

FLOWER POWER: THE VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE, A PEOPLE'S CAR?

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## **Background**

The Volkswagen Beetle was a compact car manufactured by the German automaker Volkswagen from the years of 1997 to 2019. The name “Volkswagen” literally translates to “people’s car” in German, indicating the company’s intentions to produce reliable and affordable vehicles, often with families as its target market. The Beetle had three main models over the years: the original Beetle, called the Volkswagen Type 1 (Fig. 1), the New Beetle (Fig. 2), and the all-new Beetle A5 (Fig. 3) (Rieger 2013). The original Beetle was immensely successful; it was the first car to reach twenty million sales and was the best selling single design in history. Despite that success, Volkswagen chose to rework some aspects of its design for the New Beetle, a model widely known for its “female appeal”; in fact, according to Volkswagen, women made up “nearly 70 percent of buyers” for the New Beetle. The most recent model, the Beetle A5, abandoned the “iconic arched silhouette” and other characteristics of the previous model, and “[shifted the car’s] style and personality” in the process (Patton 2012). Given the popularity of Volkswagen Beetle advertisements over the years, such as the “Think Small” campaign for its original Beetle, and the importance of visual perception in analysis, advertisements comprise some of the primary sources of this paper.

## **Research Questions**

This paper will primarily focus on the external appearances of the two later models of the Beetle, to consider the influence of visual representation when analyzing how gender interacts with advertising and consumption. The two cars had different audiences, advertising tactics, and successes, and that disparity was what provoked these questions in the first place. In particular, what may have caused that shift that led to the Beetle — the New Beetle, in particular — being associated with female drivers? Many sources attribute it solely to a shift in the appearance of the vehicle, mentioning how certain aspects of the car were changed to appear more “masculine” or

less “feminine” (Patton 2012). But how are these classifications defined — in other words, how do we gender objects? Furthermore, what stereotypes come into play when considering the owners of such vehicles? As many readings suggest, gender creates an apparent divide — but factors such as economic and social status may also contribute to who can afford and will choose to drive a Beetle. Taking these other categories into consideration will make this a more comprehensive paper.

### **Methodology**

Semiotics and its relationship with visual representation is particularly relevant. As a “discipline which seeks to define the conditions for the production of meaning”, semiological analysis can be used to evaluate Volkswagen’s advertisements, to determine what message is being shared (Solomon 1988, 202-203). As applied from the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure discussed in class, the signifier is the physical body of the car, and the signified is that characteristic of all vehicles: the ability to travel and transport with ease. Following Roland Barthes’ use of signs to explain connotation, it is evident that people may agree on this meaning on the descriptive level — that all vehicles denote the same purpose (Hall 2013, 23). Yet this car, offering the same utility as any other, is strongly associated with female buyers: there are definitely different connotations that people associate with the Beetle.

The discourse of advertising is also relevant to this research, as Volkswagen is known for its successful advertising tactics. In class, discourse has been discussed through the perspectives of Michel Foucault and Stuart Hall, as a structure by which the social world is constructed and controlled and a particular way to represent knowledge about a topic (Moallem 2019). This understanding of discourse is relevant as advertisements are constantly interacting with their surroundings, including the other text, music, or images that accompany them, as well as their viewers (Cook 2001). As practiced in class, it is important to take apart these visual pieces and

objectively analyze each component to see how they interact to create an overall experience. This paper will focus primarily on visual representation: advertisements, physical descriptions of the vehicles, and the pieces — from Volkswagen as well as other sources — that were created as a result, which primarily involve consumers' and viewers' reactions. A physical commodity like the Volkswagen Beetle is often most strongly perceived through the sense of sight, but opinions about it are drawn through communication. It is this combination of language and images that allows people to develop their understandings of what the vehicle represents to them — and also share this meaning with others (Hall 2013, 1). As discussed in class and stated by John Berger, the “way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe”: people’s preconceived notions and experiences can influence perception and thus the opinions formulated about the car.

### **Women’s Relationships with Cars**

The concept of the “women’s car” emerged as women wanted — or were expected to use — a “sturdy, spacious, and utilitarian” vehicle for carrying things like “kids and cargo”, which usually meant economy cars. Despite changes in appearance of such cars over the years, their “function remained the same...to firmly reinforce women’s gendered roles as wife and mother” (Lezotte 2012, 516). In fact, over 60 percent of original Beetle purchases were for the second car in a household, and Volkswagen was attractive to the “materially secure, white middle class” who lived in suburban areas — and could afford another car (Rieger 2013). Of course, car options were more limited at the time and many were not affordable for working women, who turned to economy cars instead.

