Cars, Car Clubs, and Community

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Abstract

In this research, the Imperials Car Club was studied as a discourse community. During the research, a document analysis was conducted of a video produced by a website that endorses SoCal car club events detailing the promotional aspects and focuses of the video to better understand the discourse community itself. The results of this was the answering of three questions. What practices occur in the Imperials Car Club? Why do these practices exist in this discourse community? And how did these practices come to be? The research showed that the Imperials Car Club involved car cruises, car shows, and occasional car hops and that they exist because it serves the values of car appreciation and community formation which was formed through historical contexts that lacked such values. This was later supported by secondary research that emphasized the practices’ role within culture and the history that has brought this about. Essentially, this research supports that cars are symbols that aid in cultural self-identification.

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**Introduction**

Car clubs are a prime example of discourse communities because they share many values, goals, and forms of communicating amongst themselves and others. Car Clubs have existed since as early as the 1950’s and are still profoundly present in today’s world. The Imperials Car Club is one of Southern California’s eldest car club consisting of classic cars, also known as “lowriders”. (In the context of this discourse community, “classic cars” are not synonymous to “lowriders”, but I use the two terms interchangeably in this research because it makes explaining the concept of cars and culture much easier.). This car club is a very significant one because it one of the eldest car clubs in Southern California and the famous Gypsy Rose once was a participating vehicle of the Imperials car club. The Gypsy Rose is the lowrider that has made a profound historic impact on how people view classic cars and car clubs because it is one of the first to be created into a lowrider and has brought much insight to the art of lowriding simply by being a symbol for the genesis of lowriding. The Gypsy Rose now sits in a museum for all to see and learn from. The Imperials Car Club originated in East Los Angeles and to this day still practices the rituals of lowriding.

In researching this car club, I wanted to learn what exactly these practices are, why they exist in this discourse community, and how these practices came to be. Based on my research, these practices involve car cruises and car shows-and occasional car hops. They exist within this car club because it helps meet the goals and values of the car club since these practices enable the members to show off their cars and, in doing so, form community among members. The history of the car club alongside the history of a post-World War II United States resulted in the creation of these practices within this discourse community because the practices could easily be organized and executed and the aesthetic modification of converting classic cars into lowriders was an attainable goal for the members of this discourse community.

**Methodology**

The methodology for my research involved taking a primary document and analyzing it as objectively as possible. The primary document that I found was a video of the car club at an event they hosted meant to promote the event and participating car clubs. The complexity in analyzing this document is that the video was on a YouTube channel that was owned by onebadpup.com, a website that promotes all Southern California classic car clubs. The video was a montage of a collection of lowriders at the annual car show event in Hawaiian Gardens, California hosted by the Imperials Car Club. The document only showed certain scenes from the event, so it couldn’t be treated as a participant observation; instead, it had to be treated as a document analysis, since everything I was observing were scenes that the creator wanted the viewer to see.

In the analysis, I took notes on what was striking to me in the video, such as the way the video was organized, the appeals used, the audience, and the purpose behind the video. My underlying questions for conducting this research was what practices are involved in this car club?; why do these practices exist in this discourse community?; and how did these practices come to be? In asking these three questions, I could understand what the Imperials Car Club’s practices were and the context that surrounds them today. With some secondary research, I was able to get support for these findings; I found articles relating cars and their practices to Chicano culture, articles pertaining to the history of lowrider car clubs, and articles that explained the evolution of cars and its influence on society today. In addition, I searched credible articles via the Google search engine and found articles on why classic cars are so appreciated and valued by car clubs and my discourse community. I also found articles on how to join these car clubs and how people practice lowriding today. From both these scholarly and credible articles, I could better understand my results and, as a result, better answer the questions I aimed to aim to answer.

