“Vetting” the American Dream: Nostalgia, Social Capital and Corvette Communities

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

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Summer Semester 2017
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my father, Dr. T.N. Layne III, a true southern gentleman who introduced me to the exciting world of sports cars. I am honored to now have the second Ph.D. in the family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank a number of people for their influence and support in helping me to complete this dissertation and the doctoral program. A huge thank you to my loving husband Mark, who has given me endless support and encouragement throughout the research process. I could not ask for a better partner in life or a better car rally partner. I would like to thank my young daughter Olivia who has been patient with me while understanding that I had to balance being a mother, professor, and a graduate student during this journey. Thank you to my mother, Peggy Layne who is always willing to read my work and offer me encouragement. I owe my love of learning to her. I would like to thank my stepson Joey D'Antonio for assisting me during the research process with his knowledge and love of cars. Thanks also to my stepson Nick D'Antonio who helped me buy my first Corvette.

I would further like to thank those that helped directly in the process of the dissertation. I owe so much of what I have learned about sociological research to Dr. Amy Best, a wonderful mentor whose professionalism and poise are unsurpassed among academics I have worked with. Thank you to Dr. Guagnano for his early influence and encouragement in the doctoral program that guided me to this research topic. I also thank Dr. Laurie Meamber for her business and marketing perspective that added great breadth to this dissertation.

I would also like to give a big thanks to all of the Corvette community members and enthusiasts that were willing to participate in my study. I hope I was able to give an honest portrayal of this wonderful, warm community of people and the love they have for America and the greatest American sports car.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Generations of the Corvette: Models of the Corvette that were produced during a specific time period in the production history of the vehicle. Each generation is identified through body style and aesthetics as well as technological advancements and engine options.

C1 Generation Corvette……1953-1962

C2 Generation Corvette…….1963-1967

C3 Generation Corvette……1968-1982

C4 Generation Corvette…….1984-1996

C5 Generation Corvette…….1997-2004

C6 Generation Corvette…….2005-2013

C7 Generation Corvette…….2014-present

Car Rally: a motorsport leisure activity that is done on a public road with a street legal car. Two people are needed, a driver and a navigator. The object is to follow pre-printed road instructions by searching for clues along the route indicated. The navigator will write down the answers to clues as the driver focuses on safely and swiftly driving the car through the designated route. The winner is often based on the best time completion, most accurate mileage, and correct answers to the rally clues.

Front Engine: an automotive design where a front -wheel drive layout places both the internal combustion engine and driven road wheels at the front of the vehicle.

Garage Queens: a rarely driven car that is in mint condition and kept in the garage. It is usually covered and only taken out in beautiful weather for a drive.

Gearheads: Someone who is obsessed with cars and is very knowledgeable about how to modify and fix them.

L88 Corvette: A special order, ultra high performance Corvette. This was a factory racing option package that could be ordered from Chevrolet on new Corvettes. The L-88 option was only available from 1967 through 1969 models.

NCCC: A non-profit, all volunteer organization founded in 1959. The organization consists of 250 clubs in 16 regions of the United States and promotes interest in Corvette ownership and fellowship activities surrounding the car.

NCRS: National Corvette Restoration Society. A non-profit organization founded in 1974. The organization includes members who are dedicated to preservation and restoration of Corvettes. They are also committed to preserving Corvette history.

'Three on a Tree' (aka Three on a Column): a term used for cars produced from 1939 to mid -1970s. A three- speed manual transmission whose gearshift levers are on the steering column.

Z06: a model of Corvette that offers a higher performance engine. The generation models that offered the ZO6 option include:

C2 (1963) Z06	C6 (2006-2013)
C5 (2001-2005)	C7 (2014-)

ABSTRACT

"VETTING" THE AMERICAN DREAM: NOSTALGIA, SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CORVETTE COMMUNITIES

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This research investigates the social organization of Corvette clubs and their membership in order to examine the wind of social change in community structures in American society during the period following industrial expansion. Specifically, this project examines the decline of traditional communities based on social ties formed through locale or productive work that have been replaced with communities based on common interests centered on consumption and leisure practice. Fragmentation of social ties among neighbors, families, and work, combined with the decline of participation in voluntary associations, reflect intensifying individualism. In spite of this age of social disconnection, the desire to find meaning and purpose through collective life remains. Today, much of the American individual's social life occurs in relationships that are mediated by markets and products that are consumed individually and collectively. This ascendance of leisure and the expansion of consumer markets as core social institutions in modern life offer opportunity structures for social connections and involvement for

informal groups of people with similar interests. Building off America's preoccupation with cars as status symbols that are representative of progress, mobility, and individuality, this research explores the social world of Corvette owners. The cultural significance of the Corvette as America's sports car is reflected in this mixed methods study of a brand community and its role in creating social capital and civic engagement for its members. The Corvette community reflects a strong social network built around the mystique and history of the car and is organized by rituals of consumption and productive activity that construct identity and cement relationships among fellow car enthusiasts. Early life experience and sentiments of nostalgia and patriotism are important in this car culture as they are a means by which the car becomes valuable to the owner as an individual, and in turn, strengthen the social ties that knit this community together. The subjective meaning of the car as related to generational influence, consumer advertising, aspirations, and collective identity will be explored in order to understand the consumer's relationship with this cultural icon. Membership based around the emotional affect and sentiments produced by the Corvette will serve as a basis of analysis for consumer objects as potential liaisons for renewed civic engagement and social forms of citizenship in broader society.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Cars and American Identity

Perhaps the most influential mode of mobility and symbol of modernity in the last century is the automobile. The history of cars in America tells a story of capitalism and technological progress into a mass consumer society. It is a story of social class and mobility told through the lens of advertising and aestheticism. The consumption of automobiles reflects a central tenet of American culture and has helped to define human relationships and community life. The environmental and ecological concerns about this technological invention have been studied more recently as a force of destruction in both the developing and industrialized world that yields a host of global problems. Yet, America's fascination with the preservation and consumption of cars as fundamental to everyday life persists through faster, safer, and more complex technology that now reaches people on a global scale, more so than ever before. Each of these contrasting orientations on automobile consumption at least agree on one thing; cars are deeply embedded in our culture and we as consumers share a relationship with them.

Cars are objects that exist in the present and the past. They symbolize the multiple relationships Americans have formed from family bonds via road trip vacations, to a romance ignited at drive-in movies (or in the back seat for that matter). In this sense, cars are objectifications of intimate social encounters. Cars signify population movement from the center of cities to the suburbs, facilitating our love affair with fast food, and also

represent rites of passage for teenagers into adulthood. All have been memorialized in popular culture films and music.