As foreign automakers entered the United States market, competition in the industry increased, leading to more car options, featuring better technology and often lower prices (Lezotte 2012, 522). These cars were not particularly targeted to female consumers, but appealed to young people. Following the 1973 oil crisis, the Beetle became even more popular, as it made “driving a

small, fuel-efficient car fashionable, if not patriotic, and a status symbol for the upper-middle class” (Drucker 1993, 142). Some women turned to these “small, sporty, quick, styling, and ‘fun’” cars, which were subsequently labelled as “chick cars” (Lezotte 2012, 516). The New Beetle, with its cute appearance and its practical, quality composition — in addition to being fun to drive — was able to perfectly fulfill that market need.

Many people associate a passion for cars with men: some men hold an “extreme identification” with their cars, where they almost “experience their cars as a sexual extension of themselves.” At a basic level, this relationship can be attributed to necessity — spending enough time with anything can warrant a connection. But cars may evoke adrenaline or feelings of pleasure given the freedom and power the driver experiences, and sports cars can even be perceived as “phallic” symbols. Many sports car brands are perceived as strongly gendered; for instance, researchers position Porsche to have an alignment of “extreme masculinity.” Mass media and popular culture has curated particular images of such brands, which can lead to consumers picking up on society’s or creating their own associations with that brand or its products. This leads to gender identity meanings that develop in conjunction with the brand’s societal meaning or value (Avery 2012, 324). In the case of the New Beetle, Volkswagen was able to offer a similar driving experience in a cute and fun body without having those connotations that other car brands held. Female consumers who wanted to experience the freedom of driving their own sporty car, but did not want to venture into the obviously male-dominated culture associated with certain automakers, could turn to the New Beetle instead.

Considering Karl Marx’s perspective, a commodity is any object that satisfies specific human needs, with its usefulness determined by its physical form and its functionalities. All models of the Beetle were inherently useful; they were of good quality and very reliable. Gradually, however, the car’s meaning was no longer “tied” to this use-value: the Beetle seemed

to develop another relationship with its drivers, evoking “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” independent of its “actual function” (Marx 1887). Drivers began to hold a “deep emotional attachment” to their Beetles; women, especially, perceived the vehicle to hold an “innocent, childlike” aura and “charming and unthreatening image” — something that spoke to their “female impulses of care and devotion.” Women also felt enthusiastic and self-confident while driving the car: they felt like they could do “anything” (Rieger 2013). This is an example of commodity fetishism, as the relationship between the consumer and whoever produced the car — a social relation — is completely ignored to instead value the car itself and the relationship the consumer held with it.

### **The New Beetle as a “Feminine” Car**

According to Volkswagen, the third model of Beetle, the all-new Beetle A5, was designed with the “profile of the earliest cars rather than the 1998 New Beetle” in mind. This new car was to be considered “powerful” and “dynamic”, as it lacked the iconic round figure of the New Beetle and had a lower roof profile. The media release also describes the new model as “characterized by a clean, self-confident and dominant sportiness” and, as a result, “bolder and more masculine” (Volkswagen 2013). Evidently, these are meant to be contrasted with the previous model, implying that the New Beetle was perceived as more feminine, with its round shape, vibrant colors, and eccentric but fun options including a flower vase on the dashboard.

Multiple categories, such as shape and color, interact and encompass the design of a product. For instance, in the case of a car, its shape must be able to be “perceived” and “memorized”, and should convey “balance, consistency, and simplicity” (Solomon 1988, 2016). It is obvious that all automakers strive for this type of brand recognition, but it is difficult to achieve and maintain. Competitive differentiation — so a consumer can distinguish between a brand and its competitors — leads to product differentiation as well, contributing to a “unique brand

positioning” and thus increased sales (Talke 2017, 400). The Volkswagen Beetle had a unique design that made its physical appearance stand out from its competitors. Applying semiotics to product design is a natural choice given that physical design communicates so much about a product’s value and meaning. According to design scholars, “[meaning] is not ‘transmitted’ to us — we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes of which we are normally not aware” (Hjelm 2002, 2). When looking at a product, consumers already have an existing understanding and “mental representation”, which has been developed over time through interactions with other products that may have a similar or different design to the present product. Consumers use their previous knowledge of products and these products’ categories to evaluate new ones (Talke 2017, 400). This explains why the New Beetle was popular: it featured the reliability of the original Type 1 Beetle in a new, fun body.

