ownership of an H2 seemed to enhance men's sexual appeal in the eyes of women, whether the man was wealthy or not.

## INITIATING AND MAINTAINING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

As we have seen, their interactions with members of the anonymous public made many H2 owners feel visible and powerful in ways they enjoyed. But it was the interactions with people on the other end of the 'personalization' continuum (Mason, 1981) such as colleagues, acquaintances, friends, neighbor, and family, where the H2 really came into its own as a mediator of social interaction. But these social interactions could go sour very easily, as the H2 owner could become the victim rather than the beneficiary of the vehicle's symbolic potency. The middle-class women H2 owners and drivers in particular had to be careful to avoid the negative reactions of their status-insecure middle-class friends and neighbors. Middle-class H2 owners had to be very careful not to arouse the status insecurities of the friends, neighbors and acquaintances who shared their aspirations and expectations. This status anxiety expressed itself as anger. Coming from middle-class men and women who felt belittled, this rage seemed to be especially virulent when it was directed at women H2 owners and drivers. When Janice, a single African-American woman,<sup>19</sup> drove her H2 in California's Central Valley, she encountered overt hostility from many of the young white working-class men who shared the road with her. A male acquaintance of hers actually accused her of borrowing someone else's H2, saying 'I know that's not yours . . .'. He then drove the knife deeper by slighting her income 'I thought you had money but I don't think you've got that kind of money.' Another woman from a Los Angeles suburb had to endure comments like 'you've made a lot of money doing nails lately,' from acquaintances who found out about her H2. She recounted several unpleasant encounters with women who scorned her as a sellout. One person identified her as a member of the 'rich bitch club' while other acquaintances taunted her with jibes. This woman led a solidly middle-class existence, managing a small hair salon while her husband worked as a police officer. When her friends and neighbors spied her new yellow H2, they felt as if she had tried to elevate herself above them.

Interestingly, the neighborhood was not the only setting in which the mobilization of the H2 could induce intense but localized social competition. A small but non-negligible number of H2 buyers from the Los Angeles area acquired their H2s with their workplace in mind. They counted on such a recognizable symbol of success and performance to make them seem more capable employees than they could appear by virtue of their workplace performance alone.

One of the Los Angeles dealers had met a man who was convinced that his boss would want to promote him once he saw the kind of car he



could afford and drive. The dealer had also encountered 'at least 10' men who were willing to buy the car even though 'they didn't like the thing'. In each case, the subordinate's ownership of an H2 posed an implicit threat to the superiors' position and authority. These men confessed that their authority was in jeopardy if other employees saw them driving a 'lesser' car.

For a particular subgroup of H2 enthusiasts, the prestige and image-related dividends derived from the acquisition of an H2 were simply too substantial to ignore. In Los Angeles I met with a prospective H2 buyer who provided personal services for celebrity clients. For a significant fee, he managed the finances of professional athletes and entertainers. In his answer to my question concerning the source of the vehicle's appeal, he emphasized the car's capacity to help him connect with actual and potential clients. While the car promised to enrich his personal life, its real value lay in its potential to increase his professional stock. A car which could convey past success, a fun-loving approach to life, and an achievement-oriented ethos was well worth the money because it would help him relate to present and future clients:

RES: Our society classifies you in a certain way of success based upon the car you drive, right or wrong, you know, in the industry that I'm in it's a help to me in terms of relationships . . . you know, dealing with athletes and entertainers, yeah . . . it's kinda of an automatic 'OK, cool . . .' thing . . . but if you roll up in a Volvo . . .

JS: If you rolled up in a Volvo, what would they say?

RES: I'd be an insurance salesman . . . my best friend does that . . . he has a Volvo and that works . . . you know, I think it dictates what you do . . . I don't wear suits and ties any more like I used to when I dealt with certain clients . . . it just depends . . .

JS: So if you drove around in a Volvo, and met your client, that would send what kind of message?