Through decades of technological innovation, modification of body style and engine, cars reflect a story about our cultural and material history while each new generation of production and style hints at where the future of our society is headed. Mid-twentieth century prosperity was marked by a rise in consumerism centered on the automobile. According to Conley (2009:40); "One company profited from, and embodied this newfound consumer demand and concomitant wealth generation more than any other: General Motors." The embeddedness of GM in American society has remained a cultural force of timeless values in the market place and a symbol of tradition. The GM Corporation saw the great potential of an untapped market abroad as early as the 1920s and was one of the earliest industries to become transnational. Domestically, GM's business had an enormous impact on the American economy. In a 1953 address to Congress, GM president Charles Wilson famously stated, "As goes General Motors, so goes the nation" (Jones 2015). American economic life was significantly driven by the success of this corporation for almost half a century. Sharing industrial dominance with companies such as Standard Oil and General Electric, GM invoked Americans' sense of manifest destiny and unlimited possibility (Mufson 2009).

GM's iconic status as an integral part of the American economy faced its demise in 2009 when the corporation filed the fourth largest bankruptcy in U.S. history. The

federal government bailout of GM was unprecedented and was perceived as a necessity for preserving the national economy and in some ways, bailing out America.[1]

The Corvette, perhaps more than any other GM automobile is an emblem of the American dream. The Chevrolet Corvette was introduced in the marketplace in 1953 as "America's sports car." The Corvette was introduced to the market in response to the desire of WWII veterans returning from Europe who admired the speed and aesthetics of sports cars they had seen abroad. The Corvette offered an original, American sports car that allowed consumers to exercise both their patriotism and their affluence at a time when the middle class was expanding and patriotism was a core idea. The purchase of this two- seater vehicle also signaled independence, success, and leisure for Americans who could reward themselves in an era of the "good life" defined by mass consumption.[2]

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[1] While the GM bailout is credited by the Obama administration, operational restructuring of GM had been in the works for years prior to the bankruptcy in order to save the corporation. Chief Executive Rick Wagoner was instrumental in reorganization efforts such as scaling back traditional retiree benefits and cutting hourly pay by half for new UAW employees prior to the bankruptcy. Jay Alix, a corporate expert on bankruptcy designed a split of GM into the "New Company" that would survive based on reliable brands (Chevy, Cadillac, GMC, and Buick) and the "Old Company" that would be liquidated under bankruptcy (Hummer, Saturn, Saab, and Pontiac). For more on this, see Dan Bigman's article, "How GM was Really Saved: The Untold Story of the Most Important Bankruptcy in U.S. History" Forbes magazine November 8, 2003 and Paul Ingrassia's (2010) *Crash Course: The American Automobile Industry's Road from Glory to Disaster.*

[2] The term "good life" did not apply to all Americans in the mid-twentieth century. For skilled labor, this was a period of unprecedented advancement. During this time, women were largely excluded from public life. Meanwhile, cars offered freedom on the open road for whites, African Americans in the Jim Crow south often experienced hostility and even violence during travel. African American motorists referred to the *Negro Traveler's Green Book* (published from 1936-1966 during Jim Crow era). The guide helped blacks navigate hotels, gas stations, and restaurants that would serve them while traveling long distances. For more on this, see Paul Gilroy's "Driving While Black," and Mark Foster's "In the Face of Jim Crow: Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel, and Outdoor Leisure, 1890-1945" *Journal of Negro History* 84:2 (Spring 1999):130-149.

During the 1950s, the success of the auto industry created labor stability in the private sector via pensions, benefits, and labor unions while it democratized class participation in the housing market, transforming millions of families from renters to owners. More people than ever before in history could now achieve the American Dream through both work and consumption. The construction of suburban life was underway and with it, new forms of community life that included neighborhoods where informal relations were formed based on similar values, types of labor, and leisure pursuits (Cohen 2003; Rugh 2008).

The car, like other objects that are important to us (homes, photographs, family heirlooms) connect us to the world, to each other, and often serve as markers of memory to a certain time in our life. Cars have long reflected personal identity and social class. The paradox of consumption in an era often dubbed "late capitalism," includes items purchased not just for fulfilling basic material needs of survival, but fulfilling social-psychological needs (Conley 2009). Items purchased for pleasure, not necessity are considered "positional goods" where the value of the product depends on the fact that others don't consume it (Conley 2009:85). The Corvette's unique history, combined with its annual limited production in the market place help to create its mythical status and its rarity. The myth of the Corvette as a consumer object serves as a unit of analysis for this study. Through the synthesis of different literatures in both the social sciences and consumer marketing, the focus of the research will be two pronged; exploring how the Corvette represents an identity object and provides collective membership of consumers in the Corvette brand community.

According to Hewer and Brownlie (2007:107), individual brands and traditions of car models often demand an act of agency to not only "stand out from the crowd, but more importantly to affiliate with others." The consumption of cars enables the ability (for some) to collectively experience the relational aspect of person to object and (through use of this object), connects person to person. Among its owners, the Corvette is a sacred object with emotional value. It is through an emotional register that fellow Corvette owners forge ties. The collective conscious, a term borrowed here from Emile Durkheim to capture the sense of unity that revitalizes a group shared by car owners is the foundation of this research project. This collective conscious serves to rebuild community based values and restructure community life through leisure practice.

This dissertation focuses on Corvette and community life. Despite the inception of the automobile industry as instrumental in the golden era of prosperity and consumption in the U.S., the impact of the automobile on social life has been mitigated by increased government regulation, environmental concerns, foreign competition, and urbanization, meanwhile transforming community life itself. The automobile ultimately offers mobility, and with this mobility, the individual gains freedom, while loosening his individual ties to community (Derber 2012). Many social scientists have suggested that over the last century, our loyalty to community has been replaced with self-interest, leaving everyday life transformed into isolated, private pursuits of leisure (television, internet), in which we engage in fewer social activities with others. Social psychologist Sherry Turkle (2011) studies how our devices and online personalities are redefining human connection and communication. Turkle's argument is compelling as it is cause for

consideration of how we view ourselves in relation to others through technology. Turkle (2011) argues we are more connected digitally, while socially and physically, we are more alone. So what does the future of social life in America look like?

