

# Let's Go For a Ride: The Genre of Bumper Stickers

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In this article, Sarah Greenberg explores the genre of bumper stickers and studies the ways they communicate information. Greenberg learns what happens when a genre provides an outlet for people to express their feelings to others without having a direct conversation. Along the way, Greenberg draws on aspects of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and how they relate to these funny, optimistic, and sometimes controversial additions to people's automobiles.

*For those citizens without wealth or power, a bumper sticker may be one of the few means available to convey a message to a public audience.*

—Judge Myron H. Thompson in *Baker v. Glover* (Hudson)

## Genre Analysis on Board

As I triple checked my rearview mirror and slid my hands back up to ten and two, I smiled at the man who passed by the side of my car. Interestingly enough, he was somewhat perturbed, maybe even mad. But yes, he spared me the middle finger. Quite confidently, I thought, “I am a new driver (beware)! I am on the road to show everyone who is boss.” What a teenager mindset I had . . .

Being the oldest child in my family, I felt a sense of pride as my parents sat with me in my brand-new car. Or, at least new-to-me car. My parents, knowing me better than I knew myself, opted for a used Honda Civic. They also opted to accompany me—and be as embarrassing as possible—for a good duration of my driving hours. My Civic already had dents, so any future damage I inflicted on it wouldn't be as noticeable, and the car looked as if

many other new drivers had already taken it for a spin. Regardless of its appearance, I was beyond thrilled to finally be on the journey to getting my license. I couldn't wait to parade my pink, fuzzy wheel and bumper stickers all over my hometown.

That being said, I was completely unaware that the bumper stickers plastered on my vehicle would have such a great effect on the other drivers that passed me. Other cars avoided me, and if they didn't, they made it their personal goal to intimidate the \*BEEP\* out of me—all for having “Caution: Student Driver” bumper stickers surrounding my car in bold yellow letters. My parents, always thoughtful and wary of their children's safety, had decided before they even stepped foot in the dealership that these stickers (an Amazon purchase) would be a necessary addition to the car.

I share this story about my family's use of bumper stickers because I find them to be incredibly interesting. The paraphernalia that you attach to your car can reflect your ideologies, your values, the presidential candidate that you are voting for, and much more. Like a tattoo, these messages exchanged with other drivers and passersby can affect your experience on the road and the identity that you create for yourself. This choice to visually present myself to other people on the road inspired this investigation into bumper stickers, which is a genre that can be particularly successful at communicating a variety of messages.

## **Born to Bumper**

So, let's start at the very beginning: the idea. As an assignment in my English 101 class, I was to submit a rough draft of a *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* article. This rough draft was to be turned into the teacher or to the actual *Grassroots* editors. To me, this was great! If I already had an assignment that resembled a piece of thorough research, I might as well attempt to publish here at Illinois State University. Surprisingly enough, writing the actual article wasn't much of a problem because I study English and writing. However, understanding cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) was a challenge. This four-letter, scarily capitalized representation of how communication circulates around society was somewhat unclear to me for quite some time, which I now believe is because I had not done anything hands-on with the theory. Looking back on my various scribbled notes in my daybook from English 101, I seem to have likened CHAT to other English theories I was familiar with. (I always try to find meaning out of words and ideas by relating them to well-known concepts in my field.) By studying literature and exploring it through psychological, cultural, historical, and many other perspectives, I felt that I had a somewhat decent grasp on the intensive study

of texts. So, before my project began, I defined **CHAT** as: “The study of the relationship between messages, representation, and the continuation of their progress throughout a culture.” Yet as I got further into my project, it became obvious that I had to grab CHAT by the nape of the neck in order to really feel confident in using it, which meant these somewhat-correct definitions of the theory just wouldn’t do.

I then began my initial research process. I disregarded many possible ideas of what my article would cover and perused my passions. Having a car on campus was extremely helpful because I had the ability to travel quickly around town to find possible themes for my research. Obviously, spending that much time brainstorming in the car led me to stare at the rear end of the vehicles in front of me, and *voilà!* As I’ve heard many times before, often the greatest of ideas are right before our very eyes. It was interesting to me that I had never thought of something like bumper stickers as a research topic before. Perhaps I was limiting myself by brainstorming on paper in my room and in the classroom, and by simply changing my surroundings to explore new ideas, I was able to find a somewhat unusual topic for my article. Hence, the birth of my project and research process began.

I snuck off to the library to take my next step in familiarizing myself with cars, bumper stickers, and other visual media topics. Researching this topic was much more difficult than I thought; many of the sources and databases available to me had little to no research about what I felt necessary to include in the article. It seemed that a few textbook and article sources would have to suffice. Here is a little bit of what I initially found important for my reader to know.

