



SPORTS CAR STEREOTYPES:

The Truth about Gender Purchase Psychology and Marketing



MERKLE

THE SPORTS CAR DECISION: How Men and Women Think

In 1955, Dodge advertised La Femme, a feminine version of its Custom Royal Lancer model from the same year. Marketed as “the first and only car designed for your majesty, the modern American woman,” La Femme was adorned with pink trim, cream paint, and floral upholstery replete with a pink purse and compact in the compartment behind the passenger seat. Indeed, it was meant to be a representation of the 1950s modern American woman.

That is, until it wasn't. It turns out the car never gained traction with its targeted demographic and was taken off of the market in 1957 after a failed two-year stint. Now, more than 60 years later, the car market is about to experience the same clichéd, pigeonholed approach. SEAT, a Spanish car manufacturer owned by the Volkswagen Group, has launched a joint venture with Cosmopolitan to release a car exclusively designed for the “modern woman.” Set for release in the UK early this year, the Mii is branded as a “car that understands the feminine side and lifestyle of the fun and fearless COSMO girl.” Designed with headlights that have an eyeliner outline in the way that make-up emphasis the eye, and jeweled, bi-color alloy wheels that ‘offer a surprise sparkle,’ the Mii serves as a disappointingly silly throwback to that 1950s specter.

Naturally, the question any marketer — or any person really — asks is: “Why?”

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1. SEAT Mii Press Release, September 2016. <http://www.seatpress.co.uk/release/1113/>
 2. ANA AFE #SeeHer Campaign, <https://www.ana.net/content/show/id/40471>
 3. The Female Economy, Harvard Business Review, September 2009. <https://hbr.org/2009/09/the-female-economy>
 4. Women Dominate Car-Buying Decisions; Few Hold Auto Executive Jobs, NPR November 2015. <http://www.npr.org/2015/11/20/456751970/>



Why do companies continue to market to women in a stereotyped way?

The answer, quite simply, might be that they just don't understand how to market to women. They don't understand what women really want and how to market to them appropriately.

Brands see studies that show women as the primary decision makers in up to 85 percent of consumer purchases;² that they control \$20 trillion in annual consumer spending;³ or that they play a leading role in 85 percent of the purchase decisions involving automobiles. Given these numbers, companies understandably want to market toward women.

initial understanding of the market,



40%

OF WOMEN DO NOT
RELATE AT ALL TO
THE WOMEN THEY
SEE IN ADVERTISING

But is a pigeonholed image the right approach? Do women really identify with a trite stereotype? Are women really relating to products positioned so obviously to a single image of their gender? According to the Association of National Advertisers and Alliance for Family Entertainment, 40 percent of women don't relate at all to the women they see in advertising. So that answer is likely "not."

Our team of researchers set out to understand what women care about when it comes to buying a vehicle and whether there are any differences between how men and women go through the purchasing process.

To do this, we needed to first understand the decision process in general. Next was an understanding of what steps are involved in purchasing a car and why people do it. Once we had that basis, we could drill further down into the decisions that men and women make separately, and identify what, if any, differences exist.

To discern the differences that might be most meaningful, we decided to narrow our focus to a sector of the automobile industry that has historically seen a split across gender: Sports Cars.

Using Merkle's Neuroanalytics™ research approach based on means-end theory, we developed the insights

included in this paper. To form an initial understanding of the market, we conducted 30 one-on-one qualitative laddering interviews (n=30) that were solicited in an unbiased fashion, seeking the unfiltered responses of recent sports car purchasers, both men and women. Using best practice, psychology-based research questions, we sought to uncover the four basic breakdowns of respondents' decision processes: (1) the attributes they seek in a sports vehicle, (2) the product benefits those attributes yield; (3) the desired outcomes those benefits provide; and (4) the latent motivations ultimately driving the purchase. This construct gave us an understanding of both the product needs that consumers have, as well as their connected personal benefits, ultimately allowing us to paint a full picture of the decision process.