The Decline of Community Life in America

The atrophy of social life described by Eitzen (2004) is a result of a mobile society that is not strongly rooted in one place. He describes a labor market where employers and employees are no longer loyal to one another and relationships with neighbors, coworkers, and friends are considered temporary. Derber (2012:92) defines this social decline in community and increased preoccupation with self-interest as "double-trouble." Our less secure attachments are characterized by the institutional changes in work and family. Today, 28 million people work from home (Eitzen 2004) while many jobs are impermanent and temporary, leaving less space for strong bonds formed through the workplace that extend to the private sphere of personal and leisure relationships. The technology that characterizes most contemporary jobs encourages social isolation. While we are in the midst of an unprecedented communication revolution, the paradox of increased non-verbal interaction between people has dramatically reduced intimacy and face to face interaction (Derber 2012). We communicate (often in cyberspace) yet we are less socially connected to each other. Sociologist Christian Fuchs (2014) takes a critical look at this perspective of lacking social connection in his research of social media. Fuchs (2014:2) argues that social media as a form of communication is part of a new participatory culture where "everyone is contributing to the content." He asserts that platforms like Twitter and Facebook offer

new public spheres of democracy where collective action can be effective in organizing social movements and communities. However, the reality is that the social world online can be illusive in people's perceptions of power and influence in society.

The second institution contributing to the decline of community is marriage. Marriage has dissolved in such large proportions that we trust each other less, and have far less social support systems than we used to (Derber 2012). More people are living alone, thus intensifying self-reliance. Even where we live, we isolate ourselves from one another via gated communities and the shift of activities indoors. One in three Americans has never spent an evening with a neighbor, while suburban neighborhoods in particular are devoid of common meeting places for social interaction (Eitzen 2004). According to Derber (2012) the lack of community ties and decline in loyalty has prompted extreme attention seeking behavior also known as hyper- individuality in which we are consumed by our own ego and far less concerned with others. These traits do not lend themselves to either democracy or community.

The study of a consumer brand community is timely as social scientists have grown increasingly concerned about the lost sense of community and decline in civic participation due to a loss of trust, the rise of individualism, and lack of social engagement with voluntary associations and informal groups (Arai and Pedlar 2003; Burr, Caro, and Moorehead 2002; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006; Putnam 1995; Skocpol 2003; Smith-Lovin 2004; Uslaner 1998). So what does this lack of social engagement mean for American society?

A Lack of Civic Membership and Trust

Several indicators suggest a decline in the very social fabric of our society. First, America's circle of confidants has shrunk considerably in the last three decades. McPherson et al. (2006) found that peoples' core discussion networks (a set of close, routinely contacted people whom we confide in with personal matters for social support) have dissipated as we have moved inward to smaller support networks centered on spouses and partners. This means fewer contacts created through clubs, neighbors, and organizations outside of the home. Our social lives have become more insular as we retreat into ourselves. Putnam (2000:2) calls this "bowling alone." Second, a dramatic decline in associational memberships has hindered civic participation. The General Social Survey noted overall socializing trends from 1974-2008 and found there to be possible social network contraction (Marsden 2012). This trend included the lowest frequency of contact to be between neighbors and the highest frequency of contact to be between relatives. The GSS data from 1985-2003 notes a large rise in adults saying they do not discuss important matters with anyone. Many contemporary social scientists agree that this change is not good for our society and threatens an individual's social ties that can lead to civic engagement, local political action, and democratic participation in general (Putnam 2000; McPherson et al. 2006; Skocpol 2003). Similar to Putnam's findings, Skocpol (2003) noted that associational forms have changed since the mid-twentieth century. Federated memberships that once dominated civic life, like the Masons, American Legion, business groups, and the PTA have dramatically declined. These federations fostered democracy as they brought together cross-class acquaintances and had elected members where ordinary citizens could exercise public power (Skocpol

2003). Today, these groups have been replaced by associations run by paid professionals where members pay dues, but are not active. The result is, membership in formal networks often exist in name only. AARP is a classic example of this network membership- one pays dues, receives a monthly magazine, and a 10% discount off at various hotels and restaurants.

Third, the shift of our leisure time has narrowed toward ourselves and immediate family and away from the wider community. Data from Simply Map's 2013 survey on leisure activity reveals that an average of 1.5% of Americans are members of a civic organization. The results of this survey including the fifty states reflects little to no variance in percentage of civic membership per state within the U.S. So, where a person lives in the U.S. has virtually no impact on their probability of membership in a civic organization. This data further supports Putnam's argument that Americans are experiencing large scale social changes that may be altering patterns of interpersonal relationships, and ultimately the fabric of how we define community and democratic citizenship.

A fourth part of the disconnection of American society is based on the fact that we just don't trust each other as much as we used to. Trust in other people has fallen from 58% in 1960 to 35% in the mid-1990s (Uslaner 1998:441). One indicator of our declining trust is the decline in civic participation in social groups- we volunteer less, vote less, and give a smaller share of our gross national product to charity (Putnam 1995). Social data shows that people who trust others are more likely to participate in almost all of these activities (Brehm and Rahn 1997). Arai and Pedlar (2003) distinguish between thick trust

and thin trust within certain types of communities. Thick trust is defined by intensive daily contact between people. Tonnies ([1887]1957) categorized the social ties of *Gemeinschaft* as a community that was tight knit and based on shared values and morals. These societies breed thick forms of trust internally, but distrust of the wider society. Thin trust is found in *Gesellschaft* that Tonnies ([1887]1957) categorized as a society where there are formal values, indirect interactions, and ties that allow overlapping and interlocking networks of voluntary associations. Thin trust expands social integration as it accommodates for a modern, pluralistic society where not everyone is bound by the same morality.

The Meaning of Leisure and Consumption

This research will look to the institutions of leisure and consumer markets in order to address the problem of social disengagement. Opportunity structures within these institutions may offer solutions to the lack of trust we have with one another through the stimulation of shared cultural values in brand communities. Cultural meaning and identity are carried through the objects that become sacred to consumers. In today's society, consumer objects have often replaced the relational meanings that were once formed within religious and family institutions. In their study of the Apple Newton brand community, Muniz and Schau (1995) find that the brand is a critical element in the relation between religion and modernity. While participation in organized religion has waned during the last century, the human need for religious affiliation endures. The modern form of religious motifs is found through consumer objects that "enchant the world of the consumer" (Muniz and Schau 1995:739). Similar to the communal nature of

religion, brand communities provide a structure where shared values and beliefs are reified through consumer to consumer relations (Muniz and Schau 1995). The mystical aspect surrounding certain consumer objects may reflect how the human need for religion has adapted to a consumer-centered world. Cova (1997:302) suggests that religion is not on the wane in postmodern society, but has changed in form: "less institutional, more improvised, but always present as a social link" for people. The meaning of consumer objects (such as the Corvette) are endowed not only with religious qualities, but also provide social links to others past and present, to childhood experiences, fortifying emotional ties to the past, and sentiments that are shared by these consumer community members.

