



Meaning Appropriation of Innovation and Customer Ownership: A Study of AGS Cars in India

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1. Introduction

India's progressive affluent younger generation shows high propensity in adopting new fashions and technology. However, the adoption of 'automatic gear shift' (AGS) mid-range cars noted to be low, leading lesser consumption of this technological innovation, in comparison to 'manual gear shift' (MGS) cars. Consumers essentially consume products for their meanings situated in the respective cultures. Thus, this study is an attempt to find out the meaning of 'AGS', the meaning making process, and its effects on the consumption.

Innovation do change the existing 'semiotic code' (Chandler, 2017, p. 178) necessitating meaning appropriation to the innovated code. Consumers do use social imaginaries (Appadurai, 1990; Taylor, 2004) to appropriate meaning of technology at various points of the product life cycle. Social imaginaries are complex at any given time (Taylor, 2004, p. 24), and undergoes change along with time, technology, and culture. Technological innovations necessitate continuous appropriation of meanings using relevant social imaginaries.

2. Research process

A multi-method research program of semiotic analysis and interpretive research approaches using qualitative methods was employed. Initially, analysed MGS and AGS driving activity semiotically, to identify the signs involved and the way it is coded (Saussure, 1916), which enabled comparison to identify changes in signs and code due to innovation. After which, to extract meanings attributed by consumers, who are drivers, conversational interviews were employed to capture their lived experiences. Further eight more related documents from online discussion forums and news portals collected. In addition, observational data along with videos sourced from YouTube were used for semiotic structural analysis and for triangulation. A total of twenty-seven participant drivers detailed their views, until theoretical saturation achieved Coded data using open and axial coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and rolled up into categories based on emerging patterns to reveal meanings and underlying social imaginaries.

3. AGS Meaning appropriation

Driving Code is primarily prescribed by the technology which falls both in visual and action modes. Culture attaches meaning to the prescribed technology code making it a cultural code. Codes are social conventions (Umberto, 1979); hence, any change in signs, both syntagmatic and paradigmatic in nature, can alter the meaning of driving. When comparing with MGS code, in AGS code a sign (clutch pedal) got deleted leading syntagmatic change and another sign got replaced by a new one (gear lever to drive mode selector) altering the code in paradigmatic direction (Chandler, 2017; Oswald, 2012), these two changes necessitated considerable change driving action and the driving discourse. Hence, the emerged meaning of AGS is based on the appropriated semiotic code. Meaning appropriation involves interpretation of change in signs and resultant code following the principle of 'hermeneutic circle' (Taylor, 1985).

Please refer to the figure below where meanings surrounding MGS and AGS are listed connecting them to the social imaginaries to which these are contributing. Also given are 'elements of imaginary' which are

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distilled from MGS meanings and are used in AGS meaning making. It is possible that elements of imaginary contributing to a specific imaginary are social imaginaries on their own right.

4. Discussion

AGS meanings are noted to be diametrically opposite to that of MGS. Though AGS is an innovation of exiting product by making it better, the meaning appropriated is not the same direction. Consumer does not much appreciate the innovation based on the meaning it carries.

Meanings like ‘easy and comfort’ too surfaced but related social imaginaries twisted the meaning to ‘under-skilled and lazy’ respectively. Importantly, lack of gear lever can be equated to loss of power or spectre and reducing to a subordinate role is belittling. ‘Good for women’ is a common view among respondents, but the same is the prime reason for ladies to choose MGS, as they want to be seen equal to men. Disability connection of AGS did the most damage, for which manufacturers are responsible to great extent as they provided AGS cars to disabled only in early days, in 90’s. Media gave good coverage to such good will gestures of the manufacturer, making the connection stronger. Moreover, missing clutch pad, new drive mode selector, idle left hand and leg, reduced driving actions, all together changed the semiotic code giving a deficient feel reinforced the ‘less-abled’ connection. These meanings can be limited to India as the social imaginaries too carry and produce context specific meanings. It is also possible that the present meanings can get revised as the socio-cultural context changes.