RES: ahmmm . . . not a bad kinda message I would say but just 'Oh, OK' instead of . . ., but my business is different because I run money so therefore it's about relationships . . . it's the way our society works . . . I think we're programmed in certain ways to go 'OK, you've got a Mercedes-Benz, you got money' . . . 'you know that's very funny . . . because I'm keeping my Cadillac Escalade and I have a Mercedes [as well] . . . when I meet with certain clients I'll drive the Mercedes, but with other clients I would not

drive the Mercedes . . . it just depends . . . my friend also has a BMW as well as a Volvo and he'll take the BMW to a different type of clientele . . . with some people he'll definitely drive the Volvo . . . 'cuz they think . . . you don't want people to think you're making too much money . . . you also don't want people to think you don't have too much money . . . you know . . .

JS: Oh, I see, so if you drove up in a Lamborghini . . . what would happen?

RES: . . . that would never work . . . it would never work, the clients would be like 'you're making way too much money'. (Interview 2 December 2003)

For clients who could afford a US\$150,000 Lamborghini sports car, the H2 struck the right balance between affluence and economic dependence, humility and self-assertion. While the strutting Lamborghini might prove threatening to the dominant member of the principal-agent pair – the one who earns the 'big' money and the one who hires the help – an H2 did not. The latter vehicle is not in the same league as a Lamborghini, either in terms of price or extravagance. But the ownership of a Lamborghini implies a level of wealth that the agent is not supposed to have reached. After all, it is the client who is pulling down the huge salaries that can pay for a US\$180,000 car. The agent who brings an H2 to the meeting, by contrast, leaves the asymmetry of the relationship untouched. At the same time he affirms his alignment with the client's carefree, no-holds-barred, edgy lifestyle in a way in which the Volvo driver cannot. Clearly, some individuals managed to exploit the H2 as a source of visibility, recognition and pecuniary status in a highly strategic manner. These instrumental owners appraised the car's value in light of its utility as an image-maker in such bounded social contexts as neighborhoods, professional 'social circuits' (Collins, 2000), and workplaces.

But not all H2 owners were so focused on the car's appearance. For a theoretically interesting subgroup of users – the off-roaders – the car was a piece of machinery whose virtues could only be appreciated when it was put into action. The off-roaders' relationship with the vehicle was quite distinctive. For these owners,<sup>20</sup> the H2 was revered as a means of stimulating the driver's emotional and existential faculties. The 'brand consciousness' (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) of the off-roaders was explicitly linked to the taste for the kinds of 'visceral' thrills one gets from climbing boulders and fording streams in a huge vehicle. In their chronicles of off-roading adventure, there was even a hint of the awe usually reserved for the sacred and mystical, something reminiscent of the reverential feelings Durkheim described so well (Durkheim, 1995[1912]).

The off-roaders had a proclivity for telling me about their pulse-quickenning adventures. One man seemed to get a lot of mileage out of an incident where he decided to airlift his US\$110,000 Hummer H1 from a crevasse where it had become stuck after a particularly audacious ascent into the mountains. The sole woman off-roader was the individual who seemed to find the most satisfaction in the social bonding that took place in the company of her off-roading companions. For this subgroup of enthusiasts, the car was a pretext for participating in enjoyable activities with other off-roading enthusiasts. The other off-roaders she met at off-roading events and on H2-oriented online forums inevitably turned out to be kindred spirits. She had so much in common with some of these people that her relationships with them quickly blossomed into friendships which extended beyond the off-roading context:

Interestingly enough ever since I met the other off-roaders it's very much about my social life though, you know . . . this was the bonus that came along with buying it . . . I didn't expect to get this community of owners when I bought it . . . I didn't expect it and I'm really pleased about that . . . I've met some of the best people in my life in the past eight or nine months . . . I'm going camping with one of them this weekend . . .  
(Interview 5 May 2003)

Thus, for some members of this subgroup, the kind of sociality fostered by the off-roading was unusually conducive to non-instrumental relationships, the antithesis of the highly instrumentalized relationships that we encountered in the lives of the majority buyers oriented to the car's visibility and outward significations:

the best part is the camaraderie at night when you get together with all the people and you tell stories about the day . . . that's the best part about it . . . you're going out on the trails and you hang out with people, that's the best part . . . the community that surrounds it . . . just hanging out with other owners and talking about what you did in the muck . . . how you climbed that hill or how you did this . . . or what you did to your truck or what they did to their truck and what you saw . . . it's just cool it lets people kinda escape what's going on in the world . . .  
(Interview 10 July 2003)

The escapist thrills cherished by off-roaders were most enjoyable when savored together with comrades who could regale each other with entertaining tales of their daring exploits on the trail.