In addition to consumption, leisure practice has become more relevant in everyday life as it provides organizational structure to our activities and shapes many of our social ties with others. The opportunity to engage in collective activity with others through leisure practice may provide the social capital that many Americans have lost in a world of online social networks, Ipods, and chat rooms. Putnam's (1990:21) seminal work on the decline of social capital in America over the last forty years, associates "social capital a conceptual cousin of community." Within dense social networks, one finds trust and reciprocity that help to lubricate social life. From these dense networks, a community arises, and in turn, civic engagement with the larger community is renewed. Hemingway (1999) argues that for leisure to contribute to the formation of social capital, there needs to be participation, communication, autonomy of choice, and development of new ideas, all of which are characteristic of democratic citizenship.

Rediscovering Citizenship

The concept of citizenship is quite complex and the definition varies within the social science literature. Therefore, I will specify the type of citizenship on which my research focuses. According to Conover, Crewe, and Searing (1991), citizenship is a fundamental identity that helps situate the individual in society. In his classic work, T H Marshall ([(1950) 2002:30] divided the concept of citizenship into three parts:

> Civil (rights to individual freedoms of liberty, speech, faith, thought, and justice), political (the right to participate in exercise of political power), and social (the right to economic welfare and sharing to the fullest in social heritage and living the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society).

Marshall's concept of social citizenship most closely relates to my research of Corvette owners while the concepts of civil and political citizenship are secondary. The fundamental relations explored in this study form around social interactions between the individual and other members of his/her community as opposed to the individual and his/her relations to the government (Conover, Crewe, and Searling 1991). The concept of social citizenship is embedded in Putnam's (2000) "neo Tocquevillean" position on civic communitarian citizenship. In this version of citizenship, "the social responsibility primarily falls on the shoulders of civil society, not the state" (Isin and Turner 2002:166). Considered a romantic notion by critics, this view of citizenship contends that a strong civil society (replete with citizens active in voluntary associations) will lead to a strong state.

In addition to social science perspectives of citizenship, the marketing literature that helps frame my study yields emerging ideas that attempt to connect citizenship and culture in the context of consumer society (Stevenson 2002). The literature situates the

modern citizen within the institution of markets where the economic shift from labor to consumption is a site for both identity and agency (Firat and Dholakia 1998). Contemporary theory suggests that marketing activities serve as a dominant mode of discourse and social activity while the institution of religion has become secularized and family has retreated into the private sphere. Firat and Dholakia (2016:3) suggest that the central institution of markets has defined modernity, thus transforming the "citizen" from early modernity into the "consumer" of late modernity. The relationship between consumerism and citizenship is one that is debated within the scholarship on marketing.[3] For the purpose of this study, I will be discussing citizenship from the perspective of living in a consumer society, focusing on whether consumer groups can enhance citizenship through leisure activities and consumption.

In this research project, the consumption of the Corvette brand is analyzed not just as a material object, but one that carries symbolic and iconic value to its members. Through theoretical frameworks of consumer culture and social capital, the sacred meaning of the Corvette as a shared, collective experience in the community will be explored. Sentiments of nostalgia and patriotism, along with early life experiences and generational influence will be examined as possible shared values that create social cohesion for the community.

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[3] Some scholars acknowledge that consumerism has not replaced citizenship, but modified it into a form of "cosmopolitan citizenship" where consumers exercise civic participation through ecological and political agendas. See Stevenson (2002) "Consumer Culture, Ecology and the Possibility of Cosmopolitan Citizenship." This alternate viewpoint is not the focus of my study but is acknowledged as part of the contemporary debate within the field.

The social science literature concerning institutional changes shaping the twenty-first century will be analyzed in order to understand the current complexities of human interaction and social attachments. The current trend of American social life toward isolation, mistrust, and decreased participation in civic life suggests that we are in the midst of a monumental social restructuring of how we form relationships, care for others, and locate meaning in our personal lives. It is proposed that a new form of social involvement surrounding consumption may be able to provide a sense of private, personal meaning through leisure groups as well as renewed civic engagement in public life.

In order to examine the Corvette brand community and its relevance to forming social ties through leisure and consumption, several aspects of the brand community will be discussed in this dissertation. First, a review of the relevant literature will provide context for the research questions through the use of social science and consumer marketing literature. Literature on community, social capital and leisure are included in Chapter two as they are integral to the Corvette lifestyle. American car culture is discussed along with nostalgia and consumer culture literature. Chapter three explains my selection of research approach, my methodology, and what experiences helped to formulate the research questions. Here, the significance of my study is explained in broader terms as a relevant contribution to social groups in society. Chapter four is an analysis of nostalgia, a sentiment that is measured both quantitatively and qualitatively as a value that carries emotional meaning for the car collectors within this brand community. A look at the generational influence of Baby Boomers and car culture,

including Chevrolet advertising help to round out this section. Chapter five will provide demographic information that was gathered of the Corvette owner sample. This chapter will answer the questions, who are the Corvette owners? What are the value systems that lead them to participate as members in this car community? Chapter six discusses the sentiment of patriotism as central to what this brand community is all about. How this sentiment is formed in the hearts and minds of Corvette owners, and how the car itself is a mythical symbol that facilitates expressions of patriotic sentiments through buying American and rituals connected to the flag and other national traditions. Chapter seven's discussion is centered on the social capital that is built within Corvette communities. Both personal relationships of couples and family are analyzed as well as the social networks that form from membership in the brand community. All of these relationships are fortified by the collective, philanthropic mission of Corvette clubs that engage with local communities in order to strengthen community ties and touch lives that are in need. The last chapter is a conclusion that addresses the contribution this research will make to American society in a broader context during a time period in our culture that seems to be experiencing social atrophy. Where do we go from here, and how will brand communities like the Corvette be a part of it? These are questions I will attempt to answer.

CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review will include discussion of the social relations and free associations that are formed within the institution of leisure. Specifically, the leisure activity of car collecting and the construction of meaning created through values of consumption and nostalgia will be used as a basis to study the brand community of Corvette car collectors. The Corvette car community will be evaluated as central to opportunities for renewed civic engagement and citizenship in a broader community context. In order to investigate this brand community in depth, the literature review explores the following; a) community and social capital; b) leisure as a primary institution for organizing activity in contemporary American society; c)the significance of American car culture as defined within both sociological and consumer culture literature; d) nostalgia as a sentiment that creates both personal meaning and constructs community; and e) brand community as structurally significant to the social transformations of community in postmodern society. Each of these themes inform the other, and are central to understand how the concept of social capital is both a resource and result of the Corvette brand community facilitating renewed civic engagement and citizenship for its members.

Community and Social Capital

For over a century, sociologists have been concerned with the study of community ties. The concept of community has often been used as a unit of analysis for American society itself. Tocqueville's nineteenth century observations of American life found a sense of community to be central to American culture. He observed America as unique in being, "the only nation in the world whose citizens think constantly of using the right of association in civil life and thus have managed to enjoy all the benefits which civilization offers" ([1840] 2003). Volunteerism and community involvement have been considered hallmarks of the American ethos (Burr, Caro, and Moorehead 2002). Perhaps these conclusions about American life stem from democracy itself, where citizens are not bound by aristocratic rule but seek to have a voice for themselves and others around them. These distinct American values that encourage democracy and citizenship will prove integral to my analysis of the brand community of car collectors.