Product personality is defined as “the set of personality characteristics that people use to describe a specific product.” Industrial design researchers, after putting together a scale to assess personality depending on product appearance, described the Beetle to have a “cheerful and friendly personality.” A similarly compact, spherically-shaped vehicle with round lights was also attributed these classifications by respondents (Fig. 8). Product personality can influence how a user interacts with, evaluates, and even chooses products, as people “prefer products with a personality that is similar to their own” (Mugge 2008, 287). This is because choosing certain commodities allows people to “confirm and express” their own identities (288). This reinforces the idea that women turned to the New Beetle as it allowed them to demonstrate their freedom of self-expression and feel more comfortable with — and confident about — accepting and displaying their own personalities.

### **Gender, Advertising, and Consumption**

Gender identities are often developed and reinforced through consumption. To some, there

exist separate consumer cultures — masculine and feminine — that “define what is appropriate (and inappropriate) for each gender to purchase and consume” (Avery 2012, 323). Women are often depicted as buyers of commodities like household products, while men are usually associated with the purchasing of appliances or larger items like cars (Romaine 1999). It then seems that commodities that are used more regularly in a household and for some sort of maintenance, whether external or personal — like cleaning products or makeup — are perceived as more feminine in nature. Of course, these are products women were primarily using and were expected to use by society during a previous time — and the connotations remain: that women should still feel comfortable cleaning and maintaining both the household and their appearance. Men, on the other hand, purchased larger items, which again follows from a historical perspective: in the past, once again because of how society was structured, men were the only or the primary source of income. That association remains as well: many larger, expensive commodities or those meant for pleasure or entertainment, often involving more complex technology or machinery, are still targeted towards men. Objects are still gendered based on historical uses and contexts, but a little more subtly now.

Gender has been used as a tool in advertising to target specific audiences in accordance with societal expectations or stereotypes. As advertising allows for the sharing and assignment of values and meanings, it influences and is influenced by society, including gender relations and the status quo (Arend 2014). Stereotypes often bring to mind several other underlying associations, so an advertisement can evoke further meaning if stereotypes are involved. But Volkswagen is unique in that their visual advertisements, such as those on billboards or published in paper, rarely included people in their advertisements. When they did, these people were never owners or buyers of the car, but instead portrayed other roles such as mechanics. Cars are often advertised to men, but Volkswagen did not target their Beetle advertisements to any gender. They used white space to



their advantage: the car itself, with its iconic shape, consistently stands out. The caption is always in the same simple black font followed by a period, where the period makes the declaration seem so confident that it should be perceived as fact. The Volkswagen “Think Small” campaign for the Type 1 Beetle, in fact, is considered of the most successful advertising campaigns. The agency, Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB), used humor and “honest advertising” without attacking their competition, American automakers (Armstrong 2011, 17). The resulting pieces (Fig. 4a - 4e) have been described as “excellent, witty, sophisticated, delightful, truthful, to the point, informative, unique, and cute” (Nelson 1965, 226).

But while these advertisements can be decoded in a certain way that emphasizes the physical features of the car, the accompanying text encodes toward certain interpretations that imply further stereotypes (Lidchi 1997, 133). With the New Beetle and Beetle A5, the captions of these advertisements are clearly directed to a specific target audience. Of the numerous advertisements for the New Beetle, one reads, “Fat.” (Fig. 5a), and another, “Farewell 120 sit-ups. / The New Beetle. Curves are back.” (Fig. 5b). As “curves” and body weight are often discussed in the context of the female body, it is evident that the Beetle is gendered as female here. The cars shown have a brighter color — the red is especially vibrant when juxtaposed with the slice of red dessert. The dessert in combination with the caption hint at the dieting and exercise that many women undertake to feel more comfortable with their appearance given societal expectations and judgments. In a later advertisement also for the New Beetle, the caption reads “Less flower. More power” (Fig. 6), implying a shift from the Beetle’s fun, cute, and flowery appearance to its self-proclaimed identity as a “sporty icon” (Volkswagen 2013).

The advertisements for the all-new Beetle also follow this theme: one reads “Son, cover-up, you’ll catch a cold” (Fig. 7a). In this image, there is both a Type 1 and a Beetle A5 present, both a similar shade of blue, with the original Beetle taking on the role of a father and the all-new

Beetle its son. The New Beetle is not present at all, emphasizing how the Beetle A5 was designed to look more like the first model, and suggesting that the middle model, the New Beetle, does not have a role in this father-son relationship. In fact, it could be interpreted that the New Beetle is a female figure, possibly the mother, in this family. This perspective is also reinforced in another Beetle A5 advertisement, where the caption is “It’s a boy!” (Fig. 7b) suggests that the success of the original Beetle and New Beetle have led to the conception of this new model. The usage of “boy” and “son” in these advertisements emphasizes how Volkswagen, aware of their female-skewed customer base, wanted to specifically attract men with this more aggressive, dynamic design of the car that they consciously chose to gender as male.