When compared with some other communities built around branded commodities, the H2 off-roading community appeared fairly open and egalitarian. This made it quite different from the core fractions of the Harley-Davidson community. This brand-based elective community, as analyzed by Schouten and McAlexander (1995), resembles the H2 community in its fundamentals. Both communities represent an attempt to combat the 'dehumanization of urban life' and recreate the natural sociality of the small-scale tribal groupings so difficult to find in contemporary societies (see Maffesoli, 1996[1988]: 42, 86, 94–8). However, the 'outlaw' Harley-Davidson subculture is more 'cultish' in that it absorbs the identities of its members. Harley-Davidson riders identify more closely with their clubs than H2 off-roaders do with theirs. As a consequence, even though they may have day jobs, the lives of hardcore Harley-Davidson riders revolve almost completely around their club activities. By contrast, the off-roading activities of the H2 owners do not compete with their professional or family lives for their time and devotion. From a sociological standpoint, the Harley-Davidson subculture is also more inward-looking than its off-roading counterparts. It celebrates members' marginality from mainstream society. Deviations from the code of behavior are sanctioned severely. Distinctions between authentic and inauthentic ways of living the biker lifestyle determine where particular members stand in the rigid status-group hierarchies within and between Harley-Davidson clubs (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995: 50, 58). The H2 off-roaders, by contrast, do not express any hostility to mainstream society. Nor do they face any social sanctions like the sanctions visited upon bikers who fail to show appropriate deference to the anti-establishment norms of the Harley-Davidson subculture.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We can discern the workings of both homogenizing and differentiating processes in the orientations of H2 owners towards their own vehicles as well as the responses of nonowners to the fact of their H2 ownership. Thus, both horizontal social alignment and vertical social distancing are implicated in the stances of H2 owners, buyers and observers. As a result, both the Veblenian-Bourdieuian framework, which highlights mechanisms of vertically-oriented differentiation, and the Blumerist framework, which lays the emphasis on conformity pressures, can prove useful as analytical frameworks.

Veblen's notion of vertically-oriented pecuniary status seems to capture the responses of middle-class observers to the H2 very well. According to

respondents, it was almost universally believed that the H2 cost upwards of US\$80,000 and therefore was beyond the means of most people. An H2 was often taken as tangible evidence of business success and acumen. One middle-aged H2 owner was surprised to find a home-made flyer and a résumé on his windshield when he got into his car after work. The note said 'you look like you're doing pretty good, could you give me a job?' He found this sad and ironic at the same time since he was not 'a business executive or anything like that' and had no employment opportunities to offer. Like other middle-class respondents, he also found it noteworthy that onlookers systematically overestimated the H2's price. In actuality, its base price came to US\$55,000, slightly more than a Cadillac Escalade. Further, H2 owners receive a tax write-off, as long as they own their own business and they can demonstrate that the H2, a vehicle legally classified as a truck, is being used for 'business purposes'. In practice this write-off could amount to as much as US\$20,000, making the car essentially as cheap as a mid-level subluxury passenger car. Given the inaccuracy of bystanders' assumptions about the car's price, the pecuniary status derived from the ownership of the H2 was unearned. Nevertheless, the backlash middle-class owners faced from envious friends and neighbors was real enough. But, both the positive and negative forms of pecuniary status were confined to the middle-class fraction of my sample. When driven by middle-class people in middle-class settings with middle-class audiences, the H2 was taken as a bald statement about one's position in the class hierarchy.

As important as this unearned pecuniary status was, it was the homogenizing pressures which seemed decisive for most of the H2 buyers and owners. Wealthier H2 owners did not encounter (or perhaps did not notice) others for whom an US\$80,000 car was an extravagant purchase. Their ownership of the car did not evoke envious or angry reactions from acquaintances of modest means. Among the wealthy residents of Beverly Hills, the presence of a new H2 did not ignite envy and resentment but sparked a frenzied competition instead. In Beverly Hills the appearance of a H2 in someone's driveway would set in motion a race between neighbors. According to a Los Angeles salesman:

. . . some woman came in, very stylish, very wealthy I'm sure, driving a very expensive car, and ahh, she said 'I want to see this car, I'm very interested in the car . . . I'll go to every third house in Beverly Hills, and it seems to have a Hummer in the driveway and in the last week I've seen five accidents because people are backing up into the other cars . . . (Interview 28 May 2003)

In this kind of wealthy and socially homogeneous neighborhood, where individuals have ample means, motive and opportunity to outdo each other, the H2 spreads like a contagion. The desire to be the first was overpowering. Sometimes, if the prospective buyer couldn't beat his neighbor in this contest, he withdrew from the competition and switched to another SUV brand. As one respondent told me:

RES: . . . you know, we had one guy in the neighborhood say 'I wanted to be the first person on the block to own one'

JS: [laughter] so, was he disappointed when you got yours first?

