The Evolution of the "Chick Car" Or: What Came First, the Chick or the Car?

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S INCE WOMEN FIRST MANEUVERED INTO THE DRIVER'S SEAT, THE qualities that define the "woman's car" have remained remarkably constant. As the postwar era introduced prosperity, as well as the two-car garage, into many American families, the "woman's car" came to represent not only women's newfound mobility, but her culturally approved identity as well. Sturdy, spacious, and utilitarian, the "women's car" was recognized as the perfect vehicle for carrying kids and cargo. Thus the ubiquitous station wagon of the 1950s and 1960s, the 1970 hatchback sedan, the popular minivan introduced in the late 1980s, and today's downsized SUV and crossover may be considered certifiable "women's cars." Despite changes in form, style, and cargo space over the past 60 years, the function of the woman's car has remained the same. And that is to firmly reinforce women's gendered roles as wife and mother.

In the past decade, however, certain groups of women have staked a claim over a very different category of car. Seeking to shed their domestic identity, whether temporarily or permanently, these women have embraced a car that is in no way utilitarian, but rather, small, quick, stylish, and "fun." This vehicle has become branded in many automobile circles as the "chick car." The term is often used pejoratively, to describe a vehicle that cannot be taken seriously by true automobile aficionados. As John McElroy, host of *Autoline Detroit*, remarks, "it's the kind of car no manly-man would be caught dead driving" (Flint).

Yet while certain populations, most often male, find it necessary to disparage the chick car, the women who drive it perceive it in a much different way. These women have embraced the technology of a

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certain kind of car with particular characteristics and have used newly acquired spending power to make it their own. Despite the attempt of automobile manufacturers to create and market this class of car primarily to men, women have appropriated the car's meaning and in the process, have created an entirely new automotive category. Neither masculine nor feminine, the "chick car" has been infused with its very own identity.

The reputation of the chick car as inferior, however, has little to do with its technology but rather, is the result of women's intrusion into what has traditionally been a male sphere. As Virginia Scharff, author of *Taking the Wheel*, suggests, "The tendency to trivialize women's driving remains strong among Americans, and continues not only to denigrate women but also to inhibit the creative possibilities of the car culture" (173). Therefore, an analysis of gendered automobile culture, combined with the testimony of "chicks" themselves, will provide an understanding of how the chick car has not only evolved into a distinct automobile category, but more importantly, into a symbol of women's empowerment.

Women's relationship with the automobile has been problematic from the start. As Scharff contends, "for over a century, the auto has been identified with masculinity and mobility, and women's right and ability to use cars has been disputed" (166). Even when the association with the automobile was as a passenger rather than a driver, women's influence was considered suspect. Industry heavyweights no doubt shared the sentiment that women's desire for style and ornamentation "corrupted automotive virtue" (Scharff 113). The post-World War II era witnessed a marked increase in the ranks of female drivers. Rising prosperity, as well as the migration to the suburbs, provided the opportunity and the need for a second car in many households. To combat the isolation of a homebound life, the suburban woman demanded a car of her own. Women's increased presence behind the wheel, and the freedom and mobility it implied, made the male population, which included those in the auto industry, nervous. However, automakers were certainly aware of the marketing possibilities suggested by a swelling female driver base. Women's growing position as both drivers and consumers presented automakers with a conundrum that exists to this day. And that is, how to market the automobile to an audience whose very use devalues the product the industry is trying to sell.

The solution was to create a strategy that would affirm women's approved gender role without disrupting the masculinity and presumed technological expertise of the male driver. As Julie Wosk, in Women and the Machine, suggests, men were fearful of women's intrusion into the masculine arena of automobile technology. Wosk writes, "to many men, [...] these women may have seemed to be abandoning their proper maternal and caretaking roles" (xiii). Reconfiguring a particular type of automobile as a form of domestic technology, a tool which enabled women to fulfill prescribed roles as wife, mother, consumer, and caretaker, allowed automakers to appeal to women without alienating men. Automobiles that served such a purpose were marketed specifically for women's consumption, thus keeping the gender binary intact. As Scharff writes, "auto industry promoters developed a dual strategy designed at once to preserve their own masculine identities and to serve their economic interests, tied to selling more cars" (115). Calling on what they believed to be men's and women's unchanging and inherent biological natures allowed automakers to apply gendered meanings to particular types of automobiles, keeping the technologies, and the sexes, separate.