According to Putnam (2000), America is perhaps best characterized as a nation of "joiners" more so than any other nation. Skocpol (2003) contends that our nation's identity as joiners has changed since the 1960s from being very active both socially and politically in federal associations (PTA, American Legion, VFW) to current memberships in associations in which active participation is almost non-existent. In other words, our contemporary idea of membership in community groups may exist in name only. These changes in the social connections formed through community have been studied by sociologists as a result of changes in industrial labor and urbanization.

Classic sociological works such as Wirth's (1938) theory on urbanism and Simmel's ([1903] 2010) essay on metropolitan life provide a foundation for the

adaptations that individuals in modern society make as outside structural forces and institutions rearrange themselves in importance to our lives. Wirth (1938:20) stated:

> Distinctive features of the urban mode of life have often been described sociologically as consisting of the substitution of secondary for primary contacts, the weakening of bonds of kinship, and the declining social significance of the family, the disappearance of the neighborhood, and the undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity.

Wirth was speaking about the informal contacts and interactions that dominate urban society and are sustained by the composition of these spaces. Urbanization encourages individualism and moves people away from bonds with people of similar morality. The collective morality of a community begins to wane and people focus on themselves in order to survive in these urban complexes, (what Tonnies identified with a society characterized by Gesellschaft). Wirth's mention of secondary groups serves as a prelude to Granovetter's (1973) theory of "weak ties" that are formed through loose, secondary associations with others. Granovetter (1973) found the strength of associational ties diffuses into opportunities for information, mobility, and community organization that may extend well beyond a person's locale. Hence, an individual can get ahead in an impersonal world by fostering ties with others trying to do the same.

The transition from close-knit communities based on kinship ties to a more pluralistic society defined by formal relationships is reflective of modernization in industrial society. Reisman (1961) described the changing character of Americans that developed as a result of the rising middle class and mass consumption following WWII. The individual who was once defined by tradition, (conforming to family values and the religious values of his childhood) now defined himself by the way others lived. Reisman

(1961) called this personal character "other directed." The "other directed" person is malleable to those around him in society and seeks emotional approval. Similar to Granovetter's 'weak ties,' Reisman recognized an individual's adaptability to the emerging twentieth century concept of communities through our contact with those who we have little in common with. It is this concept of how people maintain a sense of community amidst the bewilderment of a rapidly changing, plural society that forms the basis of my research. When family and tradition have dissolved and our existence is largely organized by our participation in consumer markets, how do people fulfill their basic human emotional and relational needs and form social connection and social capital?

What social capital is has been variously defined by social scientists. Social capital is defined by Lin (1999:30) as "investment in social relations with expected returns." Through investing in social networks (much like one would invest in the stock market), the individual is granted access to and use of resources embedded within the social networks (Lin 1999). The expected outcomes of involvement in the social networks can include "a flow of information about opportunities and choices otherwise not available" (Lin 1999:31). In addition, one's "social credentials" are enhanced as others in the network stand behind him and facilitate his access to resources (Lin 1999). Lastly, expressive needs such as reinforcement of identity through recognition/public acknowledgement and emotional support also explain how social capital is formed through the investment in these networks (Lin 1999). While there is debate among scholars as to the individual versus collective goods that are created through social

capital, most agree that these relational assets are often institutionalized to benefit both the collective and the individuals in the collective (Lin 1999). Hence, the reciprocity and mutual aid that shapes action within the collective provides a social incentive for membership and retention of the group. While Lin (1999) describes social capital as "social credentials," other social scientists show how social capital is beneficial in addressing social problems in community and social institutions.

Reportedly the most cited author of the 1990s, Robert Putnam's theory of social capital has been the most influential in the literature (Glover and Hemingway 2005) and also to my study on Corvette communities. Putnam (1993) argues that the most important form of social network is the voluntary association. In particular, leisure-based voluntary associations can serve as primary sites for generating social capital and social cohesion. Through comprehensive study, Putnam (2000) traces the decline in civic participation over the last fifty years, revealing a loss of social capital in people's lives. Putnam (2000:20) defines social capital as "the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties." He found that the Baby Boomer Generation were the biggest "givers" of time and resources to volunteering and philanthropic organizations compared to any other generation (Putnam 2000). Today, the Boomers (who have reached retirement age), are representative of a stage in the life course where people are economically comfortable, personally content, successful, and in a position to give back to the larger community. This study of Corvette owners reflects the relevance of these demographics of age, education, and income levels as significant in both club membership and productive civic engagement.

For Putnam (2000), the average American in recent decades is not isolated civically or socially, but is simply more engaged as friends and not as citizens (Putnam 2000). Time spent with others has shifted toward ourselves and family and away from the wider community. Putnam (2000:19) describes the important distinction between "bonding and bridging" forms of social capital. The bonding form of social capital is more exclusive, inward looking, and is good for encouraging reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity. While the bonding form of capital can provide social support, the individual's opportunities may be limited to just one close-knit group with a narrow set of values and information (similar to the tradition based society that Reisman described). In contrast, bridging social capital represents associations that are outward looking and link us to external assets and provide information diffusion. This form of social capital is often described as the weak ties that link people to distant acquaintances that can be good for "getting ahead" (Putnam 2000:23). These dense networks can provide support for members of the larger community as well as constitute stronger civic engagement and social well-being. The social networks that are created for the benefit of the members provide channels to recruit people for good deeds and foster norms of reciprocity. In other words, doing "with others" can encourage doing "for others" (Putnam 2000). The more people congregate with others, the more likely they are to develop a sense of community and a willingness to engage in collective action beyond the confines of their groups and neighborhood (Uslaner 1998). In the chapters to follow, we will see how membership in the Corvette community provides benefit to the individual and the group,

but also how club members' focus turns to contributing to the larger community through philanthropy and fundraising.

How one comes to be involved with a specific community often originates with self-interest or an activity that holds special meaning to the individual. In his seminal work on social theory, Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital relies heavily on rational choice theory from economics and the assumption that human action is motivated by self-interest. However, Coleman (1988) adds the context of social structures as instrumental in redirecting this self-interest to action that supports the interests of the collective. For Coleman (1988), social capital as always found in some aspect of a social structure (family, school, church, and secondary associations). These social structures are composed of resources that serve as capital assets for the individual and can be cumulative and transferrable to other relations and structures (Hemingway 1999). For example, relations formed through a club may lead to a job opportunity outside of the club. Therefore, social capital is action based and directs actors within these social relations. Coleman (1988) warns that unused social capital can be depleted of the opportunity and ability to use it. Therefore, consistent rituals of activity are required to maintain the resources and assets that the social capital provides. The construction of social capital is ultimately conceived of as a potential public good that is able to move outside of the immediate group to include other networks and social structures (Coleman 1988). Here is where renewed civic engagement and democratic citizenship are exercised as bi-products of the formation of individual social capital. Ironically, the formation of

the Corvette community that begins with personal interest becomes a social structure that expands to include the public good through philanthropic and recreational activities.

