

**Sport Utility Vehicles:
The Environmental Consequences of an American
Phenomenon**

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Abstract

The growing nationwide popularity of Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) ownership currently poses additional threats to the health of the environment. From 1980-1990, SUV sales in the U.S. increased over 380%. In 1998, 2.8 million SUVs drove onto U.S. roads. These statistics appear even more staggering when compared to the Western European nations, where SUVs comprise only 3% of the car market compared to 47.5% in the United States. This *is* an American phenomenon that poses an environmental threat of great magnitude due to the cars' excessive fuel consumption and higher carbon monoxide emissions.

This trend in car purchasing, which shows no signs of abating, prompted the current study which is an exploration into the perceptions and attitudes of SUV owners. I wanted to find out if drivers were aware of the environmental ramifications of their vehicles to see if they detect the relationship between their consumer decisions and our degraded environment.

This study consisted of a three-part social research project based on in-depth discussions with SUV drivers themselves. Intercept interviews and focus groups concentrated on inquiries concerning vehicle perception and use, environmental consequences of SUVs, and personal environmental behaviors and perceptions. A total of 50 people participated in the study. Drivers were also approached at the gas pumps and asked about their feelings on the recent rise in gas prices and their effect on driving habits.

The main findings from this study reveal some surprising and not so surprising results. For one, drivers expressed that they greatly value their SUVs for the safety, image, and combination of luxury and utility that they provide. This belief is held even in cases where the cars are actually not universally "safe". Yet, drivers also showed that they are not maximizing the utility that their SUVs provide in terms of four-wheel drive and off-road usage, the capabilities that lend to their SUV classification. Discussion about the environment revealed that the appeal of SUVs overrides any kind of personal environmental conscience or environmental "concerns" of those interviewed. While most people interviewed showed concern for the environment and recognized its declining state as a result of human behaviors and decisions, this concern was rarely complemented with actions that supported this claim.

While this study dealt with a very small number of individuals, the consistency of the findings was strong. This leads me to suggest the following as possible solutions and next steps. Consumers are too enamored of their SUVs and are not ready to give them up. The problem requires government intervention, the cooperation of industry, and the help of environmental groups. I suggest that government utilize its voice to alert the public, to not only the SUV trend but to all cultural trends such as this that damage the environment, and begin addressing the dominant lifestyle choices that have adverse consequences on the environment. Significantly, while drivers want their SUVs they said they would welcome an SUV that is better for the environment. Therefore a repackaged, more efficient and less polluting SUV would do well in this market. Environmental groups could improve upon the job they are doing educating the public about SUVs and spreading the word about consumer practices and the environment.

This study was both a market exploration and an exploration of our consumerist culture's relation to the environment. Consumers do not fully comprehend the effects that their behaviors and actions have on the environment, and so the environment continues to suffer. The SUV phenomenon is a mere slice of American life that reflects the grave danger of the dominant mindset that represents our culture. This study of SUVs puts a mirror to Americans, and reveals a threatening relationship between the cultural mindset and the environment.

Introduction

I lurked in parking lots. I planted myself on the trails. I went anywhere I thought I might encounter Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) drivers. These days that truly is just about anywhere I could end up. The SUV craze, sweeping the nation in such a consuming gale, has lent to several uncanny, unplanned, and unsolicited exchanges, with the drivers themselves even unknowing. Walking up to field hockey practice every afternoon SUVs lined both sides of Hope Street, mothers awaiting their children after school, motors humming. At the gas station, I would look around to find that I was the only non-SUV driver at the pumps. Suddenly, SUVs were constantly popping up on television commercials. It occurred to me that these SUVs had captured our culture. Upon realization, I could not put my thoughts down. I became a slave to my observational eye; this past year, my ears and eyes have been wide open. I have been like a spy, drivers and their vehicles under my magnifying glass.

As I witnessed the growing trend of SUV ownership, my thoughts moved to the repercussions of this popular trend on the environment. In light of their excessive fuel consumption and emissions, I approached SUV drivers about the environmental threat of their vehicles. The following is a discussion of my findings.

Background

They are everywhere, but what are they? A Sport Utility Vehicle, commonly known as the SUV, is a vehicle specially designed with high ground clearance and the option of four-wheel drive. Equipped to deal with off-road terrain, rigid frames, two rail construction, and high bumpers typify the modern day SUV, although manufacturers are pushing the limits of what defines an SUV both visually and aesthetically with every coming model. For the purposes of fuel economy standards, the U.S. Department of Transportation classifies SUVs as light trucks.¹ EPA, adopting a similar characterization to determine emissions standards, defines the SUV as a light duty truck.² To the American public, the SUV is currently known as the hot car.

The SUV was born on the battlefields of World War II, sixty some years ago. The MB Standardized Jeep, hailed as a vital-war winner, won the hearts of its American soldiers. At the war's end, the MB's brainchild Willys Overland and his innovative design were high in demand. Then came the Land Rover (1948), and then the Toyota Land Cruiser (1958). The rest is history. I blame it all on Willys Overland.

¹ DOT calls them "light trucks", defined as " 'truck derivatives' with a gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of 8,500 pounds or less, and [possess] a vehicle curb weight of 6,000 pounds or less. RS20298: Sport Utility Vehicles, Mini-Vans and Light Trucks: An Overview of Fuel Economy and Emissions Standards; Brent D. Yacobucci: Environmental Policy Analyst; Resources, Science, and Industry Division

² EPA uses the same basic definition as DOT although distinctions are made between Light-Duty Trucks based on GVWR and either loaded vehicle weight (LVW—VCW + 300lbs) or adjusted loaded vehicle weight (ALVW—LVW/GVWR average). These calculations result in four Light-Duty Truck (LDT) categories. LDT 1 includes compact SUVs, whereas most SUVs have LTD 2 status. Larger SUVs are given LDT 3 and 4 standingRS20298: Sport Utility Vehicles, Mini-Vans and Light Trucks: An Overview of Fuel Economy and Emissions Standards; Brent D. Yacobucci: Environmental Policy Analyst; Resources, Science, and Industry Division

Total sales of SUVs have grown ten-fold since 1980.³ The Bureau of Transportation Statistics of the U.S. Department of Transportation reported that 243,000 small and large sport utility vehicles were sold in the U.S. in 1980. A mere ten years later, in 1990, 931,000 SUVs were bought off the lots and parked in front of American homes. From 1980 to 1990, this country witnessed a sales increase of over 380%. By 1996 sales doubled, and SUV sales rose to 2,020,000. In 1998, 2.8 million SUVs drove onto U.S. roads. Hence, the SUV boom.

I call this an American phenomenon with good reason. One in five vehicles driven in the U.S. are SUVs. They comprise an astounding 47.5% of the U.S. car market, compared with only 3% of the total west European car market.⁴ Twenty-five percent of the vehicles owned in Colorado are SUVs.⁵ Europeans certainly have strong opinions on SUV crazed, image driven Americans. They say “most SUVs are, of course, wasteful, oversized and designed to perform off-road, where no-one ever drives them.”⁶ This “mammoth fleet of truly ugly vehicles” they believe is “almost exclusively American - a function of big roads and parking spaces, high incomes and cheap fuel”.⁷ Europeans have a good picture of what is occurring here over in the States, perhaps a vision clearer than our own.

So what is the problem? These enamored SUVs emit 30% more carbon monoxide and 75% more nitrogen oxides than passenger vehicles, simultaneously threatening human and environmental health.⁸ Poor fuel efficiency and increased emissions landed four SUVs on the 12 Worst Vehicles for the Environment in 1999 list

³ US PIRG, 3/17/99 Pg. 2

⁴ Ingle, The Irish Times 72

⁵ Ivison, The Scotsman 27.

⁶ Tagliabue, International Herald Tribune 2

distributed by the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy.⁹ These vehicles stand as a catalyst to global warming and a threat to international oil reserves, consuming 33% more gasoline than the typical passenger car. It is also proven they emit 1/3 more gases that contribute to global warming. Tying these variables together in an equation, the result is rather frightening. At the current emissions rates, SUVs on the road in 2020 would emit 1.38 million tons of smog-forming nitrogen oxide pollution each year. A Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) survey showed that 83% of 1396 light truck owners, a large fraction of whom were SUV drivers, were unaware that their vehicle pollutes more than a car. This is a self-created problem where humans stand in clear and present danger, alongside our environment.

Not only is this a self-created problem, but it has been allowed and accepted. When SUV emissions and fuel economy standards were first created over twenty years ago, SUVs served as work in vehicles in the agriculture and construction businesses. In light of this, they were subject to less stringent emissions standards. Times have changed. Today SUVs are solicited as family and passenger vehicles. Many are positioned as luxury vehicles, embellished with plush leather interior and shiny, gold hubs. The rationale for allowing SUVs to emit more pollution and to consume more gas than other passenger vehicles has expired.

The California Air Resources Board (CARB) recognized this injustice and challenged the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to close this legislative loophole. They argued that this adjustment would eliminate over 1 million tons of smog forming

⁷ Tagliabue, International Herald Tribune 2

⁸ www.suv.org/environ.html

⁹ www.aceee.org/press/ggct.htm

pollution each year, while cutting global warming pollution by 187 million tons per year. Motivated by CARB, the EPA, on May 13, 1999, proposed the Tier 2 Program to induce significant vehicle emissions reductions of new passenger cars, including SUVs, which would decrease ambient levels of ozone and particulate matter. The Tier 2 program also focused on lowering levels of sulfur in gasoline. In the program's defense, the EPA stated "the Tier 2 rule was justified as a necessary and important measure for reducing air pollutants and protecting public health because the current standards fail to protect health with an adequate margin of safety."¹⁰

All was quiet on Washington front until December 21, 1999 when President Clinton unveiled new rules that put SUVs and their manufacturers up against the wall. Previous to this mandate, the automobile industry had been up in arms over the demands to make SUVs less polluting. Auto manufacturers claimed the technological innovations would force them to push unwanted costs onto consumers. They also argued that only way they could produce more low-pollution engines and improve fuel efficiency was with the assistance of the nation's petroleum industry. Today, the approved Tier 2 program stands as "the first national standard that regulates autos and fuels together."¹¹ The EPA says we should expect to see the Tier 2 phase-in starting with 2004 vehicle models. SUVs that weigh between 6,000 and 8,500 pounds, like Ford's gigantic Excursion, will have until 2009 to comply with the new standards. While we cannot expect relief from the beefiest SUVs for another nine years, this piece of legislation is promising.

¹⁰ Haynesworth, South Carolina Compliance Update

¹¹ O'Donnel, USA Today pg. 1B

Safety shortcomings have not been able to dissuade consumers from purchasing SUVs either. Nicknamed “urban assault vehicles”, many contend their SUVs provide increased feelings of safety and security. Yet, “more than 60% of the SUV occupants killed in 1997 died when the vehicle rolled over.”¹² SUVs are typically characterized by a very rigid frame, constructed of two steel rails, as opposed to the one rail construction of passenger vehicles. SUVs are also 8 inches higher off the ground than passenger vehicles. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) revealed that SUVs suffer from “a rollover rate of 98 fatalities per million registered vehicles compared to only 44 fatalities per million registered vehicles for all other light vehicle types.”¹³ SUVs are known to victimize and bully other vehicles on the road. This seems to be their source of security. In fact, in a passenger car-SUV collision, the occupants of the car are four times more likely to be killed than the occupants of the SUV.¹⁴ A federal study estimated that almost 1,000 unnecessary deaths were attributed to the designs of SUVs in 1999, forcing automakers to finally acknowledge the special dangers SUVs pose to other motorists. In recognition of their relentless popularity, design modifications have been initiated by automakers to make them less hazardous. While these alterations will come at a price, the design changes being made will save 100 to 300 lives annually.¹⁵

One year ago, a gallon of gasoline cost less than a bottle of water. Today, prices have rocketed over \$2 per gallon in some regions of the country. SUV drivers are surely feeling the effects at the pumps. Consumers are balking at these outrageous prices and the U.S. is placing pressure on the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries

¹² M2 Presswire, March 5, 1999

¹³ M2 Presswire, March, 5, 1999

¹⁴ www.suv.org/safety.html

¹⁵ NYT, 3/21/00

(OPEC) to raise oil production. The United States currently imports 25% of international oil production. On March 30, 2000, nine of eleven OPEC members consented to raise production quotas by 1.45 million barrels a day. In actuality, the total OPEC increase will be much smaller because several members are already overshooting quotas by 1.2 million barrels a day. While increased production is underway, experts say “lower prices at gasoline pumps in the United States are probably months away...especially with inventories low and demand for fuel likely to rise in the summer.”¹⁶ Experts do not foresee sizable price reductions any time soon resulting from the increased production. Apparently, SUV drivers will continue to pay on behalf of their oversized gas tanks.

SUVs occupy a sizable niche here in the United States that endangers the environment. A particular attitude and mindset of the people cultivated this craze. Taking all this information into consideration, I devised a research project devoted to understanding the environmental implications of this trend through a social research approach.

¹⁶ McNamara, [The Los Angeles Times](#)

Methods

My study focused on getting in touch with SUV drivers and what they valued about these cars and their related environmental issues. Understanding the current SUV phenomenon rested on my orientation with and exploration of owners' perceptions, decisions, and behaviors. My understanding necessitated our discussion. The prevalence of SUVs made for an accessible target population. I pursued this topic by conducting intercept interviews and focus groups, two widely used methods of qualitative social research, which pays less attention to numbers and more attention to people. My findings from verbal responses complemented my observations of physical mannerisms, personality, and response tone and intensity. Probing SUV drivers with questions, statements, and visuals, I was able to stimulate talk about their vehicles and the environment.

Intercept Interviews

My first avenue of exploration was face-to-face interviews with SUV drivers. I entered the field one month after revising and fine tuning a twenty question survey comprised of three different, interwoven focuses: (1) vehicle use and perception, (2) SUVs and their environmental consequences, and (3) personal environmental behaviors and perceptions. The survey was a combination of open ended, closed, and ranking questions (APPENDIX A). I completed twenty-four rich interviews where I spoke with seventeen females and ten males,¹⁷ whom I guessed were between their mid-twenties to late-fifties. The duration of the interviews depended on the respondents. They lasted anywhere from ten to thirty minutes, although the majority were in the fifteen to twenty minute range. I approached SUV drivers at several different locations, including

shopping plazas, public schools, private schools, and a local park, in order to access different sexes and socioeconomic groups.

