# Driving Fashion

James C. Dahler

Dr. Brooke Horvath's English 10001 course was asked to explore and research a recent social issue. **James C. Dahler** spiritedly connects American social issues to transportation preferences in his piece "Driving Fashion." He finds that although sport utility vehicles are supported by American culture, they are a poor choice for consumers for several important many reasons.

Ever since Henry Ford developed the innovation of the assembly line that made it possible to manufacture motorcars in such volume and so cheaply that ordinary people could afford to buy them, American consumers have developed a strange, sick love affair with automobiles. With each generation – indeed even with each new model year – that love affair has become an increasingly important part of our culture and one of the most definitive yardsticks by which we measure each other's status, class, and rank. Never a society content with "good enough," Americans have always concluded, whether it be hamburgers, bombs, or the family car, that bigger simply has to be better. The sport utility vehicle that automotive manufacturers are currently marketing to the public as what-we-should-be-driving-now is a poor choice for the consumer in that it is bad for us as individuals, as stewards of the environment, and as members of a nation vulnerable to terrorism in an unstable world.

In its most elemental form, the automobile is a tool with simple intended purposes. It is a conveyance for the transport of people and limited amounts of cargo. Ideally, it should be able to do this quickly, with a high degree of safety and comfort for both its passengers and those in proximity to its passage. It should do this at minimal expense and with nominal impact on the environment. Of course, automobile manufacturers have continually improved their product, as cars can never be too safe, too cheap or too clean. In the quest for improvement, manufacturers also sought to provide the kind of improvements that they felt would suit the consumer's specialized needs while lending the product an aesthetic appeal.

In the middle of the "baby boom" of the fifties and early sixties, the consumer's perceived needs were for a vehicle that satisfied both the seating requirements of larger families and the wanderlust inspired by the endless ribbons of concrete that comprised the newly developed interstate highway system. Vacations were all about piling the whole family into a car and pointing it at a far horizon, with the desirability of the destination being measured as much by its distance from home as whatever novel attraction it hosted. Everyone's dad was a Magellan, and each needed his vehicle to be a vessel worthy of epic voyages. Into this void, manufacturers introduced the station wagon. With ample seating for six, perhaps another two in a jump seat hidden in the prodigious rear cargo area, standard roof racks to lash luggage to, a cavernous fuel tank, and a massive V-8 engine capable of loping for long, easy hours at fifty, sixty, or seventy miles per hour, it was a vehicle that satisfied both the needs of these large families and the image that they wanted to project.

Generation by generation, the perceived needs of the consumer and the substance of the projected image has changed. Magellan's boys didn't want their father's Buick, and the muscle cars of the late sixties and early seventies took over. Following that, tail-end Baby Boomers got rocked with the Arab oil embargo. This sparked a brief "Age of Reason" that ruled automotive fashion, and for a time what was practical happened perversely to be desirable. Smaller cars with smaller, more efficient engines were the rule through the seventies and into the eighties. In the eighties, another boom in the economy had people lusting for more luxury, power and space in their rides, and the conversion-van phenomenon was how the industry satisfied our wants. By the end of the eighties, conversion vans were perceived as overblown, tacky and too truck-like in their ride. In another moment of brilliance, the industry provided the consumer with a new design called the minivan, and incidentally came full circle. The minivan came extremely close in both form and function to the old standard station wagon – so close, in fact, that the few makers who still had mid-size versions of the classic wagon in their lineups, phased them out with the introduction of minivans. These new vehicles seemed to have it all: generous size, seating for up to eight, efficient engines, comfortable rides and car-like handling. Our too-much-is-never-enough attitude manifested itself this time in the minivan not matching the change in the size of the nuclear family, with most families (and most purchasers of minivans) not filling half the available seating in these vehicles. With the exception of occasionally hauling a sports-playing child's teammates, or performing intermittent antiquing or moving duties, most of these vehicles could be seen driving around with a single passenger or two in the front, and a sumptuously empty void behind.

Regardless of the minivan's sensibility of design, it soon came to be seen as an undesirable badge of soccer-mom ubiquity. Into the vacuum created by parents seeking transport less sedate, and grown children again looking for a design markedly different from what their parents used to shuttle them about, manufacturers have only been too happy to deliver the newest best thing for us: the sport utility vehicle. Built on a truck chassis, often equipped with four-wheel drive and stupendous towing capacities, this type of vehicle is ostensibly designed to satisfy the needs of people who frequently travel where roads are nonexistent, poor, or severely compromised by the ravages of nature. This is a vehicle also designed for people who participate in sports of an extreme nature, sports that require a vehicle more rugged, more capable of hauling people, equipment and trailers to spots more remote than a standard passenger vehicle could handle. Those are the people for whom the functional capacities of these machines were designed. Most of these vehicles, however, are not being sold to people who will ever use them for their intended purpose. Most will likely never leave pavement, never have their carpets muddied, and never feel so much as a tug on their hitch. They will, however, be purchased by consumers wishing to be thought of as the kind of people who need such a vehicle, the kind born to wear the fashionably correct vehicle of the day, regardless of their actual driving needs.