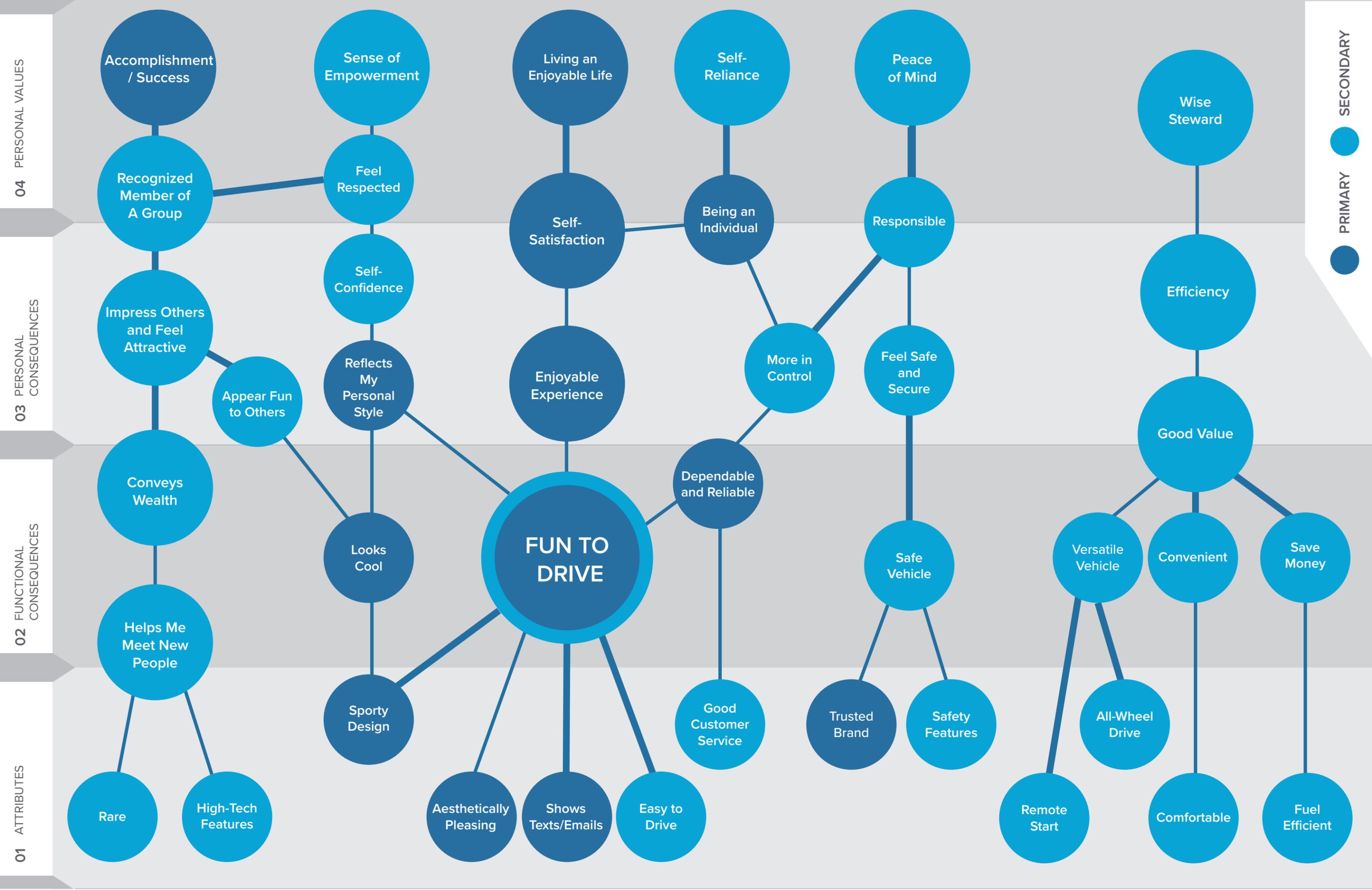
From there, the team fielded a survey to a national representative panel of participants (n=300) to validate the findings from those interviews using advanced statistical tests. To qualify for the survey, respondents must have acquired a sports car in the past year that was purchased to own (i.e., not leased) and served as either the joint or a primary-decision maker in the purchase. The outcome was a data-driven connected decision map (CDM) of sports car purchasing. In this paper, we'll outline that CDM and attempt to show the nuanced differences seen between men and women

THE CONNECTED DECISION MAP

You can think of the CDM as a game board for the consumer's decision-making process. The board has four levels, called layers, each containing the steps, or nodes, that go from one level to the next. The bottom two layers, "product attributes" and "product benefits," respectively, contain those nodes that tangibly define the product: its look, its touch, and its feel. These connect to the top two layers, "personal benefits" and "personal values," defining nodes that are intrinsic to the individual consumer; they capture how the product makes them feel and what value(s) it helps them to serve. Once nodes across all four layers have been connected, a decision chain has been created that defines how the consumer thinks. For this reason, CDMs are often used as marketing strategy tools to clearly lay out the brand positioning options in the market space and identify any marketing opportunities that might exist.

Applying this framework to the sports car decision space, we identified five distinct, yet interconnected, chains. Most interestingly, these chains appear to show strikingly few differences between men and women. In other words, men and women make decisions around sports cars in very similar ways.

In fact, as the table in Figure 2 shows, only one of these five themes showed a meaningfully significant difference when comparing the mean chain importance scores of men and women. To better understand, let's walk through each of the five decision themes.



Accomplishment / Success

Sense of Empowerment

Living an Enjoyable Life

Self-Reliance

Peace of Mind

Wise Steward

Recognized Member of A Group

Feel Respected

Self-Satisfaction

Being an Individual

Responsible

Impress Others and Feel Attractive

Self-Confidence

Enjoyable Experience

More in Control

Feel Safe and Secure

Appear Fun to Others

Reflects My Personal Style

FUN TO DRIVE

Dependable and Reliable

Good Value

Conveys Wealth

Looks Cool

Safe Vehicle

Versatile Vehicle

Convenient

Save Money

Helps Me Meet New People

Sporty Design

Good Customer Service

All-Wheel Drive

Rare

High-Tech Features

Aesthetically Pleasing

Shows Texts/Emails

Easy to Drive

Trusted Brand

Safety Features

Remote Start

Comfortable

Fuel Efficient

PRIMARY
SECONDARY

DECISION CHAIN	MEAN CHAIN SCORE (1-10 Scale)			
	SURVEY POPULATION	MALE	FEMALE	DIFFERENCE
Impress Others**	7.16	7.47	6.63	0.84
Self Confidence	8.06	8.17	7.88	0.29
Enjoyable Life	8.77	8.73	8.84	-0.11
Being Responsible	8.28	8.19	8.42	-0.23
Efficiency	7.55	7.54	7.57	-0.02

FIGURE 2: DECISION CHAIN

Note: Shading indicates a magnitude of gender difference. All differences significant at .01 confidence level.