Many brands engage in “gender-bending”, where products that had been previously targeted to one gender are targeted to another (Avery 2012, 322). One perspective is that automakers had initially attempted to develop and market what became considered as “chick cars” to men; women, however, “appropriated” the cars’ meaning to create an “entirely new automotive category.” This suggests that cars such as the Beetle cannot really be classified as either feminine or masculine: they have fit perfectly to appeal to a specific type of consumer, and, as a result, have a very specific but unique identity (Lezotte 2012, 517). Additionally, as in many other industries, the automobile industry faced a resistance to the over-feminization of products. It is understandable why the New Beetle, which did not target any gender through its images, experienced such success with female consumers. The captions in Volkswagen’s advertisements did have further subtle connotations, but these gender the vehicle itself, without assuming about or imposing anything on their consumers or viewers.

## **Conclusion**

Volkswagen was developed in order to create a transportation for all types of people, not just the affluent: lacking access to a car divides economic classes (Armstrong 2011, 37). The

Beetle is an example of that success: it was popular in places including Germany, the United States, Mexico, France, Africa, and South America; it was popular in art and movies, like Disney's *Herbie the Love Bug*. All types of people drove a Beetle: not only "Trendsetters, college professors, and people who value the quality of function over style, design and perceived image" but also certain "royalty, politicians, and movie stars", who chose Beetles over their prior fancier cars, a type of "reverse snobbery" (42). Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's idea of a culture industry indicates that mechanically differentiated products are alike at the end, yet the Beetle, with its features, design, reliability, and quality actually stood out (Moallem 2019). Considering a lens of intersectionality, it is apparent that the Beetle was accessible to and embraced by a wide range of the population, even those on a lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, as it was less expensive than its competitors and easier to repair given its interchangeable parts (Fig. 9). In survey reports, Beetle owners indicate a 96 percent approval and satisfaction rating (Cropsey 2008, 114). The Beetle offered the same utility as another vehicle in a better, likeable, reliable form.

The Beetle was a "status symbol" far beyond just a "people's car" (Armstrong 2011, 16). Its success came from a variety of factors, but most prominently through a combination of good advertising and a demand for cars at the time that were lower priced, fun to drive, and practical. It allowed people to carry out both regular routines and sportier drives without having to worry about the condition or ability of their cars. The Beetle really was a culmination of seventy years of "blending of ideas and ideals": it appealed to people of "different cultures, genders, ages, and socioeconomic levels" (53). People, especially women, wanted the ability to showcase their individuality while also driving a reliable car, and the Beetle offered that. It became part of a collective memory of a nation — a cultural icon — and, despite production ending earlier this year, remains one today.

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## Appendix



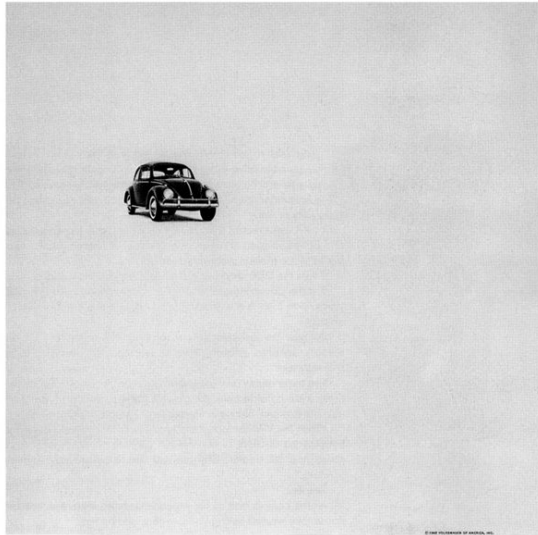
Figure 1: Original Beetle, the Volkswagen Type 1 (Motor Trend).



Figure 2: New Beetle (Motor Trend).



Figure 3: All-new Beetle A5 (Motor Trend).



**Think small.**

Our little car isn't so much of a novelty any more. A couple of dozen college kids don't try to squeeze inside it. The guy at the gas station doesn't ask where the gas goes. Nobody even stores it at our shape. In fact, some people who drive our little

river don't even think 32 miles to the gallon is going any great guns. Or using five pints of oil instead of five quarts. Or never needing anti-freeze. Or racking up 40,000 miles on a set of tires. That's because once you get used to

some of our economies, you don't even think about them any more. Except when you squeeze into a small parking spot. Or renew your small insurance. Or pay a small repair bill. Or trade in your old VW for a new one. Think it over.



Figure 4a: Original Type 1 Beetle advertisement in DDB's "Think Small" advertising campaign (Designbeep).



