

Impacts of Automotive Cultural Memory on Contemporary Society

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Automobiles have become an integral part of our modern society. Whether it be American muscle cars or German sports cars, cars are everywhere. In a report by Valentine, a writer for *Forbes* with extensive car insurance experience, 92% of American households own a car (Valentine, 2023). This highlights the deep societal reliance on cars. With this widespread use, cars have developed specific values and their own cultural memory. According to Stiefel, who has a PhD in historic preservation, "Cars can be a vehicle for conveying metaphorical aspects of culture and what people value besides moving them from one place to another" (Stiefel, 2019). Additionally, he emphasizes how "[car] heritage...emerges out of the relationship between past and present as a reflection of the future." (Stiefel, 2019). Car heritage, which is a form of automobile memory, clearly has effects on the present and future which implies that car cultural memory affects society. Furthermore, automobiles are like American memorials. They both represent the culture of American society. Powell states that American memorials honor past Americans and define American values (Powell, 2004). Automobile memory represents American and German cultures to a significant degree. Additionally, cars can help convey/emphasize different aspects of a culture by symbolizing values or representing communities. In the Maori oral narratives, Binney states that cultural memory helps redefine misrepresented Maori culture that colonizers have simplified. He further adds that Maori culture symbolizes familial values while colonizers prioritize historical chronology (Binney, 2004). Car cultural memory helps define cultures of communities like Chicano members and Americans. Today, societies like Germany and America are car manufacturers, so their societies are very

dependent on cars which leads to strong societal relations and automotive cultural memory ingrained in these societies. Such ideas of cultural memory impact bring the question: How does cultural automobile memory shape contemporary perceptions and values in society? Through the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental lenses, cultural automobile memory has significant positive/negative impacts on society yet some claim it has little to no impact on society.

Ultimately, cultural automotive memory plays a huge impact. In the past, the world relied significantly on walking and other transport methods. Now, society is extremely dependent on cars. This plays a significant role in the sustainability of the present/future society and its development which includes changes to the economy, social structures, and various cultural representations.

Cultural automobile memory has a significant impact on the economy by positively/negatively affecting the global economy through psychological impacts. In a study done by Wiedmann, a management professor at Leibniz University with expertise in brand heritage and consumer behavior, “Brand heritage has a positive effect on customer behaviors, loyalty to a brand, and the consumer's willingness to pay...nurtured over decades, heritage brands have had time to build a meaningful past, relevant to the present and prospectively to the future.” (Wiedmann 2011). Brand heritage is a part of cultural automotive memory because it is how we collectively remember a certain car brand. The legacy and emotional connection and memory that the company has established in the past contributes to customer loyalty and its good reputation that continues to affect the brand’s success in the present and the future. This shows

the psychological relationship that is linked with the automotive memory, automotive companies, and the driver. Car cultural memory helps certain brands sell more cars due to the positive nostalgia associated with the car brand that might not have even existed: “[companies] use... materializations of memories linked to a utopian past that never existed.” (Wiedmann 2011). This aligns with Norbergs’ False Nostalgia (2021) where people overlook the hardships when reminiscing in the past about the past. When more cars are sold, jobs are created and there is economic growth.

However, automobiles can negatively impact other economies. Schloemer argues in the *Saber and Scroll Journal*, “Instead of designing a transportation system to get the most out of America’s cities, America redesigned its cities to get the most out of the automobile.” (Schloemer, 2015). Suburbs are centers of economic activity compared to urban areas due to automobiles (Schloemer, 2015). Car cultural memory has led to a societal dependence on cars which places less emphasis on public transport that helps cities. There are more investments in personal automobile transport because the government invests more in highway systems. This makes it easier and encourages people who own cars to use them. “Automobiles allowed people to escape urban ills such as crime, race, and the declining quality of public services, particularly education.” (Schloemer, 2015). While this may be good for those with cars, those without cars are left in a worse situation. They stay behind and have to deal with the negative consequences of losing “staggering numbers of industrial jobs as manufacturing companies... with [economic centers] departed the metropolitan area altogether.” (Schloemer, 2015). This shows how car cultural memory has negatively affected urban economies. Ultimately, car cultural memory can

positively impact economies by increasing car sales and stimulating economic growth, but it also creates an economic disparity between those who can/can't afford cars.