As mentioned above, a decision chain connects a set of nodes from the tangible, product-specific layers at the bottom to the intangible, personally relevant layers at the top. For example, looking at theme number 1 in Figure 1, the “here to impress” chain is formed by first connecting the “rare” and “high-tech features” characteristics of a car to the benefits those characteristics allow, namely “help me meet new people” and “convey wealth.”

From here, these product benefits connect to the personal benefit “impress others and feel attractive,” which leads to the consumer feeling like a “recognized member of a group,” ultimately allowing them to achieve the value of “accomplishment/success.”

Uncovering these chains gives marketers insight into how people make decisions. Below are the key themes of each of the five main chains of the map.



1. “I’m Here to Impress.”

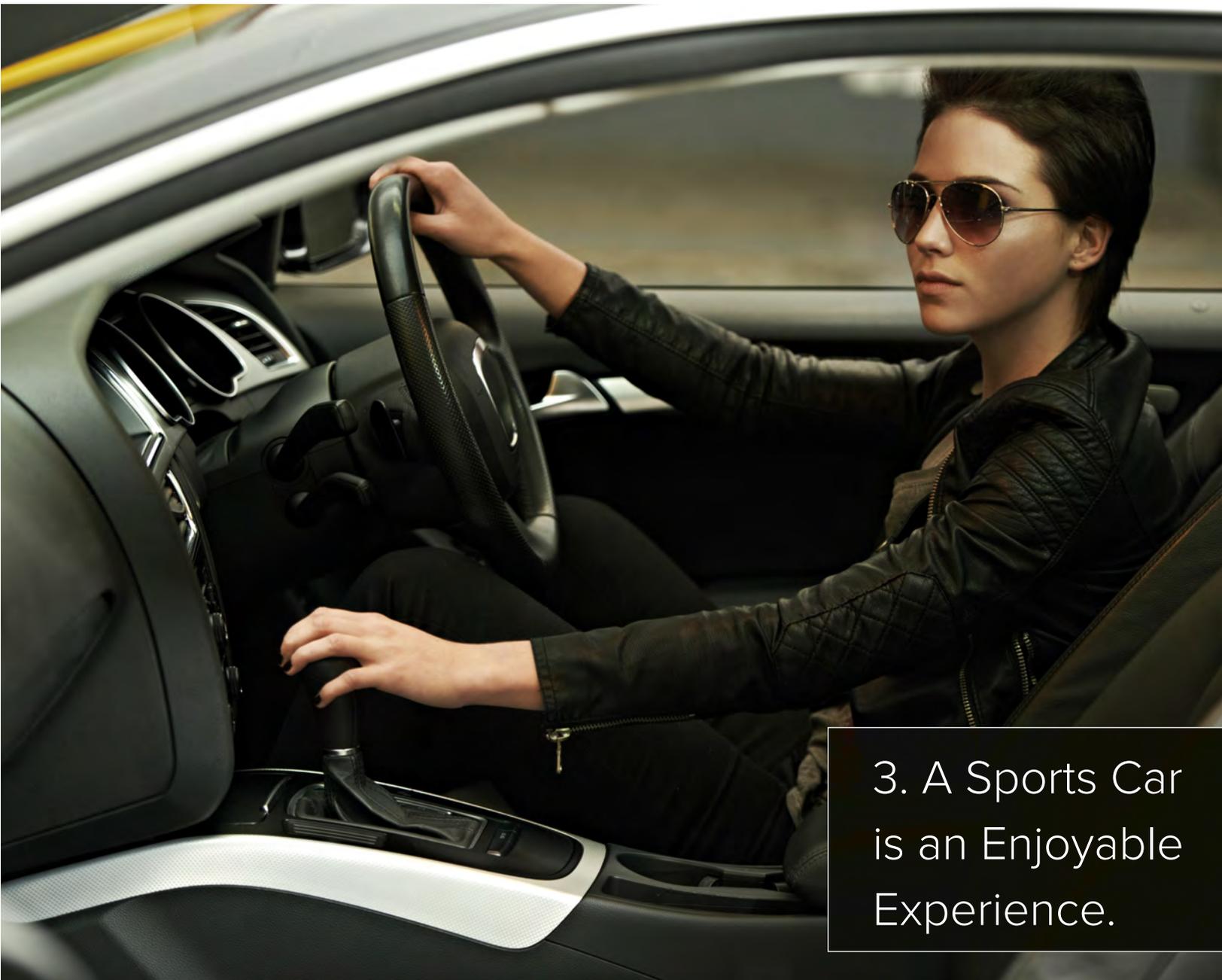
The first chain focuses on cool cars that grab attention. These sports cars are rare, unique models not commonly seen on your daily commute. They are often eye-catching cars that serve as conversation starters. Their attention-grabbing attributes help individuals convey their wealth and meet new people, ultimately allowing them to impress others and fit in as recognized, important members of a group. In the end, these external appearances and social acceptance leave them with a sense of accomplishment, validating their underlying desire to be successful. Not surprising to our team of researchers, this was the only chain that heavily favored one gender, leaning more strongly to the male preference (see table in Figure 2).



