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# Consumer Identity Work as Moral Protagonism: How Myth and Ideology Animate a Brand-Mediated Moral Conflict

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Consumer researchers have tended to equate consumer moralism with normative condemnations of mainstream consumer culture. Consequently, little research has investigated the multifaceted forms of identity work that consumers can undertake through more diverse ideological forms of consumer moralism. To redress this theoretical gap, we analyze the adversarial consumer narratives through which a brand-mediated moral conflict is enacted. We show that consumers' moralistic identity work is culturally framed by the myth of the moral protagonist and further illuminate how consumers use this mythic structure to transform their ideological beliefs into dramatic narratives of identity. Our resulting theoretical framework explicates identity-value-enhancing relationships among mythic structure, ideological meanings, and marketplace resources that have not been recognized by prior studies of consumer identity work.

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Moralism about consumption is a social phenomenon that cries out for more study. We need to know more about who makes moral arguments, how these arguments are deployed, what kinds of effects they have on others. (Wilk 2001, 250)

**M**oralism about consumption is commonly discussed as a cultural viewpoint epitomized by the writings of Galbraith (1958), Schor (2000), Veblen (1899/1927), and numerous books on "affluenza" (de Graaf, Wann, and Naylor 2002;

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Hamilton and Denniss 2006; James 2007). In this genre of commentaries and analyses, social theorists portray certain forms of consumption as looming threats to the civic and communal integrity of society, personal well-being, and, most recently, the ecosystem (Hilton 2004). While the specific consumption practices being targeted vary across sociohistoric settings, these moral critiques almost invariably invoke charges of wastefulness, personal irresponsibility, and selfish disregard for the collective good, as well as nostalgic laments that traditional bedrock values have been displaced by the superficial or inauthentic pleasures promoted by the commercial marketplace (Cross 2000). Legions of journalists, political and religious leaders, artists, educators, social activists, and public policy makers have also developed and diffused variations on this moral critique of consumption, making it part and parcel of contemporary culture (see Cohen, Comrov, and Hoffner 2005; Holt 2000; Horowitz 1984, 2004; and Schor 2007). Following Cross (2000), we refer to this cultural viewpoint as the jeremiad against consumerism.

Owing to its cultural prominence, the jeremiad against consumerism is now treated as being nearly synonymous with moralism about consumption. For example, Wilk (2001, 254) concludes that moralism about consumption is a means by which people confront basic "problems of distributive justice, balancing the goals and desires of people, the ownership and control of objects and resources, and the problem that consumption can destroy or deplete common resources." In a similar fashion, Hilton (2004, 118) argues that contemporary

moralism about consumption has emerged from “a 19th-century worldview [which] saw certain forms of consumption as the abusive, unproductive and irrational consumption of goods which contravened the control of the liberal self” and that, in the twentieth century, evolved into a discourse favored “by a cross-section of cultural and intellectual elites condemning the cheap luxuries of the mass market, the perceived standardization of which was held to limit the ability of consumers to exercise discrimination, judgment, taste and individuality in their purchasing decisions.”

However, once we began to explore how moralism about consumption unfolded in specific social settings, we discovered that consumers’ moralistic interpretations, attributions, and distinctions manifested a multifaceted spectrum of cultural meanings and forms of identity work that extended well beyond the conceptual boundaries of this conventional view. To address this conceptual oversight, we have developed a broadened theoretical analysis that illuminates an underlying mythic dimension of consumers’ moralistic identity work. We show how this mythic structure enables consumers to dramatically enact their ideological beliefs in ways that confer a particular form of identity value to marketplace resources. These underlying dimensions of consumers’ moralistic work have been elided by the diverse mix of theoretical goals and contextual details from which a more general culturally based understanding of consumer identity projects has been culled (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

To set the theoretical stage for our analysis, let us first consider the manner in which relationships between moralism about consumption and consumption practices have been broached by prior consumer research. In most of these studies, consumers’ moralistic identity work is treated as an untheorized background factor, with the primary analytic focus placed on other theoretical issues, such as consumer fantasy enactments (Belk and Costa 1998), consumer-brand relationships (Holt 2002; Muñiz and Schau 2005; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006), service relationships (Arnould and Price 1993), consumer resistance (Kozinets 2002; Sandlin and Callahan 2009), or the social construction of a gift economy (Giesler 2006; Kozinets 2002). If read for their latent moralistic implications, these studies provide empirical evidence that consumers can readily invert the jeremiad against consumerism to exalt specific consumption practices, brands, lifestyle interests, and alternative systems of exchange on the grounds that they possess redeeming virtues lacking in mainstream commercialism (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Giesler 2008; Holt 2002; Michieletti and Stolle 2007; Muñiz and Schau 2005; O’Guinn and Muñiz 2005; Thompson et al. 2006; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007).

Through this interpretive move, consumers also draw identity-enhancing distinctions to mainstream consumers, who are frequently stereotyped as self-centered materialists and/or mesmerized dupes of the corporate system (see Carducci 2006; Holt 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; and Sandlin and Callahan 2009). Some specific examples of this form of

distinction making include local coffee shop aficionados who disparage Starbucks clientele as status conscious, corporate clones (Thompson and Arsel 2004); Burning Man festival participants who decry mainstream consumers for being passive followers of advertising and mass media commercial hype (Kozinets 2002); and downshifting consumers who see themselves as leading more socially responsible and spiritually rewarding lifestyles than those who conform to mainstream consumerist norms (Nelson, Rademacher, and Paek 2007).

The prevalence of consumers’ moralistic identity work becomes even more apparent when we consider forms of consumer moralism that are not reproofs of mainstream consumer culture. Research on consumption/brand communities reveals that community members draw a myriad of moralistic distinctions, such as portraying supporters of competing brands as less enlightened, more conformist, more status conscious, and in various ways morally reprobate in the sense of deviating from values and norms that are deemed to be sacrosanct (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005; O’Guinn and Muñiz 2005). Similar patterns can also be seen in research that falls outside the conventional consumer research literature. Edensor and Richards (2007), for example, detail the conflicts between skiers and snowboarders, and, while not attending to moralistic dimensions, their data are replete with examples of moralistic identity work. They note that skiers denounce snowboarders as subversives who lack civility and defile the pristine nature of the slopes; in contrast, snowboarders disparage skiers as conformists and elitists and in turn lionize their own flamboyant actions as enlivening the ideals of personal freedom and individual expression.

These contextually varied manifestations also show that consumers’ moralistic identity work can serve a multitude of identity goals, such as constructing and maintaining class-based hierarchies of taste, as in the case of higher cultural capital consumers (Arnould 2007; Holt 2000; Twitchell 2000); defining group boundaries and enhancing group commitment, as in the case of oppositional brand loyalty (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001); and protecting valued ideals from the corruptive influences of trend followers and faddists, as in the case of intra-consumption community distinctions between hardcore members and poseurs (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Yet, these different consumption-mediated identity goals and modes of distinction all invoke a moralistic dichotomy between those who are proponents of a moral order and those who would defile or undermine these galvanizing normative values and ideals.

Such recurrent and contextually robust narrative patterns are highly indicative of underlying cultural or mythic structures that function as a collectively shared interpretive resource that individuals can use to understand their social worlds (Holt 2004; Levy 1981; Shore 1996; Thompson 1997). We propose that this particular pattern of consumers’ moralistic identity work is structured by a variation of the classical morality play myth in which a moral protagonist is called upon to defend sacrosanct virtues and ideals from the transgressive actions of an immoral adversary. By adapt-

ing this myth of the moral protagonist to their own life circumstances, consumers can ascribe morally redemptive meanings to their consumer identities through implicit (and sometimes explicit) confrontations with other consumer groups that they ideologically construe as deviating from an inviolate normative order. From this theoretical standpoint, the jeremiad against consumerism—which invokes a normative tension between self-restraint and hedonic excess—provides commonplace ideological content for fleshing out the morality play's archetypal roles, particularly in consumer societies that have been strongly influenced by the Protestant legacy. However, the moral protagonist myth is not the exclusive province of consumers who are incorporating the jeremiad against consumerism into their identity projects.

Our analysis concerns the moralistic identity work that consumers undertake through the Hummer, a vehicle which is frequently condemned for exemplifying the worst excesses of American consumer culture (Schulz 2006). The brand-mediated moral conflicts between Hummer adversaries and Hummer owners quite literally play out in the streets as well as on the Internet. Hummer owners routinely tell stories about their vehicles being vandalized, having invective-laden "love notes" left on their windshields, and being assailed by rude gestures and other expressions of hostility. They also lament how their critics and attackers are betraying a decidedly un-American attitude and proudly recount how they gain the upper hand in these confrontations by asserting the core values upon which the nation has been founded and prospered.