RES: yeah, I think he was, in fact . . . and now he and his wife are considering a new Range Rover . . . whatever [laughter]. (Interview 17 May 2003)

Once this man saw that he couldn't be the first to get the car, he substituted the 'soft' Range Rover for the H2. By opting for a totally different kind of luxury SUV, he had quit the contest entirely. When I attended a dealership reception for San Francisco area owners, I overheard owners asking each other about their H2s' serial numbers. Late-buying owners fell silent when buyers who bought their cars in the first wave boasted about their low serial numbers.

For wealthier owners, particularly those working in the entertainment industry, the most noteworthy and attractive thing about the car was the uniqueness, coolness and ruggedness of its exterior. These aesthetic qualities gave the car the indefinable and desirable quality of 'edginess'. The near-vertical windshield and the oversized grille seemed to hold particular appeal for the buyers, vindicating Schwarzenegger's insistence on retaining the H1's lines. Like hip-hop fashions in clothing, the H2's exaggerated proportions can be linked to the toughness, defiance and coolness of the street tough trying to survive and thrive in the unforgiving urban jungle. This gives the H2 a cachet that other 'softer' SUVs cannot match. Its popularity with the wealthier men and some of the women seemed to derive from these 'hard' qualities. They gave it a 'mystique' powerful enough to seduce wealthy buyers like my Orange County attorney. As he said: 'I thought the [H2s] were cool . . . they looked cool . . . they kinda had a mystique about them . . .' (Interview 24 November 2003).

Another man likened the car to his own appearance, saying 'it's so ugly, it's handsome', while another characterized it as a 'little obnoxious and irresponsible'. One man who worked as a bodyguard for Hollywood celebrities told me his wife liked the car because it appeared 'rough and rugged'. A middle-aged theater executive adored its 'in-your-face' quality.

Even women admitted they liked its aggressive styling. These characteristics applied by extension to the H2 driver. In the words of one middle-class informant, the kind of person who drives an H2 is an 'upper-class person' who 'make things happen . . . and won't be pushed around'. These respondents desired a car that could project both self-confidence and self-discipline, impulsiveness and self-control, a combination which defines 'cool' for the African-American urbanites who put the term into general circulation (Connor, 1995: 6–11).<sup>21</sup> The H2, like hip-hop clothing, puts across the 'don't mess with me' message quickly and effectively. Its size and bulk demands deference on the part of other motorists and bystanders and its boxy shape makes other cars look anemic. One of my respondents saw the H2 as a car with a 'healthy' and 'beefy' exterior. We had the following exchange:

RES: it's just a healthy-looking vehicle . . .

JS: and when you say healthy-looking, you mean what?

RES: just a beefy-looking vehicle . . . like a little monster-truck . . . which goes right into looking different . . . (Interview 13 November 2003)

In fact, many respondents gushed about the car's coolness and its uniqueness. The car's 'distinctiveness' figured prominently in the answers of many respondents from both metropolitan areas. One Los Angeles man said 'it's fairly distinctive-looking, and I can't say I dislike that.' These respondents were also preoccupied with the car's toylike appearance; 'it resembles a Tonka truck' was a comment I heard from several people.

Such people would not be driving an ordinary SUV or a tiny sports car. But these respondents were aware that the signifying power of the H2, its ruggedness, novelty, and coolness would eventually fade, as new cars supplanted it on the style frontier. As one respondent said to me, 'first there was the Escalade, now the H2, soon there will be something else.' Several wealthier respondents who had bought their H2s more than six months after its release wondered if they had missed their chance to live on the cutting edge. It was for this reason that so many of the wealthier respondents to take possession of their H2s right away. If they waited too long, they would fall behind the curve.