2. My Car Gives Me Self-Confidence.

The second chain promotes the idea of self-confidence. Like the first chain, this chain starts with the car's aesthetic appeal. These drivers are buying sports cars because they have a sporty, often two-door coupe design that features smooth lines and a sleek, cool-looking appearance. However, unlike the first chain, the personal benefits served by those aesthetics are less for the validation of the consumer's peers and more for his or her own self-validation of. Bridging the personal relevance gap (the gap between tangible product attributes and benefits and the intangible benefits and values personal to the consumer) reveals that the car's sleekness ratifies the consumer's desire to have a cool-looking car that reflects his or her own, personal style. This self-realization feeds the consumer's self-confidence, ultimately fulfilling a desire to be empowered and respected.

The third chain on the map emphasizes the idea of a sports car that is fun to drive. This is the strongest chain we identified, and is the most dominant theme for both men and women. Attributes that support this again include a sporty design and an aesthetically pleasing model, as well as other features that make the car easy to drive, such as simple design, smooth control, and an interface that has email and texting capabilities. These features combine to make the car fun to drive, which provides the consumer with an enjoyable experience. This experience is ultimately driven by a need for self-satisfaction and the desire to live an enjoyable life. For these consumers, buying and driving a sports car is like giving yourself a reward. One consumer explained it this way, “Even when I’m not driving for pleasure and have to commute one hour a day, I want to enjoy that drive. Each time I have to commute, I now look forward to it because of my sports car.”



3. A Sports Car is an Enjoyable Experience.



4. My Car is the Responsible Choice.

The fourth chain highlights the sports car purchase as a responsible one. These individuals want good customer service, top-of-the-line safety features, and a well-known, trusted brand. This helps them feel like they are purchasing a safe vehicle that will be dependable and reliable into the future. Respondents mentioned that the personal benefits here are a sense of control as well as a sense of security. These emotions are driven by a need for peace of mind. There is also a connection here to individualism and self-reliance. For this group, being independent and being their own person is also a strong underlying motivation.

5. I Need a Car that's Efficient.

The final decision chain focused on efficiency, including efficiency of time and money. At the most basic level, this group is looking for a sports car that has convenient and money saving features in order to provide them with good value. This easy and economic option provides a sense of value or getting your money's worth. This in turn provides an emotional benefit of feeling efficient and ultimately comes back to fulfilling a need to make smart choices and to be a wise steward of your resources. Although this is a classic chain that we've seen in over 200,000 survey responses across multiple industries, we're admittedly surprised to find it with such a big-ticket luxury item as a sports car. As with anything, there still seems to be a price-sensitive group of individuals looking for the thrill of a sports car while fulfilling an obligation to be fiscally smart.