The first segment questioned drivers about the considerations that dictated their decision and purchase. I went on to ask them about vehicle use and performance features. This beginning section aimed at discovering how owners use, perceive, and feel about their vehicles and what it offers them.

Next, I presented interviewees with a series of four print advertisements stressing respective themes of safety, adventure/youth, luxury, and nature (APPENDIX B-print ads). Respondents were asked which advertisement most appealed to them and best reflected the reasons they bought their SUV. The advertisements displayed how SUVs cater and appeal to an array of personalities and demands, prompting a question about their recent rise in popularity.

Now once that I had identified consumers' reasons for purchase and appeal, I placed their vehicles in the context of the environment and their ties to gas consumption (resource depletion) and emissions (global warming). At this point, I alerted respondents to the environmental consequences of their SUVs. These questions served to identify whether SUV owners were aware of the environmental effects of their vehicles and whether or not they factored the environment into their consumer decisions. I also posed a willingness-to-pay question concerning the implementation of pollution reduction technology. Lastly, I surveyed respondents on a current legislative issue concerning SUVs.

The third and final section attempted to gauge just how environmentally conscience my respondents were. Respondents were asked two opinion questions. The

¹⁷ The numbers of respondents exceed the number of interviews because I interviewed four couples.

first question concerned the role of government in resolving environmental problems, and the second asked respondents to assess how conscientious they were about their environmental behaviors. The interviews concluded with me asking interviewees to list any environmental behaviors they practice.

Question variation and order allowed me to test how fixed or fluid respondents were about their stances and perceptions on issues. Later questions served to check responses given to earlier questions. The survey's design allowed me to see either the continuity or contradictions within interviewee responses in order to detect instances of cognitive dissonance or consistent thought.

Following each interview, I wrote quick notes that spelled out my feelings and impressions of the interview, giving special attention to the interviewees' apparent environmental conscience and any contradictions that arose in the interviews. I also documented observations here in great depth about the tone of the interviews and appearance and actions of interviewees that reflected certain impressions. After I conducted all twenty-four interviews, I color-coded the written surveys according to theme and extracted all quotes that illustrated these themes and organized them by respective subject. This coding process allowed me to draw the big picture of the SUV trend.

Focus Groups

I chose to conduct interviews with my peer-students who drove SUVs. Student SUV drivers were accessible and willing. I recruited students through mass email lists on campus, requesting their participation in an informal, free form discussion that focused on their vehicles. I notified them that it was for the research purposes of completing my

senior thesis but was purposefully vague beyond that so as not to bias their discussion. Prior to the discussions, students were asked to fill out a preliminary questionnaire with questions regarding ownership and vehicle use and satisfaction. Two different focus groups were held on February 16th and 17th of 2000 (APPENDIX C-focus group protocol). In the first evening's focus group six people attended, five males and one female. On the second evening ten people attended, two females and eight males. Before discussions began, students filled out consent forms that acknowledged their awareness that the discussions were both audio and video taped for analysis and writing, and that clips may appear in my final presentation. Both discussions ran for about one and a half hours. Following the focus groups, I completed verbatim transcriptions of the discussions. I then went through the discussions and extracted overlapping themes from both groups to detect the most salient issues.

In order to open the lines of communication, students explored a common bond and right-of-passage: getting licensed to drive and their first cars. We then moved to a discussion about the inherent trials and tribulations on having cars on the Brown University campus in order to focus on their ownership of SUVs. The discussion that followed centered on issues of SUVs on the market and in the media, SUV popularity, and SUV drivers and "identities". Redirecting the discussion, I presented students with seven magazine advertisements conveying various themes and asked for their impressions and understandings of who the ads were targeting and what messages they were sending. We then viewed seven television advertisements. Again, they were asked what the advertisements said to them. The final leg of the discussions tied SUVs to the environment. I read facts and statistics concerning SUV consumption, pollution, and

sales. I asked for their opinions and feelings on environmental awareness, consumerism, and government interaction with environmental issues. In the end I concentrated on their roles as SUV drivers, the decisions they make and the practices they engage in that are bad for the environment.

In the focus groups, I intended to not only to grasp their perceptions of the SUV trend and its bearing on the environment, but also to raise their awareness about the SUVs they drive.

Interviewing Again

The recent rise in gas prices that lasted into the Spring of 2000 and OPEC discussions on oil production compelled me to step out into the field one more time. This last leg of research served as a coda to the research done previously. In light of the raised prices and SUVs' excessive fuel consumption, I approached ten SUV drivers at the pumps. Interviews lasted two minutes at most. I interviewed at four different local gas stations and spoke with 6 males and 4 females, asking them three simple questions:

1. What are your feelings on the recent rise in gas prices?
2. Has the increase price of gas changed your driving habits?
3. How concerned are you about this increase?

These three efforts consolidated to build a window into the SUV phenomenon. They were the means to my deeper vision of this popular trend. The following chapters review my findings and observations extracted from the responses and interactions that came from my research efforts.

Intercept Interview Findings

Conducting intercept interviews allowed me to develop myself as a social researcher. I approached SUV drivers, clipboard in hand, and asked for their participation in my research effort. The conversation and commentary that emerged from my questions crystallized the SUV phenomenon to a magnitude where I could dissect and analyze the reasoning behind its rooting in American culture. I spoke with 24 drivers, 17 females and ten males, at various shopping mart plazas, outside public and private schools, and at a local park. I began by asking questions about vehicle use and perception, then SUVs and their environmental consequences, and concluded by surveying respondents on their personal environmental behaviors and perceptions. Surveying engaged me with the phenomenon and its creators. This chapter presents my quantitative and qualitative findings from these categories of questions according to the central questions of my study.

How do SUV drivers perceive their vehicles?

My first sequence of questions focused on the purpose and value SUV drivers assign to their vehicles. Not only did I want to gain insight about why people want these vehicles, but also why they think they NEED these vehicles. My participants drew up many reasons. They truly were unknowing artists. I asked people to think back to when they were amidst the decision making process of buying their SUV. Most respondents answered easily, gushing with assorted factors and reasons.

“I wanted a car that was safe.”

Most respondents (20/24) agreed to feeling a “greater sense of security” driving an SUV. Half of the drivers interviewed mentioned safety within the first question as an important consideration when they bought their SUV. Drivers enjoyed the increased awareness and expanded scope of vision on the roads. One woman interviewed at a local grocery store told me, “It’s the height. I like to be able to predict an accident coming.” Riding higher up off the ground, other interviewees cited that higher seats and less glare contribute to feeling safer.

SUV drivers apparently feel advantaged on the roads. This begs the question, more advantaged than whom? It seems that SUV drivers understand that smaller cars are at their mercy on today’s roads, and they relish this. One woman blatantly remarked, “Getting in an accident with a smaller car, we will be better off.” In the competitive spirit another woman claimed, “[SUV’s] are strong, secure, solid. They are better in crashes. It’s better to be in this car over another.” Speaking of the advantages of their SUV, one couple, new parents of a young infant, stated, “we used to have a Jetta. There is a much different feeling in this car. There is a feeling of security, protection, and power.”

SUV drivers recognized their increased chance of survival in an accident with another vehicle. They also recognized that their ownership of an SUV poses a disadvantage to their opponents on the road. It becomes a game, and people are concerned with equipping themselves in order to win. Interestingly, many of these quotes, with a hint of ruthlessness and disregard for others, came from the mouths of women and mothers fending for their families. While purchasing an SUV is in step with

protecting their most prized possessions, it puts other mothers and their treasured goods at risk. None of my female/mother respondents verbally acknowledged this during our interviews. Instead, mothers have begun to pit themselves against each other, forgetting their common roles and shared concerns. While trying to protect, they place others of their kind at risk. One mother admitted, “In an accident, I have a better chance to live as opposed to driving a small car, say like a Ford Escort.” She was very matter-of-fact. The selfish side that so rarely appears to children and husbands, surfaces on our roads, as clannish mothers feel they are doing their best to protect their own.

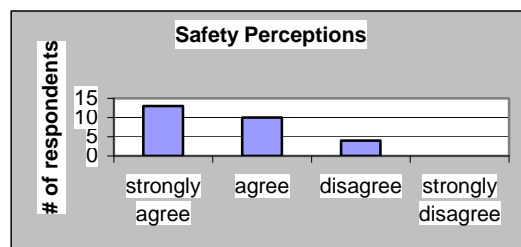
In discussing safety concerns, several respondents brought up family members, from newborns, to teenage drivers, to beloved wives as their reason for buying an SUV. One couple’s concern for their newborn’s safety was a primary reason for finally deciding on their SUV. A mother awaiting her son outside of a local private school discussed her anxiety for her recently licensed-to-drive son. She felt their Land Rover was a solid, safe vehicle for a young driver like her son, except of course that it was white, and “he didn’t like that.” A concerned husband told me he bought his SUV “to keep [his] wife safe in the winter.” One woman proudly told me that her husband’s hearing of a friend’s accident in the car they currently owned prompted him to trade it in for an SUV. She went on to brag, “The accident gave my husband the incentive to buy an SUV for protection, looking out for his family.” SUVs have become a protective shell to insure the safety and well being of loved ones in today’s increasingly dangerous world.

“Tanks” A few respondents went as far as to characterize their SUV as “tanks”. One man, new to fatherhood, described his Jeep Grand Cherokee as “a rugged car...real

tank like.” Another woman alerted me that “everybody wants to drive a **tank** today. There are so many maniacs out on the roads today. You need to a big car to feel safe. In a small car you feel vulnerable.” As drivers buckle their belts and hop in their “tanks”, they enlarge their presence and prepare to take to the roads. I was reminded that our roads and highways are declared war zones. As shown here, retaliation has become a concern for drivers who feel defenseless against maniacal and reckless drivers. SUVs appear to be the chosen armor for those interviewed.

“A false sense of security” Some respondents criticize the way SUVs handle and claimed they grant a false sense of security. Chevrolet campaigns that their Blazer provides “a little security in an insecure world”. A few drivers (4) disagreed with this statement. One woman criticized, “they have an extreme tendency to roll”, lending to her firm disagreement with my posed statement. Another mother outside Wheeler, waiting in her Toyota Rav 4, revealed to me that “4 WD provides a false sense of security. Driving a 4WD is trickier. You have to be very careful...It appears sturdy, but around curves and turns, I am less trusting.” Drivers agreeing with the statement offered contrasting views on the same points. Speaking of her vehicle’s prowess, one woman posited that “it maneuvers well out of tight spots. Passing other cars and around bends, it really holds to the road.” One woman, remembering the many close calls, said, “in almost accidents, [she felt] well in control.” Contradicting accounts were given on identical models.

Table 1



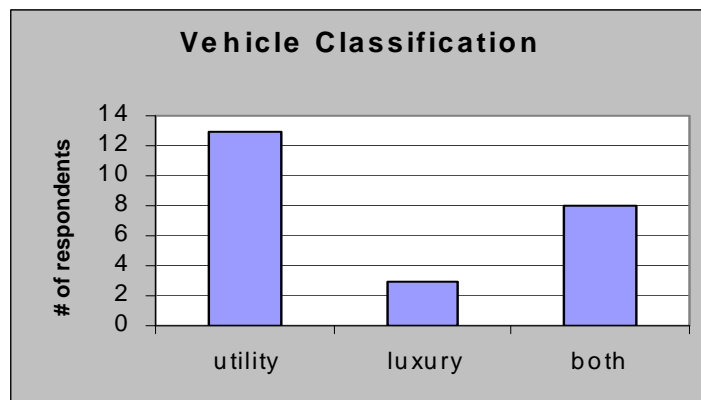
“It’s everything and more.”

Many drivers expressed appreciation for their SUV as a multipurpose vehicle. One woman talked about her Blazer saying, “I use it for everything...business, [to transport] animals. We needed a vehicle that could serve all purposes.” She seemed to delight in the convenience of her vehicle’s multitask ability. Another woman agreeing said, “It’s a multipurpose vehicle. Before you had a small car to go out in, as well as a truck. Now you can get two in one.” Comments on the multipurposeness of the vehicles were made matter-of-factly, almost in a relieved and soothed tone. Lives are made easier by this type of car.

SUV and SULV

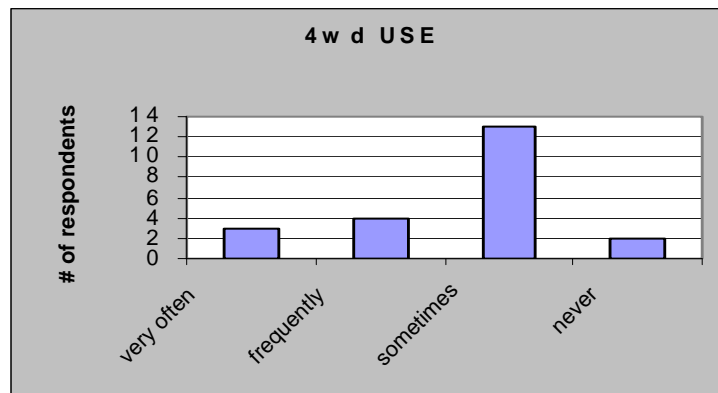
An SUV, means Sport **Utility** Vehicle. How many respondents actually perceive it this way in an era where auto manufacturers are increasingly positioning them as luxury vehicles? Well, most respondents (13) stayed true to the acronym and categorized their SUV as a “utility” vehicle. A few drivers (3) classified their SUV as a luxury vehicle, while the remainder (8) could not differentiate their SUV as a utility or luxury vehicle and called it “both”.

Table 2



Further discussion showed that my respondents do not maximize the utility their SUVs provide. The majority of respondents (13 of 24) claimed to use the 4wd function on their SUV only some of the time. The remaining nine respondents distributed fairly equally between “very often”(3) , “frequently”(4), and “never”(2).