The Ford Model A, introduced in 1927, was revolutionary in its new safety features, including what we now call a “bumper.” This metal plate on the back of Ford’s Model A was made as a protective measure in the event of a car accident. Nonetheless, consumers soon realized that with the latest invention of adhesive tape and cardboard, they could easily attach brand messaging onto this otherwise empty piece of metal. At first, bumper stickers were mostly composed of company names: car companies, organizations, and other chains that saw the future success of these stickers (Goldblatt). These companies found an easy way of advertising that literally went all over the world. With the immense amount of routes, detours, and trips that people took in their cars, the possibility of companies’ information being viewed by others who saw their name on car bumpers was guaranteed. Although the company name might not be entirely important to the driver, the catchy slogan or opinion included on the sticker often was worth displaying. Moreover, if other drivers wanted that same bumper sticker and could find out where it was being distributed, interest in the company might skyrocket even more. Similarly, as other bumper stickers were created, the more popular and the

wittier the bumper stickers were, the higher the demand for whatever product the bumper stickers were promoting.

Compared to the cardboard product that people initially taped onto their bumpers, adhesive and plastic bumper stickers have come a long way. Today, printing companies can quickly produce mass quantities of almost any design, color, and layout of sticker. The stickers' price range is also extremely manageable, ranging from approximately one dollar to ten dollars. In this way, almost any member of society can get their hands on these powerful communication tools, and bumper stickers may be one of the best ways for the poor and powerless to convey what they want to the public (see introductory quote). Before diving into the texts that I used for this article, I had overlooked these somewhat obvious conclusions. Never before had I considered these stickers to be such a powerful vehicle—ha ha—of communication.



Figure 1: Autism awareness ribbon and peace sign bumper stickers in Kroger parking lot in Normal, Illinois. Photo by author.

## I Brake for Analysis

It is rather astounding that in just a twelve-inch by three-inch rectangle, some of society's most important messages are being broadcast. Although there are risky and humorous statements that make their way through town, there also are a variety of inspirational or informational bumper stickers. The crossed ribbon, colored to match what it symbolizes, is one of my favorites. By having a ribbon on your car, you are letting other drivers know that a disorder, complication, or condition has had a major impact on your life, that it is worth being recognized, and that knowledge is worth spreading. What better way to show support for important causes than to spread awareness of them on the vehicle that takes you everywhere? These small ribbons, whether representing breast cancer or autism awareness, symbolize much more than a sticker. They communicate a fight for a cure or a community that cares. They express our need or desire to share our values with each other.

In addition, people often are proud to showcase bumper stickers from local companies. Just in the last few years, a nearby drive-in movie theatre located in Gibson City was on the verge of shutting down. In an attempt to increase interest in and raise funds for the theatre, the managers opted to make hundreds of bumper stickers for moviegoers to purchase. With buttery fingers, the moviegoers did exactly what the company wanted: they posted “Save Harvest Moon Theatre” on their cars and drove off to raise awareness of the struggling business. Although the company did more fundraising than just selling bumper stickers, the amount of funds raised by the bumper stickers helped support the Harvest Moon Theatre. Not only that, but the theatre also gained a number of new audience members. This example of how companies use bumper stickers shows the communicative ability that this genre has; in other words, if we are speaking in terms of CHAT, the **socialization** of bumper stickers is what’s really being highlighted here. As I define it, socialization is the way in which the product, consumer, and audience mutually communicate with each other, sometimes without even being aware of it. It also has to do with preconceived notions and what each group values. Socialization can be subtle, as it is with bumper stickers, or it can be quite the opposite. By communicating both with the consumer and the eventual viewer, the companies that make the bumper stickers are able to converse quite easily; they promote their value, humor, or goal on the product itself and then leave the information in the hands of drivers to further distribute to viewers via their bumpers.

Following along with the references to CHAT, the **representation** of bumper stickers is another crucial aspect of their communicative capabilities. According to what I have understood this concept to mean, representation is how the creators want the bumper sticker to appear to viewers. It comes into play in terms of what the graphics on the sticker convey to the audience. Are there certain symbols that hold value or meaning? Is the text or font conveying subtle messages? How is the size of these graphics or dimensions affecting the way the text is represented?

I became interested in how this specific aspect of the bumper sticker genre compared with other texts. Because the bumper stickers are placed on a vehicle that (often) moves, the audience has a specific distance at which it is able to view the product. That means the graphics and text have to be extremely clear and sharp. If the information is not easily read, the audience may pass by your car without seeing your sticker (or, if they attempt to read what your bumper sticker says, their bumper will end up way too close to yours!).

Audience members that do not particularly like what you have to say can also easily alter the representation of bumper stickers. Back when Barack Obama

was running for his second term as president, my mother proudly displayed an Obama bumper sticker on our van. After only two weeks, the attention that this sticker brought to our family was noticeably negative. We were not surprised to find “Nobama” scribbled onto our bumper sticker with thick, black permanent marker—certainly an interesting way of altering the genre.

