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Hummer Love

By ROB WALKER

Recently I noticed a Hummer in the parking lot of a Goodwill location. Almost involuntarily, I smirked. This reaction was not particularly surprising — least of all, I would guess, to whoever owned the thing. Lots of people judge not just Hummers but also the people who own them, right down to their fundamental morality (and thus whether their presence at a Goodwill is smirkworthy), and do so with no information beyond the existence of this large, gas-guzzling object. Some observers even record a pithy summation of those judgments in the form of a mean note left on the vehicle's windshield. Or if the owner is present, the critique may be manifest as an obscene gesture, a diatribe or both. Plus, of course, there are Web sites devoted to Hummer hatred. Among the material goods that people are willing to see as reflecting and embodying very specific aspects of their owners' identity, the Hummer looms large.

Hummer owners surely know that an audience of smirkers and note-leavers judges them as callous earth-killers or worse. Just as surely they must ascribe different meaning to their consumption decision. A recent article in *The Journal of Consumer Research* takes the unusual step of trying to articulate the Hummer fan's view of the world and himself. It draws on material found online as well as interviews with 20 or so devoted owners conducted by Marius K. Luedicke, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Innsbruck in Austria and an author of the article.

Hummer loyalists come across as a beleaguered lot. Less predictably, Luedicke and his fellow authors, Craig J. Thompson and Markus Giesler, argue that Hummer drivers position their ownership at the center of a "brand-mediated moral conflict" in which Hummer enthusiasts are not only innocent but also heroic. Conflict with vehement critics turns out to play a key role, with the Hummer owner casting himself or herself as a "moral protagonist" who must, according to this theory, "defend sacrosanct virtues and ideals from the transgressive actions of an immoral adversary." And what sacrosanct virtues would those be? To oversimplify a bit: American exceptionalism, rugged individualism, love of the frontier, community and freedom.

One owner's comment from the forum of an anti-Hummer site probably falls right in line with critics' judgments: "I want to continue living in an America where we all have the liberty to drive the biggest, ugliest gas-burning monsters that will fit on the roads." (Recall that, in 2001, Ari Fleischer, the White House press secretary, asserted that prodding the citizenry to conserve energy runs counter to "the American way of life.") The additional twist is that those who disagree are enemies of freedom itself: "Open your minds and hearts, and live and let live." Another fan makes an even more nimble rhetorical leap: "Grow up and join us Americans that believe in our freedom. . . . Stop trying to oppress others that don't share your beliefs, color and religion." Thus the debate is reframed, the journal authors write, as one between defenders and destroyers of personal freedom. Hummer owners are not just right; they are righteous.

This attitude is positioned as descendant from classic American myths — John Winthrop's vision of the City Upon a Hill, endlessly besieged by outsider foes who hate our freedom but are invariably swept aside by the forces of destiny itself. Clearly this involves ascribing meaning, motive and morals to Hummer critics, who are portrayed in the comments that Luedicke collected as narrow-minded hypocrites — particularly those who drive a Prius, or as some Hummer fans call it, a Pious. Getting down to details, enthusiasts point to volunteer groups that team up in their

Hummers to clean debris from highways, or even help the Red Cross in disaster situations by way of the Hummer Club's HOPE (Hummer Owners Prepared for Emergencies) program. In this way, they see themselves as caring for the land and acting selflessly on behalf of the community. A somewhat-related buy-American argument will presumably fade if G.M. completes its reported sale of the brand to China's Sichuan Tengzhong Heavy Industrial Machinery Company.

The traditional explanation for an object like the Hummer — big, flashy, expensive to acquire and maintain — is that it's a conspicuous status symbol. After all, consumer goods are often thought of as projectors of meaning, tools for individuals to send signals to onlookers known and unknown. Surely that theory is incomplete. The Hummer carries meaning, all right, but what it exemplifies is how wide the gap can be between what the owner and those onlookers think the meaning is. And while it's an extreme case, it's hardly a singular one. Probably we all send signals with products — your Birkin bag, my Levi's, everybody else's iPhone — that fly so wide of the mark, we'd be chagrined to learn just how differently the members of our invisible audience receive them. Probably we don't want to know. And neither, I suspect, do Hummer owners.

Notes

¹http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/01/magazine/01fob-consumed-t.html?_r=2