As we will show, these Hummer-mediated brand conflicts manifest the morality play myth latent to the previously discussed consumption community studies. However, the Hummer is also embedded in a potent system of ideological meanings, perhaps contributing to a cult brand effect among its more devoted owners (see Atkin 2004). Accordingly, the conflicts between Hummer owners and critics also exhibit a clearly discernible and documentable ideological subtext. This circumstance makes the Hummer an ideal case for explicating the ways in which ideological meanings are inflected through mythic forms and then used by consumers to undertake moralistic identity work through consumption practices.

## MORAL PROTAGONISM AS MYTHIC NARRATIVE

Morality plays have a long and hallowed history in Western culture, providing engaging and captivating demonstrations of abstract moral belief systems in terms that connect with the everyday concerns and interests of a given social group (Pineas 1962). As Godshalk (1974, 62) elaborates, morality plays typically demonstrate that "ends are governed by means. If the Morality figure [protagonist] wishes to reach ultimate 'good,' he must achieve that end by means of the 'good' life. Good deeds always yield good ends." In its classic, medieval form, morality plays featured a protagonist, who allegorically represented an everyman, confronting a choice between the

godly (and typically ascetic) life or a life of sin and avarice. In resisting temptation and pursuing the virtuous life, the protagonist attains higher rewards such as divine grace and spiritual regeneration, thereby affirming to its audience "the permanent truth of Christianity as a theology, as a theory of history, and an explanation of the human condition" (Potter 1975, 8). In very blunt terms, these morality plays retold the story of Adam and Eve as though the everyman Adam had resisted the proverbial apple.

As the morality play carried on as a dramatic tradition, it evolved in response to shifting sociohistoric conditions while retaining its quintessential plotline: a polemical struggle between forces of moral virtue and sinfulness (Pineas 1962). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the morality play provided a template for more secular commentaries on societal conditions by writers, artists, and journalists (Potter 1975). In keeping with modernist trajectories, these later articulations of the morality play became more individualized and placed greater emphasis on the heroic qualities of the moral protagonist rather than a specific moral canon that would provide salvation and redemption. In this modernist form, moral protagonists displayed their virtue by defending the moral system rather than simply adhering to its virtuous principles. Similarly, the proclaimed forces of evil and sin were rescripted as a potent threat to the civilized and morally righteous society rather than as temptations that could lead humanity down the path to perdition (Slotkin 1973). In these modern mythic tales, the moral protagonist eventually triumphs over his/her dissolute foe, either through conversion or through some form of conquest, thereby validating the moral superiority of the normative ideals being defended. In this spirit, Barthes (1972, 18) famously posited that the professional wrestling match, in which an exaggeratedly heroic protagonist prevails over a supremely villainous antagonist, "is above all meant to portray a purely moral concept: that of justice" (cf. Jenkins 2006).

Building on Barthes, Wagner-Pacifici (1986) argues that this mythic structure provides an archetypal cultural template that societies can use to represent and understand complex cultural occurrences and sociopolitical crises. Morality plays help individuals to assuage uncertainties, doubts, and anxieties precipitated by everyday experiences of moral ambiguities. Social actions often fall into normative gray areas, marked by contextual nuances and mitigating circumstances, which do not easily map onto such clear-cut normative distinctions. In contrast, modern morality plays cast situations in terms of clear and unambiguous contrasts and outcomes, thereby allowing individuals to experience an idealized moral universe and reaffirm their faith in the guiding normative system (Barthes 1972).

The myth of the moral protagonist, however, underdetermines how a given moral conflict is understood and enacted. A mythic framework in and of itself cannot provide ideological guidance into what social actions and social types will be placed into the general categories of the good and the evil or the virtuous and the sinful, nor can it specify the terms of the moral conflict or the strategies for defending

the moral order from these threats. The formulation of any given cultural morality play therefore presents a blending of mythic structure and the ideological meanings that provide the cultural content for specifying its respective polemical tensions and character types.

## RESEARCH PROCEDURES

We began this study by investigating anti-Hummer sentiments expressed on well-known backlash Web sites, such as fuh2.com. We realized that these Hummer condemnations reproduced many of the defining themes and motifs that have historically characterized the aforementioned jeremiad against consumerism and most particularly its demonization of conspicuous consumption as a sphere of profligate waste that posed immanent threats to the common good. At this point, we began attending more closely to the flame wars that routinely erupted on anti-Hummer Web sites. In these situations, self-proclaimed Hummer owners would assail the site, and its posters, for being un-American, terrorist sympathizers, tree-hugging socialists, and a host of other epithets, which challenged Hummer critics' commitment to true American values. Next, we turned our attention to Hummer owner Web sites. We also saw a parallel set of narratives being expressed by Hummer enthusiasts, often without direct provocation, that condemned drivers of the hybrid Toyota Prius, global warming activists, and Al Gore's (2006) iconic documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* through a similar un-American lexicon.

These adversarial Internet exchanges provided an impetus for more closely scrutinizing the ideological meanings being enacted and contested through Hummer ownership. Toward this end, the first author conducted in-depth interviews with 20 U.S.-born-and-raised Hummer owners living in San Diego,

San Francisco, and Los Angeles (see table 1). The interviewer, a native European, presented himself to participants as someone who had limited knowledge of American consumer culture and who was curious about what made the Hummer so popular in the United States. These Hummer owners hailed from a range of middle-class backgrounds, including a mid-western farmer, a military components engineer, and a media communications professional working in Hollywood. With the exception of four telephone conversations, interviews were variously conducted at participants' homes, Hummer dealerships, and in rural settings during off-road excursions.

The interviews ranged in length from 1.5 to 4 hours and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each interview began with general questions about the informant's background, interests, and life goals and then proceeded with inviting the informant's narratives related to the Hummer brand, from first impressions to reception of advertisements, consumption practices, brand community relationships, and encounters with outsiders. Questions concerning the participant's political beliefs and values were raised toward the end of each encounter. The interviews were supplemented with photographs, videos, and field notes from several Hummer expeditions and extended with follow-up e-mail conversations concerning current developments in the Hummer brand discourse.

In making sense of the interview data, we embarked upon an iterative, part-to-whole process of hermeneutic analysis (Thompson 1997). Initially, all three researchers separately analyzed the entire set of transcripts and developed provisional understandings of emergent thematic commonalities. As we then continued to iterate through our data in a more collective manner, we became sensitized to the morality play framing that Hummer owners placed on their antagonistic encounters and their respective roles in these interactions. The

TABLE 1

PROFILES OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Ownership and usage
Austin	42	Off-road adventures manager	H1, H2, H3, on-/off-road
Brad	42	Hummer sales manager	H1, H2, H3, on-/off-road
Cindy	32	Fashion model	H2, on-road
Daniel	46	Biologist, stay-at-home dad	H2, on-/off-road
Frederic	48	Hummer dealer	H1, H2, H3, on-/off-road
Jamie	36	Advertising creative	H3, on-road
Justin	50	Entrepreneur	H2, on-road
Jordan	47	Hummer dealer	H2, H3, on-road
Jose	54	County sheriff	H3, on-/off-road
Julia	57	Retired, grandmother	H2, on-/off-road
Karen	38	Shop owner	H2, on-road
Kenneth	36	Insurance broker	H3, on-road
Marcel	45	Hollywood lawyer	H2, on-road
Martin	51	Recycling business owner	H1, on-/off-road, HOPE
Peter	45	Construction business owner	H2, on-road
Robert	59	Engineer	H1, on-/off-road, HOPE
Steven	59	Actor and horse breeder	H2, on-/off-road
Susan	54	Farmer	H1, on-/off-road, HOPE
Tandy	38	Film studio marketing manager	H3, on-road
Thomas	48	Off-road expert, Hummer dealer	H1, H2, H3, on-/off-road

structural features of the morality play, however, only partially illuminated the dynamics at work in these confrontations. We also needed to unpack the ideological meanings through which Hummer owners interpreted their cultural critics as moral foes, formulated their own moralistic counterarguments, and reconstrued their condemned actions as virtuous ones. In this particular case, the moralizing narratives used by Hummer critics and Hummer enthusiasts drew from (and echoed) a broader ideological system that has been prominently expressed in public representations of the United States' national identity and their corresponding duties of citizenship, known as American exceptionalism (see Noble 2002). This ideological system provides the meanings and rhetorical resources that Hummer owners use to cast themselves in the role of heroic protagonists who are standing up to their critics' un-American (and morally suspect) activities. American exceptionalism is a historically constituted system of meanings that have significantly shaped the United States' national identity: that is, the collectively shared meanings and ideals that Americans invoke when they think of themselves as rightful citizens of the nation and feel a sense of common cause (and historical ties) with other Americans (Hughes 2004; Lipset 1997).