If the ownership of an H2 gave most respondents an exhilarating sense of belonging to the 'with it' faction of the upper middle class as well as a comforting sense of affluence, it gave the off-roading minority a very real sense of Bourdiean apartness and distinction.<sup>22</sup> The appearance and re-appearance of the H2 in conversations performed an excluding and

differentiating function for the off-roaders, who seemed to have a strong need to demarcate themselves from the driver of Range Rovers, Chevy Tahoes, and other 'soft' SUVs. The potentially solitary quest for new sensations was something she wanted to share with others equally passionate about the car and off-roading in general. But socializing with garden variety H2 owners was something they avoided. Like fiercely loyal members of other 'brand communities' (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Schouten and McAlexander 1995), the off-roaders only socialized with other H2 owners with similar orientations to the car and off-roading activities in general. Like other members of this 'emotional community' (see Maffesoli, 1996[1988]), the woman off-roader felt a sense of kinship only with other off-roaders. Her sense of solidarity did not extend to the ordinary SUV drivers who failed to grasp the H2's real purpose or attraction. Although they emphasized that their imaginary 'community' of H2 owners was open to anyone, regardless of race, class, gender or creed, they also made it clear that they were not in the same league as the 'soccer moms' who wanted the car for mundane reasons.

I know that there are a lot of H2 owners who buy it for a lot of very different sets of reasons . . . you know people use the term in a disparaging way, but you know, the 'soccer moms' which is a perfectly legitimate description of someone who you know uses it to raise their kids and ferry them around to swim practice, soccer, all that good stuff, you know I think there are a lot of people out there who buy it for the same reason people buy the Lincoln Navigator, because they can, they've got the wherewithal to do it, they like it, it provides enough room for their family, you know that kind of stuff, but the people that are active in the club have the same sort of gut response to it that I do . . . (Interview 5 May 2003)

The off-roaders found it distasteful that others treated the H2 as if it were a domesticated SUV suited for parking lots and freeways rather than dirt trails. The off-roaders praised the car as an instrument to add excitement to their lives. The accomplishment of mundane aims such as getting a promotion or a new client was beneath the vehicle. When I revealed that other buyers were choosing the H2 because it enhanced their image in the eyes of bosses and clients, two of the off-roaders reacted with something akin to revulsion. One off-roader felt that people who used their cars to remake their image were 'sad' and 'pathetic': 'it's just sad, if you want one for yourself that's great, be individualistic, but don't buy it because of what



someone else thinks about it, that's just sort of pathetic . . .' (Interview 10 May 2003).

Another off-roader lambasted the people who had no use for the H2's phenomenal off-road capabilities and paraded their H2s around as mere 'street queens'. These comments were affirmations of their capacity to appropriate an 'object of quality' in a natural and unforced manner (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 281). This capacity eluded the majority of owners, people who could not properly appreciate the vehicle and wrongly used it as a prop in their transparent quest for social esteem. For the offroaders, the decision to purchase an H2 should come from one's inner 'authentic' self rather than the self one sees reflected in the impressions of others. Indeed, for the off-roaders the act of conspicuously consuming vehicles like the H2 was more offensive in its inauthenticity than in its vulgarity or crassness.

While none of the analytical frameworks introduced in the article's beginning can stand alone as explanatory resources for making sense of the orientations of Hummer owners, enthusiasts and observers, each of the three has something to offer. The Veblenian notion of pecuniary standing does have some applicability, because the H2 was understood by many buyers and onlookers as a tangible 'boundary marker' (Sauder, 2005: 281). Ownership of the vehicle visibly demarcated those who could afford the car from those who could not. In the blunt formulation of one of my very first respondents, 'I can afford this car and you can't.' For the off-roaders, however, social differentiation came into play in a different way. These H2 enthusiasts distinguished themselves in the ways they integrated the car into their 'self-actualizing' (Holt, 1998: 15–16, 19) leisure practices and communalistic sociality. The car's cost did not seem to make an impression on them. Finally, the wealthier majority owners and enthusiasts, perhaps the most common type in my sample, fixated on the car's sign-value (see Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]: 88, 92–4). In their minds, its coolness, toughness, and toylike appearance counted for everything but imputed price did not matter. Pecuniary status was not a priority for these wealthy buyers who moved in social circles where everybody had money. Rather, they wanted to mark themselves as dynamic people who lived on the style 'frontier', the symbolic position where cultural innovation takes place.