Table 3

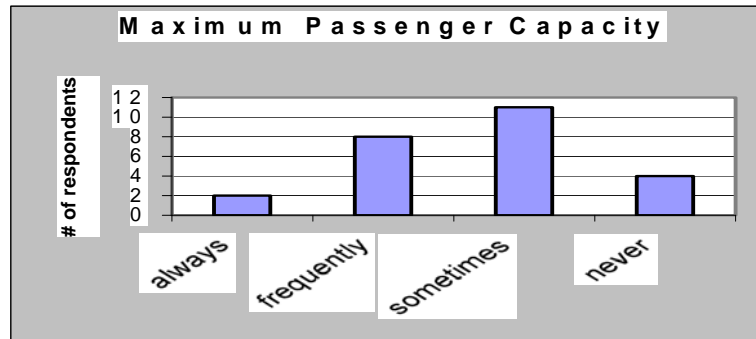


With their recent emergence on the automotive scene, SUVs come loaded with the latest performance feature options like hill descent control, electronic traction systems, and hydropneumatic adjustment. These features legitimize their characterization as a sport utility vehicle. However, when questioned about desired performance features, most respondents (14/24) strictly cited 4-wheel drive. Interestingly, only 3 drivers use their 4-wheel drive “very often”. Seven consumers named antilock brake systems. None of my respondents named anything beyond these basic features.

How often a vehicle is at its maximum passenger capacity (mpc) is also an indicator of whether or not a driver is using his/her SUV for what it is designed to handle. The majority of respondents (19) said their SUVs were at its mpc either “frequently” (8)

or “sometimes” (11). Four respondents answered “never”, while two respondents answered “always”.

Table 4



An important finding arose out of the questions concerning utility. Of the thirteen respondents who called their SUV a “utility” vehicle, most (8) use 4wd “sometimes” and most (9) have their vehicle at its mpc “sometimes”. Almost all (12) have never taken their SUV off-road. Importantly, twenty of my twenty-four respondents NEVER took their SUV off-road.

Twenty years ago, SUVs were predominantly used as work vehicles. Today, as my respondents showed, they are perceived and used as passenger vehicles. Most respondents (19/24) characterized their SUV as a “personal” vehicle, while a few (4) used it as a “personal” and “work” vehicle. One respondent who took his SUV off-road from time to time called his SUV an “off-road” vehicle.

“This is much more of a utility vehicle...”

There were two instances where interviewees employed the space and power offered by their SUV to aid in running a profitable business. One couple, who owned a bed and breakfast, depended on their Pathfinder’s spaciousness and towing capacity to transport furniture. They expressed to me what a chore it was to preserve and maintain

the quaintness and quality of the rooms they offered. Another woman, practiced in the art of animal grooming, found that her SUV is a blessing for her line of work. Her work vehicle could also be her personal vehicle. One woman bought her SUV primarily for her hobby: horse shows. When we spoke, she had just returned from hauling her horses to Ohio and back. Before her SUV, she had to trouble her father and borrow one of his trucks for each trip. Her Mercedes Station Wagon wouldn't cut it with two horses in tow. Solution: a 1999 Lincoln Navigator, also known as \$50,000.

"I can bring the kids to McDonalds in it. It's rugged. It can handle it."

Beyond those two instances, utility often meant hauling the kids around, doing errands, and grocery shopping. At the outset, one woman let me know, "This car is for grocery shopping and bringing the kids to soccer...It's a routine car. It's basic. It's not as exciting as my Jaguar. It meets my needs...the kids, soccer, horses. I can bring the kids to McDonalds in it. It's rugged. It can handle it." Although it seems extreme, the woman calls the vehicle 'routine' and 'basic'. Her Grand Jeep Cherokee gets the kids to their one million and one destinations, while her Jaguar gets her to the theater. She sees it as a practical vehicle for the day-to-day rush. Yet, you won't find her rushing out for the evening in her Jeep. Her Jaguar is reserved for the fancy nights out. This perspective is quite different from the woman who put her 1999 Suburban and Lincoln Mark 8 in the same class. She claimed, "I had a Lincoln 2-door Mark 8 before this, and interior wise, I get no less than what I had with that with my SUV." While some are able to confine their SUV to the utility label, some relish the blend of luxury and utility they provide.

"SUVs have elements of luxury and utility"

What some drivers meant by multipurpose was actually bipurpose: their SUV as a luxury/utility vehicle. An SUV (luxury) vehicle. In one sentence, drivers praised its luxuriousness and its utility. In fact, people had a difficult time classifying their SUV as a luxury car OR a utility vehicle. Several opted to label it as both. Drivers seemed thankful for a vehicle they could use for all aspects of their life. One woman rejoiced, “it’s everything and more!”

Another woman, also coupling the ideas of luxury and utility, made it seem like the car had changed her life. There was life before and after SUVs. As a young researcher, she reminded me of the past and said, “you *used* to buy a truck and a vehicle. Now it’s a pick up truck that has luxury and is classy. SUVs have elements of luxury and utility.” For these urban/suburban women, trucks were designated for work, the dirty work if you will. You did not use a truck for “non-work” activities in the past, but now, “it’s acceptable to go out in a truck.” Times changed with the coming of the SUV. It’s this hybrid capable and prepared for everything. As one woman commented, “It does everything. You can park it. It’s small enough that it is not a pain. And you get the luxury on the inside.” SUVs are luxury and utility tied up into one little (or huge) package. Perhaps the term bipurpose has a place here.

After this “utility” classification, five of these thirteen respondents went on to convey, either verbally or through observation, that they did conceive of their vehicle as somewhat of a luxury item. It’s a wonder why they may have resisted labeling it as a luxury vehicle in the first place. SUVs certainly have more functional capabilities than the average luxury sedan. Perhaps discussion of SUVs’ *utility* functions prompted respondents to rethink the luxury perception of their vehicle.

Out of all the 24 interviews, only one woman focused intently on issues of the environment in relation to her ownership of an SUV. This discussion was prompted by discussion of perceptions of SUVs as luxury and utility vehicles. My survey became a 30 minute conversation. I spoke at great length with a woman about environmental problems confronting the local community and within her personal life. I established a level of trust with her where she felt comfortable opening up.

Admitting her guilt, she told me, “If I were very [environmentally] conscientious, I wouldn’t drive an SUV.” While she did use the vehicle for a utility purpose, hauling horses to shows, in her mind, she *did* think of her SUV as a luxury vehicle but claimed, “it’s a very pretentious vehicle. It’s too flashy for me. For myself, this is much more of a utility vehicle compared to how most others are using them.” She was aware that SUVs are commonly conceived as luxurious station wagons. She alerted me to the fact that she had a use for her vehicle beyond carting her children around (although that is what she was in the midst of) and that it was the primary motivation behind its purchase. She did not want to be associated with those other mothers out there wasting gas for no good reason.

After confiding in me about this sense of guilt and working strenuously to prove that her vehicle did have a “real” purpose, she did admit to enjoying the luxurious features of the vehicle. I could see for myself the plush leather interior and inflated seats inside. How couldn’t one take pleasure in such lavish conditions? As hard as she tried, she couldn’t play the part forever. She broke down, wide-eyed looking around the interior of the vehicle, and reluctantly told me, “I enjoy the luxurious aspect to it,” and then

scurried to recover, “but that was not our main reason for buying it.” Five others seemed caught up in the same cognitive dissonance that these luxury SUVs present to drivers.

“Oh, it’s an Eddie Bauer”

Interviewees described their vehicles as “flashy”, “pretentious”, and “status seeking”. A mold has been cut of the SUV driver. More and more people are trying to fit its dimensions for the social message it sends. One woman interviewed at a public Rhode Island elementary school told me she bought the vehicle because “all [her] friends have them.” Another woman commented, “A lot of them are status seeking vehicles. They portray a certain status for couples who want a certain image in the community.” You open the door to a Mercedes ML430, a social ladder extends, and up the rungs of society you go. A good example is of a woman who when I asked her for the specific make and model of her SUV she replied, “Oh, it’s an Eddie Bauer.” Before it’s a Ford or an Expedition, it’s an Eddie Bauer in her mind, an expensive clothing outfitter. Comments like these convinced me that SUVs have become badge items, much like the Gucci bag or Birkenstocks, placing consumers in desired social circles and giving impressions of economic standings or social groups.

Chevrolet takes great pride in its Suburban, which occupied the SUV title long before its contemporaries. Advertisements boast, “The Original Chevy Suburban. Opened in 1936. Hasn’t been without a crowd since.” Yet over the last five years a whole new class of SUVs has emerged catering to those with expensive taste. Mercedes, Lexus, and BMW have given birth to a class of models that has refaced the concept of the SUV. SUVs once boxy, overbearing, and undesired, are #1 on everyone’s wish list. These producers have turned overweight into voluptuous, plump into curvy.

SUVs have been injected with style and appeal, rubbing out the blemishes of a truck-like vehicle. No longer overweight, these models are sleek, aerodynamic, and trim. A rock climber interviewed at a local state park remarked, “Today it’s status. You have the Lexus and Mercedes, alternatives to minivans with style.” I was given the impression minivans are outdated, stale, and void of style. One may have a valid point. He went on to say, “For Lexus and Mercedes you pay an extra twenty grand and you don’t get much more in utility. It’s style and price that go together.” For the additional money you make leaps and bounds in social circles, but it won’t help you get up the mountain any easier than an \$18,000 Nissan Xterra. His comments illuminate consumer concern and reasons behind product appeal. They are not paying for added capability, but rather for a vehicle that will reify one’s social standing.

“I don’t want one of those!”

If you want to commit social suicide, take it from my respondents, buy a station wagon or a minivan. One woman uttered in practical disgust, “my mother had a station wagon. *I don’t want one of those.*” Another woman satisfied with her vehicle’s command of style said, “It’s the cool version of the station wagon.” So it’s like a station wagon, but it’s not. One young mother recounting the buying process said, “we wanted a station wagon and this is what we got.” An SUV doesn’t carry the sinful appearance of the station wagons many of my respondents were reared in. When people spoke of them, it was like they revisited a bad, distant memory. Consumers resent their appearance, but crave the space and safety features wagons and minivans provide and were always known for. Several women told stories of their old wagons and minivans. It appears they were just ready to move on and an SUV was the next logical step. For many mothers I spoke

with, the SUV and the station wagon achieved the same thing in terms of safety and room, but not in the style department. The SUV is the station wagon with a major facelift.

“It portrays a rough, natural, nature loving image.”

While some women bought their 90’s station wagons to avoid some dreaded image, others are out buying to create a nature loving image. It appeared that some of my respondents engaged in outdoor recreational activity on a regular basis, for which their SUV was helpful in lugging their gear. For others, outdoor activity was minimal and not a factor in choosing to buy an SUV. I wanted to get at a sector of the population who had some appreciation for green space, for the great outdoors. In search, I ventured to a park outside Providence on a few Saturdays in the Fall to find many people out and about, fighting off the onset of winter. And of course where I found people, I found SUVs lining the forest edge, their drivers on foot and on bikes, concealed in the forest growth. I waited for them to emerge.

As a group they offered something interesting. All five drivers interviewed at the state park owned models from 1997 and down. Two participants owned 1997 model year SUVs. Two others owned 1995 models, while one owned a 1992 Explorer. Most of my respondents outside of Lincoln Woods were driving 98’s and 99’s. The owner of the 92’ Explorer trudged up the trail, rock climbing gear strapped to his back, weighing him down. He saw me in the distance. In our interview he pointed out to me, “Ya see, I’ve had this vehicle for years. I had it before they got popular for the reasons they are today. I had to fit all my gear somewhere.” He drew a distinction between himself and the rest. Conscious of their uses as status symbols, he emphasized his practical uses for the

vehicle. He legitimated *his* “real” need for the vehicle, while making some commentary on the number of people buying them for more superficial, social reasons. A couple interviewed at the park said that “people want to appear like they are taking them off road and they never do.” They recognized the outdoor image one consumes through their SUV, although they resisted this association, stressing this is not the reason *they* bought their SUV.

Four of the five interviewees at Lincoln Woods valued and stressed the utilitarian aspect of their SUVs more so than many others I interviewed. They hurriedly and pointedly disassociated themselves from the image driven consumers bolstering the SUV phenomenon. They were concerned with space, cost, and practicality. I got the strong impression that they were less concerned with getting the latest, sleekest models hot off the assembly line, and rather more concerned that their vehicles could survive all the wear and tear their lifestyles demanded. The condition, age, and appearance of their vehicles confirmed this. Driving relatively older models, caked with mud, dog hair laden, and compartmentalized to neatly fit all the gear for a Saturday afternoon hike, they did not present the image I so often encountered outside of Lincoln Woods. They did not convey the style and image obsession I sensed outside park limits.

I had caught them in the act. Some emerged refreshed and revived from nature’s crispness, while others were just enrolling in nature’s program, looking to acquire this same state. There was some understanding of nature’s delivery. Otherwise the people I interviewed would not have been there those mornings. They were in search of nature’s offering driving to the park in their SUVs. The space their SUVs provided allowed them to fit all their gear that molded their experience and contributed to its enjoyment. Their

bikes and climbing gear contacted them with the contours of nature. And from this activity experienced in this park arose their lifted spirits that I sensed in our discussions. They extracted some high, some energy in their immersion with nature. Indirectly, they could thank their SUV. While they refused that SUV/nature advertisements motivates their SUV purchase, on the basis of our interviews, I got the sense they appreciated their SUVs for establishing and maintaining their connection with nature, especially in the cases of three of the Lincoln Woods interviews. They do not strive to *construct* a nature-loving image. Their appreciation for nature is genuine and remembered each time they set foot on the trails. Other consumers emulate this image and buy SUVs to falsely depict this lifestyle.

I was reminded that those who knowingly pollute and degrade the environment through their consumer choices can still be deeply cognizant, mindful, and respectful of the natural environment. The attributes of space and power appreciated by these outdoor fanatics are the very factors that force SUVs to pollute such large quantities. Three out of five participants needed the cargo space of their SUV to transport their equipment to engage in their chosen outdoor recreation at Lincoln Woods that day, while the other two were walking and running the trails. The appeal of their SUVs, that in their minds validate their ownership, lead to excessive pollution emissions. One way or another, all respondents expressed a utility need for their SUV. With all five respondents agreeing to pay an added \$200 to have a reduced emissions and more fuel efficient SUV, it seems a solution looms in the distance. A more environmentally friendly vehicle will still meet their needs for a rugged, roomy vehicle. For those who have a concern and appreciation for the environment, an improved SUV is in demand.