Contrasting with Coleman's premise, Bourdieu's (1984) treatment of social capital includes the role of social structures in reproducing patterns of power and inequality. He sees social capital not as something that is individually possessed, (like other forms of capital), but as the collective possession of those who are connected by social ties (Glover and Hemingway 2005). For Bourdieu (1984), social capital can be deliberately created through the construction of social ties and are considered investment strategies with the goal of establishing and reproducing social relationships. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that individuals bring pre-existing resources and assets to the group that may be deployed for the person's advantage and often result in the closure of social networks. This suggested exclusivity applies to the Corvette community as members are seldom allowed to join or participate unless they already own a Corvette. Hence, prior ownership and knowledge of the car's history and technological functionality are assets to establishing the social relationships involved in the group.

The search for community and bonding with others through leisure activity and consumption serves as a basis for my study. The social science literature reflects a strong correlation with leisure and the production of social capital (Bishop and Haggett 1986; Glover and Hemingway 2005; Hemingway 1999). According to Hemingway (1999:154), "the concept of social capital is grounded in a perspective that emphasizes the interconnectedness rather than the separateness of human activity and human goals." Therefore, social capital may be achieved through the pursuit of leisure activities where

common interests are exercised and perpetuated. Let us now look at the literature on the institution of leisure as predominant in forming and maintaining social relations.

Leisure

Like the study of the social changes that transformed communities during the twentieth century, the study of leisure reveals changes in labor, consumer markets, and allotment of time devoted to the pursuit of interests, hobbies, and recreation.

Early twentieth century reformers such as Jacob Riis and Jane Addams held a strong belief in the potential of recreation to enrich quality of life. “They recognized the connection between democracy and recreation as public good” (Arai and Pedlar 2003:186). In fact, leisure was considered a necessary part of development of the social self that was central to teaching proper citizenship (Duncan 1991). The concept of leisure as a foray to increased democratic citizenship and ultimately, a more stable, democratic society is one that is pervasive in the literature (Glover and Hemingway 2005; Hemingway 1999; Putnam 2000; Wilson 1980).

Contemporary leisure research emphasizes the “individual benefits, choices, and autonomy that arise from involvement” (Arai and Pedlar 2003:188). In fact, the technological advances of post-industrial society have created more opportunities for increased leisure time while the cultural attention to work and achievement shifts to status and taste as forms of identity (Goldman 1983; Wilson 1980). Wilson (1980:21) argues that, definitions of leisure vary according to an emphasis on “a portion of one’s time, or a quality of experience unconfined to particular times.” The way individuals in society make leisure choices is often determined by primary characteristics of income and

access to resources, family and home obligations, occupation, age, and gender (Wilson 1980). Csikszentmihalyi's (1981) classification of leisure is more subjective as he claims leisure has intrinsic meaning for its participants. Often, this intrinsic meaning is derived from material objects in our life and are reflective of our personal history. My research will include an evaluation of all the above characteristics as they are significant to determining individuals' motivation and involvement in group leisure activities.

Trends in leisure research reflect a decline in occupational community that once provided recreation for families and neighborhoods (Bell and Boat 1957; Coleman 1990; Frey and Dickens 1990; Glover and Hemingway 2005; Goldman 1983; Granovetter 1973; Putnam 2000; Wilson 1980). For example, early twentieth century corporate sponsored leisure such as that of Henry Ford provided organized activities such as employee picnics, dances, baseball games and outings that promoted sobriety and Christian values in order to maintain stable and productive machine workers (Currell 2005). Ford observed the leisure time of his employees and only those who adhered to his established policies would earn the five dollars a day wage desired by many. Ford's policies (and other corporate welfare programs) reflect how employee activities both in and outside of work were controlled by the company they worked for. For much of the mid-twentieth century, family leisure often included organized or weekend activities with co-workers and their families. Today, this idea of leisure has all but disappeared and been replaced with what Conley (2009:156) describes as "elsewhere", where "modern boundaries that we once took for granted have given way, crumbling under the force of family, economic and technological change." Relationships formed through the

workplace that extend to the private sphere are far less common today. In her book, "Gig Economy," Diane Mulcahy (2017:1) describes employment in the new millennium; "Gig economy includes consulting and contractor arrangements, part-time jobs, temporary assignments, freelancing, self-employment, side gigs, and on demand work." Mulcahey makes the argument that work is all encompassing and we shape other parts of our lives around it. Relationships that are formed within work spaces often tend to be ephemeral and leisure is found by taking time off in between gigs.

The development of leisure within the last century reflects the increased social significance of consumerism in American society. Consumption has gained traction as a source of pleasure, as opposed to a form of production or utility (Goldman 1983; Hirschle 2014; Wilson 1980). We now consume things based on the emotional affect they yield, as opposed to consumption out of need. Hirschle (2014) attempts to explain the proliferation of leisure consumption activities as informal social relations and a result of economic growth in society. He contends that "consumption as a mode of social and cultural action has come about as marketing has become a central institution in modern economies and replaced participation in religious services" (2014:1405). Similar to Bourdieu (1984), Hirschle claims that increased expenditures on affluent consumer products induces social changes in social action on a micro-level.

Leisure has been presented as both a secondary institution (Dumazdier 1974; Wilson 1980), measured by freedom from obligation, and a primary institution (Frey and Dickens 1990) that is defined by "elements of both freedom and obligation" (Frey and Dickens 1990:264). As American society advances further into post-industrialism, the

prominence of leisure as a primary institution is defined by the characteristics of its organized nature and its growing significance as an alternative for those in search of community or bonding with a social group (Frey and Dickens 1990). According to Goldman and Wilson (1977), the establishment of leisure as an organizational force in contemporary society has replaced family as a major provider of recreation experiences, and is subsequently rationalized. In addition, Hirschle (2014) found that religious institutions have increasingly been replaced with leisure consumption activities. I will argue that the functions and values of these traditional institutions of family and religion are deeply embedded in the contemporary institution of leisure through our intimate relationships with consumer objects. A look at the symbolic meaning of cars within American culture will reveal the intimate relations many of us have with this consumer object.