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## Notes

1. Bourdieu's framework does make room for horizontally oriented interactions between members of the same class or class fraction, but this dynamic is almost always a secondary or derivative effect of the primary dynamic, which involves the orientation of object-based practices towards those practices associated with people higher or lower on the social scale.
2. It is useful here to make the distinction between global status – the social standing given to someone by society 'at large' and local status, the context-dependent status conferred by particular groups on particular occasions. Many sociologists would argue that the concept of status only has analytic purchase when it has been properly specified with regard to social context (see Collins, 2000; Sauder, 2005).
3. In his attempts to emulate the natural refinement of those richly endowed with both economic and cultural assets, the conspicuous consumer gives away his true colors. Such behavior betrays an insecurity and precariousness, which is at odds with the 'ease' so central to the orientation of someone who can claim distinction by virtue of who they are, not simply what they possess.
4. Like any other acquired object, mass-produced branded commodities can mediate social relationships. Highly visible and recognizable 'attention-getting' commodities such as cars and clothes (Derber, 2001[1979], Schor, 1998) play a prominent role in structuring both ego-self and ego-alter relationships. Cars, for example, are cherished by many of their male owners as tangible evidence of their masculine prowess vis-a-vis both the physical environment and the social environment of anonymous others with whom they are in competition (Marsh and Collett, 1986).
5. American analysts have long faulted Bourdieu for his inattention to the generic character of most goods and services in contemporary society. Since almost all consumers are choosing from the same menus of mass-produced branded commodities (Gartman, 1991; Ritzer, 2005), they argue, distinction does not issue as much from the disposition evident in the act of choosing as it does from the ways in which the consumer appropriates and uses a good or service which might be something also preferred by people located in a very different part of social space (see Holt, 1998). Some observers even go so far as to suggest that styles of consumption are increasingly converging across class lines. The 'individuating' style of consumption pioneered by educated professionals is gaining a foothold in a broad swathe of the American middle classes who find the homogenizing influences of the mass market increasingly distasteful (see Brooks, 2000).
6. Social psychologists have noted the unusual strength of the bond between driver and vehicle, bonds which come to the surface when drivers erupt in fits of road rage (see Katz, 1999).
7. We should note that, during the 1998–2002 period, sales of luxury cars and SUVs climbed at a very fast pace. At the high end of the SUV market, Range Rover reported that sales of its Land Rover line increased by 37 percent during this period (*Automotive News*, 2002).
8. *Sydney Morning Herald* 21 December 2002.
9. Eighteen months after the debut of the Hummer H2, seven car dealerships were offering new H2s to the public in the Los Angeles/Orange County area and four

in the San Francisco Bay Area. The sales figures from the LA dealerships were particularly impressive, as three of the LA dealerships sold more than 400 H2s in the 10 months following the car's release. By comparison, it took the two largest Manhattan dealerships 10 months to sell a total of 400 H2s, despite the greater wealth and population of the New York metropolitan area (see *Columbia News Service* 23 May 2003).