Through our iterative process of hermeneutical interpretation, we identified two discourses of the broader ideology of American exceptionalism that were particularly germane to the moralistic identity work undertaken by Hummer owners: the City upon a Hill/Captivity and the boundless frontier/rugged individualist. (For more extensive reviews of American exceptionalism's core tenets and historical evolution, see Bercovitch 1978; Greene 1993; Hughes 2004; Madsen 1998; and Wrobel 1993.) In the following sections, we provide some background on how the Hummer rose to iconic cultural status (Holt 2004) and became a magnet for both American exceptionalist idealizations and jeremiad-oriented condemnations. After this overview, we then show how Hummer owners use the previously noted American exceptionalist discourses to animate the morality play mediated by their morally contested vehicles. A more encompassing compendium of evidence for the themes that we illustrate in the following analysis can be found in an appendix of the online version of this article.

## INSCRIBING THE HUMMER IN A NATIONALISTIC MORALITY PLAY

### A Commercial Icon Is Born and a Jeremiad Is Launched

The emergence of the Hummer as an iconic cultural brand can be traced to media portrayals of Operation Desert Storm (c. 1990–91; Padgett 2004). This unexpectedly quick and lopsided military victory sparked an intense, if short-lived, period of patriotic fervor and renewed faith in the tenets of American exceptionalism (McCrisken 2004). The Gulf War produced a number of media stars, such as Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell, but none shone more brightly than the emblematic vehicle that carried American troops to victory: the high mo-

bility multipurpose wheeled vehicle (known as HMMWV or HUMVEE; Packer 2007). As the Hummer brand myth goes, the transformation of the HUMVEE into the Hummer was instigated by action hero Arnold Schwarzenegger, who lobbied the manufacturer AM General to produce a model for civilian use (Dillman 2007; Padgett 2004).

In 2002, General Motors, which had purchased the rights to the brand from AM General, introduced the Hummer H2 as a sport utility vehicle that appealed to a wider swath of affluent suburbanites or less affluent consumers willing to take on a requisite level of debt. Whereas the original military-type H1 was priced at \$100,000+ and sold only about 12,000 units during its 14-year run, the H2 had a base price of \$50,000 and offered more consumer amenities. Although the H2 was built on a Chevrolet Tahoe platform, it maintained the aggressive militaristic styling of the H1, which, of course, bore a strong family resemblance to the HUMVEE. The Hummer H2 became one of the most successful niche products in GM history, with first-year sales unexpectedly totaling 35,500 units.

The same factors that contributed to the Hummer's success—audacious styling, imposing size, associations with American military might, and its status symbol trappings—have also made it a very tempting target for those who wish to protest the presumed societal and ecological ills foisted by American-styled consumerism (Foster 2007). Activist groups such as the Earth Liberation Front and Code Pink have specifically called for violent and nonviolent protests against these vehicles. More extreme protests have taken the form of eco-vandalism targeting Hummer dealerships as well as privately owned vehicles. In the latter category, a tire-slashing, window-smashing attack on a Hummer parked in front of the owner's home (located in a liberal-leaning and affluent Washington, DC, neighborhood) garnered national media attention (Klein 2007) and subsequently inspired a large support rally among Hummer owners and even an FBI eco-terrorist investigation (de Vise 2007).

Moral condemnations of the Hummer find frequent and often colorful expression on anti-Hummer Web sites. Posters to these sites castigate Hummer owners for wastefully consuming scarce petroleum resources; for producing excessive carbon emissions that worsen the problems of climate change; for endangering other drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians with these oversized vehicles; and, in a more radical vein, for leading the nation into military conflicts over oil resources. As Hummer owners themselves often retort, these anti-Hummer invectives could be directed at other large SUVs and various other facets of resource-intensive American lifestyles. However, the Hummer brand is a particularly resonant lightning rod. Echoing de Tocqueville's (1835/1954) warnings about the dangers of unbridled rugged individualism, moral injunctions against the Hummer portray its owners as exhibiting a reckless degree of selfishness and an unconscionable level of social irresponsibility:

Maybe you don't know the impact of your actions, or even worse, you don't care. Why the hell do you think you deserve to drive some fucking oversized overpriced piece of shit and

pollute and increase the chance of death to pedestrians and other drivers? My family and friends are getting killed so you can save a little money on fuel and drive a big car. Fuck you and your ugly impractical “makes you feel like somebody” H2. (MC Michael Bukake, fuh2.com, 2004)

Such invectives reproduce the same binaries that structure the jeremiad against consumerism, such as moral restraint versus ostentatious consumption and commitment to the collective good versus selfishness. For our purposes, the relevant point about the jeremiad against the Hummer is that it presents an opportunity for Hummer owners to assert their affirmative vision of the frontier spirit and to claim the moralistic mantle of being true Americans who are forward looking, freedom loving, and high achieving:

Such language!?! You wouldn't want to fuck my H2, too much metal and it would really hurt ya. As for your opinions on Hummer ownership!?! Stupid ignorance coming from ignorant backwoods thinking. I paid my dues. I was in the Army for 6 years and nobody handed me a damn thing. My parents were poor and I grew up and went to school in the ghetto and I was intelligent enough to get myself out of it. I pursued an education after the Army, became an LA County Sheriff in the interim, got my degree and started a successful contracting business. I don't have shit to prove to anybody. I bought my H2 because I wanted the damned thing. You are probably one of those communist pinko idiots (probably voted for Kerry too) that like to run around burning SUVs and saving fishys from bad fisherman with PETA. Grow up and join us Americans that believe in our freedom, love our country, and don't hang around with Al Qaeda types idolizing Osama and flying Confederate rags hoping slavery will come back someday. Stop trying to oppress others that don't share your beliefs, color, and religion. You will never get anywhere in this good country with HATE!!! Get over it!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (RudeDogg, DodgeTruckWorld, 2005)

You have a lot of time and energy to expend on intolerance and hatred toward vehicles. Actually, I suspect it is not hatred of the H2, but of H2 owners that really burns you. I want to continue living in an America where we all have the liberty to drive the biggest, ugliest gas-burning monsters that will fit on the roads. And you may drive your Vespa or Mini Cooper or ride a damn horse to work for all I care. Open your minds and hearts and live and let live. If you are frightened by the H2, I suggest you take the bus. (Doug, fuh2.com, 2004)

In these forum excerpts, Hummer owners RudeDogg (whom we also interviewed via the Web) and Doug raise several key characterizing features of the American frontier in their passionate defenses of the Hummer brand. Both reframe the debate as one between those who stand for personal liberty and those who would destroy personal liberty. For Hummer owners, this later conceptual category is an exceedingly broad one that encompasses any individual or group whom they see as being

hostile to their rugged individual ideals—communists, PETA members, terrorists, and liberals (who are presumed to support regulatory constraints of all types over personal freedom). Most pointedly, RudeDogg portrays himself as a quintessential freedom-loving and self-sufficient American who contributed to the nation in multiple ways and therefore has paid the necessary dues to enjoy the full benefits of the American way of life, which he sees as being most essentially defined by the ideal of personal liberty. From RudeDogg's ideological standpoint, he has an irreproachable and inviolate right to own an H2 that needs no further justification than his desire for the vehicle and his financial wherewithal to make the purchase.

When stepping outside the common-sense viewpoint of American culture, the idea that criticizing a gas-guzzling vehicle is so readily construed as an un-American, unpatriotic, freedom-hating sentiment should seem curious. However, the moral condemnations directed at the Hummer invoke meanings that Hummer owners can construe as being antithetical to two foundational discourses of American exceptionalism.

### The City upon a Hill/Captivity Discourse

The seventeenth-century English settlers sowed the mythic seeds for the ideology of American exceptionalism. These pioneers saw themselves as fulfilling a covenant with God to create a purified religious community free from the corruptions of the imperfectly reformed English Church (Hughes 2004; Madsen 1998). The colonial governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop, sermonizing from the deck of the Puritans' flagship *Arabella* heading westward in spring 1630, gave expression to a metaphoric image that would become central to the ideology of American exceptionalism—the City upon a Hill (Gunn 1994). Commenting on the enduring cultural influence of this Puritan image, Boorstin (1958, 3–4) writes: “No one writing after the fact, three hundred years later, could better have expressed the American sense of destiny. . . . The Puritan beacon for misguided mankind was to be neither a book nor a theory. It was to be the community itself. America had something to teach all men: not by precept but by example, not by what it said but what it did. The slightly rude question of ‘what of it?’ was thus, from the earliest years, connected with belief in American destiny.”