The automakers called upon advertising to ascribe gendered meanings to particular vehicles. As Judy Wajcman, author of Feminism Confronts Technology, asserts, the "powerful, large car [was] destined for the male head of household" (135). Women, on the other hand, were assigned the pedestrian, utilitarian "second" car that enabled them to perform household tasks and family errands. Advertising from the postwar era confirms this marketing strategy. Print ads from the 1950s and 1960s promote the station wagon as the transportation for families (Figures 1 and 2). The hatchback, designed for "running around town and shopping" is promoted as the car designed around the grocery bag (Figure 3). Appealing to women's "maternal instinct" is evident in ads for minivans, which promote room, reliability, and safety (Figures 4 and 5). The automobiles featured in ads directed toward women are never promoted for their drivability, handling, or performance. Rather, they are presented as a safe, reliable "practical necessity" in women's fulfillment of the culturally prescribed, domestic role (Wajcman 135).

Although women were solicited to purchase these automobiles, they were not expected nor encouraged to be drivers in the same sense as men. As Scharff suggests, the question of how people wanted to



Chevy holds everybody and his brother - beautifully! Busy people find the roominess of a Chevrolet wagon made to order. Especially people with little kids to consider. You can tote a whole swarm of Brownies or Cubs. Over 90 cubic feet of cargo space is offered in all 5 Chevy wagons. You might prefer the 9-passenger job with its rear-facing third seat. But whether it's a wagon, sedan or convertible you go for, Chevrolet's roomier Fisher Body seats you in style. Some evening after a hectic day drop by your Chevrolet dealer's and just sit in one.

CHEVEROLET THE CAR THAT'S WANTED FOR ALL ITS WORTH - CHEVROLET DIVISION OF GENERAL MOTORS, DETROIT 2, MIC



FIGURE 1. Chevrolet advertisement: "Chevrolet holds everyone and his brother - beautifully" (Redbook, July 1959). General Motors Corporation. Used with permission.

use cars rested on the "common, longstanding assumption that men and women, quite naturally, would have different expectations and desires" (119). Men drove for speed, excitement, and exhilaration. They got behind the wheel to experience independence, recklessness, and mastery of the car and the road. The car became part of the male



Foreground, Caprice Estate Wagon, background, Chevelle Nanad Custom Wagon.

If you've got the family... we've got the plan.

Luxury plan...Caprice Estate Wagon

A Caprice wagon is to driving what a champagne flight is to flying. First class all the way, in a way no other wagon offers. Luxriously pleated vinyl on the seats and sidewalls. A control panel with the look of rich-grained walnut. Up to one hundred and six cubic feet of cargo space wrapped in sculptured steel and trimmed distinctively in two contrasting wood-looking grains on side and rear panels. The Caprice Luxury Plan gives you so much more of everything, except the champagne price tag.



Try the silent ride of quality



Economy plan...Chevelle Nomad Custom

Here's the plan: Get everybody and everything there, beautifully, comfortably and economically, in a way nobody else can. Body by Fisher, a graceful design and Magic-Mirror acrylic lacquer take care of the beauty. An improved Full Cail suspension, advanced body mounting system and soft, soft seats take care of the comfort. And a larger standard 200-hp V8 engine that runs on regular gas takes care of the economy. In short, the Chevelle Family Plan is: Drive now, pay little. Be smart. Be sure. Buy now at your Chevrolet dealer's.

FIGURE 2. Chevrolet advertisement: "If you've got the family, we've got the plan" (*Better Homes and Gardens*, March 1968). General Motors Corporation. Used with permission.

identity; its power, technological superiority, and performance was often conflated with the man who drove it. Women, on the other hand, drove cars not for the excitement they might provide, but simply as a means to perform prescribed tasks and fulfill gendered roles.



FIGURE 3. Honda advertisement: "The Honda Civic. The car we designed around the shopping bag" (1978). Copyright American Honda Motor Co., Inc.

Driving was not to be enjoyed, but rather, became a duty to be performed, a means to get from here to there. A woman was not encouraged to take pleasure in the driving experience, as to do so would be to infringe on male territory and thereby threaten masculine identity.

While women have always worked, the women's movement of the 1970s brought women into the workforce in record numbers, not only out of necessity, but to contribute to society in a meaningful way. As migration to the suburbs left many women without access to public transportation, the automobile became an important means to labor participation. As Margaret Walsh, in *Gender and the Automobile in the United States*, asserts, "women's participation in the labor force has been the impetus for their greater familiarity with and usage of automobiles". Married women with children in the workforce were still responsible for gendered household tasks; thus the cars they drove remained those deemed suitable for the domestic role. However, many women put off marriage and childbearing to establish careers. And a good number of them desired to own cars that reflected their newly acquired professional status. As Charles Sanford writes in *Woman's Place in American Car Culture*, "each stage of life begets its

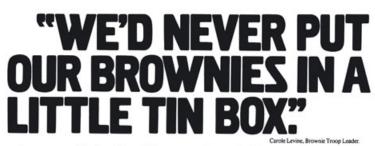


FIGURE 4. Volvo advertisement: "There's only one safer place than a Volvo to carry young children" (1986).

own characteristic kind of car, one that hopefully signifies an upward social progress [...]" (138).