American Car Culture

Early sociologists George Simmel and Robert Park at the Chicago School of Sociology placed mobility at the center of their understanding of the world through analysis of movement within urban areas. Cresswell (2006:22) argues that mobility is a necessary social production for the modern world, surrounding other foundational geographical concepts such as space and place and is deeply implicated in the politics of modernity.

According to Sachs (1984:92), automobiles are a material representation of a culture:

> Far from being a mere means of transport, automobiles crystallize life plans and world images, needs and hopes, which in turn stamp the technical contrivance with a cultural meaning. In this interchange, culture and technology prove mutually reinforcing. Technology does not simply fall from the sky, rather, the

> aspirations of a society (or a class) combine with technical possibility to inject a bit of culture into the design like a genetic code. Yet, neither do lifestyle and desires emerge from the thin air of a culture; instead they coalesce around a given technology.

The industrial and social progress of our nation can be historically studied through the design of automobiles past and present. As Sachs states, not only are cars a material representation of our culture, they reveal our aspirations and shape our lifestyles. Often, we shape our values and desires around the cultural objects that are created for us in the market.

According to Heitmann 2008:3-4:

> The automobile and its related infrastructure transformed everyday life as well as our basic values. It is the job of the automotive stylist and the advertising people to induce those personal feelings inside of us so that we cannot live without the car of our dreams. Cars are also one measure of our identities. They provide hints to the world concerning our values, aspirations, and our present day economic situation.

In the United States, the aspirations of independence and freedom from want, both of which cars symbolize, resonate with particular force. The physical movement represented by the automobile is metaphorically linked to the promise of social mobility and ever-growing material abundance-expectations central to American life (Schulz, 2006).

Best (2006:14) argues that cars have never existed apart from the economic logic of modern life; “cars are first and foremost commodities.” Car culture reflects the historical relations of modern capitalist production and consumption (Best 2006). The duality of this technological invention has been studied more recently as a force of both production and destruction. Each of these contrasting schools of thought on automobile consumption acknowledges that; cars are deeply embedded in American culture.

The literature on car culture will focus on four themes; a) identity construction, b) gendered activity, c) objects of emotional affect and d) a community for social networks. Each of these themes is relevant to the Corvette owners and communities in my research.

Identity Construction

Car consumption is one of the earliest identifiers of class distinction. Belk and Associates (1984) reveal that children as young as second grade, (boys and girls) can associate different houses and Chevrolet models with owners. Sociologist Mimi Sheller (2004) found that entry into car culture begins as early as age two, with an ability to identify different kinds of brands of motor vehicles. Brand loyalty is something that may be formed in childhood through family owned cars that manifests itself in the construction of identity during adulthood (Dannefer 1980; Motichka 2003; Schindler and Holbrook 2003). Later, these references to early childhood experiences will be discussed as significant with regard to nostalgia and car consumption that find car collecting to be a very gendered and age related activity.

In his study of H2 Hummer owners, Jeremy Schulz (2006) finds the consumption of the vehicle as an effort to survive in the urban jungles of Los Angeles. Schulz describes the consumption as a frenzied competition among the wealthy to outdo one another. The identity construction that is formed sends a message to others "don't mess with me" (Schulz 2006). Other forms of consumer identity work of Hummer ownership construct moralistic ideologies based on mythic values of American exceptionalism that owners defend via their purchase of the vehicle while environmentalists protest the

consumer choice as one that degrades the public good (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2009).

The distinction of identity sought by elites is well described in Veblen's ([1899] 1991) classic work on pecuniary emulation in which status is achieved via acquisition and accumulation through the consumption of goods. Although the aforementioned theories on class and consumption are valid, I will show that the leisure class of the Corvette owner is quite different from the elite consumers of the Hummer, or those explicated by Veblen. Bourdieu's (1984:337) term, "petit bourgeois" will be used to describe the community of Corvette owners as "ideal clientele of the bank or the school: having cultural goodwill and financial prudence, seriousness and hard work." The distinction of the Corvette community has middle class aesthetic appeal that creates identity and status for a leisure class that often cannot afford the cars purchased by the elites, but also expresses a general disdain toward those cars for reasons I will explain shortly. A set of values tied to tradition, brand loyalty, patriotism and nostalgia surround this particular group of the "petit bourgeois" who are overwhelmingly male participants, thus, gender plays an important role in the formation of these values.

Gendered Identity

Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2007) state that for young men, motorcar ownership holds particular cultural resonance in that it reproduces a traditional association between masculinity and technology, marking a cultural rite of passage into manhood. Best (2006:4) describes car culture as "a space where men can be men, and in many instances provides one of the few opportunities for men to forge emotional ties with other men,

often across generations." Belk (2004:273) describes cars as "prosthesis for men" that link the powerful engine to a feeling of enhanced power for the owner. He describes the high performance of the automobile as making the man feel "capable of high performance as well" (Belk 2004:273). Often, cars are defined in similar terms as the female body, 'beautiful', 'curvy,' and having 'sex appeal'(Belk 2004; Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2007; Sheller 2004; Latimer and Munroe 2006). Lane and Sternberg (1985) describe cars as sexual extensions of the owners, to whom damage to the vehicle can represent castration. References to cars as extensions of the body are often described mechanically or functionally in masculine terms, yet aesthetically in feminine terms. According to Hebdige (1988), the first marker for identity of many consumer objects, particularly motorized machines, is sexual difference. Once the machine has been assigned a sex, "it functions as a material sign of gender differences: mechanical sexism" (Hebdige 1988:125). Belk (2004) found that male consumers referred to their car as "she" and equated them as having personal characteristics. The image that is created through production and marketing processes serves to show that consumers can be manufactured through this concept of mechanical sexism. While women's involvement with cars is all but absent in the literature, it has been proposed that women judge men by their cars because they see automobiles as an expression of the owner's personality and symbolic of wealth and power (Belk 2004).

Car consumption and collecting cannot be denied as a male dominated activity that begins in early childhood. Identity construction for little boys (not girls) through the play of matchbox cars, building things with parts, car posters for the bedroom wall, and

reading motor news magazines are just a few of the socially prescribed activities. This research will reveal that these early experiences resonate among many a grown man who have established themselves and their families, and can now purchase these "Big Boy Toys" that as teenagers they could only fantasize about. Cars often exist as objects that facilitate fantasy and spark visceral, emotional responses.