As Davis and Lynn-Jones (1987) discuss, celebrations of America's unique virtues and its superiority to England's political and religious institutions were an important facet of the proto-national discourse, long preceding the Declaration of Independence and the subsequent emergence of the United States as a world power. Echoing the Calvinist spirit of the early colonial settlers, a sense of predestination became woven into the fabric of the United States' national identity (Hughes 2004). The nation's founding fathers melded this religious utopianism with secular, but no less utopian, political ideals drawn from Lockean liberalism (Greene 1993). They envisioned the American colonies as possessing the divine appointment to perfect a new form of government that would honor and defend the natural (i.e., God-given) rights of liberty and democratic self-determination. As the United States looked to expand its geo-



graphic boundaries and sphere of geopolitical influence, this City upon a Hill narrative provided a key cultural rationale for the expansionist doctrine of manifest destiny, which, in the words of Weinberg (1963, 1–2), represents “a dogma of supreme self-assurance and ambition—that America’s incorporation of all adjacent lands was the virtually inevitable fulfillment of a moral mission delegated to the nation by Providence itself.”

As Slotkin (1973) discusses, the City upon a Hill discourse, as a narrative of national identity, has also helped to spark periodic fears that heretical others might seek to destroy the nation and the exceptionalist values it represents. In making this argument, Slotkin focused on a storytelling genre, which proliferated in oral and written form during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which he termed the “captivity narrative.” In these stories, pioneer settlers, and most particularly white women, would be placed under siege by “savages” (i.e., indigenous Americans) and subjected to threats of physical harm and moral threats of sexual temptation before being rescued in most cases by a quite literal Christian cavalry. As Schaffer (1995, 50) elaborates, “captivity narratives, when read through the structuring discourses of ‘Nation,’ pit civilization against the wilderness, white against dark-skinned people, colonizer against the colonized, and Man against his physical, psychic, and symbolic others, although the meanings of these terms shift considerably over time. Always, God is on ‘our’ side.”

This captivity narrative has been adapted across a wide range of American popular literature and cinema with different symbolic others standing in the heretical role originally ascribed to indigenous Americans (Mortimer 2000). In the sociopolitical sphere, discourses expressing captivity narrative rationales have been used to drive a wide variety of moral panics about symbolic others who threaten the nation’s strength and integrity, such as the Eugenicist movement of the 1920s, which lobbied for strict controls on Eastern European immigration, to McCarthy era efforts to purge the nation from communist infiltrators, to the 1980s’ backlash against welfare mothers, who were vilified as promiscuous, social leaches (see Glassner 2000).

Shifting from cultural representations to consumers’ moralistic identity work, the City upon a Hill/Captivity discourse has a clear structural compatibility with the myth of the moral protagonist. As inflected through this mythic structure, consumers can interpret selected consumption practices and actions as expressions of the nation’s City upon a Hill virtues. The experiential twist is that the moral protagonist myth enables consumers to also play the role of the defender of the City upon a Hill when placed under some semblance of besiegement by critical foes, who represent the threatening other. Membership in the Hummer brand community greatly facilitates this interpretive turn by projecting this discourse of national identity onto a controversial and contested consumption practice undertaken by a comparatively small number of Hummer owners.

## Inflections and Extensions in the Hummer-Mediated Morality Play

Devoted Hummer owners most directly interpret the moral outrage directed toward their vehicles as ad hominem attacks that betray an unpatriotic disdain for the ideals and values that made America great. Through their antagonisms, the anti-Hummer community provides a necessary ideological foil and, indeed, an audience for Hummer owners to enact City upon a Hill meanings through defense of their iconic vehicles. The following comments from Susan’s interview illustrate some of the ideological turns that Hummer owners use to reframe Hummer ownership as a patriotic act that reflects the nation’s most virtuous traits:

*Susan:* Many of the environmentalists that preach at me for driving a Hummer are folks that are from the upper income levels that have a lot more money than they have time and good sense. And so they are, “Oh well, let’s save the environment here. Let’s write Al Gore a check for \$1,000. Now I’ve done my job saving my environment and will continue to live in NYC and drive a car and use a lot of electricity and I’m not going to change my lifestyle but I am going to send Al Gore money so that he can do it.” You know, a lot of our “environmentalists” are like that. And a lot of environmentalists come from our college campuses or they are college professors.

*Interviewer:* Would these environmentalists and college professors consider themselves patriots for doing this?

*Susan:* Of course they do, from their perspective. I would label them misguided in many ways, but that’s what this country is all about. It’s hard to come up with a one-paragraph explanation of what this country is. I think 9/11 showed us more than any other time. It brought the country together I would say.

*Interviewer:* In what respect?

*Susan:* The vulnerability. When it happens on your doorstep, you unite and say “wait a minute,” you know, “not here.” We want to preserve what we have. All of a sudden they saw themselves in danger of losing what we try to maintain here. Even on the West Coast because these were the next cities that were going to be hit. We felt the same way and many of us had friends or relatives there or had visited there. “Oh my god, this could have happened while we were there.” Or many were traveling by plane, because those of us on the West Coast travel a lot, much more than on the East Coast. All of a sudden people saw that they had to get involved. They couldn’t just take care of their family. They had to be more involved in their community. They had to be more involved in their state and they had to be more involved as a part of their nation. I saw this happening with many, many people. All of a sudden they were patriotic. All of a sudden we were standing as one “I,” an individual. I’m not saying everyone, but it was a renewed ideal. People remembered why we were here and why we were a nation. We had to look to our strengths again as a united people.

Whereas critics of the Hummer often assume that its owners are seeking security in a literal fashion (e.g., this big, tank-like vehicle makes me feel safe), Susan, like many of the Hummer enthusiasts we interviewed, employs strength in a far different, Jeffersonian sense: the Hummer reflects the strength of a people united by the values of American exceptionalism. In this framing, prototypic Hummer critics (environmentalists and intellectual elitists) are portrayed as being hypocritical and as subtly undermining the unity that enables the nation to stand strong against external threats. Echoing the besiegement motif, Susan interprets the 9/11 attack as sending a message that a presumed majority of true Americans received—we are a vulnerable nation and need to stand united—but that the critics of the Hummer missed because of their misguided zeal.

In their adaptation of the moral protagonist myth, our Hummer owners assume the role of being hard-working Americans who are being unjustly attacked by those who are antagonistic to the nation's shining virtues. Hummer owners' sense of being under siege is reinforced by news reports on Hummer vandalism (which members of pro-Hummer Web sites track and make readily available to others in their community) and, most directly, intermittent personal experiences of antagonism from non-Hummer owners:

I was at the mall the other day and when I came back to my H2, there was a note attached to my windshield with the following remark: "Ask yourself . . . what am I doing to save the environment?" At first I was a little upset because there was a large suburban [truck] parked right next to me and it didn't have a "love note" attached to it. I thought to myself, I bet this guy was riding a bicycle, and then I turned over the note and found that it was written on an Exxon receipt. Okay just because I am getting 10 mpg doesn't mean I am killing the world and all its available resources. Heck I drill oil and gas wells for a living! Don't people have better things to do than to drive around and put notes on peoples' windshields? How pathetic! (kknwitz, h2fanatic.com, 2004)

This posting from an exasperated H2 owner casts his clandestine adversary as being pathetic and cowardly while portraying himself as a rugged individualist who is directly combating America's energy shortages by drilling oil and gas for a living. This proclamation of being part of the solution rhetorically justifies his H2's admittedly substandard gas mileage, but it also presupposes a boundless frontier (i.e., if we use more gas, we simply need to drill for more oil), which, in turn, rhetorically circumvents Hummer critics' missives about rapidly exhausting resources. For Hummer owners, their (ideologically framed) experiences of besiegement provide a powerful pretext for interpreting the act of driving their vehicles, and defending their right to do so against anti-Hummer forces, as an act of moral protagonism that holds the line against threats to the nation's City upon a Hill ideals.

These Web-mediated confrontations between Hummer owners and anti-Hummer crusaders more often than not take the form of *de facto* serial monologues as posters righteously inveigh against one another. In the following vignette, a

Hummer owner describes a fleeting social encounter with a disapproving Saab driver at a stoplight. This reflection provides some insights into how these contentious exchanges enable Hummer owners to experience both besiegement and regenerative triumph:

My H2 turns 1 year old next week, and while most 75% of the comments have been favorable—and yes, the other H2 owners around here in Chicago all wave—there have been that 25% that flip me off. When it first happened, I couldn't figure out what was going on. Then, after the third or fourth, I had to know. So, when the Saab driver flipped me off, I pulled up next to him at the next stop light and asked, "what's the problem?" He stated that it was because of me we were at war in Iraq. I chuckled at him and stated that I was happy for him that he didn't live in Iraq, or in another country that if he spoke against the government he would be held accountable for those words. And that living in such a country allowed me the ability to choose what vehicle I drove. I then pointed out to him that by me purchasing my truck, I kept two people working in the United States and that while his Saab may be a Cadillac product, he kept two people working in Sweden. The light then changed, and I drove away. (Andypilot, h2fanatic.com, 2003)

Andypilot's story conveys a clear sense that he trumped his ideological opponent in this impromptu confrontation, thereby demonstrating the moral righteousness of his American exceptionalist beliefs. However, the denouement in which he drives off in vainglorious victory only tells part of his moral protagonist story. Again invoking a besiegement motif, Andypilot depicts himself as an unsuspecting victim who is forced to defend himself from these egregious acts of hostility and disrespect. Andypilot reframes these anti-Hummer indictments in American exceptionalist terms. His Saab-driving critic has the right to freely express his displeasure only because the United States is a nation governed by the very values represented by his Hummer. In this narrative frame, Andypilot's closing economic rationale can be read as yet another way of asserting his status as a bona fide American patriot: whereas he creates jobs for fellow Americans, his bird-flipping adversary supports European workers and hence is indirectly undermining the well-being of the nation.