**Lemon.**

This Volkswagen missed the boat. The chrome strip on the glove compartment is blighted and must be replaced. Chances are you wouldn't have noticed it. Inspector Kurt Kromer did.

There are 3,389 men at our Wolfsburg factory with only one job: to inspect Volkswagens at each stage of production. 3,389 Volkswagens are produced daily; there are more inspectors than cars!

Every shock absorber is tested (spit checking won't do), every windshield is scanned. VWs have been reached for surface scratches barely visible to the eye.

Final inspection is really something! VW inspectors run each car off the line onto the Funktionärshof (our test stand), note as 189 check points, gun ahead to the automatic

brake stand, and say "ho" to one VW out of fifty.

This preoccupation with detail means the VW lasts longer and requires less maintenance, by and large, than other cars. It also means a used VW depreciates less than any other car!

We pluck the lemons; you get the plums.



Figure 4b: Original Type 1 Beetle advertisement in DDB's "Think Small" advertising campaign (Designbeep).

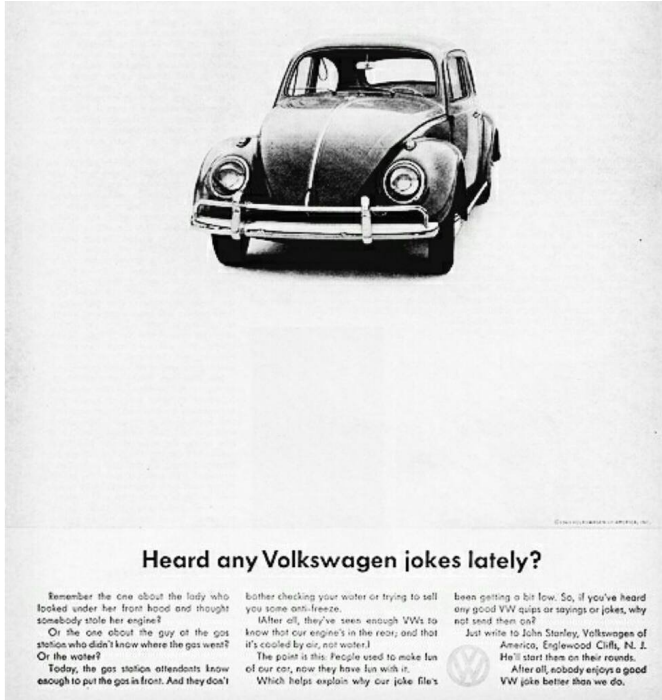


Figure 4c: Original Type 1 Beetle advertisement in DDB's "Think Small" advertising campaign (Designbeep).

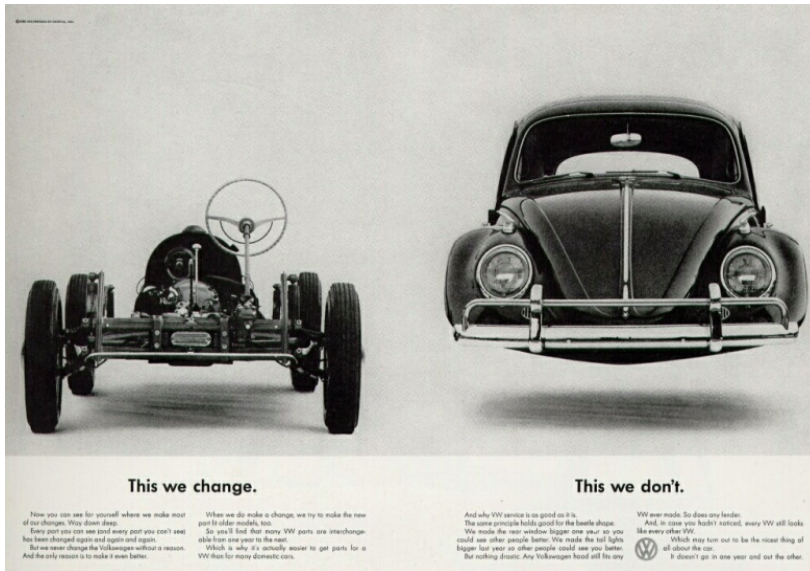


Figure 4d: Original Type 1 Beetle advertisement in DDB's "Think Small" advertising campaign (Designbeep).





Figure 4e: Original Type 1 Beetle advertisement in DDB’s “Think Small” advertising campaign (Designbeep).