However, the selection of cars available for working women during the 1970s and 1980s was limited at best. Gender equality had not yet reached women's paychecks; the types of cars that appealed to successful men were financially inaccessible to the average working woman. Thus most women drivers had to make do with the economy cars of the time, such as the Ford Pinto, AMC Gremlin, and the VW Beetle. Or they were regulated to what the auto industry executives referred to as "secretary" cars, low-priced versions of vehicles such as the Chevrolet Camaro, "with fewer features and less power" (Levin). These sparse, low-budget cars were hardly viewed as a threat to the masculinity associated with high-performance and high-status automobiles.

The infiltration of foreign cars into the United States and the resulting competitiveness of the automobile industry in the later part of the twentieth century resulted in a profusion of car models and styles, and the technology that accompanied them. The era also witnessed a steady increase in women's salaries; working women soon discovered a wide variety of affordable cars available to them. These



As you can see, the leaders of Brownie Troop #1900 in Los Angeles have a lot of responsibility. So when it came to choosing troop transportation, they were very tough cookies.

As one of them puts it, "I must have frustrated half the car salesmen in southern California looking for the right station wagon. The ones I looked at were so small and tinny. No way would I ever feel safe driving a bunch of girls around in any of them." One by one, each of these Brownie leaders end-ed up at a Volvo dealer. And today, Troop #1900

travels around in a Volvo wagon train.

According to one of the other leaders, "I was sold on the Volvo wagon the minute I saw it. I knew the girls would fit very comfortably inside and there would be plenty of room left for their gear. When I drove the Volvo, it wasn't all over the road like other wagons I'd driven. It offered great visibility. And it

just plain felt solid and safe." If you're looking for a station wagon you can feel good about putting your kids in, join Troop #1900. Buy a Volvo. A car you can believe in



FIGURE 5. Volvo advertisement: "We'd never put our Brownies in a little tin box" (1981).

cars were not spartan economy types, nor were they designed around a grocery bag. They were not directly marketed to women; rather, they appealed to a young or young-at-heart, carefree spirit who

thoroughly enjoyed the act of driving. The automobile that attracted many women without domestic proclivities or responsibilities was small, sporty, quick, and most important of all, fun. And when women began to embrace this type of automobile in great numbers, it garnered the cultural label of "chick car."

The "chick car" label embraces a number of automobiles currently on the market. An unofficial survey of articles by automotive writers suggests that the "chick car" category includes the Mazda Miata, Mitsubishi Eclipse, BMW MINI Cooper, VW New Beetle, Toyota RAV4, and for the more affluent, the Audi TT. The chick car category includes certain models that, in the words of journalist Ted Laturnus of the *Globe and Mail*, "hit women where they live." All of the cars, with the exception of the Audi, fall into the \$19,000 – \$25,000¹ range, which is a lot of fun for the money. Most come in convertible versions, and many are available in a variety of colors other than silver or black. They are small, quick, and easy to maneuver; most chick cars are, in fact, two seaters. However, the most common attribute awarded to the chick car is "fun to drive."

The chick car is the antithesis of the traditional "woman's car," the vehicle traditionally marketed to fulfill women's domestic responsibilities. In fact, the primary owners of chick cars are either young single women who want some fun before marriage, kids, and a minivan, or empty nesters who purchase a car, as MINI owner Susan Prosser tells us, "because I had only myself to please." Young single women can often be found taking their cars on road trips, participating in motor sport events, or hanging out with like-minded chick car owners. For many young women, the chick car represents their first major purchase. As Julie Garren, owner of an electric blue MINI with a white top, exclaims, "It gave me a sense of achievement that I was able to save and purchase the car I wanted." Of her RAV4, Lindsev Seyferth remarks, "it symbolizes freedom because it is the first car I have purchased without my parents' help." For women in their late forties and early fifties, the chick car often represents a new phase in life. "I drove a minivan for 18 years. It was the 'mom' car, the carpool, and vacation car," states Paula Adams, owner of a RAV4. Of her Miata, Cheryl Goodell says, "It can only seat two people; all my other cars were four seaters or more. I went from a soccer-mom car to an empty-nest car and love it." These women do not view the chick car as a cure for the midlife crisis; the automobile is not purchased as

a means to recapture one's youth. Rather, for women of a certain age, the chick car is a declaration of independence from the domestic role. For young single women, it often represents financial independence from mom and dad.