Echoing the *laissez-faire* suspicion of regulatory initiatives, Hummer enthusiasts also express worries that meddling government agencies might take the side of anti-Hummer crusaders and ban the vehicle from the commercial marketplace: a doomsday narrative that accentuates feelings of besiegement and buttresses the mythological linkage between the defense of sacrosanct values and the act of driving a Hummer:

*Interviewer:* Did you ever see someone flip off an H1?

*Thomas:* Absolutely! Absolutely! Honestly I have had probably, in the last few years, I've probably had more people that drive up and start yelling at me while I am driving. I will be stopped in traffic, and they will start yelling at me, calling it a gas hog or whatever. And it is their misconceptions of what the car is. They don't understand that the black

coming out of the exhaust is carbon and it's nothing different than when you burn toast and you scrape off your toast. It is carbon, it is the same thing.

*Interviewer:* What cars did they drive?

*Thomas:* A lot of the time they drive those little [Toyota] Priuses. Yeah, they'll drive those little things. Here is the flip side to that stuff. Here is what people don't understand. When you buy an electric car your batteries that you run in that car, that battery can't be disposed of in a manner, like you could just burn your fuel. You can't even total that car because that battery is hazardous material. And when you pull that thing out it takes 100 years to decompose a battery the correct way. So you are doing more long-term damage to the environment even though it is not in the air, it is not in the ozone, but it is in the ground. It is where people are going to have to live for the next 100 years. It is battery issues. It's like the computers and all that stuff out there. I just find that hypocritical that people feel as negatively as they do against an automobile. I could understand if it was not safe. Back in the '60s Ralph Nader crucified the Corvair because it flipped over very easily when you turned corners. He single-handedly killed that car. Same with the Pinto from Ford, because when they got rear-ended they blew up. They stopped building the car, because they killed it with that reputation. I'd hate to see a car get killed because of the reputation, because of the opinions of a few environmentalists that don't understand.

Thomas's narrative also highlights that the Prius (which on many pro-Hummer Web sites is sardonically rechristened as the Pious) has become the Hummer's quintessential mythological foil. Online message boards provide a major forum (along with the street) where these opposing camps collide and passionately argue the virtues or vices of these politicized automotive icons. In these rhetorical battles, Hummer enthusiasts frequently make reference to a controversial study that claimed that hybrid automobiles carry higher environmental costs than the Hummer when calculated across the vehicles' production to final disposal lifecycles (CNW Marketing 2007). While this analysis has been vehemently disputed in environmental circles (Gleick 2007), its overall conclusion has become a mantra among Hummer enthusiasts. By purportedly discrediting environmental arguments for driving a Prius, Hummer owners buttress their moralistic claims that their critics are misinformed and misguided zealots who threaten the nation. In most cases, Hummer owners discuss this threat in fairly abstract terms, such as laments that the nation is losing its pioneer spirit or its commitment to personal liberty. However, they can state this moral threat in far more practical terms by appealing to the meme that the Prius does more long-term damage to the environment than the Hummer, and in so doing they ironically cast themselves as being more environmentally responsible citizens than their iconic cultural counterparts.

Looking beyond this particular debate with the Prius brand community, our Hummer owners define themselves as active environmentalist as opposed to the passive tree

huggers they deem to populate the anti-Hummer brigade. They see their Hummer-facilitated excursions on trails and backwoods as spiritually and mentally revitalizing undertakings that viscerally reimmerge them in the munificent splendor of the nation and reaffirm their commitment to being good American citizens. Rather than ecological balance and preservation of a pristine nature, Hummer owners' environmentalism is more practical, focusing on maintaining God-given aesthetic beauty (via organized clean-ups of debris and litter) and functionality (working with park officials to maintain trails) so that they can be freely enjoyed.

### The Boundless Frontier/Rugged Individualist Discourse

Over time, the City upon a Hill construction of America's national identity became intertwined with another significant American exceptionalist discourse, that of the boundless frontier/rugged individualism:

The [Frontier] myth that yet surrounds the rugged individuals who settled the unexplored universe of the North American continent articulates an ideology for national identity, a narrative that accounts for the democratic government, economic growth, progressive policies, and martial exploits of the American nation. (Dorsey and Harlow 2003, 63)

Throughout the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century, a gamut of religious and political leaders interpreted the vast expansiveness of the North American continent, and the bounty of resources it contained, as an incontrovertible affirmation of the nation's divine grace (Pieterse 2003; Weinberg 1963). Crystallizing this amalgam of cultural ideas and beliefs, Frederick Jackson Turner (1893) suggested that the cross-generational experiences of settling the American wilderness, via westward expansion, had contributed to a national character that was optimistic, forward looking, and, most of all, ruggedly individualistic. In Turner's formulation (and its diffusion throughout American popular culture via Westerns and other literary forms), the frontier-settling, rugged individual stands as an unabashed paragon of Protestant virtue: industrious, self-reliant, adventurous, fiercely independent, strong, and dutifully committed to an internalized moral code.

Other historians have further argued that the American frontier and its conduciveness to the ethos of rugged individualism provided the material conditions that distinguished the sociopolitical climate of the United States from those of European nations (Lipset 1997). Unlike Europeans, who had to confront strife and inequity in a relatively bounded space and hence resorted to wars of acquisition and class-based politics, Americans could move to proverbial greener pastures, or at least placate their economic discontent with the knowledge that such opportunistic movements were possible (Beard 1932; Noble 2002). From this standpoint, the American exceptionalist belief that the nation's economic activity could always be expanded and that every citizen had a fair chance to experience the American dream of economic pros-

perity and self-sufficiency helped to defuse the socioeconomic pressures that had fomented class conflict and socialist movements over the course of Europe's embattled history (Lipset 1997; Noble 2002; Ruggie 2005).

### Inflections and Adaptations in the Hummer-Mediated Morality Play

Our participants view the Hummer as a material means to rekindle the pioneer spirit that they believe has been dampened by a culture that encourages passivity, mindless conformity, and an enervating dependence on the government. For Hummer owners, the pioneer spirit encompasses a constellation of moral ideals that laid the foundation for America's national greatness: self-reliance (i.e., the rugged individualist archetype), defense of personal liberty, resilience in the face of adversity, and Christian charity. This latter ideal also imbues Hummer owners' collective notion of rugged individualism with a sense of communal responsibility, in the specific sense of helping others in times of crisis and need. The volunteer service organization HOPE (Hummer Owners Prepared for Emergencies) exemplifies this help thy neighbor ethos, as Susan expresses in her interview:

We [H1 and H2 drivers from all over the United States] went down to Katrina, and we were there for 3 months. That's what people do in the United States. This is a nation of volunteers. I lived in Austria for a year, and I never saw that. I didn't probably have the occasion to see it, but I didn't see that kind of spirit. I think it all has to do with "love your neighbor and your fellow man" kind of thing. Us ranchers, we all live by it. If someone needs help, you help. It goes back to ideals and working together for a common goal. You think about yourself as being "a part of" rather than "apart from," and that is what this nation was founded on, I think. People came from places where they felt oppressed for one reason or another, whether it was religious oppression, stems from governmental oppression or for one reason or another, they didn't have an opportunity to do what they want.

