Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Journal of Consumer Psychology 26, 4 (2016) 568 – 582

JCP JOURNAL OF CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY

Research Dialogue

Understanding consumer psychology in working-class contexts

Rebecca M. Carey *, Hazel Rose Markus

Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305, United States

Accepted by Michel Tuan Pham, Area Editor

Received 5 March 2015; received in revised form 2 September 2015; accepted 25 August 2016
Available online 26 August 2016

Consider two television ads for fuel-efficient cars

In an ad for the Cadillac ELR (MSRP $75,000), a man moves quickly through his luxurious house, espousing the value of hard work and high reward. He has only brief interactions with family (e.g., high fiving his daughter, passing a newspaper to his wife) as he proclaims, "You work hard, you create your own luck, and you've got to believe anything is possible." Of the 60s in the ad, 50s depict the man alone as the sole focus of the viewer's attention.

By contrast, in an ad for the Chevrolet Malibu (MSRP: $22,465), every scene depicts interactions between people. A mom gets ready for work with her daughter, a son sits with his father at a diner, a group of friends go to the beach. The narrator tells us, "we're trying our best to be role models," "we don't worry about the opening bell; we're trying to make the school bell," and that the "corner booth beats corner office every day." Of the ad's 30s, more than 25 depict close relationships (see Fig. 1 for ads).

Although both car ads are visually appealing, featuring beautiful people in attractive spaces, they differ dramatically in the stories they tell and the values they communicate. The consumers targeted by these ads differ in their level of formal educational attainment, occupation, and income. Moreover, the ads communicate a sharp difference in the goals, aspirations, and understandings of what is important in life between those who buy a $20,000 car and those who buy at $75,000 car. In other words, the ads imply that social class matters in understanding consumers. These two ads, the first with a focus on the individual and the second with a focus on relationships, highlight differences between socioeconomic status (SES)-based market segments and are consistent with a growing volume of research revealing how social class standing shapes everyday social behavior.

Although the literature on social class is growing, we know relatively little about people occupying the lower end of the social class ladder (Lott, 2002). Indeed, social scientists are increasingly aware that the majority of current generalizations about human behavior are based on studies with middle-class participants in European American contexts (Arnett, 2008). Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) argue, in fact, that researchers know everything about the "weirdest" people in the world as the majority of research is based on Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) populations. Because most researchers are themselves WEIRD, we know a great deal about WEIRDs but still vanishingly little about the other 85% of people alive today. In particular, we understand relatively little about consumers in working-class contexts even though most measures indicate working-class consumers are by far the majority of consumers in the U.S. For example, based on educational attainment—a frequently used index of social class in the U.S.—70% of Americans would be classified as working-class (i.e., have no more formal education than a high school degree; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

People who differ in their social class standing have access to different types and amounts of material resources, but they also negotiate worlds patterned by different norms and modes of social interaction. Of key importance, social class shapes different understandings of how to be a self, including what it means to be to be a good, moral, or successful person, and what is ideal, expected, and possible. Together, these differences

* Corresponding author at: Stanford University, Department of Psychology, 450 Serra Mall, Jordan Hall, Building 01-420, Stanford, CA 94305, United States.
E-mail address: rcarey@stanford.edu (R.M. Carey).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2016.08.004

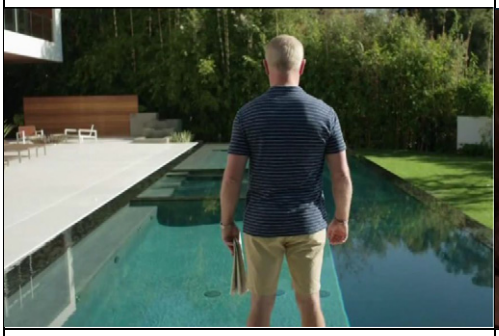
"Poolside"	*"The Richest Guys in the World"*
	
Why do we work so hard? For what? For this? For stuff? Other countries they work, they stroll home, they stop by the café, they take August off. Off. Why aren't you like that? Why aren't we like that? Because we're crazy driven hard-working believers, that's why. Those other countries think we're nuts. Whatever. Were the Wright brothers insane? Bill Gates? Les Paul? Ali? Were we nuts when we pointed to the moon? That's right. We went up there and you know what we got? Bored. So we left. Got a car up there and left the keys in it. Do you know why? Because we're the only ones going back up there, that's why. But I digress. It's pretty simple. You work hard, you create your own luck, and you got to believe anything is possible. As for all the stuff, that's the upside of only taking two weeks off in august. N'est-ce pas? (Cadillac, 2014)	*We're not super models, we're trying our best to be role models. We don't jump at the sound of the opening bell, because we're trying to make the school bell. Corner booth beats corner office any day. We make the most out of our time and our money. The Chevrolet Malibu—the highest ranked, midsized car in initial quality. The cars for the richest guys on Earth.* (Chevrolet, 2014)

Fig. 1. Screenshot and narrative of Cadillac (2014) ad (left) and Chevrolet (2014) ad (right).

result in distinct ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (Fiske & Markus, 2012; Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012; Oyserman & Markus, 1993; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012).

The national culture of the mainstream U.S. reflects and emphasizes the *independence* of the individual (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). National media, national political discourse, and most formal institutional practices and policies stress autonomy and individual control and responsibility. And by many accounts, this American emphasis on the individual is strong and growing (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015; Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012). Yet independent values, understandings, and practices are not uniformly distributed across all American contexts. Independence is most strongly reflected in and fostered by the conditions prevalent in relatively well-resourced U.S. middle class contexts (Plaut, Markus, Treadway, & Fu, 2012). In comparison, U.S. working-class contexts include relatively high levels of risk, scarce resources, and dense relationality Greenfield, 2013; Kraus et al., 2012; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). The conditions of these worlds highlight one's connectedness to others and the necessity of enduring and adjusting to an uncontrollable world (Brannon, Markus, & Taylor, 2015; Greenfield, 2013; Markus & Conner, 2013; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). U.S. working-class families, communities, and work environments promote some aspects of the American concern with freedom and independence, but they also simultaneously give rise to a strong sense of interdependence with others and with the world that tracks the emphasis on independence.

In the current article, we focus on the influence of working-class culture on the American consumer. We will suggest that the psyches of people negotiating working-class contexts are complex and in need of further systematic analysis. People in working-class contexts live at the busy crossroads of the ideas and practices of mainstream American culture and those of American working-class culture. We propose that as a consequence of this intersectionality, they are likely to develop two selves—i.e., two ways of understanding the self—one rooted in the *independence* of