Terry Jackson of Bankrate.com writes, "Carmakers recognize the powerful influence women have today in the auto marketplace while they simultaneously have to avoid sending a message to men that they shouldn't be caught dead driving these cars." While automakers welcome the female consumer, the "chick car" label creates a good amount of anxiety and concern among them. Car manufacturers are uneasy when automobiles become associated with femininity and the female car buyer. Forbes journalist Jerry Flint asserts, "Chick car is a derogatory term, and apparently men shy away from these vehicles. When half the market shies away from your vehicle, it is trouble." Women's attraction to a particular automobile causes members of the male population to question the car's technology. As Wajcman suggests, "the absence of technical confidence or competence does indeed become part of feminine gender identity, as well as being a sexual stereotype" (155). The assumption that women lack technical expertise creates a reverse kind of logic in the minds of many male consumers. They believe that since women cannot appreciate the finer technical characteristics of a car, such as power, handling, and performance, the cars women purchase must be technologically deficient. Women's approval, in the minds of many men, leads to the devaluation of the car. This notion, while appearing to rest primarily on women's assumed lack of automotive knowledge, actually originates in the historical subordination of women. As Scharff remarks, "what is seen as feminine, or belonging to women, seems trivial at best, dangerous at worst" (167).

Male drivers also consider the "chick car" an affront to their masculinity and fear what driving such a car will say about them. As Laturnus suggests, "for a lot of male drivers, the thought of driving a 'chick car' is the kiss of death when it comes to signing on the dotted line." The automobile has been historically associated with masculinity, aggressiveness, and power. Scharff writes, "according to popular mythology, men enjoy a sympathetic relation with cars, mastering their machines as skillful and fearless drivers" (166). Cars have a central place in male culture, as symbols of "individual freedom and self-realization" (Wajcman 134). And many men consider the automobile as both an extension of their personality and as an important contributor to their identity. Therefore, in the mind of the male consumer, driving a "chick car" may put one's masculinity in question. As *Bloomberg* writer Dorin Levin remarks, "Guys need unusual selfassurance to drive a vehicle singled out by the distaff set."

Automakers have responded to the "chick car" dilemma in a number of interesting ways. Many industry honchos adamantly deny the reality of such automobiles. "Cars just for women don't exist," states a representative from General Motors. "We are however careful not to exclude, or turn off, female buyers so we make sure our approach resonates with all buyers" (Laturnus). Of the Miata, Mazda director Greg Young says, "if it is a chick car – which I'm not confirming or denying – it doesn't bother us" (Laturnus). Advertising produced for automobiles dubbed "chick cars" is either directed toward men or is notably gender neutral. Many automakers, such as MINI Cooper and Audi, eliminate people from the advertising altogether, concentrating solely on the car (Figure 6). Whereas Miata print ads include male drivers (Figure 7), those for the VW New Beetle are "people-less."²

Car manufacturers have also reacted by "beefing" up the offending cars to be more masculine. As Levin writes, "VW has attempted to 'male up' the New Beetle over the years by adding a turbocharger to the engine and a spoiler to the rear." In 2012, VW introduced a "bigger, less 'cute', and sportier Beetle" in an attempt to ditch the "girl" car image and attract more male buyers (Healey). The RAV 4 has gone through a makeover as well, as Toyota "appears to have pumped steroids into its small utility vehicle" (Green). Sports minded additions to the MINI Cooper include aerodynamic body



FIGURE 6. MINI advertisement: "What doesn't close you makes you stronger" (Spring 2009). Copyright 2009 MINI, a division of BMW of North America, LLC. All rights reserved. The MINI and BMW trademark, model names and logo are registered trademarks.



FIGURE 7. Mazda advertisement: "Don't just drive the car. Be the car" (*Travel & Leisure*, Apr 2006).

molding, a roof spoiler, sports suspension, 18-inch wheels, and electronic brakeforce distribution, as well as a direct injection turbocharged engine. Mazda added a new masculine moniker to accompany changes under the hood; the Miata is now officially referred to as the MX-5.