Cultural automobile memory has significant positive/negative socio-cultural impacts in representing specific communities. In a Cambridge University article by Rodríguez, Chicano members' lowriders are "both a literal and figurative extension of its lowrider owner." (Rodriguez, 2024) which emphasizes the role of cultural automobile memory in representing Chicano communities. Additionally, they also serve as "modern chariots in a battle for cultural survival...Mexican revolutionary heroes, such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, who fought for liberty from tyranny [are similar to] lowriders' fight for equality." (Rodriguez, 2024). This demonstrates how automobile memory is a way of Chicano cultural preservation and a symbol of equality. Just like Chicano members, automobiles represent American culture. Stark, who has a PhD in Historic Preservation argues: "Automobility has affected identity formation, gender roles, and the ways people interact with one another...Cars manifest peoples' identities and their desires for autonomy." (Stark 2019). This demonstrates how automobile memory has become integral to ideas of personal/cultural identity. Similar to cars representing Chicano culture, American cars symbolize independence, freedom, and self-expression which embodies positive values that define American culture.

While many groups are positively represented by automobiles, some groups are overshadowed. According to the Journal of Transport Geography, there are more car-dependent cities and environments due to the increasing usage of cars. "Individuals are isolated from people

and destinations by long distances and physical barriers such as motorways. Without a car, one cannot access food, healthcare, work, education, family, or friends." (Miner 2024). Additionally, "some car infrastructure creates obstacles for people with mobility disabilities, ... curb cuts...can be a barrier for people who are blind or have limited vision." (Miner 2024). The car-centric society is caused by car cultural memory which has made cars ingrained with American culture which has made cars essential for daily life. This leaves Americans with cars well off but leaves the poor and disabled at a disadvantage by limiting their independence. The poor need cars to get essential items. The disabled must yield to cars with great difficulty, which limits their mobility and independence. Similar to the poor and disabled, Women are also significantly disadvantaged. In a study by the Journal *Frontiers in Sociology*, car culture is very masculine. In the past, every ideal car needed a "beautiful girl sitting alongside in the front passenger seat" (Dundes 2023) with a man in the driver seat. Sexism limited women's representation in automotive culture in the past. Despite changes in women's rights, sexism still persists in the present automotive culture. "Today women are blamed more for car accidents compared to men ... car guys... promulgate the notion of cars as superior to women on social media and elsewhere." (Dundes 2023). Women are still inferiorized and objectified by some car societies. They are being objectified and compared to cars while their driving skills are being inferiorized due to the masculine memory of American car culture. Cultural automotive memory has positively impacted American and Chicano cultures, but they have created challenges for marginalized groups including the poor, disabled, and women.

Cultural automobile memory harms the environment due to car emotional attachments. According to *Transportation Research Part F, a reputable journal in transportation studies*, “Even motorists who are particularly sensitive to the negative externalities caused by their car use prefer private vehicles over public... transportation.” (Helferich 2024). This shows the deep-rooted nature of car culture in society, which is due to automotive cultural memory. The collective attachment as well as desires for personal mobility overshadow the environmental concerns. As a result, these fond memories prevent the efforts towards more environmentally friendly modes of transport. Helferich’s observation that feelings toward car use determine the fate of the environment (Helferich, 2024) further emphasizes how emotions/memories are responsible for this environmental crisis. This car dependency is further seen in German society. Mogeles, who has a PhD in human geography, notes that Germany's automotive legacy, stemming from Daimler’s invention of the first fueled car, significantly influences their rational policy making, “...eclipsing any negative side effects for people and the environment...rational decision-making and evidence-based policy-making can be effectively sidelined by appealing to this deep [automotive] cultural meaning.” (Mogele, 2020). This furthers the idea that car cultural memory has created an emotional connection between the people of Germany and their car industry. These emotions link back to fondness of car cultural memories and the legacy of automotive cultural memory which impacts the development of more sustainable modes of transport. Cultural automobile memory impacts the environment through Germany's car-centric policies and society’s continued reliance on cars, which exacerbates emissions and environmental degradation.