**Analysis**

Based on my research, it can be interpreted that each of their practices serve a purpose to meet the desire of car appreciation and community. Evidence of this is in my observation when the video focuses on the lowriders and then focuses its attention on the car clubs at their respective booths. The reason for this is because it focuses on just two of the aspects to car showing: with one being showing the car’s external aesthetics and the second being the socialization of car club members among other members and car enthusiasts. David Schultz (2014) could explain why these practices are this way. Schultz (2014) in his article uses an anecdote to explain how difficult it has been to find and preserve classic cars. The scrapping era (a period where many cars during the 1930’s and 1940’s were being thrown to junk yards for scrap metal), he explains, eliminated a lot of cars after World War II and so a lot of people appreciate these cars because they survived through the sands of time we know as history (Schultz, 2014). Many practice simply observing them and their aesthetic because they understand and empathize the journey they went through to maintain existence. These cars survived what would seem like a genocide of vehicles after World War II, which was for the purpose of bringing about new models in the years that were to come. For car enthusiasts and car club members, the eradication known as the scrapping era was a warning that the history that these cars were immersed in, was on the verge of being erased alongside these cars. The preservation of these cars then became not just a salvation of classic cars but instead a salvation of a history on the brink of extinction. The cars themselves represent this preserved history of a post-World War II America and are valued so dearly because of this. Therefore, the practice of showing the car’s aesthetics was created in a mutual appreciation for them, which answers why these practices came to be.

Additionally, the community formed through the car event is a display of the car club’s value of community. In the video, the focus turns from the cars in order of model and year to the club members in their respective stands with each socializing and conversing about what would appear to be topics related to cars. The video plays hip hop and funk music in the background while showing the rows of classic cars and then turns to the conversing car club members. Bright’s (1998) explanation of the relationship between lowriders and Chicano culture can best explain why this is so. As an anthropologist, she concluded in her research that cars aid in the self-identification of members of the community as they hold their own shared meanings (Bright, 1998). These shared meanings are what create common ground for socializing and, according to the propinquity effect, these shared meanings are what aid in communities being formed due to the shared understandings of what these cars represent. In other words, since these members of the culture were all familiar with the same symbols, in this case cars, they form bonds much more easily than if they did not have familiar understandings of cars. When observed from an anthropologist’s point of view, the practices of this car club are like other car clubs because each share the same interpretations of the cars and their importance to their respective identities. This perspective also answers why these practices came into existence in my discourse community.

Furthermore, this explanation is especially true when the historical context of the origins of lowriding and the conditions of America are taken into consideration. Tatum (2011) provides that after World War II Hispanic veteran and immigrants used their mechanical skills as income by using them to work in repair and auto body shops and eventually these veterans and immigrants started to modify their cars to exhibit their skills in auto body work (Tatum, 2011). This became a trend and then soon became a popular practice with non-mechanics. When, everyone wanted to show their cars, they started organizing clubs. The Imperials car club is one of the first to begin in Southern California, so as an effect to their formation, hundreds of other clubs came to be. Their practices in car showing, while also serving as a show of their cars’ aesthetics attesting to their skill sets in exterior modification, is what has united them through the decades. These shared understandings of cars are what led to the preservation of these practices and the communities it has formed are its effect. The history behind car clubs are in itself the explanation to how the practices came to be. Holtz (1975) can attest to this because they depict the same practice of lowriding in 1975 that is identical to the lowriding practices today. Except today these practices are not limited to just Chicanos as it was in 1975, contrary to what Bright (1998) suggests. Today these practices have remained the same but have expanded beyond just Chicano culture. Members of other cultures like African-Americans have adopted these practices as well, and this fact is evidence of the shared understanding that aids in community formation and goes beyond just community; it reaches to a cultural level and this evolution supports that car club practices were formed for their respective purposes under certain political contexts. The political contexts were a political reconstruction of the U.S. government after World War II and this is a shared history amongst not just Chicanos but all Americans per se. The cars themselves represent this shared history because as the practices of lowriding were being formed, America was undergoing political changes that were experienced by its citizens. The shared history and the shared understandings of what these cars represent are what aid in community formation- which is evident in my primary research as the car club members converse about their cars. But this influence has evolved from being a practice of few to a practice of many from varying cultures. The practicing of lowriding exists today but is now widely practiced by people of other cultures, not just Chicanos, and is practiced still because it celebrates the shared history that the cars represent. Hence, car practices exist even today because it doesn’t just show the car’s aesthetics and owner’s skillset, it celebrates the history in which the practices were born.