Advertisement Appeal

Many of the values assigned to SUVs by respondents appear to match or reflect themes in the advertisements for these cars. I chose four print advertisements illustrating the themes of safety, youth/adventure, luxury and nature and presented them to interviewees. I asked drivers to choose the advertisement that most appealed to them and best reflected the reason they bought their SUV. The majority said the “safety” (8) and “nature” (8) advertisements spoke to them the most. Runner up was the luxury advertisement, with six counts of appeal and support. The advertisement stressing adventure and youth received one vote from the youngest participant I questioned. Two participants, a couple I questioned at the local park, went entirely against the grain and refused to choose an advertisement.

There has been a recent surge in advertisements depicting SUVs trekking off into wilderness and carrying passengers to remote places in nature. The SUV appears as catalyst for creating a bond with the natural world. These advertisements prompted me to ask respondents if these specific ads played a part in their decision to buy an SUV.¹⁸ Most respondents denied this notion and claimed these advertisements had no effect on their decision to purchase their SUV. The most intense response I received to this question was from the couple who declined to choose an advertisement in the previous ad question. Their distrust for advertising reemerged and they mocked the idea behind the question saying, “That is a load of shit!” Laughingly they joked, “Yeah, let’s get in touch with nature and go four wheel driving!” They perceived these advertisements as illusions and held disbelief in the power of an SUV to spiritually unify man with land. Four respondents admitted that their purchases were somewhat motivated by these ads.

A following question asked drivers if the “getting in touch with nature” advertisements affected their decision to buy an SUV. I found that most of the respondents (5/8) who selected the “nature” advertisement as the one which most appealed to them and best reflected the reasons behind their purchase, said the “nature” ads were not influential.

Are SUV drivers aware of the environmental consequences of their vehicles?

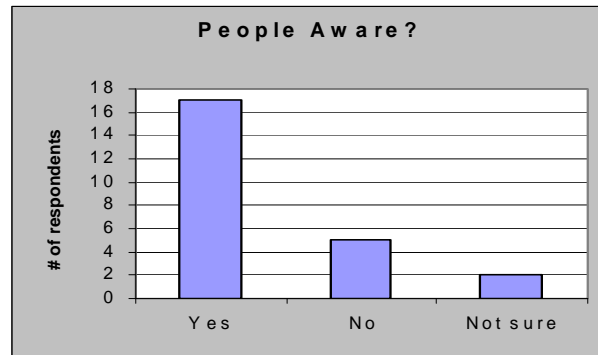
After I had engaged my participants in discussion of their SUVs, probing and prodding to find the reasons for their purchases, I moved to a related topic: the environment. The environment lays victim to this overwhelming trend. Vast amounts of clean air are dirtied by SUVs’ excessive emissions, while they force the drills deeper into international oil reserves. As one can see, SUVs are adversely affecting several environmental dimensions. Are consumers aware of the direct relationship that exists between their purchases and a degraded environment? Do they perceive themselves as direct contributors to environmental destruction and depletion? Do they care?

I began to explore these questions by presenting them with the facts, namely that SUVs use 33% more gasoline than passenger cars. If they had raised the issue of fuel economy before this question, I reminded them of that. Otherwise, I commented that their poor fuel economy was a current issue in the media. Most respondents nodded in agreement. I also pointed out that regardless of their low mpg rates, SUVs continue to win the hearts of consumers. Most respondents (17/24) believed that SUV buyers were aware of their increased gas consumption. I also found that almost all of my respondents

¹⁸ Note: this was asked two questions after the initial advertisement question

(20/24) were aware that their SUVs were gas guzzlers when they originally purchased them.

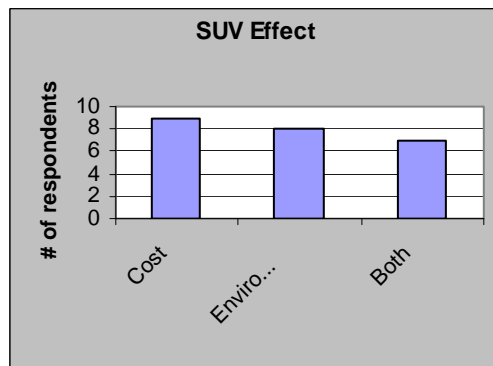
Table 5



Drivers said fuel consumption is not a huge factor that encourages or discourages a vehicle purchase. Rather, it seems rather insignificant. Enticed (and secretly frustrated) by this understanding, I asked the pointed question, “Does this matter to you [that your vehicle consumes this much fuel]?” Thirteen respondents said “no”, while eleven respondents said “yes”.

Given that there are an estimated 65 million light trucks, a bulk of which are SUVs, consuming 33% more gasoline than the average car on the road, a relationship exists here. I asked them if they saw this relationship in terms of increased out-of-pocket

Table 6



costs or environmental impacts. Respondents distributed pretty equally amongst cost (9), environment (8), and both (7).

Willingness-to-Pay

I then posed a traditional survey question, known as a willingness-to-pay question, used in many national polls that attempts to gauge the importance of an issue to a person relative to personal financial impacts. I presented them with the fact the typical SUV emits 1/3 more gases that contribute to global warming than a regular passenger car due to its excessive fuel consumption. I asked if they would be willing to pay an added \$200 for an SUV that had reduced emissions and is more fuel efficient.¹⁹ All twenty-four respondents said they would have accepted this extra cost to get emissions and efficiency benefits. Although they may not be willing to give up their SUVs, they are willing to pay for a more environmentally friendly version. Note that this was the only question on the entire survey where there was unanimous consensus. Consensus at last, consensus at last.

At the time I administered my surveys (unbeknownst by the general public) the California Air Resources Board (CARB) was spearheading a crusade to have SUVs subject to the same stringent emissions standards as regular passenger cars. An existing loophole subjected SUVs to relaxed standards regardless of their identical uses to passenger cars. Contending with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), CARB argued that SUVs are no longer used and perceived as vehicles of construction and agricultural businesses, but as passenger vehicles. The truth is that this legislative adjustment would eliminate over 1 million tons of smog-forming pollution each year, while cutting global warming pollution by 187 million tons per year. Given this

information, would drivers support CARB in their appeal to the EPA? Almost all respondents (21/24) found this plea to be reasonable and said they would support CARB in their efforts. Four respondents, all who agreed to pay an extra \$200 for environmentally friendly technology, said they would not support this conservation measure. The primary reason behind disagreement was that SUVs are a different type of vehicle and therefore should have different standards.

Is Government Doing Enough?

Following up on the government's role, I asked people to express their feelings on government's role in resolving environmental problems. Did they feel government needs to increase or decrease their intervention with environmental issues? Were they happy with the level of regulation? I also asked respondents if there were any environmental issues they were personally interested in or concerned about. I was delighted to see that 17 participants would like to see the government doing more for the environment, while none felt that government had too strong a hand in environmental legislation and problem resolution. Four respondents felt government involvement was at the right level, and three honestly felt they were too unaware to make an accurate assessment. Consumers suggested the following ideas for an improved government role:

1. Push for technology
2. Nationally consistent legislation
3. Pressure on private sector
4. Increase awareness programs
5. Environment needs to be a higher priority
6. Too much "red tape"

¹⁹ This is the amount reports suggest will be added in order to implement the necessary technology

A Self Report Card

Interested in how people perceive themselves and the environment, I asked participants to conduct a self assessment on how conscientious they are about their environmental behaviors. Six of the twenty-four said they were being “very” conscientious, the highest possible ranking. The rest of the SUV drivers (18) characterized themselves as being “somewhat conscientious”, while no respondents admitted to being “not very” or “not at all” conscientious. A woman I interviewed outside of a nearby private school illustrated the inconsistencies found in my consumers regarding their environmental ethics. She responded to the question concerning government action saying, “[Government is] doing no more than they have to because of consumers like me who are **not very** conscientious.” She had taken the words right out of my mouth. In the following self-assessment question, seconds later, she failed to place herself in the “not very conscientious” category. She denied her actual self-perception when confronted with the question. I assume that many of the people who more appropriately should have addressed themselves as “not very” conscientious are well intentioned, but that their environmental awareness does not stimulate actions and behaviors that prioritize the environment.

As for environmental behaviors that they practice, my respondents listed the following:

1. Recycle (23)
2. Only mentioned Recycle (7)
3. No littering (5)
4. Home conservation practices (water, oil) (3)
5. Proper car oil disposal (2)
6. Nature trail maintenance (2)
7. Environmentally-friendly consumer purchases (1)
8. Environmentally educate their children (10)
9. Save the Bay functions (1)

A Review of My Findings

The following sum up my key findings based on interviews with SUV owners:

- SUVs are valued for safety, image, utility/luxury, and are predominantly used as personal vehicles for day-to-day travel.
- While drivers enjoy the utility their SUV provides, they are not maximizing their SUVs' utility. SUVs are not being used for what they are designed to handle.
- People would support increased government intervention within environmental issues and many would be willing to pay more to have more efficient SUVs.
- People are not highly involved or concerned with specific environmental issues.
- Most drivers are aware that their SUVs are bad for the environment, but the appeal of the vehicle overrides any environmental conscience.

Discussion of Interview Findings

The Prevalence of Cognitive Dissonance

It is often true that concerns about the environment are not matched by actions. Six of my respondents claimed to “very” conscientious about their environmental behaviors, but there were clear instances where their actions were misaligned with their claims. While I recognize that the numbers are not astounding in this instance, I present my findings as a matter of qualitative importance. When asked for examples of practiced environmental behaviors, only three of the six “very” conscientious respondents cited specifics beyond recycling, a relatively simple, accessible, and commonplace environmental practice. They mentioned “no littering”, trail maintenance, proper oil disposal, and minimal impact camping. Three respondents mentioned nothing beyond the simple act of recycling. One woman, who judged herself as “very” conscientious, responded with examples of community volunteerism believing that these constituted

environmental practices. I read the question a second time stressing the word “environment” and she told me she donated clothing to the Salvation Army. We had entirely different conceptions of the word “environment”. She equated “environmental” with “social”. Hoping to clarify what I meant, I asked if she recycled and she said, “Sometimes, but is hard at my apartment building.” This did not trigger any other environmental behaviors for her, yet she claimed herself to be a “very conscientious” practitioner of environmentally benefiting behaviors. Another “very conscientious” interviewee who recently moved into a new house claimed the move made recycling difficult, although “[he’d] like to start soon.” Even to those who categorized themselves as “very conscientious”, there are obstacles to being “environmental” even in the most simple senses.

Filing through the responses of my six “very conscientious” environmentalists, other gaps appeared in their commitment to the environment. In a ranking question considering the importance of safety, size, and gas in their SUVs, half (3) placed gas last amongst this group of factors. Only one put gas at the top of the list. Half of the “very conscientious” respondents also placed size over gas. Most (4/6) went on to say that they felt they made no tradeoffs when they purchased their vehicle. This inclined no perceived tradeoffs, say gas for safety or mileage for size. Four drivers stated that the excessive fuel consumption of their SUV did not matter to them. I was also surprised to see that four of these participants saw the relationship between SUV popularity and their increased gas consumption more in terms of personal cost than environmental impacts.

This leads me to wonder where their point of reference lies. To whom do they compare themselves when making a claim to be “very conscientious” about their

behaviors? Even though this is only a small number of people, this indicates that there is a sector of the population under the impression that they are fulfilling their environmental duties to the best of their ability. As one participant claimed, “The way we live today necessitates constant, excessive use of automobiles...Life forces this.” People are victimized by this culture, forced to mistreat the environment, in order to stay in the race. Its destruction appears inevitable, yielding a sentiment of helplessness. My claim here is that there is always more that one can sacrifice. While I believe that all six respondents were well intentioned, I question their idea of what actually constitutes a “very conscientious” person. There are many untrodden and unexplored avenues of environmental commitment, even for those who claim themselves as “very conscientious” environmental stewards.

My view of these six respondents, self-classified as “very conscientious” practitioners, was formulated by and restricted to the discussions I had with them. My conception is that two of the six were actually environmentally conscious in the way that I would define it. In my field notes, after speaking with respondent #23 I remarked, “I felt like I was talking to an environmentalist over an SUV driver.” I got the sense he had a maturely developed environmental conscience. Within the first question, unprompted, he raised the issue of his SUVs gas consumption as a “bad problem”. He expressed a sense of guilt. He went on to say, “I don’t like that I have a pig for a car.” He talked about his involvement with the Appalachian Mountain Club and his efforts to expand environmental awareness. I sensed his appreciation for the outdoors. He told me of canoeing and camping trips, stressing the need for minimal impact camping. Likewise, I felt another respondent also had a very secure stance on the environment as well. He

answered questions in a confident manner. He willfully spoke about green space and the outdoor environment and the need to keep it clean. Conveying his respect for nature, he commented on the junk and litter he saw strewn throughout the park. He proclaimed, “I clean bottles around the lake. I respect nature. I pick up the broken bike parts in the woods.” He expressed a frustration in finding the unnatural in the natural. Human waste and carelessness denied nature of its wholesome beauty. The shreds of human residue that lined the park were misplaced. In his eyes they did not belong. He defined the human role as one of stewardship saying, “Nature needs to be kept by us.”

The remainder of my respondents agreed to being “somewhat conscientious” about their environmental behaviors. Their responses revealed inconsistencies and gaps as well. Most drivers (16/18) ranked gas last in the safety, size, gas factor group. The remaining two placed it second in the hierarchy. Eleven did not perceive any tradeoffs in their SUV purchase. Seven did admit to making a tradeoff, six of which concerned sacrificing fuel economy. Comparable to the “very conscientious” respondents, 1/3 saw the SUV/gas consumption relationship in terms of environmental impacts. Almost all (16/18) were aware of their SUV’s excessive gas consumption, and half of the drivers (9/18) said it did not matter to them. When asked about their personal environmental practices, almost half (7/18) did not name any behaviors beyond recycling. I had an interesting interaction with one woman interviewed at a local private school. Asking her about her environmental behaviors she said, motioning with her hands, “You know, we put things here and there...”, trailed off and looked to her son. Seemingly in disbelief, he reminded her in a scolding tone, “Recycle, Mom.” Looking quite embarrassed she returned to me, “Yeah, recycle.” We would expect to see concern for the environment

from “somewhat conscientious” people, but I found quite the opposite on a number of accounts. Disappointing me, one consumer said, “I see how the relationship could be in terms of increased environmental impacts, but this is not a concern for me.”