Some claim that cultural automobile memory has little to no effect on society. According to Rerat, a professor of human geography of mobilities at the University of Switzerland, driving has become an automated skill rather than a culture for new drivers influenced by factors like territorial structure and employment opportunities.” (Bednar, 2020). This suggests that younger generations view cars as tools disregarding the symbolic values/memories associated with cars. This shows how memories associated with cars don’t impact newer society as it does with other drivers. While younger generations may see cars as utilitarian, this perspective overlooks the pervasive influence of car culture on urban design and society. According to Schloemer, “America redesigned its cities to get the most out of the automobile...exacerbating urban sprawl.” (Schloemer, 2015). which normalized car dependency. The automation of driving doesn’t negate the cultural impact rather it reflects the ingrained societal culture prioritizing car use which demonstrates the impact of automotive cultural memory. Just like utilitarian views, road scars suggest safety has little impact on automobile culture. According to Bednar, who has a PhD in American studies and 20 years of data collection/writing experience, road shrines help us remember those who died in car accidents, yet “ [drivers] ...will keep on driving past [road scars], into a projected future... There are accident blackspots all over the roads that we use ...but the people that have died there ... are not marked, unless by homemade shrines and personal memorialization.” (Bednar, 2020). Similar to the younger generations overlooking the culture of cars, society overlooks automobile safety, which plays a big part in automobile culture/memory. Safety is a piece of cultural automobile memory that has little effect on society

because of the glamour and freedoms associated with cars. However, this argument focuses on large safety changes. We already have seat belts and airbags in place which shows the impact of safety on cultural automotive memory in the past. Although there might be other technological measures to address automobile safety, it is to the point where safety is dependent on driver behavior. So the safety aspect of cultural automotive memory does have an impact on society technologically only to a certain extent. It is ultimately dependent on the actions/attitudes of the driver to address safety. Despite claims of limited impact, cultural automobile memory significantly shapes society through ingrained car dependency and ongoing safety innovations, reflecting the influence of the memories on society.

It's evident that cultural automobile memory shapes society. Economically, it has driven car sales and supported the global economy, However, it has contributed to urban sprawl through economic prioritization for suburban economies. Culturally, it represents Chicanos' cultural survival and fight for equality while for Americans, it symbolizes freedom and liberty. Yet, this memory has contributed to a car-centered society that has significantly disadvantaged women, the disabled, and the poor by exacerbating social inequalities, making car ownership essential for basic goods/services, while perpetuating sexist ideas. Furthermore, environmentally, the car-centric society has stifled the society's progress towards more sustainable modes of transport. Emotional attachments to automobiles have hindered this change which contributes to air pollution and accelerated resource depletion. A possible solution to this problem, according to Hrelja, a graduate of Malmo University with expertise in public transport systems, is to promote

walking, biking, and public transport while building support for anti-car policies gradually rather than imposing restrictions (Hrelja & Rye, 2022). Implementing changes slowly would reduce automobile reliance and minimize the impact of car culture/memory without restricting car access. People are still given a choice so it is less imposing and more likely to shift people's attitudes towards cars. While this approach can help lessen emotional connections with cars over time, there will be people who still have strong attachments/memories to automobiles which may limit its effectiveness. Ignoring the impact of automotive memory on society will lead to environmental degradation, worsened social inequalities, and difficulty in transforming society into a more sustainable form.

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