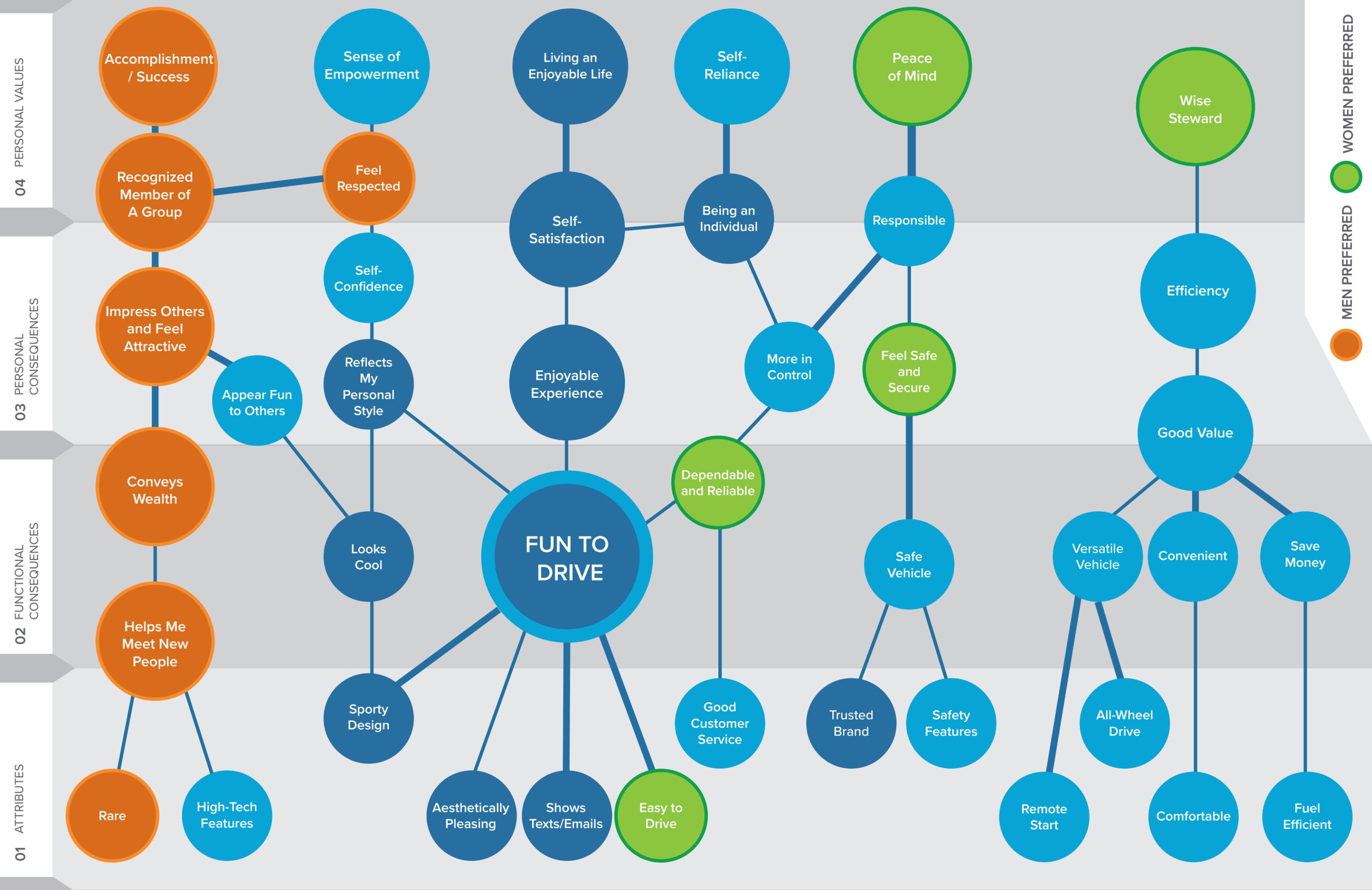
GENDER DIFFERENCES

While there are few fundamental differences in the structure of how men and women make sports car purchase decisions, this doesn't mean that men and women have identical preferences. Apart from the first chain, the map suggests that men and women are driven by similar motivations and values (i.e., ends) when purchasing a sports car. What differs are their underlying motivations (i.e., means) that allow them to achieve those ends. As seen in Figure 3, men and women place different levels of importance on various product and personal benefits and values. With significant differences shown in orange (men preferred) and green (women preferred), and values for these differences provided in the table in Figure 4, we begin to see a story starting to unfold.

As shown in the 'I'm here to impress' chain—the only decision chain shown to be significantly different between men and women—men place more importance on the external, social benefits helping them to feel important, impressing others, fitting in, feeling respected, and ultimately feeling accomplished. On the other hand, women favor more internal items that are located on the right-hand side of the map – valuing safety, a feeling of security, dependability, peace of mind, and confidence knowing that they made a smart purchase. Again, these differences don't suggest that the decision-making processes and structures of men and women are different when purchasing



a sports car, they simply imply that the means that make up and drive those decisions may differ. Consider the node “sporty design” as an example. This is one of the most important elements on the entire map, for both men and women (hence its lack of shading), but it has very different implications for each:



NOTABLE GENDER DIFFERENCES				
CDM LEVEL	CDM NODE	MALE	FEMALE	DIFFERENCE
Product Attributes	Easy to drive	8.29	8.67	-0.38
	Rare	6.52	5.35	1.17
Product Benefits	Dependable and reliable	8.56	8.98	-0.42
	Safe vehicle	8.18	8.55	-0.37
	Looks cool	8.19	7.82	0.37
	Helps me meet new people	6.61	5.22	1.39
Personal Benefits	Feel safe and secure	7.97	8.49	-0.52
	Appear fun to others	7.66	6.57	1.08
	Feel respected by others	7.48	6.43	1.05
	Conveys wealth	6.93	5.72	1.22
	Impress others and feel attractive	6.86	5.53	1.33
Personal Values	Success	8.36	8.05	0.31
	Peace of mind	8.07	8.46	-0.39
	Wise steward of my resources	7.67	7.99	-0.32
	Recognized member of a group	7.03	5.83	1.20

FIGURE 4: NOTABLE GENDER DIFFERENCES

Note: Shading indicates a magnitude of gender difference. All differences significant at .05 confidence level.