In addition, Minderler (2012) explains the steps to get into a car club which follow similar steps as the ones described by Holtz (1975). First, it involves communicating to a member or owner about membership and then they eventually start attending events and becoming involved (Minderler, 2012). To initiate this involves a shared appreciation for the cars that are membered in the club which leads to the community being formed. Cars in turn become a way to form community through interactions. Since cars aid in community formation and aid indirectly to entire cultures being self-identified, cars themselves are associated with culture by the members of the respective cultures, thus becoming a car culture. This explains how these practices have come to be now. Best (2006) describes that to analyze car culture would be to describe the cultures it influences. This is a very important viewpoint because it acknowledges that so many people have associated cars with their own culture that it has itself become its own culture surrounded by its respective practice across the different types of car clubs, which answers why car practices are the way they are today because it expanded beyond just practices amongst certain groups to rituals across members of a self-identified culture. This is profoundly noticeable in my primary research as members from different car clubs converse to each other and share their similar understandings of their classic cars.

Moreover, Wollen and Kerr (2002) have gone into depth in the art cars have influenced. Cars within cultures have had such a profound influence on art and these pieces of art reflect that influence on society. Art has become an explication of the influence cars and automobiles have had upon all society. This is evident not just in the paintings that are exemplified in Wollen and Kerr’s work, but also in my primary research. The cars themselves are an art form as they have illustrations created by the artist. One having an illustration of an Aztlan warrior which expressed that person’s heritage. The cars have not just influenced art but have become an art, an art that has influenced society by being a form of expression: an outlet. Therefore, this car club has these respective practices because of their profound effects in car appreciation and forming community that has went beyond just sub groups and has itself been manifested into its own culture of appreciation due to its historical background and is then not limited to just this discourse community but all discourse communities that share this culture’s ideals.

**Conclusion**

As I’ve mentioned previously, my research suggests many points; one being that cars have been made to be its own culture because of its association and partaking in the self-identification of cultures- such as Chicano culture- and goes beyond just my discourse community instead this research expands to a general process for car clubs and car enthusiasts. The fact that, in this research, the Imperials Car Club does not view their cars as just a means of transportation, but rather machines of art and history- as seen through both the articles and the video- demonstrates that these automobiles are more symbolic than functioning objects. Since this is the case, cars become more than hunks of metal, but novelties meant to be preserved that- in turn- preserve their histories. The scrapping era’s extinction of old modeled vehicles made car enthusiasts realize the significance of these cars because of their survived battles against time and history. What we get from this survival is a burning appreciation for these cars and, not only is it a grand appreciation for them, it is a form of expression that aids in defining one’s culture. Lowriders for the Imperials Car Club is an art form that contains their history and- in this respect- defines them. However, it is also its effects that make it a cultural symbol. Many of the members and even outside members, share the meanings of these symbolic cars and this shared understanding is what unites them. Cars lie the foundation for these interactions to take place and, thus, lie the foundation for whole communities to be formed. This effect of community formation is what insists that cars have their own culture when instead it is only that the cars aid in community formation and expand entire cultures, as a result. However, this can be interpreted very differently. The practices of lowriding have changed quite a bit since their origination and these changes may result in other findings. But more research needs to be done to understand how these changes affect this “car culture”. For now, all that can be- truly- said is that cars remain more than forms of transportation and are instead symbols that aid in community formation and, therefore, are tools to cultural self-identification.

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