I conclude that, in light of the talk about the environment between respondents and myself, while people make promising claims about their commitment to the environment, the extent to which they put their claims into practice is disheartening and potentially problematic. While their concerns warrant hopefulness about our environment, their attitudes do not warrant confidence about the future of human environmental stewardship.

Guilt and Justification

In my interviews, I sensed several instances of peoples’ guilt when we discussed the issue of SUVs and the environment. One woman concluded our interview saying, “I know I am a bad person.” (#2) Another woman displayed her guilt physically. She admitted that her SUV’s excessive gas consumption was not a concern to her. Her response was not only verbal, but physical as well. Shoulders shrugged, eyes squinted, her answer leaked out in a whisper, “No, it doesn’t matter.” I welcomed her honesty and sensed her shame. A third woman, blaming herself, reluctantly said, “If I were very conscientious, I wouldn’t own an SUV.” She wanted to claim herself as a very concerned and conscientious person, but her polluting, gas guzzling SUV stopped her from falsely categorizing herself. One woman quickly jumped to the defensive when we reached this section of the survey. Before I could finish answering the question, she cut me off, hurriedly claiming, “Oh, I’m conscientious,” as if how dare I think otherwise.

As an extension of a guilty conscience, a few respondents attempted justifying their ownership. Participants differentiated themselves from other SUV drivers. One woman interviewed at Moses Brown understood SUVs as status/prestige symbols and was sure to tell me this was not the reason behind her SUV ownership. Looking around she declared, “There are plenty of mothers driving around here that don’t need them...It’s a very pretentious vehicle...For myself, this is much more of a utility vehicle compared to how others are using them.” Later in the interview, she went to say that she very much enjoyed the luxurious aspect of her SUV. Another Wheeler mother followed her criticism of drivers’ lack of awareness of vehicle fuel consumption and emissions production declaring, “But I have to have one. I need one for work.” Mind you she worked downtown. Participants attempted to convince me that their SUVs had a functional, utilitarian purpose. The root of this persuasion may be their own understanding of their ownership: that this is the hot car, the station wagon of the nineties that confirms their membership to a desired social circle. Perhaps it is their truth they deny.

Some drivers did not show any signs of guilt about driving a vehicle that pollutes excessively. Those who do, do not seem ready to give up their SUVs anyhow.

Focus Group Findings

In my efforts to explore the SUV invasion, I tapped into a population at my fingertips, student SUV drivers. Cruising around campus, my eyes were peeled. Old one, new one, silver one, yellow one. This population is surely not exempt from the SUV takeover. They are prevalent here as anywhere else. While some are second generation drivers, as parents retire their SUVs to their children, there are those driving SUVs hot off the assembly line. Students like anyone else, need to get from A to B. They need the means. They need a car. They drive Sport Utility Vehicles.

I recruited my peers for an informal discussion to mull over issues of SUV popularity, pollution, and promotion. Utilizing school-wide email lists, I was able to recruit 16 students willing to discuss their vehicles and themselves as SUV drivers. I announced that it was a facet of my senior thesis research, hoping they would extend their sympathy and help a fellow student out. In return for their help I promised the discussion would last only an hour, hoping that this would stand as some sort of an incentive to many students immersed in the business of school. I purposely neglected to tell them the premise or intent of my study and its ties to environmental matters in my effort to as not bias or contaminate any of their answers or perceptions. Sixteen students held to their commitments to attend, six of whom partook on the first evening and ten on the second. The first focus group, held on February 16th, consisted of 5 males and 1 female, while 8 males and 2 females attended the second on February 17th. All students were either in their junior or senior years at Brown. Both groups were audio and video taped in order to capture both verbal and physical reactions to questions and information presented. The focus group resembles a high intensity action film. As moderator, I was able to watch

ideas emerge, and in turn energize and animate new thoughts of new actors. Perceptions and impressions are contagious. As they formulate and find their definition within language, their constructs spur the building process within others. The participants allowed me to witness the sharing, exchange, and building of ideas amongst such groups. In the following, I discuss the findings that emerged out of the focus group discussions.

Licensed to Drive

Initially establishing a level of comfort and trust amongst participants is instrumental to the success of any focus group.²⁰ I opened the avenues of discussion by asking my participants to think back to a monumental day they all shared, the day they were licensed to drive. At first there was silence, as they mentally filed back to the carefree mindset of being 16 years old. Smiles appeared as memories and stunts they had pulled off years before burst back into their minds. They laughingly began to share about the naive notions of invincibility they operated under. The test preparation: practicing three-point turns, “mom clutching the side [of the door]”(John), surprise attack one way streets they weren’t equipped to handle. Some reflected on the anticipation and pressure of the driver’s test, a present day cultural rite of passage, recognizing that those “that failed driver’s tests were just mocked and derided forever”(Andrew). The day was still fresh in their minds. One participant claimed the anxiety was “worse than Christmas”(Daniel). They alluded to the pressure and the dread that surrounded the day, but then to the joy and freedom which followed. One participant fondly remembered carting him and all his buddies up to the swimming hole that afternoon, reveling in his new freedom, a freedom able to be shared with his best friends. Another participant recounted his first year of freedom saying, “I think for that first year all I did with my two

best friends was drive around in that car and just hang. It [was] just a like a big couch. It [was] just a like a big rolling couch...We were just psyched to be in it and hear music. It was like our own place.”(Noah) They had been coated with new identities and welcomed the liberation and independence granted. From this conversation, I gathered that the day they received their licenses was certainly a memorable one for most, filled with mixed emotions of anxiety, joy, excitement, and dread. They carried many lasting memories about the special day and those that followed as a result of this earned privilege. It led to a whole new phase of teenage life, one of road trips, accidents, and designated drivers. The great new freedom enjoyed overshadowed any drawbacks. In fact, they did not recall many bad times, mostly just the good times with friends, fostered by the personal freedom their cars allowed.

The Car Connection

Students in the focus groups illuminated the bond which exists between driver and car. Americans, perhaps more than any other culture, express a deep emotional attachment to their vehicles. They use their vehicles as a means of transportation, as a trusty chest to transport their goods and possessions. They can close the windows and lock the doors and be alone with their thoughts. They tag their vehicles with bumper stickers, defining their beliefs, making their stance clear on a range of issues. Americans have a fetish with space; they are obsessed with proxemics. They employ different spaces as facilitators to their own self identification and realization. You can learn a lot about a person from the car they drive, in America. My participants conveyed that this relationship is molded early on. Bringing their car to life, giving it an identity of its own, some participants fondly recalled the names they had assigned to their first vehicles: “the

²⁰ Krueger, pg. 6

blue bitch” and “the beast”. Several students were still driving their first cars. They had not been forced yet to cut ties. One participant lamented, “I’d be sad to see it go.”(Susan) Another participant spoke of the relief he felt when he was “finally [able] to have [his] car up here”. Completed by its arrival, he now had “something to show affection for all of the time.”(Noah) Another participant chimed in and said, “It was great at parties. It was very enjoyable. I had a good time with it.”(Connor) This ‘it’ he spoke of, being his car, in the context of which he spoke, could have been replaced with a person. The freedom and independence granted elicited bonds with their first cars. Vehicles had the power to bolster an image amidst the awkwardness and insecurity of adolescent and teenage years. It was the birth of cool. Although, there were some horror stories. One participant spoke of the emasculation he suffered throughout high school in being forced to drive a Ford Taurus station wagon. While it did nothing but cramp his style, he praised its capacity to be stuffed like a sardine can, “8 people in seat belts and then stuff 4 more on top of them.”(Steven) Through our discussion, I discovered the bonds which lay between my participants and their vehicles. The bonds were immediate it seems, locked and sealed that very first day of drivership.

Cars on Campus

Students shared all the same gripes about having a car at Brown: the lack of parking space, the very well known and hated ticket man, and the infamous, unmistakable bright yellow Denver Boot, that shackles the hub of your tire restricting your car to move in any desired direction. Redemption is only received once you pay all your overdue parking tickets including an added fee for boot removal. They exchanged ploys and

advice on how to get out of parking tickets. We sat in disbelief as one participant shared the story of how there was a warrant out for this grandmother's arrest due to his accumulated tickets here at Brown. To combat the limited parking spaces on campus, they have staked out all the secret parking spots. As one participant bragged, "I can even tell professors where to park."(Kayla) Some students religiously drive to class, day in day out, regardless of the inevitable struggle for parking. While a few students lived over a mile away from campus, others blamed it on a newfound laziness that one participant termed as "a disorder [he] suffered from"(Andrew), admitting that there was no real excuse. Other students vowed never to drive to campus because of the lack of parking and fear of the overzealous ticket man. One student shared an experience he had driving to the focus group that very evening which reminded him that driving to campus was impractical and somewhat irrational. Driving to the discussion, he passed a friend riding her bike towards campus. By the time he had made it to campus and maneuvered into a parking space conveniently located near his destination, there was his friend passing him by on her bicycle. Recounting this occurrence, he concluded that driving to campus simply "makes no sense at all."(Noah) Despite the struggles, all students were grateful to have their vehicles with them at Brown. They did not have to depend on friends and acquaintances to take them grocery shopping or home when break finally slipped around. They enjoyed being able to take off for weekends to visit friends and get away from the stress of Brown.

Today's SUVs

I then moved onto a discussion of SUVs. I wondered if any SUVs in particular had caught their eye or if there were SUVs that they would be interested to test-drive. In

the first group, the new Nissan Xterra was an immediate topic of discussion. Instantly responding, one participant declared, "I like the Xterra because it is definitely more outdoorsy, more rugged, and built for the reason of driving up in the mountains and carrying stuff around."(Steven) Another male participant bellowed a deep "Yeah!"(Connor) in response to this claim, humorously expressing his feeling that the Xterra satisfies the rough and tumble image men strive for. This remark set discussion off about the Xterra Ad campaign. Students began humming the commercial's signature song, performed by Lenny Kravitz, an eccentric, alternative singer who emerged on the popular music scene in the mid 90's. As one person brought it up, they all nodded in recognition of the tune as "yeahs" filtered through the audience. They discussed the style of the new Jeep Sport and its "throwback" to the old style Jeep. Another participant pitted maneuverability versus style, comparing the Expedition and the Dodge Durango. He liked the Expedition in terms of driving, but the Durango in terms of vehicle design. With two participants from Minnesota and Texas, discussion emerged concerning the different SUVs that are prevalent in different geographic regions of the country. The Texan attested that "where [he] comes from everybody has trucks and SUVs. Where there are farms and ranches, there [are] SUVs and a pick-ups. There the norm is an SUV or a pick-up."(Paul) The Minnesotan agreed and relayed how his mother, while visiting the weekend before, drove out of the Athletic Center and commented, "You don't see many trucks out here."(Connor) It seemed like, relative to their homeland, trucks and SUVs were not as common here in the East. The Texan reminded us that you do see as many SUVs out here, just of a different class. In the East, he noticed that the Land Rover, the Range Rover, and the Grand Jeep Cherokee are predominant. They seemed to

making a cultural comparison. In the West, there are more SUVs being employed for practical, work purposes, specifically for agriculture, while in the East, SUVs are just another typical car, with those on the high class end predominating. One male participant, born and raised in New Jersey, perhaps reflecting the Eastern attitude, concluded this segment of the discussion remarking, “The Range Rover. That’s my goal one day. That’s why you go to Brown.”(John)

The second group began on a much different note in responding to the latest SUVs on the market. The initial comment made was about their increasing size. Disgusted, one participant raved, “I think that Ford is completely out of control with that Excursion.”(Ashley) She went on to comment on the impractical reality of the vehicle, recounting a ridiculous scene in the parking lot of a grocery store in Vermont. Still engrossed with the absurdity of what she had seen she relayed the story: “[The woman] had her window down, just to get out of a normal parking spot. She’s hanging out the window too because she can’t tell how far away she is from anything.”(Ashley) After witnessing this incidence, the participant claimed, “You need a separate license or something to drive the Excursion.”(Ashley) There was agreement expressed throughout the group. They laughed at the mental picture the story provided, and shook their heads in disbelief that the vehicles had grown *that* impractical and difficult to maneuver. This spurred commentary on how most SUVs are never put to the test. One participant joked, “I mean, it’s made to chow on a mountain and they are just driving down these suburban streets.”(Noah) The initial comment, a negative critique of SUVs, seemed to direct the nature of the conversation regarding the latest SUVs. This evidenced how the first comment directs the nature and tone of the comments to follow.* The comments to

follow criticized the “cheesy” concept of the Xterra and how the campaign’s intent was to “force feed some sort of image of what alternative lifestyle is supposed to be”.(Ryan) Moreover, the Xterra is “klinky” and looks “top heavy”.(Daniel) Only negative characterizations were voiced. The group went on to discuss roll over tendencies of the Isuzu Troopers, Cherokees, and Explorers. Remembering the Isuzu Trooper, one participant practically trembling, dreadfully remarked, “Oh God, that thing.”(Noah) One participant reflected on the time he flipped his own Chevy Blazer out in a canal, requiring two tow trucks to turn him over and pull him out of the mud laden ditch. At the hands of these negative SUV statements, participants started considering 4wheel drive wagons, like the Subaru Outback and the Volvo wagon.