Although my mom couldn’t believe what strong emotions her bumper sticker had caused, this act of vandalizing our vehicle did not stop her for a minute. Because **distribution** of bumper stickers is often so accessible, my mom was mailed a new one in a matter of days. Distribution, the dispersion of the product, can occur in a variety of modes. Bumper stickers can be purchased online or in stores, distributed for free at special events, and even handmade and passed along to friends. In the case of the company my mom purchased the Obama sticker from, they made sure that their product could be distributed very quickly. Distribution can also mean where the text moves, not just in terms of sales, but also how far it spreads. So my mom’s pro-Obama sticker was seen by people who disagreed with it (and then socialization kind of intersected here and one person responded back). In the case of bumper stickers, distribution and socialization have a lot of overlap.

## Speed Bump

In the case of my Honda Civic, and many others, the bumper stickers that exist on your car are there without your permission. Either the owner before you decided that they were important enough to keep on the vehicle throughout its sales process, or the current owners/other drivers of your car would not be pleased if you removed their personalized car graffiti. Unfortunately, this aspect of permanence with this genre can be extremely inconvenient if the messages that you are transporting all over town are not aligned with what you actually stand for. The same goes for bumper stickers that are years old. Quite possibly, your ideals, political views, and supported organizations have changed over the years. Unless the driver is willing to peel off their pride (and the paint on their bumper) or slap a new sticker on top of the other one, this problem is almost inevitable. In this way, bumper stickers are made for the cocky; there is no room for error or indecisiveness.

We shouldn’t be surprised, then, to find that drivers with the most reported road rage having something in common. Their personalities are very similar: they are outspoken, driven (pun intended), and usually very opinionated. Branching off from these traits, the drivers reflect these attributes in the way they decorate their cars. William Szlemko, a social psychologist, calls these “territorial markers” (Vendantam). Such drivers distance themselves from

others in society who have opinions other than what they promote with their bumper sticker. Whether we are conscious of this precautionary choice or not is hard to say, but it appears that bumper stickers have the ability to make or break our perceptions of others. Similarly, drivers promote groups, beliefs, or jokes they think others might find interesting. In this way, bumper stickers are territorial markers for the drivers or, indirectly, passengers.

Without a doubt, the stickers on our cars help others form ideas about who we are, what we believe in, and how careful we are in regard to other drivers. As Mark Goldblatt, author of *Bumper Sticker Liberalism*, so eloquently writes, “Your bumper sticker says, in effect, ‘This is how I roll’” (3). Whether or not the audience likes how you “roll” depends solely on their **reception** of the genre. The more controversial the driver tends to be in the graphics or text displayed on their bumper, the more unlikely that the driver behind them will agree with their viewpoints. On the other hand, most drivers will not become aggressive after seeing a hot pink breast cancer ribbon posted on your ride. Regardless of your purpose in posting these decorations, it is necessary that your logo, text, and image convey exactly what you want it to—bumper stickers are just as much for you as they are for everyone else.

Because we have freedom of speech, it seems that there would be almost nothing off-limits to display as a bumper sticker. LEGALLY. However, bumper stickers can insult the belief systems that other drivers have worked so hard to build. This might be because the bumper sticker is extremely out of hand in terms of what it expresses (its representation is radical) and/or viewers may have a particular sensitivity to it (other drivers’ reception of anything said on this particular topic is negative). Yet drivers are free to express themselves via bumper stickers however they may choose. In fact, the Supreme Court states, “the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable” (*Texas v. Johnson*). The only obvious law violation would be that of profanity on bumper stickers. Different states often vary in their decisions to enforce fines or warnings about obscene, vulgar, or inappropriate language and may indeed prohibit you from displaying extreme ideas regardless of the First Amendment (Hudson). Obscene language or material is sometimes successful in getting its point across, but it’s not always appropriate for young drivers or passengers to see as they drive to Chuck E. Cheese’s.

## Thank You for Not Tailgating

By stalking many cars, trucks, and vehicles in parking lots in the town of Normal, Illinois, I found out how hands-on the process of research sometimes

can be. However, I struggled a little with the thought of someone walking up to their car as I took a picture of it for “research.” Fortunately, this did not happen. It was comical to me that I assumed the bumper sticker owners would be so aggressive or private that they would be offended by my taking pictures of their bumpers. It made me wonder if picture taking oversteps an unspoken boundary between messages and their owners. Or perhaps that sense is just a part of my socialization.