Susan, who has been an active member of HOPE for 5 years, understands America's frontier spirit to be one of volunteerism and Christian charity. For Susan, this altruistic tendency emanates from a collective memory of being defiant in the face of oppressive power, which creates an inexorable social bond among freedom-loving individuals. At first blush, this idea of a community of rugged individualists may seem oxymoronic. However, the sense of incongruity disappears once the other ideological aspect of these Hummer owners' moralistic identity work is taken into account—they, as true Americans who live in accord with the nation's exceptionalist values, are heroically resisting the encroachment of anti-American forces. Steven describes this during his interview:

When you fly from New York City to Los Angeles, you fly over the real United States. You don't start out in the real United States because New York City is as about as far re-

moved from the American ideal as you can get. And you land in LA, which is also as far removed from the American ideal as you can get. But if you fly over Kansas and Nebraska and a lot of those places you're flying over those places that still have that feeling, that spirit of individual rights. Where they value individual rights more than everywhere else and their community is important and that kind of stuff. . . . I think that's very much an American value that's been lost. So, I'm afraid that what happens on the edges—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago—spreads. Kind of insidious, you know? It starts here and it kind of spreads across. . . . When we are out [in the wilderness] with a group, with the Hummer West Club [name changed], then it's like an old-fashion, really small community. The values are very different. How many times do you drive down the road and you see someone on the side of the road broken down and you don't stop? You know? Because of this, I call it the dehumanization of the city. But when we're out there with this small community, this small group, if someone has a problem, we all have a problem. And you don't stop until everybody is off the trail, and you do whatever it takes, and it's just a wonderful, wonderful feeling. It's an old-fashion kind of feeling that I miss.

In this passage, Steven uses the commonplace trope of the heartland as a bastion of distinctively American virtues to convey his identity-affirming claim that real Americans are surrounded by individuals who have lost touch with the values that made America great. Rural communities (and Hummer owners who share these quintessential values) are then portrayed as the bulwark against the insidious spread of this un-American orientation. Stepping back from Steven's self-aggrandizing gloss, one could argue that many other off-road vehicles could allow individuals to experience the great American frontier. However, these devotees commonly explain that the Hummer possesses unparalleled all-terrain capabilities that afford experiences of the wilderness unattainable by most other SUVs.

As a practical matter, the off-roading capabilities of the Hummer, specifically the H2, are generally rated as being very good but more or less comparable to competing high-end SUVs sold under the Jeep and Toyota brands. However, brands' symbolic meanings are seldom a direct expression of functional product attributes (Holt 2004). With this cultural branding caveat in mind, it is quite possible that the Hummer's association with resurgent American military might—and the potent media images of Humvees victoriously traversing hostile territories—is being inflected through these owners' enthusiastic references to their Hummers' unrivaled ability to conquer rugged terrain. Among some of our Hummer owners, strong support for the U.S. military and hawkish foreign policy provides a basis for the elective (and collective) affinity (Holt 1997) that they exhibit toward the Hummer brand. These affinities become most apparent when Hummer owners describe their political views and their unabashed support of America flexing its military muscle. Consider this self-reflection that Steven shouted out over the roar of his H2's

engine as he maneuvered up a precariously steep, off-road hill:

I honestly think we got soft. We got complacent from the feeling that war is gonna be fought with nuclear bombs from now on. . . . I think that the long period of cold war softened us up. I think with no hot war going on, we all got fat and lazy. Not all of us. I think today's military, I think that people that are in the U.S. military today are phenomenal and take it back on. . . . I think we should withdraw our military from Iraq, but right through Iran. We should bring them home. Just with a detour through Iran. Maybe Iran and North Korea. So, I'm at a bit of a hawk. I don't see the point of being the world's lone superpower if you don't flex a muscle.

Steven's interpretation of the cold war era and its aftermath, though selectively omitting the Vietnam conflict, echoes Reagan's political clarion call that the United States must regain its status as the world's prevailing military superior power in order to realize its City upon a Hill destiny (Troy 2005). For Steven, the Hummer is perfectly suited to this vision of resurgent American exceptionalism. In contrast to the complacent Americans who have gotten fat and lazy (and thereby weakened the nation), Steven depicts himself and other Hummer adventurers as Reaganite hard bodies (see Jeffords 1994): man-of-action heroes who possess the inner strength and self-reliance needed to make America great. Projecting from the personal to the political, Steven sees military conflict as a regenerative force that strengthens and revitalizes America's body politic.

Our participants readily characterized confrontations with their critics as both a battle for freedom and a fight against an America-hating hypocrisy. In regard to the latter issue, Hummer owners assail their save-the-environment critics for not living up to their own lofty rhetoric and furthermore for not acknowledging that such freedom-constraining ideas and demands are actually counterproductive:

You must have significant time on your hands to build this Web site. I have an idea for you though. How about you go create jobs for the American economy like me. I employ 26 people in SoCal and have two more positions available. So ask yourself, what do you do besides spread hate against American products? How many people do you employ? What do you do for the economy? Are you riding a bicycle or are you driving a car around that seats five but you drive alone? Look in the mirror at who you are and what you do. That is how you make change. And, no, it's not fair to say "we're just having fun." You are spreading hatred and passing judgment on the owners furthermore. You are endangering the people who are flipping off these owners. You're going to get someone hurt by promoting aggression and that's not funny. (Jason, fuh2.com, 2004)

These are the same tree huggers that wouldn't let the state of California clean up all the dead brush because of the animals that live in the brush. . . . YEA that worked well didn't it! Last I remembered I saw millions of acres burnt

up, animals and humans killed because of all the dead brush. TREE HUGGERS NEED TO GET A LIFE, OR A JOB, leave everyone else alone, worry about yourself, let nature take its course (like it has for the last several billion years). Keep your f#@ing hands off other people's property before you get shot, get in your hybrid, go to starbucks and shut the f\*\$# up! In the forums, they say, that h2 people are stupid, azzholes, and several other nasty names. Well, I hope its their child that comes into the burn ward that my buddy works at that treats burned children. Oh yea he drives an H2 so I guess he's an azzhole. (Morphuss, h2.fanatic.com, 2004)

These defiant narratives invoke the can-do, self-made, entrepreneurial aspects of the frontier ethos. For Jason and Morphuss, their key moral claim is that Hummer owners are contributing to the nation's well-being through their productive work as entrepreneurs and doctors, while they disparage their (more vociferous) critics as unproductive, American-hating hypocrites (i.e., Are you driving a car around that seats five but you drive alone?) and tree huggers who value dead brush over a vibrant economy.

Hummer owners rail most indignantly at the (perceived) hypocrisy of their proverbial Prius-driving antagonists for engaging in a gamut of consumption practices that consume vast quantities of natural resources and produce CO<sub>2</sub> in substantial volumes. For mainstream environmentalists, this structural dilemma makes it imperative that socially responsible consumers work to offset their respective contributions to global warming and resource depletion by adopting energy-conserving technologies (such as hybrid cars and fluorescent light bulbs) and supporting the still nascent market for renewable forms of energy (Gore 2006). For Hummer enthusiasts, however, carbon-offsetting plans and other presumably eco-friendly consumption practices simply mask another kind of inconvenient truth: self-proclaimed environmentally conscious consumers are hypocrites.

Okay, so drive a Prius, that's fine, but then don't get into an airplane to fly to a movie set, because the private jet that you have is gonna put a lot more exhaust in the air than this Hummer, and a thousand Hummers, and use a lot more fuel, you know? Let's talk about it realistically. You want to drive Prius and have to shoot in New York? Drive your Prius from LA to New York. We will see you there in a week. They will never do that. It's uncomfortable. They will do whatever is convenient for them. And I'm sure if you went into their mansions, you will find stuff that isn't ecologically right. You put hair spray into your hair? Well, that has a lot of ozone in there. Anything you're doing is gonna ruin something. You know? (Marcel, interview)

Marcel, who works as an attorney in the Hollywood area, invokes a contrast between the legion of average, real Americans and environmentally outspoken celebrities—who nicely fit the bill of the so-called Hollywood elite so often vilified on conservative talk radio. Through this framing, critics of the Hummer are cast as sanctimonious frauds who lead extravagant lifestyles while bashing humble, hard-working Hummer own-

ers. Marcel's passage ends on a note that sounds fatalistic: no matter what you do, you will be damaging the environment. However, this sentiment has a different connotation when understood in the broader context of the Hummer community's articulation of American exceptionalism. It portrays nature as a rugged and indestructible entity that has withstood eons of wild fires, volcanic eruptions, meteorite impacts, floods, earthquakes, ice ages, and other geological and meteorological traumas:

But before we got here forest fires burned for thousands and thousands of years, and you can't tell me that a fire burning for a thousand years wasn't putting a whole lot of CO<sub>2</sub> up in the atmosphere. If you go back to a place like that, there's a whole layer of ash where all the forests around here burned down 20 billion years ago, or 20 million. I think Mother Nature is going to take care of us. She's a mean old bitch. And I think she appreciates being taken care of. Sure, I'm using a little bit of dead dinosaur. I should give a little bit back. That was my daughter's comment. One of her professors beat her up for owning a Jeep. And she said, you know, "My whole family's religious conviction is to go out in the world and enjoying its ambience. And this Jeep allows me to get to places where I will never get otherwise. Some of those are pretty magnificent places. And you'll never see them." And the guy was completely taken aback. (Robert, interview)

In articulating his views, Robert relies on ambiguous phrases and near non sequiturs (e.g., nature is a mean old bitch who is going to take care of us) to posit a proportional contrast between the carbon produced by eons of forest fires and volcanic eruptions versus the comparatively minute amount of carbon emissions that accrue from "using a little bit of dead dinosaur" to fuel his H1. Through the story about his daughter's (triumphant) conflict with her professor, Robert expresses his view that the American frontier is meant to be explored and enjoyed, providing revitalizing experiences that are presumably foreclosed to those who do not countenance off-road vehicles. In this passage, Robert also expresses his sense of moral obligation to "give a little bit back" to nature in return for his consumption of fossil fuels. One of the ways he fulfills this sense of duty is by organizing local Hummer drivers to go on maintenance excursions where they clear brush, pick up litter, and make repairs to the off-road and hiking trails in a Californian state park. From Robert's perspective, these tangible environmental efforts are more useful and more in keeping with America's "can do" spirit than the hypocritical eco-orthodoxy of condemning Hummers and driving hybrid automobiles. Robert and his fellow club members regard themselves as modern-day pioneers who are venturing into forgotten areas where most Americans, owing to laziness and diminution of the nation's pioneer spirit, no longer dare to tread.