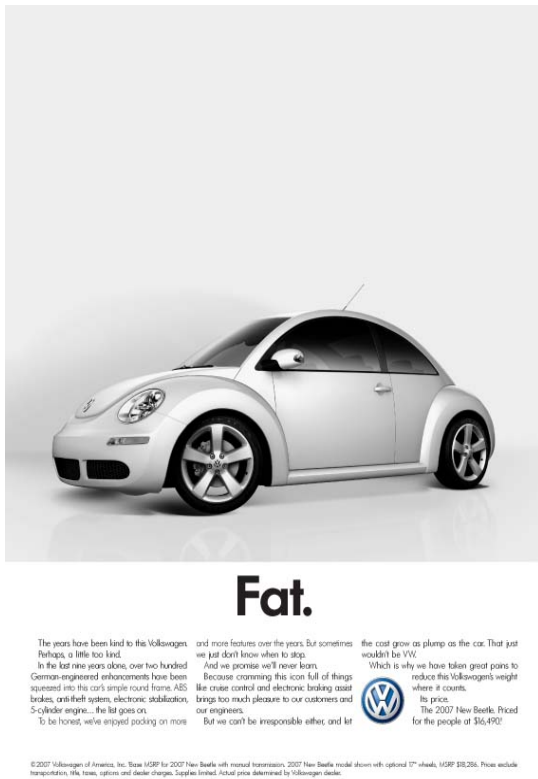




Figure 5a: New Beetle advertisement (Ads of the World).

www.volkswagen.co.in



**Farewell 120 sit-ups.**




**The New Beetle. Curves are back.**

Now gorging on a mouth-watering cheese cake won't make you feel guilty. Just take a look at the gorgeous New Beetle and you'll know why. And there's a lot more to its curves than meets the eye. For instance, the 2.0L petrol engine which gives you a thrilling 135 PS (103kW) of power. Or the 6-speed automatic gearbox that makes every drive incomparably smooth. So, it's time to give in to the temptation and get all the right curves. German engineering. Re-creating Legends.

\*Prices and conditions apply. Accessories shown and features listed may not be part of standard equipment.

Authorized Dealers: Bangalore: Elite Motors: (080) 4268000, 9972922144, 9731496775; Volkswagen Palace Cross: (080) 41508072, 9686601244, 9686601245;  
Volkswagen Unwinstown Bangalore: (080) 43232006, 43232222, 9900991212, 9900486442.

For Corporate enquiries: 9820548864, 9930496472. Volkswagen India Assistance: 24x7. Anytime. Anywhere. Toll Free: 18001029905, 18002090905.



Volkswagen. Das Auto.

Figure 5b: New Beetle advertisement (Ads of the World).



**Less flower. More power.**

Figure 6: New Beetle advertisement, for a later model of the New Beetle (Ads of the World).

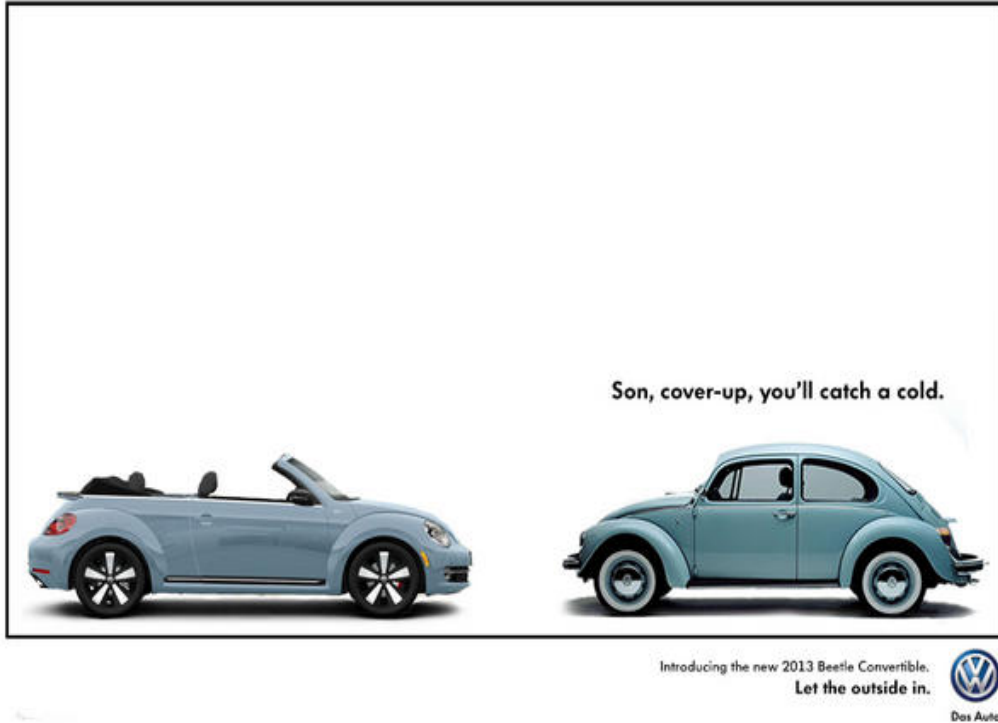


Figure 7a: All-new Beetle A5 advertisement (Ads of the World).