Certain models of the current SUV's offered are the largest, heaviest vehicles that have ever been licensed for non-commercial passenger duty, and there is no indication that manufacturers have reached a boundary regarding the excesses they will make available to us. In fact, if anything, they seem eager to push the boundaries. Under the headline of "Hummer Crusher," *Cycle World* reports that International is promoting a vehicle called the CXT, for Commercial Extreme Truck. The equivalent of a twenty ton dump truck set up as a luxury SUV, its turbocharged diesel engine will squeak out a mere 7-10 mpg (Hoyer). It's perhaps time to push our chairs back away from this table.

In the absence of any evidence of an actual need for the capabilities of these vehicles, most owners will cite safety as a reason for ownership, claiming that the raised height and the additional weight of these vehicles, combined with the additional traction provided by four-wheel drive, make them feel safer. Both statistics and common sense tell us that they are not safer vehicles. Statistics for 2003 indicate that the likelihood of being killed in an accident for people driving or riding in an SUV were 11 percent higher than for people driving or riding in cars (Hakim). From the common sense aspect, all you have to do is think about the simple physics of the situation. The curb weight of a Lincoln Navigator is 5760 lbs. That is within one hundred pounds of the combined curb weight of both a Buick Century (3342 lbs) and a Toyota Corolla (2502 lbs). So the driver of something like a Lincoln Navigator is in fact piloting the equivalent kinetic energy of *two* vehicles through traffic at all times, with the capability of injecting that energy into any accident he or she may be involved in. Additionally, the chances of drivers being involved in an accident may actually be increased by their feeling of security and invincibility because it could lull them into a degree of complacency and slow their reaction times. Further compounding the danger of this situation is the fact that twice as much weight, combined with the higher center of gravity of an SUV, makes it a fairly ungainly and slow-to-react vehicle in emergency maneuvers, not to mention contributing to a proclivity to roll. Even the benefits of four-wheel drive can prove to be negative. Some of the systems are so sophisticated, with their abilities to sense wheel slippage and seamlessly transfer power to the wheels that are not slipping, that a driver may not even realize that roads are hazardous until he or she tries to bring the vehicle to a stop. One realizes very quickly that four-wheel drive is excellent for making vehicles go, but doesn't do anything to improve braking under icy conditions. With all of the massive SUV's and their oblivious, invulnerable (in their minds, anyway) drivers zipping around out there, it's almost as though everyone used to walk around with BB guns strapped to their hips but they've all suddenly swapped them out for .44 magnums. It might make them feel safer to have a more potent weapon, but the potential for disaster is certainly greater, and it sure as heck doesn't make *me* feel any safer.

Ecologically, there is no argument, sound or otherwise, why people should drive such a vehicle if they don't have a definite need for the capacities inherent in its design. Heavier construction and larger engines result in higher fuel consumption over the same amount of miles traveled. Carbon dioxide, the greenhouse gas chiefly responsible for the global warming that scientists are blaming for (among other things) the increase of more violent tropical storms and hurricanes, with every indication that these things will continue to worsen, is loaded into our atmosphere primarily from automobile exhaust. In the course of a vehicle's lifetime, a difference of as little as five miles per gallon of performance will add up to as much as *ten tons* of carbon dioxide. With respect to toxic pollut-

ants, SUV's produce up to thirty percent more carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides than passenger cars (Bindler). It's time to question the ethics inherent in choosing fashion over being environmentally conscious.

Finally, lets address how the choice of one's vehicle could possibly affect homeland security, or terrorism on a global scale. Energy gluttons that we are, Americans are responsible for one-quarter of all the oil used each year in the world, and one-quarter of all that comes from sources in the Middle East (Horn). This is a region of the world that has been historically unstable yet would have little income but for the vast amounts of money that are exchanged for the plentiful oil reserves situated beneath that portion of the earth. It could be argued that money wasted on gasoline to fuel vehicles with low efficiencies lined the pockets of the terrorists behind the attacks of 9/11, and may even now be financing future attacks against our country or that of one of our allies. Certainly the possibility that the oil-rich and unstable countries of Iraq and Iran might use their oil-wealth-funded capacities to create weapons of mass destruction, combined with their proximity to the Saudi Arabian oil fields, plays a huge role in the presence of our military in that region, and must bear some responsibility for the resultant loss of lives there. I'm having a hard time imagining what aspect of owning an SUV would make that justifiable.

In summary, SUV's don't serve the majority of people that buy them. They're not safe. They pollute more than other vehicles that would serve most people just as well. They're not helping us become energy independent in a fashion that helps make our country and world more secure. A vehicle's purpose is to deliver people to a destination safely, in reasonable comfort, and with minimal impact on the environment. Ownership of a certain type of vehicle doesn't make one a better person, but it can make a statement about a person's ethics...or their lack thereof. People need to select and drive vehicles that serve their real needs, and not their egos.

Works Cited

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