**While the first group positively commented on the functionality of SUVs, the second group continued to denounce SUVs, from their advertising campaigns to their safety shortcomings. It is apparent that the initial response has the ability to contaminate the subsequent discussion. This is evidence of Albrecht et al’s definition of communication as “ a transactional, symbolic process of mutual influence occurring between two or more individuals that alters their affective, cognitive, or behavioral states.” The content of discussion in the respective groups was directed by the nature of the first response to the question at hand, a stark instance of transactional influence. This is also a reflection of Asch’s finding that “those responding last tend to echo the sentiments of those responding first.”²¹ Group communication dynamics were sharply apparent in this segment of the discussion.*

²¹ Albrecht et al, pg. 56-57

SUV Popularity

Next I prompted the group to consider why SUVs had grown to be so popular with nearly 50% of vehicles purchased in 1998 being SUVs. Among the reasons given were the following:

Safety In both groups, the factor of safety was mentioned as a top reason. Students discussed the perception of safety that consumers buy when they purchase an SUV. They also felt that these purchases are motivated by the fear people experience driving on today's roads. With the SUVs seeming to dominate road and highway fleets, drivers find the need to be defensive and protective. What a better way than to match, or even, top your competitor? One participant described the current situation as "a battle. You need a big car so you don't die." (Greg) Another student defended SUVs saying, "They survive...I mean, people are dying because their cars aren't big enough in the United States." (Paul) Students agreed that you need the means to retaliate against the encroaching behemoths today. Two students had survived accidents with passenger cars without harm, which they attributed to the brawn of their SUVs. One student thankfully recognized, "had we been in a car, we would have been demolished." (Connor)

Power and Security One student felt that SUVs are merely an injection of testosterone, "that makes you feel more powerful and secure." (Steven) This sentiment stemmed from personal experience. Students themselves recounted the invincibility they felt when they first started driving their SUV. One participant felt his SUV instilled in him this notion that "you can do whatever you want with it, and take it wherever you want to." (Daniel) Another student's experience directly reflected this perception. Frustrated with traffic, he "thought [he'd] be suave and take it through one of the canals

and not have to go through traffic.”(Phil) Once he got out to the middle, half way through the canal, he realized he had abandoned himself. He could see nothing but mud for 200 yards in every direction and could not move an inch. Four tow trucks were called to the scene, two to remove a tow truck that had attempted to rescue him and got stuck in his efforts, and then another to finally remove him.

Trend As one student put it, “It’s the hot car.” (Greg) You don’t only feel safe, but you look cool. The vehicle offers two-in-one, which is why it continues to thrive as the trendy hot car of today. One student explained that “adults can drive them and not look like irresponsible adults [yet still] feeling like they are driving the cool thing.”(Andrew) Students felt that people enjoy and exploit the practical, as well as the socially symbolic functions of the vehicle. Recognizing this trend, one participant feared, “God knows what’s next.” (Susan)

It’s American Students readily acknowledged this trend as “very American” (Noah), a car in line with American ideals. One student who cited SUVs as next in line to the “Caddi’s of the 70’s”, said, “American culture has always liked big things.”(John) Another student laid out for us the American idea he felt surrounds these vehicles and makes them so appealing: “I think it’s so American. [Just] throw all our stuff in the back and we can go anywhere and this whole place is open to us. Throw all the kids in the back and grab the skis.”(Noah) This statement draws several pictures of “the American,” labeling us as consumers, loaded with gear, and requiring a special space to transport it to the appropriate destination. This participant alluded to the limitless destinations within this country’s boundaries. He implied that rather than stewards, we are conquerors, determined to reach every nook that nature provides. The SUV will allow this and put us

in touch with the corners of nature, no matter how small. He draws a picture of the happy American family, escaping for the weekend, skis in hand, perhaps singing carols as they drive out to snow country. The American Family. One student refuted this “American” claim and defended that “they are not necessarily inherent to American culture”(Ashley), but instead are a product of an industry that markets these American ideals for consumers to eat up.

A Farewell to Minivans Although the issue of minivans was just briefly mentioned in the first group discussion, in the second discussion group, all students agreed that the SUV was the great American escape from the minivan. One student recalled that “the Caravan was the hot car in the 80’s. It was the idea to get the family and everything in there. Now you don’t have the family car. You can have all that in a cooler looking car.”(Greg) Students felt that minivans and station wagons, apparently void of style, are being replaced by SUVs. Another participant reminded us, “that you don’t *have* to be driving a minivan anymore.” (Steven) He reminded us that a more masculine, cool alternative exists.

It’s Only the Family Car, When the Family is in it Members of both focus groups recalled and reported this blurb from a Mitsubishi SUV ad and agreed that SUV owners enjoy this versatility and multipurposeness.

Economy Students commented on the relationship of the SUV phenomenon and the flourishing economy. One student observed that “the economy is so high...Americans have a lot more money to spend on cars than they ever have. They cost a little more, but [it’s worth it] for what you are getting.” (John) Participants agreed that the surplus of money floating around not only allows Americans to be purchasing, but also keep filling

them with gas. Discussion of gas prices led students in the first group to begin complaining about how their SUVs were draining their bank accounts, costing students anywhere from \$27 to \$42 for one tank of fuel. Regardless, “[people] have so much money. They need an outlet to spend money.” (Kayla) One student felt that the booming economy reduced SUVs to “toys, just safe toys” in the eyes of many consumers.(Andrew) With the economy making SUVs affordable, they have propagated and rooted themselves as the car of the 90’s.

Youthfulness Students attributed recent SUV popularity to an aging population with hopes of regaining their youth. Some named their own parents as primary offenders. It’s a car “you can still feel young in.” (Kayla) One student, while on a roadtrip with his buddies, recounted a scene travelling along on the highway: “There were four of us. We saw an identical model driving right ahead of us and it was four older guys. We said , ‘Hey, that is us in thirty years!’ You could tell they were doing the same thing. They were trying to get back to their youth...”(Phil) Another student targeting her father remarked how “he feels much cooler in [his SUV]”.(Kayla)

Status Symbol Students admitted that SUVs have morphed into a status symbol, part of which has been made possible by the latest luxury class of SUVs: Mercedes, Lexus, and BMW, labeled by one student as, “some of the most impractical vehicles [he’d] ever seen.”(Ryan) Nonetheless, some folks are finding a reason to have them. This student commented on “the older people, thirty-somethings, forty-somethings. They have the money for a prestigious car, and that is important to them.”(Ryan) Students felt that SUVs have the ability to bolster the image their drivers are striving to create. SUVs voice a higher socio-economic status that consumers want to convey.

Utility Image aside, focus group participants said SUVs are useful. While students named emotional deliverance and social status as culprits to the soaring popularity of SUVs, they did feel that these vehicles serve some practical utility purposes. Students were quick to critique their impractical tendencies, yet they defended that SUVs do have practical applications. Students were discussing the drama of advertisements, the unrealistic depictions of SUVs summiting enormous mountains. They believed that most SUVs never even leave the pavement. In response to this, one student said it best, “But you can.”(Andrew) That is the bottom line. Drivers enjoy the fact that their vehicle is very capable of handling unpredictable situations. Several students spoke from personal experiences where their SUV had served them well. A couple students referred to the chore of moving back and forth from school. The life of a college student is impermanent and constantly in transition. This was a chore made easier by the capacity of their SUVs. All of their belongings conveniently required one car, one trip. One participant could fit all his surfing and snowboarding gear in the car. The car supported his interests. His Navajo’s durable cloth interior could handle all the wax and sand left over from the beach. “[He was] never worried.”(Ryan) Another student remembered the 5 mile hill that stood between her and the ski mountain year-in-year-out. In their friend’s station wagon it was always a struggle, while SUVs cruised right up the hill with ease. She said, “honestly, it is just so much easier now with an SUV.”(Ashley) Another participant who lives out west told us that in that terrain “it is really hard to not have a car that is not going to be able to do the mountains...you need the power...it is useful.”(Phil)

Is there a typical SUV driver?

Students felt that there is not one typical SUV driver, but that the SUV promotes many personas, an SUV image with many shapes and sizes. Behind any given windshield lie soccer moms, youth aspiring men, preppy kids, and surfer dudes immersed in the extreme culture of the new day. One student admitted, “Everytime I see an SUV, I can picture in my head who I think would be driving it and why they are driving it.”(Steven) He searches for the different personalities. Although there is not one common denominator which binds all SUV drivers, students did seem comfortable in making associations between specific SUVs and the type of people driving them. Participants registered assumptions concerning the sex, age, lifestyle, and socioeconomic status of the drivers, dependent upon which SUV we were discussing. One student announced that he had seen “a definite soccer mom at the grocery store driving [a Nissan Xterra]”(Noah), an SUV primarily marketed to the twenty something Xtreme population. In disbelief, another student responded, “You saw a *soccer mom* driving one?”(Ryan). Another participant spoke of how the Jeep models span and cultivate different SUV images, such as the Jeep Cherokee Sport for youths, and the Grand Jeep Cherokee for moms. He also made remarks that those driving around in the high end Range Rovers and Mercedes “aren’t buying a car like that to go drive around in the woods by themselves.” (Steven)

This talk about “Who is driving SUVs?”, prompted commentary on the misuse of SUVs. Students criticized that SUVs are rarely utilized for their capabilities as all-terrain, rugged vehicles. As one student said, “I rarely see [them used for] what [they are] advertised as...predominantly, I don’t see surf boards strapped to the top or mountain

bikes on the back.”(Noah) Students felt that drivers are more concerned with “status symbol grill guards” (Andrew) and “the image of adventure” (Ralph). One participant felt that his own mother bought into this idea. He said, “They are not appealing to the real rugged person. They are appealing to a person like my mom. She wouldn’t go camping unless she had most of the luxuries from her home, or at least some. She wants the half way. She wants to say she went camping, but at the same time she wants a hotel room nearby where she can change and shower.”(John) Another student provoked by a Lexus commercial said, “They definitely didn’t look like they had the right shoes on to get out and walk around.” (Noah) Students agreed that the SUV driver buys more than a functional vehicle when he/she decides upon a certain SUV. There is an awareness of what SUVs represent socially, and this is consumed as well. As one student affirmed, “[People don’t buy them] necessarily for what they have to offer, but instead buy them for the Monday coffee group conversation. “OH what did *you* do this weekend?” (Connor) Between all the SUVs on the market, students felt that a wide range of desires and images are satisfied. The SUV does not articulate just one personality, but many. Their various shapes and sizes, from bulbous to streamline to mini, construct and support a plethora of personalities.

What is the media saying about SUVs?

Midway through the discussion, we shifted gears to view selected magazine advertisements and television commercials. Students echoed what they had heard about SUVs from various media sources. As commonly heard in the media, students coined SUVs “gas guzzlers”.(Susan) They learned from media sources that despite the stress SUVs place on the environment, sales continue to soar. They had also seen reports on the

overgrowth of SUVs, disapproving of the excessively lengthened Ford Excursion, or “the Expedition on crack.”(Paul) There was some knowledge expressed in both focus groups about the recent move to heighten SUV emissions standards. One student expressed that he found it “ridiculous that...the emissions standards do not go into effect until 2004-5.”(Andrew)

A range of responses and reactions surfaced from the magazine and commercial advertisements shown. Participants discussed what they thought the advertisements were attempting to impress upon viewers and what viewers the advertisements were attempting to target. Amidst the outrage and disgust, students conceded on the general themes, shown in these responses that follow.

**If this SUV could talk, messages conveyed through SUV advertising...
Security/Safety/Power**

- “What is below is a dangerous world. [The SUV] puts you on a pedestal. It almost makes you seem like you are rising above everything that is dingy and grimy and scary. And here you are in this secure SUV.”(Daniel)
- “This is going to be the car that is going to take you home and it’s going to be ok.”(Ralph)
- “It is the car that is going to get you through the storm.”(Doug)
- “Superiority”(Ryan)

Versatility

- “It’s saying wealthy people drive this car...”(Ralph)
“...but they have fun too”(Andrew)

- “So this is the car you can go to the black tie ball in and then head to the mountains...This is a luxury man on the go. It’s like Bond.”(Noah)

Man vs. Nature

- “It does say this truck will conquer nature. Have no fear. This is the great truck that will destroy Mother Earth.”(Noah)

Escapism

- “They are both saying bye-bye to asphalt, hello back woods.”(Noah)
- “Like escape your horrible reality and pretend you are a monkey for the day.”(Noah)
- “There is obviously a theme of breaking away from the conventional, from the city getting away from tuxes, away from the asphalt.” (Paul)
- “All the other ones focus on the wilderness, but the Xterra focused on more on yourself alone in the wilderness without your car. Your car helps you get there, but it’s you out there by yourself doing the hiking and mountain biking.”(Steven)
- “I think the whole escapism idea...the whole sales pitch is kind of angled to the people working the 100 hour work weeks, they can’t fly away or got away to the Cayman Islands for the weekend, but they can hop in their car and go hiking and biking. Someone who has worked all week wants to get away.” (Ford Outfit) (John)

Image

- “It’s not we are going to sell you a car, we are going to sell you fun for your soul.”(Noah)
- “I think they are saying people will sweat you if you drive this car.”(Noah)
- “Let’s get something a little more sporty. Let’s get hip with the times.” (Greg)
- “It’s the whole extreme, adventure aspect.” (Connor)

- “They are selling to the guy who drove his minivan down to the gym, his family car as opposed to his SUV, which can still pass for a family car, but looks much more rugged in the gym parking lot.” (Connor)

If these SUVs could sell themselves, populations targeted in SUV advertising...

Wealthy/Upper Class

- “It’s saying wealthy people drive this car.” (Navigator) (Susan)
- “It’s for an educated upper middle class person.” (Lexus) (Kayla)
 “I hate this ad. It is for a group of people who can say ‘we have so much money we can live up on the mountains.’” (Lexus) (Ralph)
- “It’s catering to the Yuppies.” (Lexus) (Ralph)

Extreme/Youth

- “Obviously targeting a younger crowd that is looking for an extreme sport vehicle as opposed to the soccer mom who wants the luxury SUV.” (Xterra) (Greg)
- “I think with the Xterra, they are trying to get back to the post college pre work force generation and give them something that is a little practical, a bit cheaper.” (Xterra) (Daniel)
- “You mentioned identity...what kind of identity does a person feel when they get out of their car? This one is specific. They want to get out of this and they want people to think they are radical.” (Xterra) (Ryan)
- “It’s the whole Yoga culture.” (Suzuki) (Ashley)

Male/Female

- “This is more family and female too. It reminds me of a dove.” (Blazer) (Kayla)

- “They are selling to the guy who drove his minivan down to the gym, his family car as opposed to his SUV, which can still pass for a family car, but looks much more rugged in the gym parking lot.” (Mitsu) (Connor)
- “It’s so clearly for you boys.” (Mitsu) (Kayla)
- “Going for the soccer moms with that one.” (Noah)

SUVs as polluters...How do students feel?