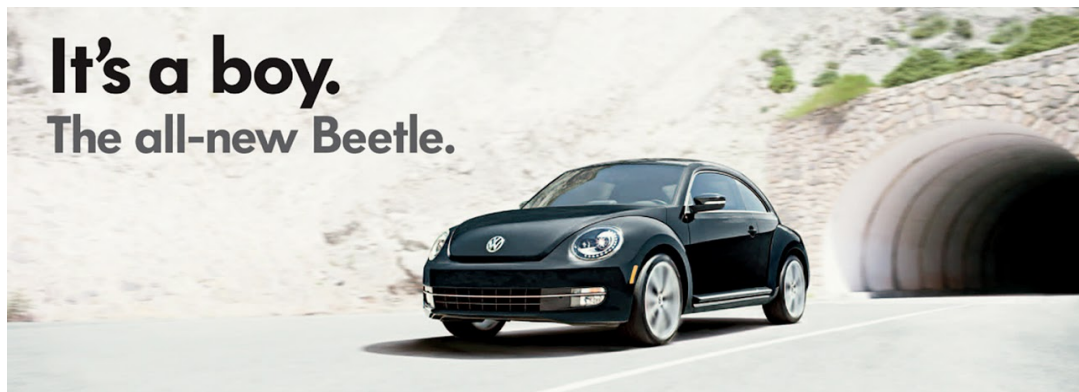


Figure 7b: All-new Beetle A5 advertisement (Ads of the World).