Whereas environmentally oriented critics of the Hummer interpret nature as being in a pristine state that must be protected from human encroachments, Hummer owners endorse a more pragmatic, hands-on cultural construction of

being responsible caretakers of the American frontier, which echoes the pioneer spirit canonized by the ideology of American exceptionalism:

*Thomas:* I was a Sierra Club member years ago not because I heavily believed in it, but because you should preserve some stuff. I was not active in it. Just send in the money and get the magazines, which was fine because the money went towards fighting something. But I chose not to renew for one time. And they sent someone out to my house to re-recruit me, and they saw the Hummer outside my house, and, oh my god, they thought I was killing people with axes.

*Interviewer:* What did they say?

*Thomas:* The rudest things. Like "how could [you] be a member of the Sierra Club and own a Hummer?" And I go "What have I done wrong?" I mean if you look at the Hummer community and you have been out with the H1 guys, those guys will pick up debris that is on the side of trails, old cars, washers, that people throw away. They do stuff to beautify or back up what a mountain range or desert was. They go out and help people when boulders roll down and cover their driveways up in the mountains. The city doesn't come out to move them, but these guys will go out there and hack that thing away and pull it out for them. I mean the people who own Hummers, they are a community.

Although Thomas clearly indicates that Hummer owners and Sierra Club members should be on the same side, the responses of the Sierra Club recruiters have made him aware of an ideological rift. From his standpoint, this schism is due to an emotional prejudice that precludes Sierra Club types from understanding that Hummer owners are a community devoted to preserving the frontier. In contrast, he portrays the Hummer as being uniquely suited (via its rugged off-road capabilities) to the task of restoring the American frontier to its former glory and keeping the threats posed by littering and dumping at bay. This rendering places the Hummer on a different cultural plane from the waste that is created by consumer culture, an interpretation that environmentalists would most assuredly challenge.

For devoted Hummer owners, Al Gore is living proof that their environmental critics are misinformed hypocrites who do not live up to their own lofty and ill-conceived standards. In our interviews and on many Hummer-related Web sites, Gore is routinely castigated for his grandiose lifestyle and his frequent use of airline travel to spread the word about global warming and the deleterious consequences of carbon emissions. For Hummer enthusiasts, Gore's eco-posturing is actually worse than the proverbial case of the pot calling the kettle black; rather, he is portrayed as an eco-scammer who is attaining wealth and fame at the expense of their freedom. In keeping with Hummer owners' commitment to the trope of the boundless frontier, Gore's dire warnings about global warming are summarily dismissed as lacking commonsense, as illustrated by the reflections of Robert:

Al Gore is one of the truly biggest hypocrites, as far as I'm concerned. I mean, he does this global warming movie, but

he's got a 25,000 square foot house in Tennessee that sucks down 2,000 dollars for energy a month, and he is bitching at me for driving a Hummer?! I don't think he's a patriot, I don't think he's a straight up kind of guy. I think he's doing whatever he can do to keep his name in the news. He is kind of like these people that taught my daughter. They would say something that is totally nonsense, has no common sense. And she caught on to it, and they just beat the shit out of her, you know? And she said, "I really like the environment, I want to learn about the science of environment, but I want to learn real science, not real hysteria." After her graduation [ceremony] they had a little environmental science lecture. Listening to this guy speaking, I wanted to drive up there [to the podium area] purposely in my Hummer, but she begged me not to [laughs]. But I didn't stay long, because of all the rhetoric that they were generating while I was standing there. It wasn't good science. I've spent my whole life trying to understand why things work the way they do. Why chemical reactions work.

Robert's passage illustrates the ways in which Hummer owners rhetorically invert the condemnations that they are uninformed, uncaring, or the status-chasing dupes of advertising. In these enthusiasts' rejoinders, Hummer antagonists are the ones who are deemed to be irrational, mindlessly jumping on the global warming bandwagon, and regurgitating "junk science"—their trope du jour for rejecting anthropogenic causes of climate change. Robert further depicts his eco-nemesis as attempting to indoctrinate his daughter in these nonsensical beliefs, though she heroically resists owing to her rugged individualist spirit and commitment to real science (both presumably inherited from her father). Drawing the connection to besiegement and the defense of liberty, Robert imagines using his Hummer to disrupt his daughter's graduation event, an envisioned act of aggression, which he justifies on the grounds that the environmental science lecture constituted an unwarranted attack on truth and personal freedom.

## DISCUSSION

In this article, we have analyzed the mythic and ideological tensions that animate a brand-mediated moral conflict and the kinds of identity work that consumers undertake through these antagonisms. When our Hummer enthusiasts are directly confronted by their moralizing critics, they invoke a historically established, countervailing set of ideological meanings to portray these condemnations as the epitome of un-American values. By infusing the morality play myth with meanings drawn from the ideology of American exceptionalism, Hummer owners cast themselves as heroic moral protagonists (i.e., true Americans) who are defending sacrosanct national values, beliefs, and ideals from hostile and potentially destructive attacks. For Hummer enthusiasts, their moralistic identity work also engenders feelings of moral validation and vindication through their (perceived) rhetorical and ritualistic triumphs over their anti-Hummer adversaries.

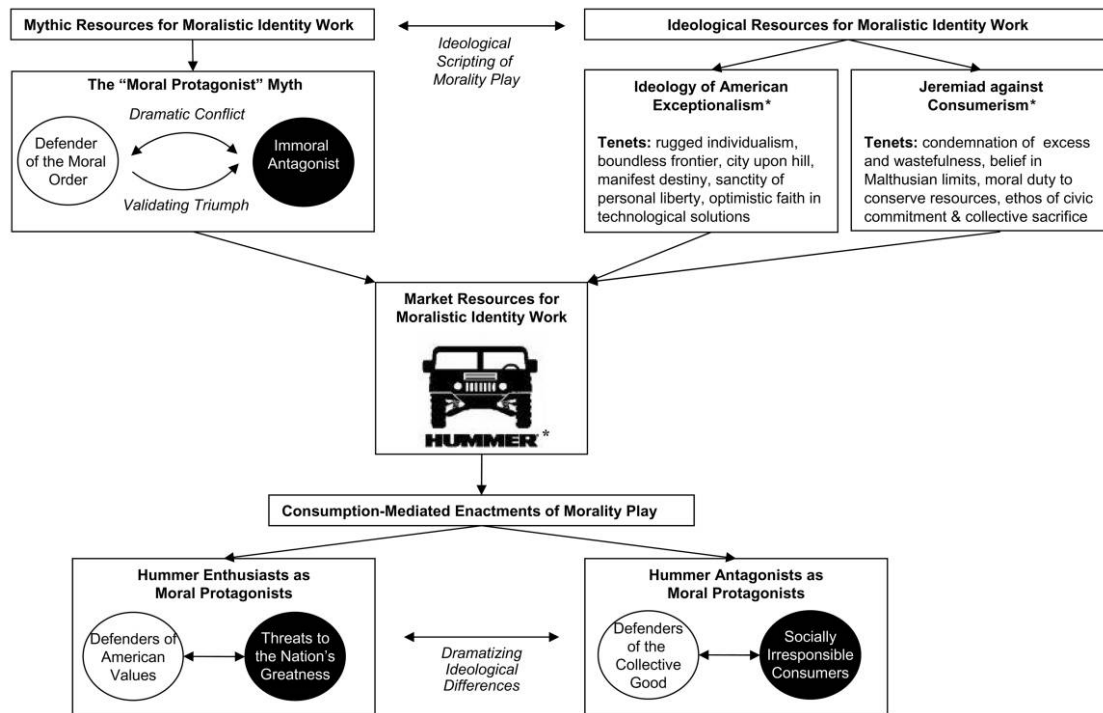
From the observed articulations of consumers' moralistic identity work, we have derived a model of consumption as moral protagonism (see fig. 1). The model highlights a constellation of mythic structure, ideological tensions, and market resources (upper and central boxes) that consumers engage when they vindicate their preferred ideological systems through market-mediated moral conflicts (lower boxes). In this framework, the moral protagonist myth provides a resilient narrative structure for these rhetorical battles that can accommodate a broad range of ideological meanings and marketplace resources, with the latter two being contingent upon situational contexts. This model can be usefully compared to prior studies of the mythic and ideological shaping of consumption practices. These studies tend to blur distinctions between mythic form and ideological meanings and effects (cf. Crockett and Wallendorf 2004; Hirschman 1988; Holt 2004; Holt and Thompson 2004; Peñaloza 2001; Thompson 2004). In contrast, our model provides enhanced analytic clarity by discriminating between mythic form and ideological content and opening up considerations of how different mythic structures are animated by a diversity of ideological meanings, how the identity relevance and resonance of ideological meanings can be enhanced by being incorporated into culturally prominent mythic structures, and the ways in which marketplace resources (and corresponding consumption practices) are situated in a prevailing mythological script and used to articulate ideological meanings in context specific ways.