Part of my intent in this endeavor was to raise students’ awareness of their vehicles and the pollution SUVs emit. Once aware, I wondered how they felt about their role in contributing to environmental degradation through their SUV. I attempted to get their environmental consciences in view. I was tapping to get a sense of how deep or shallow this conscience was and to find what was recognized by this conscience. Students expressed an array of sentiments. I revealed to students that their vehicles, on average, consume 33% more gasoline and emit 1/3 more global warming gases than passenger cars. I reminded them sales of SUVs have grown tenfold since 1980, intending to elucidate the correlation between increased SUVs and increased environmental degradation. Exposing the astounding amounts of pollution emitted by their SUVs, a feeling of helplessness amongst some students manifested. There was a delay after the information was given. Students were pondering and processing the information. On the first evening, the first student to respond could say nothing but, “It sucks....” (Scott) He trailed off and could say no more, implying that the situation had grown out of his hands. His shrugged shoulders asked the question “what am I to do?” Noah, who participated in the second group, responded readily to the consequences of this information. Absorbed

in the information, he remarked, “I mean these cars are going to be on the roads for the next twenty years...We are going to be pretty screwed I feel like in a short period of time. It’s so exponential. There have never been this many cars consuming this much gas.” His tone was almost scared and remorseful in talking about the endangerment of the environment. Other students began reflecting on themselves saying, “if we just cut down the amount of commuting from work” or “it seems like we should be smart enough to not be using such harmful substances”. (Daniel/Ralph) They were suggestive. They spoke of the role of technology and government, but nowhere did they say “We need to stop driving these vehicles.” One student questioned technology stating, “I don’t understand why it can’t be more efficient. I just don’t understand why that’s not true.” (Greg) He indicated our dependence on technology to correct our wrongs. Turning to government, another frustrated participant asked, “...can’t someone just decide?” (Ralph) The information did not motivate students to give up their SUV in the name of our suffering environment. In fact, one student responded, “It’s a sad fact that even though all those things are so true, sales are only increasing. I know those things and I still love my car and definitely will consider getting another one.” (Susan) I had spurred no change of heart.

The information I stated, factually toned with a quantitative defense, also sparked questions of uncertainty regarding the *actual* state of the environment within the first group. Two students discussed their skepticism towards the information circulating about a dwindling and degraded environment. One student questioned, “I don’t see this as a pressing problem. I mean, is it?” (John) He referred to the opposing viewpoints infesting the scientific arena concerning the ozone layer saying, “Last I had heard the hole had

shrank.” (John) In the final stages of this discussion Connor proposed two other dilemmas posed by the issue: misrepresentation and trust. His feeling that “there has been a lot of misrepresentation in terms of how bad the problem is” leads to his struggle in not “know[ing] who to trust right now.” (Connor). Students posed the issue of not knowing how concerned to be, a question even people deeply within the research realm are grappling with everyday. Overall, students conveyed the need to be persuaded by more substantial, hard, concrete evidence in order to feel a strong enough sense of urgency about our environment to motivate a change in behavior. John’s honesty in saying, “Until I see that hole up in the sky, it doesn’t affect me...It’s just the way I am, and a lot of other people too” solidified this notion. (John) Participants conveyed their disillusion and need for a definitive assessment of the situation. They want something to go on. Until then, an expanded awareness and motivation for change is doubtful.

The Three Way Bind

Discussing this SUV phenomenon raised the question of responsibility of whose responsibility it is to curb this outrageous trend. Students were able to cite three parties having a share in the responsibility, but did not feel that they could depend on any one. They spoke of consumers. Outright, one student claimed, “I feel like so much of the responsibility is on consumers.” (Noah) Another student who understood that “it has to take people not to buy them in order to make a difference” (Susan) was reluctant to depend on consumers to change their buying behaviors. She did not hold faith in consumers, as she went on to say, “It’s not very realistic.” (Susan) Another student went on to say that “there is just an environmental awareness that isn’t there.” (Andrew)

Students felt that the environmental consciences of most would not motivate a change in their buying habits. People, simply, are not conscious enough. Students also identified the problem that most people perceive themselves as ineffectual and insignificant when it comes to environmental efforts. As one student said, "People just don't care...I am one person of however many billions. But everybody thinks that way. There is no incentive. You are not going to see the benefits of what you do because there is minimal impact." (Daniel) He elaborated that because of this people do not feel proud or fulfilled when they put forth an environmental effort, because they need instant gratification. They need to know that the effort expended will reap benefits. Fortunately, this student, an avid recycler constantly heckling his own roommates to be more conscientious, recognized that "when it all adds up, that is when it really matters." (Daniel) Participants complained that overall there is no luring incentive, people are too concerned with our thriving economy, people are not aware, and hence, not in any way dependable to make this change. Noah said it best in concluding the second evening's focus groups, illuminating what needs to happen in order to make headway in this environmental mess: "[P]eople need to realize that their individuality and what they do and these freedoms come with a huge amount of responsibility, and that their choices do matter in terms of the long haul and that they are also affecting things not even in this country and other places." Amen. While students readily recognized the means to the desired end of a healthier environment, they heavily doubted consumers and their power to make change in their own behaviors, and hence, this environment.

Industry did not provide much promise in the eyes of my participants. Voicing the group's distrust for the industry, one skeptic, shaking his head and squinting his eyes

said, “I think they know how to [make SUVs more efficient]. I really do. There is something that tells me they know how to make a really efficient car.” (Noah)

Discussing auto lobbyists, distrust surfaced again. Kayla, in referring to industry’s mindlessness of the environment, said, “I think the auto lobbyists are tremendously powerful. In terms of making environmental standards, you can only hope...”, expressing that we can not depend them as a source of change. She referred to their power to drown out environmentalists and resist environmentally progressive legislation that would stunt their own growth. Nevermind our environment. Students did not hold much faith or foresee an industrial move to prioritize the environment. Connor advised “from the big business standpoint, they need to be more honest as to where the profit margins can be cut” suggesting that “[was] the way to address the problem.” Participants recognized industry’s obsession with profit undermining any environmental concern. A profit driven industry, ignorant of its effect on the environment, has consequences they deemed problematic. Again, they expressed a lack of faith in industry in their disregard for the environment, as they did for consumers.

Students perceived government as a potential catalyst for change towards environmental betterment as well, but doubt remained. Aware that the hands of government could delve deeper into the realm of environmental management, a few students also felt that government is an easy target. As one student contested, “It’s always easy to say government could be doing more. I mean the government could be doing more in a lot of areas.” (Connor) Yet this was also conceived as an easy way out of this situation for government, a valid excuse for not tending the situation to the necessary degree. Sure politicians are busy, consumed and thinned out over numerous

projects, but eventually, as one student argued, “the government is going to have to say something.” (Kayla) Participants suggested taxes and education as avenues to environmental improvement. While Connor, who participated in the first group, contended that “the government has a good conscience, is working towards solutions, and is aware of the problem,” I found that most students did not hold this viewpoint. Instead, students expressed several gripes about the government’s handling of environmental matters. Paul commented that the public majority perceives the environment as one small item on a lengthy agenda. As a result, environmental issues, abandoned and sacrificed, are left to the wayside. In such a case, which students felt is heavily based in reality, Andrew resigned himself to the sentiment that “government isn’t going to change things.” In discussing the government’s lack of action, students suggested resorting to “the people”, “environmental groups”, and “local community groups” for environmental progress. This reflects an absence of faith in government intentions to protect the environment. Students had no concrete idea of where the environment actually sits on the agenda, although they assumed a lowly place based on its competition with other matters on the list.

Students questioned government motivations and priorities. In fact, they implied the need for apolitical motivations. They perceived politicians as puppets, car companies and wealthy elites tugging at their strings. Government agencies and officials have a sensitive ear to the big business calling. Andrew, who suggested the idea of taxation on SUVs based on vehicle emissions and fuel consumption, concluded, “It’s just not going to happen. American car companies have too much leverage to prevent a tax on those cars.” (Andrew) Ashley critiqued, “I just feel like the economy is way more important to

politicians than the environment.” But John, who attended the first group, offered an explanation for government’s apparent apathy. He pointed to the “inverse proportion” of the environment and our economy, sensing that “the government is probably afraid to take any major steps because they don’t want to derail the economy as it is right now. If they have to curb industrial output of toxic fumes, they are afraid that could affect the economy in a negative way. Everyone has a hands off approach [to] just let it go.” Regardless of this insight, both groups did not excuse government for its mistreatment of the environment in the name of the economy and business-as-usual. They further doubted government’s adequate treatment of the environment.

In summary, my participants sensed a latent capacity to induce environmental restoration and recovery within consumers, industry, and government. While they found potential in each, they doubted whether this potential would be fully actualized and activated. No one suggested a joining of forces to strengthen and substantiate a collective environmental effort between consumers, industry, and government. Instead the stakeholders were successively eliminated. All three parties were regarded with doubt and skepticism. We were left bankrupt of a solution, regardless of the pointed fingers and known offenders. No one participant was comfortable placing all the eggs in one basket. Each basket had a visible hole for the egg to drop out. Students did offer a few general ingredients to the solution: education, increased awareness, increased certainty within science, trustable government and industry, campaign finance reform, and slow, gradual change. But the question still lingered, is there anyone we can trust to carry this responsibility?

Reflections

Skepticism

The tone of much of the discussion was critical. The participants regarded many of the advertisements with some skepticism, terming them “ridiculous” and “sickening.” Ads were mocked, preceded and followed with gasps of derisive laughter. They conveyed skepticism of several natures. While some were weary of the messages, perceiving them as thin, unfulfilled promises, others distrusted the images presented. One participant, unconvinced of the advertisement’s “we are going to sell you fun for your soul” (Noah) message, responded by declaring, “This makes me sick. It really does.” (Noah) He seemed insulted by what the ad attempted to communicate. Another participant, distrusting of Ford Outfitters “No Boundaries” campaign, found their ploy practically comical. The commercial flashed commands we hear from parents as rambunctious youngsters, one of which was “Don’t Run With Scissors in Your Hand”. He criticized the correlation that Ford was attempting to show: that if you were a risky, live-on-the-edge child, “you are destined to have an SUV,” (Connor) a Ford SUV that is. Participants resented these advertisements that almost insulted their intelligence.

Students pointed out misportrayals within the images presented as well. An advertisement depicted the Amigo hopping from one ledge to another, and compelled one participant to question, “Do they *really* think they could make that jump?” He questioned the vehicle’s *actual* capability of achieving that risky maneuver. Another advertisement pictured a “pristine, white” Chevrolet Blazer parked deep in nature, looking like it just went through the car wash, not a spot of mud to be seen. Noah pointed out, “Look at the rims.” Others responded, “they didn’t even drive it up there,”

and “they just dropped it in there.” To my participants, these ads were not a reflection of reality. Others found contradictions between the types of people advertised driving SUVs and those that they assume *actually* drive them, and for what reasons. A magazine advertisement for the Lexus reveals a view of an awesome mountain, implying that this is a view only those driving a Lexus SUV will ever be privileged to see. In response, one participant claimed, “No one who buys a Lexus SUV is going to take it where that SUV is going.” (Connor) Piggybacking this idea, other respondents followed by saying, “These are not aimed at kids. They are not selling to us. They are selling to our parents.” (Scott) A female respondent noted, “They sell a lot more towards men.” (Kayla) They recognize classes of SUVs, assign constituents to these classes, but find that the advertisements are not aligned with these assumptions which they feel are based in reality. Skepticism abounded. As one student asserted, “They show a typical person go out and buy it and take it out into the woods, but that is not the reality of it.” (Steven)

So what is the origin of this skepticism and why this conception? It is rather easy to attack and be critical. The dismembering and fiery contention of the ads presented came rather quickly. I wonder where the actual foundations of this skepticism lie. Why were they so quick to jump? I found overlap between the roots of students’ skepticism and the reasons students argue that SUVs are so overwhelmingly popular. For example, image. Participants conceded that image was a selling proposition consumers bought into, and yet they denounced the ads that put forth image oriented messages through visual tactics, aesthetics, or slogans. A second example is size which maximized utility for some. They condemned the Excursion, deeming it outrageous, while some drove vehicles of comparable length and size. Thirdly, they called SUVs a present day status

symbol that legitimately substantiates one's position in society. Then they went on to mock the "yuppies" that appeared in SUV commercials.

An Enlightened Bunch?

The thoughts and ideas generated by participants in response to my questions and prompts were aligned with the premise and underlying assumptions of my study. A researcher's dream is satisfied when her preconceived answers and explanations are confirmed in her research. I sensed that they were empathetic to my frustration and grief for environmental degradation, the very emotions which gave this project life. They even mocked the Excursion and the soccer moms as I do on a daily basis. Yet, I was saddened in realizing that few were ready to desert their beloved SUVs. No offerings or sacrifices were made in the name of an excessively consumptive culture or a pained and degraded environment. A number vouched they would buy another. Was this effort in vain? I am encouraged in my meetings with participants since as they expressed revelations and a heightened awareness about the SUV trend and its detriment to the environment. But I wonder of their practices and if the enlightenment they experienced in our discussions will find a place in their day-to-day lives. While my participants pointed fingers in the same direction as I, and assigned guilt to the same responsible parties, they did not offer much self-reflection. While I was delighted at their in-depth discussion of the environment, which seemed for most to be a topic so rarely touched upon, I feel I am left in the very place I fear: a place where awareness is powerless and unstimulating, where the people are unjarred, and action not taken. What I find is somewhat hopeful, the mild existence of an environmental conscience. But I am left with the exhausting task of tapping in, digging out, and digging deeper, unsure if my efforts will ever be satisfied.

A Coda: Approaching SUV Drivers at the Pumps

Serving as a coda to my study, I approached 10 SUV drivers, 6 males and 4 females, at four different local gas stations to get their feelings on the staggering gas prices plaguing Americans nationwide. SUV drivers who are particularly targeted by this price increase because of their vehicles' relative fuel inefficiency compared to that of regular passenger cars, expressed various sentiments about the added costs and minimal concern for the raised prices.

While some respondents conveyed frustration saying the prices were “ridiculous” and “inconvenient”, others recognized that the increase was “inevitable” and “minimal compared to [what the rest of the world pays for gas]”. While none of the drivers I spoke with welcomed the price increase, 8 of the 10 respondents had *not* changed their driving habits as a result. Although, a couple drivers (2) mentioned canceling summer trips if the prices remained this high. Overall, it appeared that it would take a more significant increase in price to induce a substantial change in driving habits.

Most drivers showed minimal concern for the hike in the cost of gas. As one man said, “As it relates to my life, I am not at all concerned.” Another man, appearing to be relatively well off, commented that he was “more concerned for those where cost is more of an issue”, reminding me that many SUV owners have the means to keep these vehicles on the roads. A third respondent confidently told me that, “the prices will go down...so I am not too concerned.”