I soon realized that one of the most common bumper sticker themes in this area is religious. This includes bumper stickers that read “follow Jesus,” “coexist,” and a variety of symbols that have a religious connotation. The most common is the ichthus fish. Although the fish’s meaning has changed a little over time, it is mainly understood today as a symbol that identifies a believer of the Christian faith. This simplistic drawing is not always in the form of a sticker, but is sometimes made out of metal and pressed on the bumper of the car. In my driving, I have also seen a very creative variation of this same fish. Instead of having just a tail, this fish has legs. Yup, you guessed it. Evolution! Because of this symbol, evolution or Darwinism can now be presented to the other cars on the road. I find it particularly interesting how bumper stickers can be subtly altered to represent an entirely new idea (like NObama). Regardless of their religion or worldview, many drivers find it important to reflect their beliefs about creation on the backs of their cars. Because they cannot see it while they are actively driving, we can conclude that it is more for the other drivers to see or reflect upon. I am a fan of this non-confrontational way of sharing beliefs, religious or not. It shows that sometimes communication can be brief, impersonal, and without any verbal exchange of words. In this way, drivers on the road can communicate important messages to others.



Figure 2: Religious bumper sticker in Walmart parking lot in Normal, Illinois. Photo by author.



Another common bumper sticker theme is that of politics. Although bumper stickers are often focused on national elections, local candidates also use the power of bumper stickers to get their name out to the public. What better way to have your name advertised than on a vehicle that stops all over the town you want to represent? In this way, political bumper stickers do more than just tell the other cars whom you're voting for. They get the candidate's name out to further reaches than a sign in a yard. Because so many drivers commute and travel to a variety of spots around town, the likelihood of the political statement being seen is inevitable. Unfortunately, the permanence of these political stickers can be a little annoying. If you voted for Obama years ago, you might not want this sticker plastered on your car now. This makes the information being communicated somewhat unsuccessful—it's outdated. The same goes for a bumper sticker representing an organization you don't belong to anymore, ideologies you don't stand by anymore, and other information that no longer remains prevalent to your life. Perhaps the makers of bumper stickers were pretty stable people who assumed that the person who slaps on the sticker has unnaturally solid viewpoints that are not going to change until: 1.) they buy a new car; 2.) they ruin their present car trying to scrape off the sticker; 3.) they slap a different sticker right on top of the original one. Having thought through these options, I started to wonder why companies that make bumper stickers didn't make their product less permanent and less of a long-lasting choice. Perhaps an erasable bumper sticker or one that doesn't ruin the entire paint job of your car's rear end? Then I realized this product exists! It is called a decal.

## Making the Journey

Having completed the background research of how bumper stickers came to be and my initial firsthand research about them, I moved on to exploring the future of this genre. In the Normal area, I have seen the number of bumper stickers dwindling. They are being replaced by a sneaky competitor: the car decal. This sticky sheet of adhesive is a mom's best friend. It doesn't rip off paint, it is not permanent, and it has the freedom to be stuck on any surface of the car. But, by changing the **production** of bumper stickers, new factors come into play in regard to the genre. Production is the manufacturing of an item; it can include many machines, people, and systems. Over time, products may be altered before they are produced in order to make the item more appealing to the consumers. This is the case with the decal that is replacing the bumper sticker. Car owners have flexibility in where they choose to place their decals. However, according to my observations, the back car window is usually the most popular location for these decals, which means in many cases car bumpers now remain unadorned.

## Conclusions Are My Copilot

By having such an inexpensive and accessible way to advertise one's beliefs to all other drivers, it is surprising to me that more people don't obtain bumper stickers for their cars. This led me to ask the following questions: What types of cars have the most bumper stickers? Do drivers with bumper stickers have anything in common? What would cause someone not to have bumper stickers? As I pursued my research, however, it seemed highly unlikely that I would be able to find the answers to all of these questions on my own in the time I had available to tackle this investigation, particularly since it would involve catching people with bumper stickers as they got into or out of their vehicles (or shouting at them through my window as I drove next to them). As such, I was limited in both production (the time I had and my timing), and socialization (shouting might be seen as off-putting). And, unfortunately, there is not an overwhelming amount of existing research on the subject of bumper stickers. I also discovered that, because many car bumper stickers are viewed while the audience member is driving, it became extremely difficult to capture pictures of the stickers that I saw. Similarly, people do not always want their vehicles to be in pictures. For these reasons, one limitation of my investigation is that I was able to draw only surface-level conclusions as to patterns between drivers with bumper stickers. But perhaps this is something that another writing researcher can take up further after me.

Another difficulty that I have discovered in my research is how CHAT played a role in my thought processes. Because I only had one class that depicted these new concepts and terms, I felt somewhat naïve to their overall meanings. I did my best to incorporate my thoughts, my teacher's definitions, and other explanations of CHAT into how I represented the concept here, yet I know that each of the terms I discussed above is much more complex than they appear from my descriptions of them. I have simply attempted to share their definitions as I understood them. To me, CHAT is a fluid structure for how we organize the texts around us. For the most part, this theory is flexible; each of us can bring our own ideas about the meaning of the concepts involved.

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