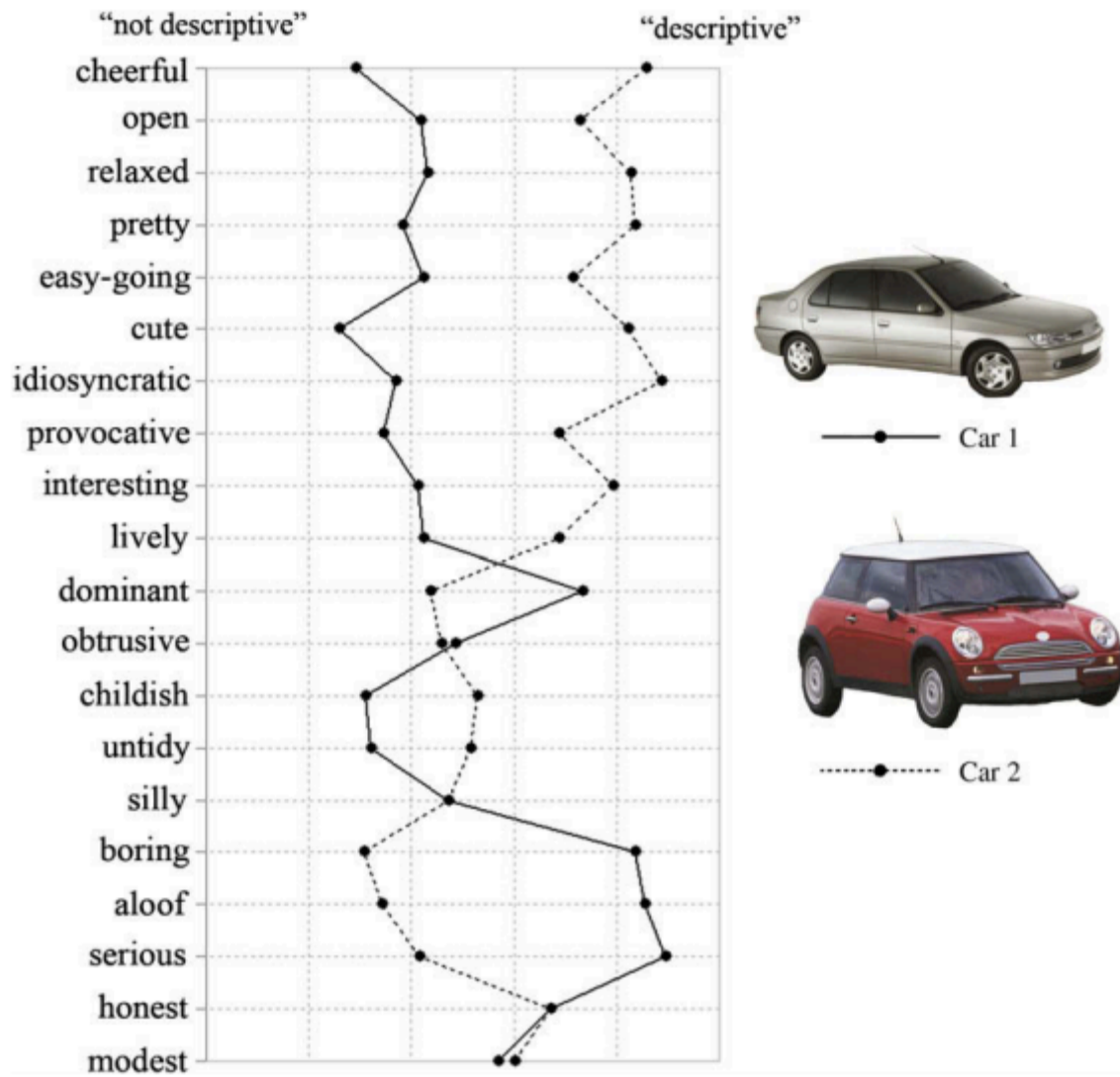


Figure 8: The product personality descriptors respondents associated with the two cars (Mugge 2009).

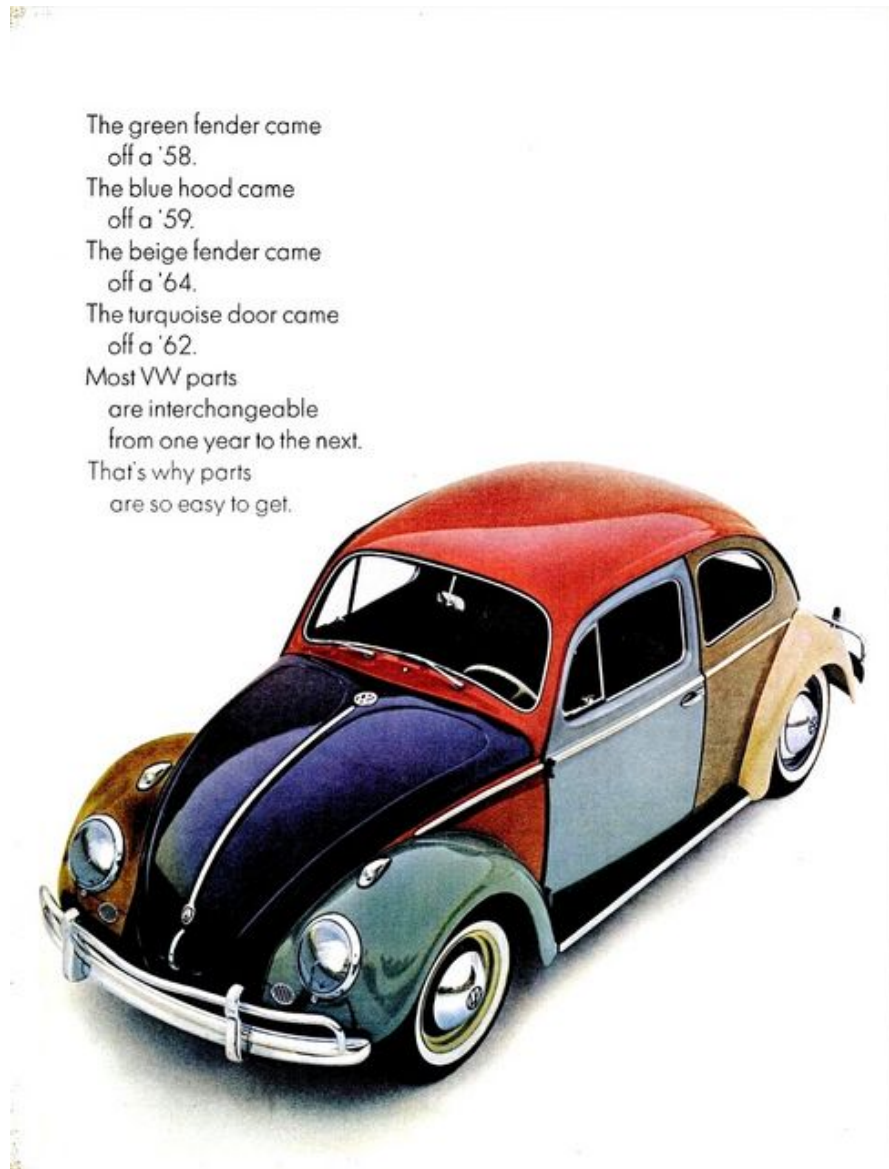


Figure 9: Original Type 1 Beetle with parts from different years (Ads of the World).