The drivers whom I spoke with did not appear to be too shaken by the cost increase to fill their gas tanks. My respondents expressed that a price increase of this magnitude will probably not affect a decrease in SUV ownership or large change in

driving habits if drivers can continue to afford the rise in cost. Unless prices continue to rise, a significant shift in car choice or driving habits should not be expected.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has been one of exploration and discovery as much as emotional restraint and struggle. Acting as a researcher as well as a person with a deep concern for the environment, at times it was difficult for me. This research better oriented me to understand the consumer mindset and to begin to understand what it might take to change this mindset, primarily through environmental education. While participants did remind me of the dangerous relationship between the dominant mindset and our environment, I more importantly discovered that there *is* an environmental consciousness, which just needs to be tapped into and educated. Once this occurs, there is greater potential for consumers to make more informed decisions and to rethink choices and behaviors based on their environmental consequences.

Based on my study, it appears that consumers do not fully comprehend the effects that their behaviors, especially their driving behaviors, have on the environment. My observations, findings, and passion about this issue leave me to propose some recommendations to begin to move towards a solution.

Firstly, all my time spent talking with SUV drivers tells me that SUVs are firmly rooted in our culture. They will not be leaving nearly as quickly as they came. The adoration of these vehicles has grown and created a tight hold on American consumers, and auto manufacturers will continue to promote this, even though industry can offer consumers a repackaged SUV that is more fuel efficient and less polluting. My research shows that consumers are concerned about the environment and would welcome a repackaged SUV. The new SUV would give consumers a chance to exercise this concern by appealing to a conscience that lies somewhat dormant. Consumers would still get the

utility and luxury that SUVs provide (a cool car) and feel good about a decision that is environmentally friendly.

The company to pioneer this design and repackage the SUV benefits as well. Simultaneously developing a "green" name while increasing or maintaining profit are two goals which tend to be inversely correlated. While companies strive to do things that promote the social good, like Toyota who suggests we "Tread Lightly", these efforts can be unprofitable and seemingly hurtful to keeping business alive. This new SUV fulfills both corporate concerns so often wrestled with, the social good and profit. Profits are a legitimate concern, as companies are making an average profit of \$10,000-\$12,000 on each SUV sold. They hold a valid concern for maintaining sales. A more fuel efficient and less polluting SUV satisfies the consumers needs and wants as well as industry's monetary and social goals.

Next, I commend Volvo for providing safer, less polluting vehicles that provide utility and luxury comparable to SUVs. Volvo even goes so far as to pit themselves against these SUVs in radio and television commercials, pointing out the safety and efficiency shortcomings of SUVs to listeners and watchers. It would be beneficial for companies like Subaru, Honda, and Volkswagen, whose sales may be suffering as a result of the SUV boom, to hop on this bandwagon as well. Consumers must have the choice to *not* buy an SUV and still get a vehicle that is as capable as an SUV. I urge these companies to focus on the development of models and advertising that present alternatives to SUVs, in hopes that people will choose the vehicle that is better for the environment.

I would also look to environmental groups for assistance in educating the public about car choice. Web-based consumer research is widespread; therefore I recommend that groups dedicate web pages to SUVs providing information on their environmental drawbacks. Web pages designed by concerned groups, containing emissions and fuel consumption information on specific models and makes, would be retrieved when a perspective buyer does a search on an SUV. Intrigued, the consumer enters the site to discover that this vehicle is excessively bad for the environment. As an effort to increase environmental awareness within consumer decisions, consumers may be jolted by what they find, and thus rethink their choice. This is another method of tapping into the dormant environmental conscience I found within my study. Providing the information gives consumers something to react to that will stimulate actions that are mindful of the environment.

Lastly, I feel that government needs to stop responding to the calls of big business and start tending to the people and encouraging their concern for the environment. Students in my focus groups assured me that we can not depend on consumers to willingly change their lifestyles and consumer decisions based on a concern for the environment. Primarily, people feel inconsequential in their environmental efforts and so continue to act without the environment in mind in the forefront. Yet, even where concerns exist, it does not usually translate into action. Based on this, we need to incorporate more government regulation into the current solution. It is time they step up. Government is in a position where they can make people listen. They need to start exercising this power in the environmental domain by moving it up on the agenda and communicating the importance of this issue. In this specific case of SUVs, if it were not

for government intervention, there would be little incentive for industry to make adjustments to SUV models that will decrease their emissions as the Tier 2 program mandates, passed by President Clinton this past December. By forcing industry to design and sell products that account for their effects on the environment, better products are on the market and government communicates the importance of the environment. While the environment has risen on the national agenda over the past few decades, it is an issue that needs treatment, and government has the muscle to position it as an urgent issue. The fragility of this issue necessitates careful handling; people need direction and guidance.

This study, a market as well as a consumer culture exploration, reveals that there is still room in the dominant mindset to write and edit the environmental consciousness necessary to rebuild and fortify our environment. This study of SUVs puts a mirror to Americans, and reveals a threatening relationship between the cultural mindset and the environment, but there is hope for it to be reworked. My respondents displayed a willingness to tend to and mend the environment, as well as a sense of guilt about their current decisions that adversely effect the environment. With strong, targeted educational efforts by the government, industry, and environmental groups, this willingness can find action. These actions may prompt people to go beyond the issue of cars and driver, to the larger issues of people and the environment.

APPENDIX A

Intercept Interview Survey

1. Buying a new vehicle is a big decision in one's life. I would like you to think back to when you were making the decision to buy your SUV. Tell me a bit about the decision process of buying this new vehicle, why you chose **this** particular vehicle over others, what important considerations you had in buying **this** vehicle.
4 wheel drive safety feature/rep. _____ large/space/roomy
warranty gas mileage _____ brand loyalty _____
power _____ tech capability _____ interior
CD player color _____ appearance/style
Outdoor capability passenger capacity _____ price range
2. Which one of the following best describes how you use your car?
__work vehicle (hauling etc.)
__personal vehicle (you commonly find it is just yourself in the car, use to transport yourself to work, errands etc.)
__off road/recreational vehicle
3. SUVs are equipped with many performance features these days. For example, All-terrain Anti-lock Break Systems, Hill Descent Control, and Electronic Traction Systems. Were there any specific performance features you looked for in buying your SUV?
4. I am going to read three vehicle features which can contribute to a person's decision in purchasing a vehicle. After I have read them, I'd like you to rank them in their importance to you from most important to least important, 1 being most important and 3 being least important. I will be reading two lists. Think in terms of when you were in the decision making process.
4wheeldrive____
Style appeal____
Price____

Now I am going to read another three features you may have considered. Please rank them from most important to least important.
Safety feature/reputation____
Size____
Gas mileage____
5. Do you recall making any tradeoffs between say safety and fuel economy, or efficiency and utility when buying your SUV?
6. Would you be more likely to describe your SUV as a __luxury vehicle or a __utility vehicle? (They do not have to choose)
7. On a scale from 1-5, 5 being most satisfied, rate your satisfaction with your SUV. ____
-Why?
8. Would you say your SUV is at its maximum passenger capacity, which is the number of people it is designed to carry, never, sometimes, frequently, or always?

APPENDIX A (continued)

9. How often would you say you use your four wheel drive, very often___, frequently___, sometimes___, or never___?
10. Throughout the year would you say you take your vehicle recreational “off-roading” very often__ sometimes__ or never__?
11. Please tell me if you strongly agree___, agree___, disagree ___, or strongly disagree ___ with the following statement. I feel a greater sense of security on the road driving an SUV.
Can you give me an example of a specific time where you felt protected by your SUV?
12. I am going to show you four different SUV advertisements. Can you tell me what each advertisement says to you? What message do you see being sent in each of these advertisements? -safety-luxury-sport/recreation-nature
-Which of these advertisements speaks to you the most? Least? Why?
13. The marked rise in popularity of SUVs over the past five years is indisputable. Why do you think they are so popular today?
14. Many advertisements show SUVs trekking off into the wilderness, carrying passengers to remote places in nature. Did these types of advertisements play a part in your decision to buy an SUV?
15. The issue of fuel economy has arisen a few times in this survey. It’s been proven that SUV’s use 33% more gasoline than passenger cars. Yet, they continue to be very popular.
Do you think most people were aware of their increased gas consumption?
Yes __ No__
Were you aware of this when you purchased your SUV? Yes__ No__
Does this matter to you? Yes__ No__
How? Why not?
16. There is an estimated 65 million SUVs on the roads today in the U.S. alone. Each of these vehicles consumes 33% more gasoline than a passenger car. Do you see a relationship here in terms of increased out-of-pocket personal cost___ or increased environmental impacts___?
17. Other recent studies have proven that the typical SUV emits 1/3 more gases that contribute to global warming than a regular passenger car due to its excessive fuel consumption. Would you have been willing to pay \$200 more to get an SUV that has reduced emissions and is more fuel efficient? Yes__ No__
The California Air Resources Board recently challenged the Environmental Protection Agency claiming that SUVs were unfairly subject to more relaxed emissions standards. These relaxed standards had been justified on the grounds that in the past SUV’s were primarily used as work vehicles for hauling heavy loads in agriculture and construction businesses. Now that SUVs are commonly used as passenger vehicles themselves, the California Air Resources Board is arguing that SUVs be subject to passenger vehicle emissions standards. The Board claims that this adjustment would eliminate over 1 million tons of smog forming pollution each year, while cutting global warming pollution by 187 million tons per year. Would you support the California Air Resources Board appeal for SUVs to be subject to the same emissions standards as passenger vehicles? Yes__ No__

APPENDIX A (continued)

18. I was wondering if you could express your feelings on the role of government in resolving environmental problems. (Do you think government regulations need to be relaxed, strengthened, or is there enough being done right now?)
19. Which one of the following statements best describes you?
 - I am very conscientious about my environmental behaviors.
 - I am somewhat conscientious about my environmental behaviors.
 - I am not very conscientious about my environmental behaviors.
 - I am not at all conscientious about my environmental behaviors.
20. Could you give me an example of an/some environmental behavior(s) that you practice?

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Protocol 2/16/00-2/17/00

- Hello, my name is Kristen. I want to thank you all for coming this evening. I have invited you here because there something in each of your lives which is of interest to me, the vehicles you drive, which will be the focus of my questions.
- As young adults and peers, I have brought you all together to have a free form discussion. I encourage everyone to express themselves and to be open and honest. I want to remind you that there are no right or wrong answers, just differing points of view.
- I will be presenting your viewpoints in the write up of my senior thesis as well as in my thesis presentation, but will not reveal your names.
- Our discussion will be videotaped/audiotaped in order for all comments to be captured and to spare me from having to write throughout the discussion.
- I anticipate that our discussion will last about an hour. Again I am interested to hear what each of you has to say. Please speak freely, but one at a time.
- Maybe now we could just go around the circle and introduce ourselves.

Questions

1. The day arrived and you turned 16. I am sure you all remember the day you got your licenses. Our lives haven't been the same since. You began to enjoy an entirely new sense of freedom. Many new doors were opened once you had a car to drive. I want you all to think back to the day the car became yours, when the keys were placed in your hands.
 - What was your reaction?
2. We all most likely had pictures in our heads of "our first cars". Did you have feelings specifically about the type of car you received? Were you pleased/dissatisfied, more than you'd hoped for/just what you wanted/less than you'd expected?
3. Did you always have a car on campus?
What are your main reasons for having a car on campus?
Where do you park your car? Has parking been a problem?
4. How often do you use your vehicle here out at school and for what types of things? (day-to-day, few times a week....errands, athletics, travel)
5. Are there any SUVs out on the market today that have caught your eye, that you wouldn't mind driving?
If the price was equal, how many of you would trade in for an SUV?

APPENDIX C (continued)

6. In 1998, almost half of new vehicles purchased were SUVs. There are X number of models Why do you think they are so popular?
7. Has anyone heard anything about SUVs in the media?
8. Do you think there is a typical SUV driver?
 - Or are there many?
 - Do specific SUVs have their typical drivers in terms of age/sex/interests?
9. In America, a person's vehicle is a means of self expression. The car in America is commonly used by individuals to define and differentiate themselves, to help form their identity. What kind of identities or personalities do you think are expressed through Sport Utility Vehicles?
10. Slides. Please take a few moments to glance at them and form some impressions. When done I would like for you to discuss what the different advertisements are trying to say....do you sense any underlying messages....who are they trying to appeal to, is there a type of person.....I would also like you to tell which one speaks/appeals to you the most.
11. Now we are going to watch a commercial from TV advertising
 1. Polar bear.....parallel to animal? Big strong powerful unpredictable.....
 2. Ford.....no boundaries slogan.....xtreme sports.....youth....adventure
Who? What types if interests, lifestyle?
 3. Mitsubishi.....emasculatation.....music.....what is being pitted against each other..masculinity/family vehicle.....multipurposeness
 4. Volvo/Jimmy.....safety.....their opposing opinions of SUVs.....can they handle?
Are they safe?.....
 5. Lexus.....getting in touch with nature.....a smooth, comfortable ride....what do we have to say about this couple
 6. Mercedes.....the new class if luxury SUVs.....BMW, Lexus.....it's a long way....a durable, endurant vehicle
12. Now here are some more facts about SUVs. I'd like you to listen and then tell me what you think of this information. On average SUVs consume 33% more gasoline than passenger cars. They also emit 1/3 more gases that contribute to global warming than a passenger car. Sales of SUVs have grown tenfold since 1980, with more than 2.8 million of these new SUVs hitting the roads in the U.S. in 1998. Should there be something done to curb the trend?
 - How many people were aware of this before I read it?
 - Do you think most SUV owners/drivers know?
 - How important do you think it is to their purchase decisions?
 - Should there be something done to curb the trend in light of the environmental consequences?

- How does it make you feel personally about driving an SUV?
13. I was wondering if you all would express your feelings on government's role in resolving environmental issues.
- Are they doing enough/not enough?
 - Criticisms/praise, support?
 - Any issues important to you they should pay more attention to/allocate more resources to? Issues less attention/resources to?
14. We've talked here about some things we do and decisions we make that are not good for our environment. Some of us have expressed that we have concerns for the environment. So how do we deal with this and other behaviors of ours that are not environmentally beneficial? How do we feel about it?
15. With everything that has been said does anyone want to make any closing comments?

Thank for coming this evening.....

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