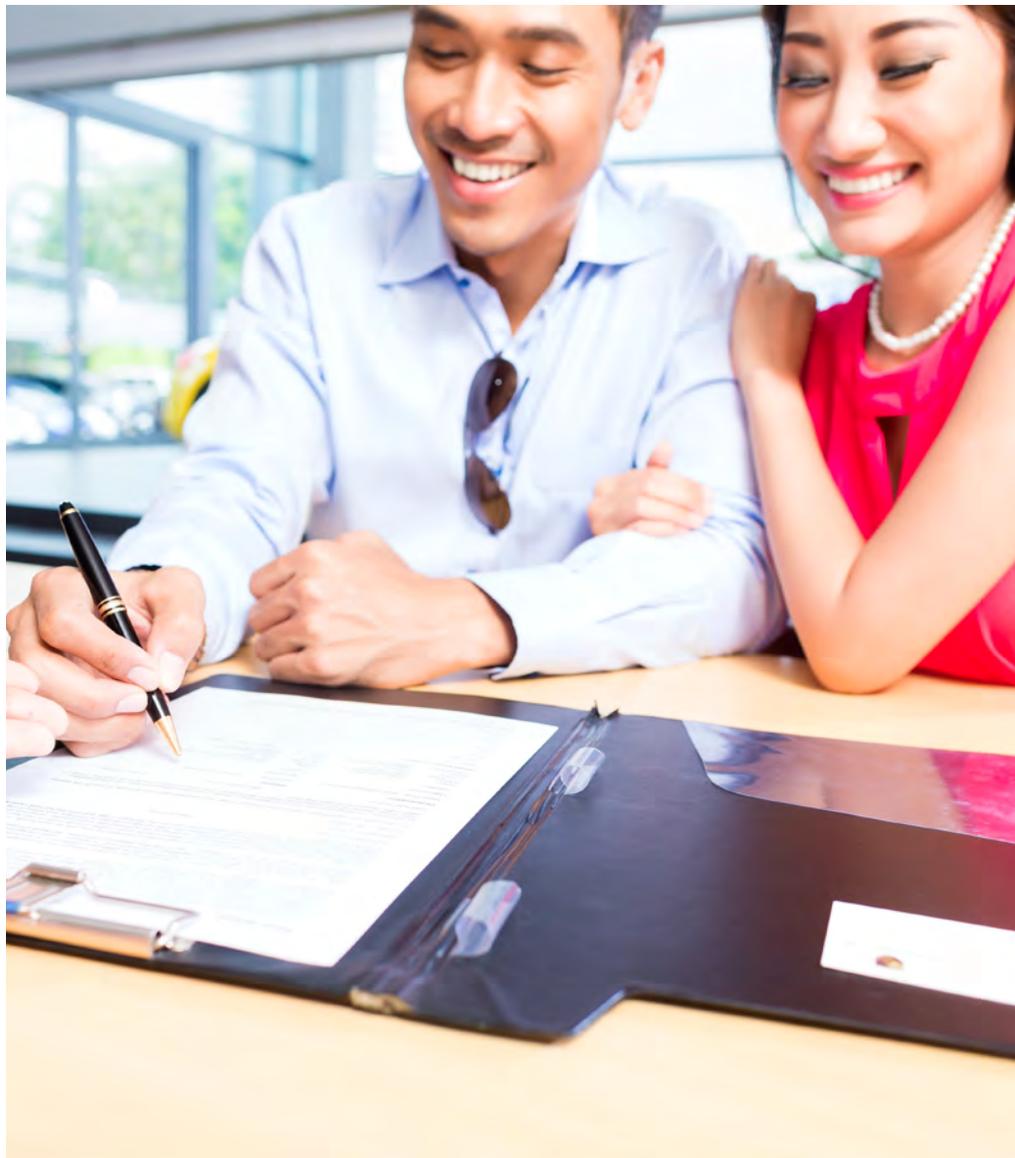
- Men value a sporty design because it looks cool, which allows them to meet people and impress others. This helps them meet the latent need of being a recognized member of a group.
- For women, a sporty design makes the car more fun to drive, which in turn leads to a feeling of control. This control provides a personal benefit of feeling self-reliant and responsible.



The map allows marketers to tap into and understand nuanced differences, which is why it can be so important. A marketing campaign that doesn't take into account these differences might assume that men and women care about different things for different reasons, when in fact it actually might be the exact opposite.

