

# The Role of Symbolism in Early Markets for Hybrid-Electric Vehicles

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# Overview

- 1. Automobiles and Symbolism**
- 2. Study Introduction**
- 3. Methods**
- 4. Findings**
- 5. Implications**

# Automobiles and Symbolism

- **Automobiles Provide More than Just Transportation**
- **Represent Concepts that Link to Personal Identity**
  - Can Tell Others Who We Are, or Who We Would Like to Be
  - Communication: Automobile is Visible and Used Often
- **Multiple Types of Value** (Williamson, 1978)
  - Use Value (Accomplish Practical Objective)
  - Symbolic Value (Communicate Identity)
  - Fuel Economy Can Have Both Types of Value for Consumer
- **Symbolic Meaning Affects Vehicle Purchase**



# Study Introduction

## *Background*

- Research Suggesting Symbolism Important in Adoption of BEVs (Gjøen and Hård, 2002)
- Hints that HEV Owners Were Motivated by Symbolic Value (OEC, 2003; Kurani and Turrentine, 2004)

## *Objectives*

1. Do Hybrid Owners See Symbolic Meaning in their HEVs?
2. How Do They Characterize Symbolic Meaning?
3. What Was Role of Symbolic Meaning in Purchase?

# Methods

## *Qualitative Study*

- Focused Sample (25 Households in Northern CA)
- Semi-Structured Interview Format
- Reveals Behavior, But Not Frequency
- Ideal for New Products

## *Quantitative Challenges*

- Misunderstood/Undefined “Cultural Categories”
- Consumers May Not Understand Own Behavior
- Retreat to Rational Explanations

# Findings: HEV Symbolism

## Better World (WE)

- Environmental Preservation, Resource Conservation, Energy Independence
- Concern for Others, Individual Sacrifice, Cooperation to Address Social Issues
- HEV as Way to Make a Difference and Educate Others: “if everyone drove hybrids”

## Mixed Meanings

- Making a Better World While Spending Less
- Balancing of Household Interests
- HEV as Way to Satisfy Diverse Symbolic Desires

## Spending Less (ME)

- Lower Fuel Costs, Less Time Spent Fueling, Lower Vehicle Cost
- Intelligent Consumerism, Making Sound Investment, Money-Saving Technology
- HEV as Way to Demonstrate Wise Financial Choices

# Findings: Symbolism of Other Vehicles

## *Compact Cars*

- Frugal by Necessity: “This is the best I can do”
- Few Trade Compact for HEV
- Almost no Cross-Shopping of HEVs and Compacts

## *SUVs and Pickup Trucks*

- Opposite Meanings of Hybrid
- Wasteful, Self-Indulgent, Lack of Concern for Others
- Mixing Symbols: Hybrid SUVs
  - Full-Sized Hybrid SUVs/Pickups: High Use Value, Low Symbolic Value

## *BEVs and FCVs*

- Borrowed Meaning: BEV → HEV → FCV

# Implications

## *Delivering Both Use Value and Symbolic Value*

- Two Types of Value Are Not Necessarily Coupled
- Use Value: Emissions Reduced, Fuel Saved
- Symbolic Value: Am I Making a Difference? Am I Being a Smart Consumer? Does it Show?

## *Vehicle Characteristics*

- Engine Stop/Start: Moderate Use Value, Very High Symbolic Value
- Electric (Only) Drive, Telematics, Vehicle Range

## *Policy Measures*

- Tax Incentives: Low Use Value, Medium Symbolic Value
- HOV Lane Access, Reduced Registration Fees, Distinct License Plates

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