5. Conclusion

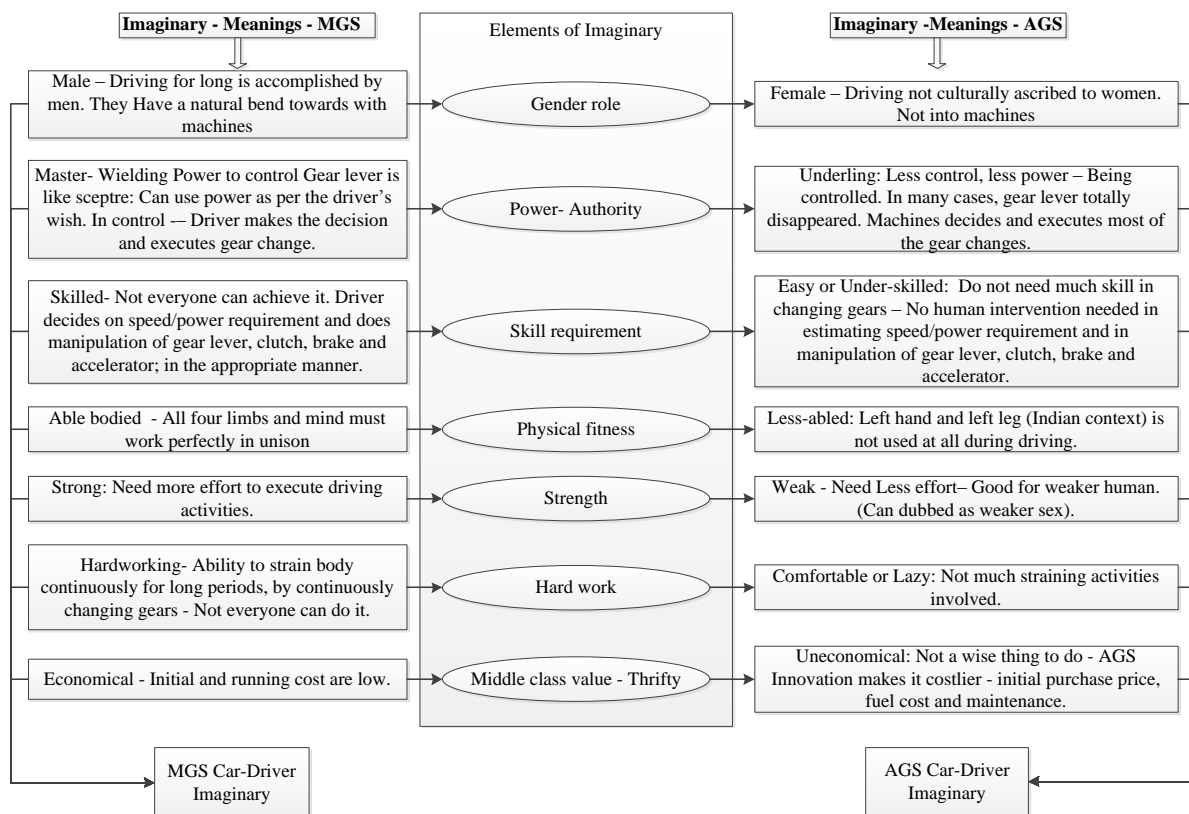
AGS meaning most of the respondents have does not favour it’s consumption. Meanings connecting to ‘physiological deficiency and loss of control, is not favourable to shy away from AGS cars due to these new meanings, causing low rate of adoption of new technology and lesser sales. Innovations that reduce human effort is technically advanced and logically get valued positively, resulting higher propensity to adopt. But, cultural symbols, meaning and social imaginaries interact with human experiences leading new emergent contrary meanings. Media, manufacturer’s communications and manufacturer’s actions aided in developing AGS meaning as they initiated or reinforced the respective social imaginary connection.

6. Implications

Social Imaginaries influence on product (car), innovations decide diffusion or adoption of the same by the consumers. Product need not only technologically better, but should carry favourable meaning as well. Manufacturer’s awareness of the fact and ability create favourable meanings too are important. Marketer must take good care in creating and disseminating right message through media and in actions.

This is more so in case of long standing ‘symbol-meaning’ pairs. By extending the study finding findings, we propose that ‘Autonomous cars’ also may get such a negative meaning turn causing low individual ownership in India.

Figure 1 MGS and AGS driver Imaginaries and Meanings



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