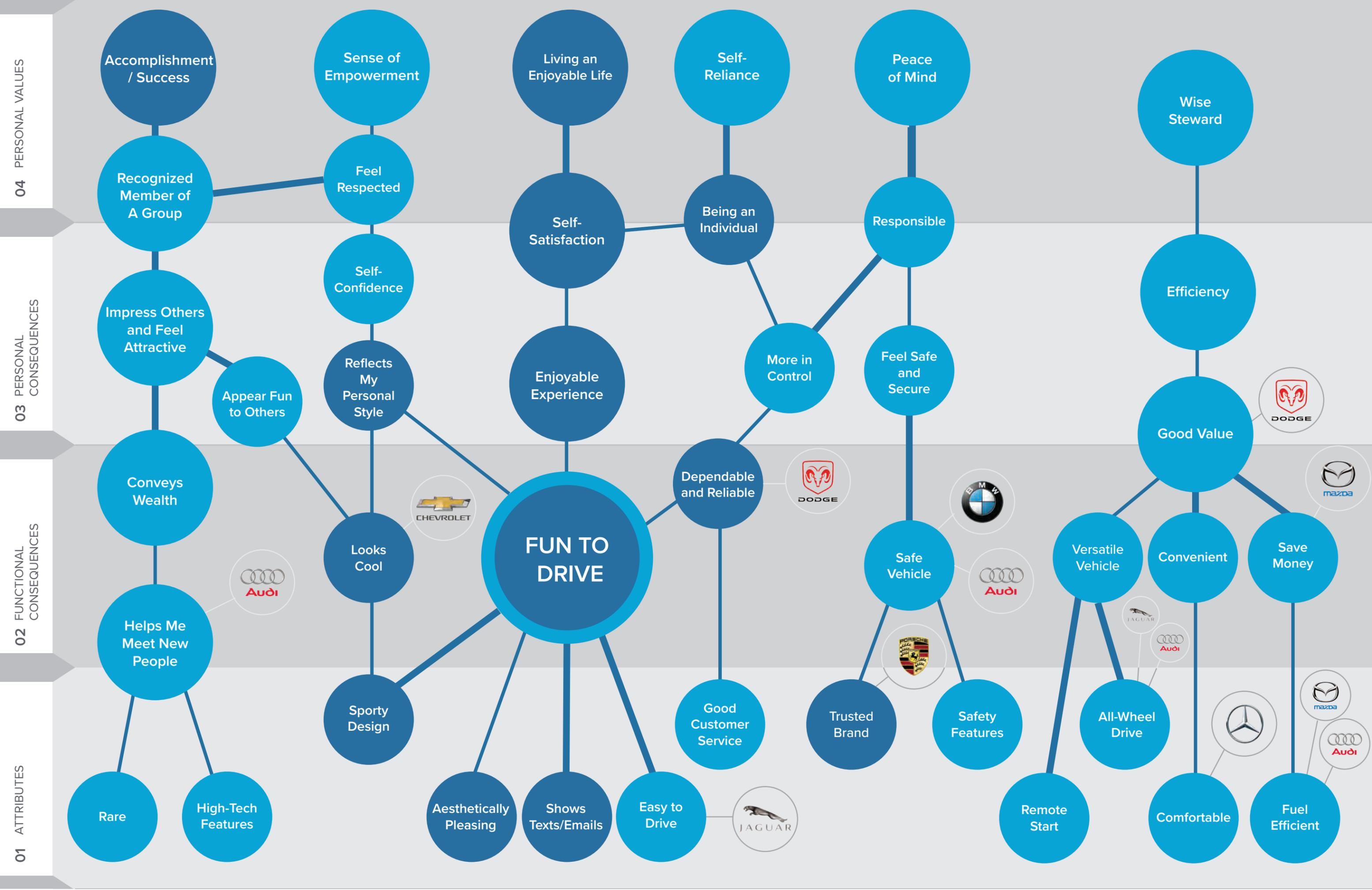
THE CAR BUYING EXPERIENCE

While the CDM provides core insight into the motivations and purchase behaviors driving the sports car buying decision, it is worthwhile to explore additional areas of the purchase process. The survey posed a series of questions aimed at identifying such areas, including the make of sports cars that respondents own; other types of vehicles owned; and the components of the shopping and buying process they feel are most important. As with the CDM, the structure of these additional factors suggests the sports car buying experience is largely the same for men and women.



Brand Preference is Linked to Personal Benefits/Values

In addition to understanding the general structure of the CDM, it is also useful to understand which areas of the map are associated with which brands. This helps marketers identify brand strengths and weaknesses, thereby helping to inform potential areas for improved market share. The map in Figure 5 shows these brand linkages, and the table in Figure 6 shows the distribution of the brand owned by respondents.



The distribution of car makes was largely the same across all respondents, and any differences that do appear were linked to the personal benefit gender node differences discussed above. Audi was the most owned brand, at 16 percent. This dominance was bolstered largely by men, almost one-fifth of whom claimed to own the brand, compared to just over 10 percent women. This difference is the largest and most notable among all makes and points to Audi being associated with “helps me meet new people,” a dominant need on the male preferred “accomplishment/success” chain.

Men Buy More, Not Different

Respondents were also asked if they owned any other vehicles, and if so, which types. Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of respondents mentioned owning another car in addition to their sports car. The most common type of vehicle owned was a luxury vehicle (15 percent), followed by a car (e.g. family sedans or hatchbacks) (14 percent), SUV (including minivans and crossovers) (13 percent), electric car (9 percent), and truck (8 percent).

		BRAND OWNED	GENERAL SURVEY POPULATION	MEN	WOMEN
	Audi	16%	18%	12%	
	Ford	13%	14%	12%	
	BMW	13%	13%	14%	
	Chevrolet	13%	14%	11%	
	Dodge	10%	8%	12%	
	Porsche	7%	7%	7%	
	Nissan	5%	5%	5%	
	Mercedes-Benz	4%	4%	4%	
	Mazda	4%	4%	3%	
	Jaguar	4%	4%	3%	
	Honda	3%	1%	5%	
	Ferrari	2%	2%	3%	
	Mitsubishi	2%	1%	3%	
	Lamborghini	2%	1%	3%	
	McLaren	0%	0%	1%	
	Other	3%	2%	4%	