10. For example, every one of the dealerships I visited served areas which far exceeded the nation's average in terms of income and wealth. Most customers who frequented these dealerships lived in very affluent California communities such as Beverly Hills, Long Beach, Pacific Palisades and Century City in Los Angeles, and Marin County, Concord, San Francisco and Santa Clara in the San Francisco Bay Area. These are among the most affluent communities in the USA.
11. I took notes on the phone interviews. Face-to-face interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.
12. Although some interviewees were uncomfortable revealing their financial situation in a totally public setting like the dealership showroom, several respondents were willing to share their financial information in written form. One respondent I interviewed in his private office showed me his tax return from the previous year.
13. This income level puts them in the top 2.5 percent of the US income distribution, according to 2001 census figures. See [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) for US income statistics.
14. The preponderance of non-employee buyers is not surprising, given that, in 1995, over 50 percent of the households with a median net worth of US\$1.6 million have an income-earner who classifies himself or herself as 'self-employed' (see Stanley and Danko, 1996: 8, 23, 98).
15. *Columbia News Service* 23 May 2003
16. *The Sun Herald* 9 February 2003
17. *BusinessWeek Online* 22 July 2002. Prior to its release in July 2002, GM predicted that they could sell around 20,000 Hummer H2s during the first year. After a year on the market, however, American dealers had disposed of over 35,000 Hummer H2s, even though the base price was US\$55,000 and no financial incentives were offered. The manager of the Hummer H2 line at General Motors declared that the 'passion it generates' was like nothing he had ever experienced (*San Jose Mercury News* 19 November 2002). In California alone, some 6000 Hummer H2s were sold during this first year. One of the dealers told me that her dealership could sell 'twice as many H2s if we had the inventory' and that it was more common for H2s to be bought with cash than credit or financing, a highly unusual situation even for dealerships serving affluent areas.
18. This finding is consistent with what Holt found when he interviewed the culturally endowed residents of his college town; the more highly educated people tended to use more elaborate constructions when they spoke about their possessions and belongings (Holt, 1998).
19. Like all proper names in this article, 'Janice' is a pseudonym.
20. All five of the off-roaders lived and worked in or near the San Francisco Bay Area. All but one were male, although the woman off-roader was the one who spoke the most enthusiastically and articulately about her H2 and her off-roading

activities. In addition, all five worked as highly paid professionals in technical fields such as software programming.

21. While the posture of the street tough is antithetical to the securities of middle-class life (see Connor, 1995), it has been appropriated by mainstream white American society. As Marlene Connor explains, the Bronx and other New York City neighborhoods are the capital of 'cool' for young African-American males. Any such resident needs to develop a cool exterior if he is to survive, prosper, and claim his manhood (see Connor, 1995). Thus coolness is an implicit reference to one's unpredictable, dangerous, and chaotic social environment. But the desire to appear cool is not restricted to African-Americans and other minorities who have to endure the harsh realities of the ghetto or inner city. The cool stance appeals to teenage boys and young men who live in secure suburban neighborhoods, particularly white males still experimenting with different models of masculinity (Kotlowitz, 1999). Of course, in the kind of social environment that demands coolness as survival strategy, any attempt to buy cool rather than earning it is doomed to failure. Any person well-versed in the ways of cool can easily tell when cool is only skin deep and when it is bred in the bone (Connor 1995: 29). Attempts to purchase 'cool' can only go so far when audiences see these demonstrations for what they are.
22. However useful Bourdieu's theory is for making sense of the off-roaders' posture towards the H2, it does not seem particularly illuminating when applied to the phenomenon of off-roading in general. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu argues that upper classes gravitate towards 'cybernetic' sports (Bourdieu, 1984[1979]: 305) involving control over their natural and social environments. The ascetic-cybernetic sports (skiing, rock climbing, scuba diving, surfing, hangliding) emphasize the steering and control of one's body and require relatively small inputs of energy when compared with 'popular' sports (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 219). The outdoor 'Californian' sports tend to be cybernetic in a way, especially when nothing stands between the person's body and the implacable forces of nature. When motor vehicles are brought into play, some cybernetic aspects of the activity are preserved because mechanical power is substituted for human effort. However, this substitution would seem to subvert the signifying potential of the activity. How can off-roading be seen as an indicator of the same 'legitimate' taste for asceticism and rigor as marathon running? Mechanically mediated leisure activities such as off-roading thus pose a conundrum for Bourdieu's theory of sport as a vertically-oriented practice of class differentiation. Bourdieu explains the prevalence of jogging and other aerobic exercise among the upwardly mobile bourgeois by citing the 'striving' habitus unique to this class fraction (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 265). Tuning and sculpting one's body through one's own efforts naturally appeals to the class which seeks to carve out its own social fate and expects the world to honor its efforts. But driving huge motor vehicles on trails does not call for the same efforts or produce the same bodily effects as cross-country skiing. Indeed, testing oneself against nature with the aid of motorized vehicles would seem to negate the 'striving' aspects of the activity entirely. One would expect the downwardly mobile factions, not the upwardly mobile factions, to gravitate towards such activities. But this does not seem to be the case. In fact, there is a negative correlation between mechanically mediated

forms of leisure (motorcycling, off-roading, powerboating) and income (see Florida, 2002: 169, 173). Further, such leisure activities are not as common among members of the professional-managerial classes as they are among classes lower in the social hierarchy.

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