Our model also extends and modifies prior theorizations of moralistic identity work. To begin, extant studies on consumer moralism have limited utility for understanding consumers' moralistic identity work because they have tended to equate moralistic consumption with market-mediated demonstrations of anti-corporate, anti-consumerist ideology. We argue that consumers' identity work attains a moralistic quality by mobilizing particular mythic structures rather than reiterating any specific ideological content. By invoking the myth of the moral protagonist, consumers can frame ideological differences in terms of an essentially Calvinistic distinction between the elect (or saved) and the sinners. This mythic divide is the foundational premise for the morality play's quintessential narrative motif—the good, the moral, and the just will ultimately triumph over the evil, the immoral, and the unjust, although this beatific outcome can only be attained through struggles and resolute belief (Barthes 1972). Thus, the morality play myth allows consumers to venerate and validate their own ideological beliefs and values while casting different ideological views—all as represented through consumption practices—as antagonistic threats to a sacrosanct moral order. This morality play framing also provides consumers with another cultural means for interjecting a captivating sense of drama and existential significance into their everyday lives (cf. Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Holt and Thompson 2004).

Our study also offers new insights into the rhetorical and ritual significance of ideologically based antagonisms in consumers' moralistic identity work. To illustrate this point, let us consider the findings of Kozinets and Handelman (2004) regarding the adversarial relationship between self-proclaimed

FIGURE 1

CONSUMER IDENTITY WORK AS MORAL PROTAGONISM



NOTE.—The \* designates contextually contingent aspects of the model.

anti-consumption activists and mainstream consumers. They highlight that anti-consumption activists routinely portray themselves as “more knowledgeable” and “morally superior” to stereotyped mainstream consumers, who, in turn, are represented as mindless dupes of the corporate system who are prone to laziness, selfishness, and even wickedness. From Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) theoretical standpoint, these adversarial constructions of mainstream consumers pose a barrier to activists’ achieving of their society-transforming goals because actual consumers are likely to reject such strident and absolutist arguments and normative pronouncements. They then suggest that a more effective activist strategy would “acknowledge the many areas of overlap and common concern between consumers and activists” and, furthermore, “enact activism as a meeting of equals, a dialog, a co-construction” (Kozinets and Handelman 2004, 702–3). However, this conciliatory approach assumes that this adversarial quality is an incidental, and therefore excisable, aspect of consumer moralism that stands in the way of activists’ real objectives: making the world a better place, enhancing quality of life, and so forth.

In contrast, our analysis suggests that moral polemics and adversarial conflicts are structural features of the moral protagonist myth that consumers draw from in the course of performing moralistic identity work. From this perspective, anti-consumer activists’ adversarial formulations provide a sense of moral superiority and the moral certainty of good/

us versus evil/them dualisms and hence produce identity value in both a personal and collective sense. This identity value is produced by demonstrating the inherent righteousness of their normative and ideological beliefs through the ritualistic and rhetorical vanquishing of a moral opponent whom they deem to be transgressing a moralistic order. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) also conclude that mainstream consumers reject activists’ evangelical overtures because they are reacting negatively to the paternalistic, constraining, and overzealous connotations of these anti-consumption/anti-consumer formulations. However, our analysis further suggests that consumers’ repudiation of the activists’ narratives can entail a more proactive, moralistic form of identity work.

From this standpoint, the moral protagonist myth also provides consumers with a rhetorical means to link their consumption practices and personal identities to a consequential, collectively shared moral project and, thereby, insulate themselves from the threats of anomie, reflexive doubt, social alienation, and existential insecurity posed by the fluid and perpetually contingent conditions of postmodern society (Bauman 2000). This collective project of saving a group, society, and even the world from the excesses of sinners, however they may be ideologically defined, is fairly evident in the evangelical tone struck by anti-consumer activists (Kozinets and Handelman 2004) or the vitriolic indictments that anti-Hummer groups



direct toward the brand and its owners. However, we have also shown that such de facto moral crusades against a consumer group provide a pretext for the targeted consumers to rhetorically exchange mythic roles and portray themselves as heroic defenders of the greater good and sacred values and ideals. Thus, evoking the morality play myth produces identities that are dialectically linked and animated by adversarial relations among ideologically opposed consumers. Through this play of moral protagonism, consumers imbue their consumption practices and identity-relevant brands with sacralized meanings (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) and existentially anchor their consumer identities in a system of ideological beliefs that are mythically canonized as being inherently virtuous.

This facet of our model also has implications for understanding consumers' employment of oppositional brand meanings in their individual and collectively shared identity projects. Prior research has documented that consumers can intensify their brand commitments and loyalties by designating certain brands as enemies and infusing them with disparaging meanings, often carrying moralistic charges (Atkin 2004; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). These accounts further argue that consumers view certain brands as enemies when they are deemed to be direct threats to the survival of the celebrated brand, as in the cases of Apple Mac consumers demonizing Microsoft (O'Guinn and Muñiz 2005), local coffee shop enthusiasts rallying against Starbucks (Thompson et al. 2006), or Harley riders' vehement rejection of Japanese-built bikes (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Our analysis suggests that consumers can have other more mythically driven motivations for identifying and vilifying certain brands. From this perspective, consumers' enemy narratives are another means for enacting morality play dynamics and enhancing the identity value of their own brand-centric consumption practices.

In the case of the Hummer versus Prius antagonisms, for example, at the time of our data collection, the Prius did not pose a direct competitive threat to the market survival of the Hummer. These brands were targeting very different market segments through appeal to quite ideologically distinct brand stories. In terms of our model, Hummer owners saw the Prius as their emblematic enemy brand because these ideological differences readily mapped onto the mythic tension between a moral protagonist and a moral antagonist. More generally, we suggest that consumers conduct moralistic identity work by consuming brands and lifestyles that accentuate rather than assuage (latent) ideological tensions that prevail at a given cultural moment. The identification of enemy brands (and by implication enemy brand communities) personifies these underlying ideological schisms and thereby allows particular marketplace resources to be potent symbols for moralistic identity work.

This constructive interplay between the moral protagonist myth, ideological beliefs, and consumers' identity work may also be quite germane to the emotional and experiential aspects of status distinctions and symbolic boundary maintenance (Bourdieu 1984). For the most part, prior consumer research has focused on how specific consumer practices,

preferences, and tastes serve, in a largely unreflexive manner, to reproduce a given structure of social arrangements and status hierarchies (Allen 2002; Henry 2005; Holt 1998). Our analysis suggests that these structural predispositions can also be animated and reinforced through morality play dynamics that imbue these distinctions with heightened emotional significance and enable them to be more readily enacted as a dramatic aspect of one's identity. Echoing Nietzsche, Foucault (1977) argued that moral arguments can serve to rationalize and justify the imposition of power and their constituent relations of domination and subjugation. In this spirit, moralistic narratives can be used to reproduce and justify status distinctions in a manner that does not explicitly invoke the specters of domination, subordination, and competing collective interests. For example, high cultural capital consumers, who are ardently defending a class-based distinction between refined and vulgar tastes, do not need to understand themselves as simply protecting their social status, and indeed such a self-serving rationale would undermine the moral authority needed to effectively defend the symbolic boundary. Rather, such consumers can vest their identities in the moralistic idea of protecting morally redeeming, aesthetic ideals from debased cultural forms that could ultimately undermine the social order. Thus, underlying structural imperatives and forces that push for class reproduction (e.g., Holt 1998) can be experienced, enacted, and justified as moral struggles to protect sacrosanct ideals and values from threatening others.

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