FIGURE 6: BRANDS OWNED

Vehicle Ownership by Gender

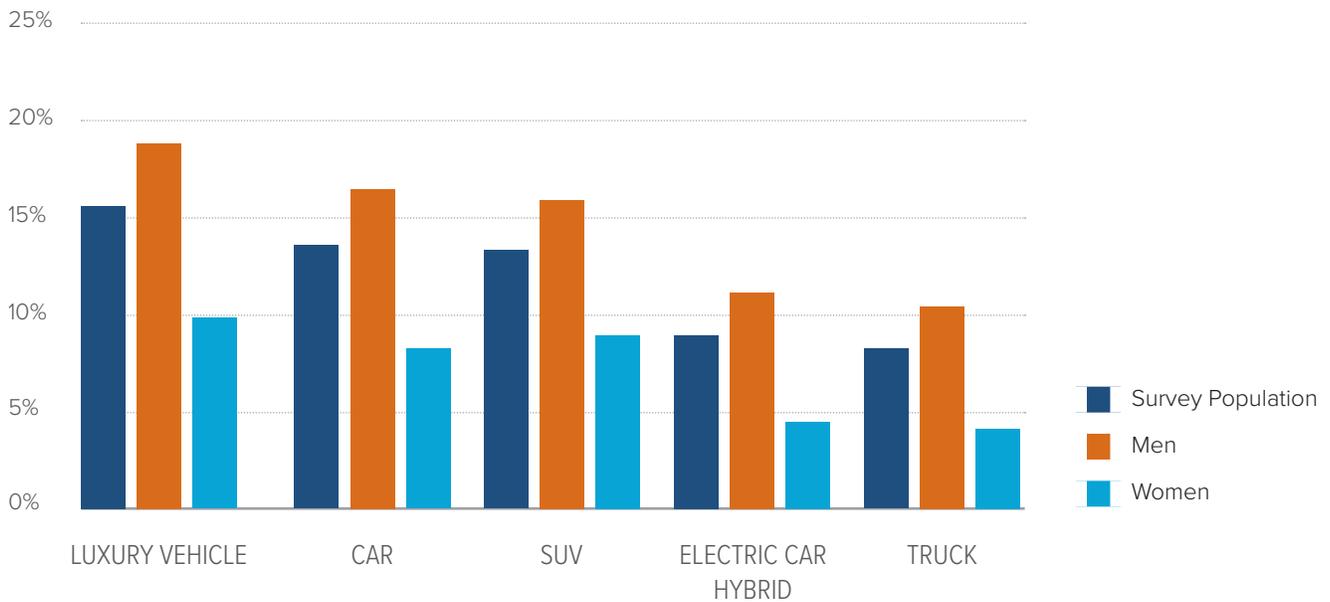


FIGURE 7: VEHICLE OWNERSHIP BY GENDER

This pattern holds across gender. Men appear more likely than women to own every type of vehicle presented, but the ranking of these vehicles among men is the same as it is among women. For both

genders, the most owned “other” vehicle is a luxury vehicle; the second- most is either a car or an SUV; the third is a hybrid, and the fourth and fifth are electric car and truck.



Nearly one-quarter (24%) of respondents mentioned owning another car in addition to their sports car.

THE SPORTS CAR BUYING PROCESS IS IMPORTANT...FOR EVERYONE

It is common to hear that the car buying process is a hassle. You are overwhelmed with choice, it is stressful to deal with financing, research and test drives consume your free time, and when you finally think you know what you want, the salesperson or dealer tries to convince you that you actually want something else.

COMPONENT RATES AS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE CAR BUYING PROCESS	SURVEY POPULATION	MEN	WOMEN
Test Driving the car	74%	70%	83%
Knowledgeable car dealership	62%	59%	67%
Trustworthy salesperson	58%	53%	66%
Great shopping experience, even if it means higher price	42%	38%	49%
Neogtating with the dealership	39%	37%	41%
No haggling with the dealer	27%	26%	30%
Lowest price, even if it mean a poorer shopping experience	18%	18%	18%
Other	0%	1%	0%

FIGURE 8: BUYING PROCESS

To understand the areas of the buying process that could have the greatest impact we asked respondents to rate seven components of the shopping process and select those they felt were important to a good experience. Overall, test driving the car, having a knowledgeable car dealership, and having a great shopping experience (even if it means a higher price), made it to the top of the list, with responders selecting these three more than 60 percent of the time. Women gave greater importance to each item in the buying process except for “lowest price,” even if it means a poorer shopping experience when compared to men. When viewed by gender, both men and women ranked the items in exactly the same order of importance as the overall survey population. They both mentioned caring about “test driving the car,” “knowledgeable car dealership,” and having a “trustworthy salesperson.” both did not mention caring about haggling or having the lowest price, even if it means a poorer shopping experience.

CONCLUSION

What can be concluded that “your majesty, the woman” expects from a car maker? Well, it certainly doesn’t appear to be black eyeliner to enhance headlights or red lipstick on the front bumper (Sally Carrera in the movie *Cars* wasn’t even wearing lipstick in the fictitious town of Radiator Springs).

No, what we can conclude is that, when it comes to cars and sports vehicles, the decision processes for men and women are mostly similar. Specifically, there are five broader values that consumers are seeking to fulfill with a sports car: (1) to impress others; (2) increased self-confidence; (3) a greater ability to enjoy life; (4) to feel responsible in their choice; and (5) to live and use resources efficiently.

Only one of these, “impress others,” is rated significantly different between the genders, and every respondent, male or female, seems to care about “enjoying life.” Yes, there may be nuanced differences in men’s and women’s preference for the elements within these chains; men care about the external, social benefits of a car and women care about internal ones like safety, dependability, and feeling responsible. But the ends sought are the same. This is apparent in the similarities in brand preference and vehicle types purchased, as well as in the components of the sports car buying process that consumers feel are important.

Given that 40 percent of women don’t relate to the advertising, and that, when it comes to buying a car, women largely value the same things as men, we don’t recommend the strategy taken by SEAT. Marketing to women in this way isn’t only limiting, but also risky. Not only may women not be able to relate, but worse, they may get insulted by being targeted in such an overtly stereotyped way. Instead, car companies should tailor their marketing to focus on the five key values identified in our analysis and focus on the next generation of vehicles with AI systems and advanced technology, rather than focusing on the non-existent and assumed extreme differences by gender.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Alex is a statistician, analyst, and all-around curious researcher. As a Manager on Merkle's Audience Strategy team, he uses customer decision-making and behavior insights to understand the nuances of the consumer brand choice. Alex has a background in economics, analytics, and statistics, and uses this skill set to help provide answers to questions that don't readily have one. His interest in the "why" behind the "what" has afforded him the opportunity to deliver successful customer strategies for some of the world's largest brands including Samsung, WB, MetLife, Dell, Regions Bank, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and Lowe's.

When he's not crunching numbers or building market surveys, Alex can be found on the trail with a map in his hand and Max, his one-year old Blue Heeler mix, by his side.

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