The overwhelmingly male bastion of automobile journalists attempts to praise the "chick car" while struggling to keep their masculinity intact. Many suggest the term is unwarranted. Writes Craig Fitzgerald in Hemmings Motor News, "The Miata has always been unfairly labeled as a 'chick car.' Terry Jackson, in the "Top Five Chick Cars" remarks, "It's hard to reconcile the Miata's 'chick car' reputation with the fact that it's the most popular car among racers in the Sports Car Club of America." Reference is also made to the MINI's racing heritage. As auto journalist Jason Harper states, "a star turn in the remake of 'The Italian Job' helped allay some male drivers' concerns that [the MINI's] small size and cuteness made it a 'chick car'". Some members of the press call on certifiable "manly" individuals to validate the chick car. Levin writes, "a friend and former jock who builds homes, drives a big pickup and is about as macho as one can be, just loves his." Although the attempts of male journalists to defend their masculinity while praising the chick car

are certainly humorous, what is significant is the universal implication that the only way the chick car may be assured of credibility is through male approval. It is difficult for those involved in all aspects of the auto industry to admit that women's participation in American car culture is not only crucial, but valid as well. As Charles Sanford observes, "Men have been understandably slow to acknowledge this truth, for it means relinquishing power" (146).

Women who drive chick cars are aware of the derogatory meanings attached to female automobile ownership. As RAV4 owner Sabra Townsend remarks, "I think that the term 'chick car' [is] used to marginalize women and their preferences." Maggie Young declares, "I used to hate it when people say [the MINI] is 'cute'; now I tolerate it and consider them ignorant." As for what others think of the chick car, Allison, owner of a velvet-red MINI replies, "I'm not invested in the car culture enough to care." Deidre O'Reilly, who can be found tooling around town in a used Audi TT says, "I don't take [chick car] as a derogatory comment, but rather I find it somewhat humorous as I believe deep down there is a bit of envy." Such comments suggest that these women are not only aware of the effect chick car ownership has on both the masculine psyche and male car culture, but create personal agency from it. They understand that they are, in fact, actors in the creation of the "chick car" culture. These women have appropriated a car with particular characteristics as their own, and in the process, have disrupted the notion of what a "woman's car" ought to be. As Scharff writes, "Women's role in the making of car culture was assuredly as important in the instances where they refused to conform as when they acted according to conventional thinking" (169).

Chick car owners have not only appropriated a segment of the automobile market, but they have infused driving with meaning that differs significantly from that of men. "For men," Wajcman writes, "cars afford a means of escape from domestic responsibilities, from family commitment, into a realm of private fantasy, autonomy, and control" (134). The common perception of women drivers is that they utilize the automobile as a means to get from one destination to another. However, chick car drivers get behind the wheel for access to an experience that had been heretofore closed to them. And that is the sheer enjoyment of driving. Says Athena Rodriguez, "The [MINI] is the most FUN car I have ever driven." Denise

Bradshaw declares her MINI is "fun to drive, very nimble [and] expresses my individuality." Julie Garren remarks, "when I'm driving [my MINI] I often feel like I have the best car on the street, and that can brighten my day." Miata owner Cheryl Goodell exclaims, "I feel like I'm always having fun every time I drive it, regardless where I am going." And Renata Melnitschenko affirms, "The car has become an important part of my life because it has brought me more joy."

The chick car has also brought women together in the car community. The women belong to Internet car lists, attain membership in car clubs, and often socialize with like-minded chick car owners. Garren remarks, "The [MINI] gave me access to a whole new circle of friends." VW New Beetle owner Jessica Jaskola writes, "The car has brought me so much happiness. It has also led me to some of the best people in the world." "The Miata is almost like a 'buddy.' It is fun to see, drive, and yes, even fun to talk about," declares owner Petra van den Berge. The chick car community is a sisterhood of sorts, in which women share experiences, concerns, and the love of driving. American women, Scharff writes, have always wanted more in a car than a "cushy place to sit." Scharff continues, "Automobility, to the diverse women who sought its power, meant access to a wider social life," as well as "new and flexible possibilities for women's independent entry into the public realm" (171). Chick car owners have appropriated a segment of the automobile market to do just that.

While the male automobile constituency of auto makers, journalists, and drivers alternately disparages the chick car, ignores its existence, alters its construction, or defends male use of it, chick car owners continue to wield an enormous amount of power over an important segment of the automobile market. They have embraced the technology of a certain type of car, and use their newly acquired spending power to make it their own. To the women who drive them, the chick car represents personal freedom, independence, agency, and a whole lot of fun. Choosing a chick car not only unsettles the notion of the kind of car a woman should drive, but also disrupts the gendered responsibilities and roles that accompany it. Whether temporary or permanent, chick car ownership represents a sense of empowerment in the lives of thousands of women. Chick car owners are not, in the words of Ruth Oldenziel, the "passive consumers of technology" (40). Rather, these empowered women have determined what technology has meaning for them, and have simply driven off with it.

Notes

- 1. 2012 estimated pricing
- Volkswagen Group of America, Inc. would not grant permission to reproduce the aforementioned Audi TT and VW Beetle ads.

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