Objects of Emotional Affect

The emotional connection to cars that consumers have is something that is described as a sensory experience or extension of the senses (Latimer and Munro 2006). The affect that is created by sitting in the car is described by Dannefer (1980:393); "When the enthusiast-most often male-climbs into his old car, it envelops him and insulates him from the world. When he settles back into the seat, it comforts him." The deep meaning of the car to the owner is highly subjective, personalized, and a manifestation of his success, his dreams, and desires. However, the meaning for the car owner is not created on his own. "Car manufacturers manipulate brand desire through the emotional resonance of their advertising campaigns that emphasize the 'thrill of driving,' the 'joy' of the road, the 'passion' of the collector" (Sheller 2004:221). Original advertisements of the Chevrolet Corvette emphasize its unique design of a light, fiberglass frame and distinct low to the ground body style. The sports car boasted its wide wheel treads that help the driver to feel safer, grounded, with a certain "feel" of the road (Chevy 1954). "The response of the car to your control is always immediate and positive" (Chevy 1954). Such descriptions evoke a sensory experience in which the visceral feel of both the car and road within the driver's body make driving this car an

experience that is transformative. The body of the car is "felt" as extension of one's own human body through manipulating this powerful machine.

Sheller (2004) provides a cultural explanation for styles, feelings and emotions that underpin the relation of things and people in material worlds. She describes these feelings as "automotive emotions" that are embodied in car-users visceral feelings about driving and their relationship to the car (Sheller 2004:222). Passion is a term used repeatedly in the literature to describe the car owner's attachment to and relationship with his car (Dannefer 1980; Hewer and Brownlie 2007; Motichka 2003; Sheller 2004). Passion best describes the emotional investment that people have made in their cars, often applying human traits to them, caring for them as children, lovers, and friends (Belk 2004). This anthropomorphic description of the car suggests the object may replace relations that used to be formed within family and religion.

Car Communities as Social Networks

In his study on old car collectors, Dannefer (1980:410) reveals that tradition gives sacred meaning to the car in two different ways: a) "the general tradition of the marque and/or particular model of car, b) specific tradition of the individual car brand." The car possesses qualities that give it the ability to provide a subjective sense of certainty in private life that is held sacred. Ironically, the rational world of mechanization provides continuity through the consumption of objects that receive emotional investments within the frenetic public sphere. In their research on virtual car communities, Hewer and Brownlie (2007:108) find the central focus is to "construct a feeling of community amidst a world increasingly constructed through consumption."

The projects of car enthusiasts provide ways to externalize their passionate sentiments through activities that bring them together as a group.

In her study of Chicano car culture, Brenda Bright (1998) found that lowriders represented local culture of family and tradition within Hispanic heritage. In a broader context, the local culture of lowriders in New Mexico developed as a response to mass-produced culture by customizing these cars and trucks to reflect ethnic cultural forms that told a story of the changing relationship between the imagination and social life (Bright 1998). Thus, the lowrider culture established agency within the local Hispanic community through expressive forms of consumption and modification. The cars serve as biographical objects that help create community ties.

In her study on brand loyalty and the Corvette, Motichka (2004:86) discusses the concept of fandom within social groups; "A material culture is evident in most fan circles; a certain collection of physical objects is central to admission, practice, and ritualized behavior associated with loyalty." Here, the social world of car owners as group members emerges. My study of Corvette owners will reflect how the specific tradition of the car brand as previously mentioned by Dannefer (1980) leads to social ties that offer friendship, production of knowledge, trust, and ultimately, ties to a broader social community embodied in civic participation. The meaning of these social ties for the individual is continually reinforced through participation and rituals within the car club such as meetings, cruises, car shows, parades, and other community events giving rise to a collective consciousness. Collective consciousness is a concept coined first by Durkheim and referred to a group's ability to revitalize its unity and the sense of itself by

meeting and going through the process or rituals that define it (Ferris and Stein 2012). This discussion of sacred objects and rituals as it relates to collective consciousness will be continued later in the section on brand community. First, let us look at the larger consumer culture that shapes brand communities.

Consumer Culture and Symbolic Meaning

In our analysis of the cultural meaning of cars, the broader institution of consumer markets must be acknowledged as a framework within which brand communities are constructed. According to consumer marketing theorist Cova (1997:309):

> The relevance of the market has become central in our societies whereas all other institutions and forms of mediation have lost a part of their legitimacy (state, class, school, family, etc.). The postmodern individual gives meaning to their life essentially through consumption and therefore, marketing is considered a major postmodern institution.

In the absence of traditional communities where values and physical living spaces were shared, individuals in postmodernity turn toward objects to forge an identity while the system of consumption becomes central to the existence of the individual (Cova 1997). The search for meaning in life is no longer constituted through the shared morality of traditional communities, but is found symbolically through the consumption of objects and brands where consumers must take action to show their own existence and difference among others (Cova 1997). Cars are one such object in consumer markets that carry cultural meaning and create identity for the owner. In order to work within a framework of consumer behavior, the concept of consumer culture must be defined. Consumer culture theory is denoted by Arnould and Thompson (2005:868-69) as:

> A family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings. Thus,

> consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets.

Here, consumer culture is described as heterogeneous in its distribution of meaning while acknowledging that culture comes from lived experiences, action, and the freedom of choice in the marketplace. Consumer culture is also constituted and shaped by broader historical forces (such as cultural narratives, myths, and ideologies) and grounded in socioeconomic circumstances and marketplace systems (Arnould and Thompson 2005). In addition, consumer culture is dynamic, free-floating, and liberated from contractual restrictions that were present in more traditional societies.

The symbolic importance of consumer goods often reflects the motivation of the consumer. “People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean” (Levy 1959:118). From this viewpoint, modern goods are considered symbolic of personal attributes and goals, social standings and strivings (Levy 1959). Contemporary consumer culture literature emphasizes the importance of image and identity construction in consumer preference and experience (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Hebdige 1988; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Levy 1959; McCracken 1986; Solomon 1983). Building off the earlier literature on modernization and community, consumer products as mediums of identity become more relevant as we progress into an increasingly individualized society.

McCracken (1986) argues that cultural categories of time, space, nature, and person help us to organize the phenomenal world. Material objects give cultural meaning a “concreteness” for the individual that is vital, tangible, and recorded (McCracken

1986:73). He also argues that meaning first resides in the culturally constituted world and must be transferred into goods via the instruments of advertising and product design (McCracken 1986). Once the meaning has been transferred from world to goods, the final transference is from goods to consumer. The location of cultural meaning ultimately lies in the individual consumers themselves and is reinforced and reconstituted through various rituals that draw meaning out in personal terms (McCracken 1986). This transference of meaning is not finite, but a fluid process where production/consumption is a mutually constitutive and interactive process. This is a very important point that was found by Schouten and McAlexander (1995) in their study of Harley Davidson enthusiasts, and also parallels with the Corvette owners in my study.

The Mythology of Consumer Objects

Beyond material objects carrying cultural meaning, how do objects like cars become filled with mystique and symbolic significance for the consumer? In his study of the Italian motor scooter, Hebdige (1988:120) looks to the larger networks of relationships between objects and consumers that are created in what he calls "moments." These moments are defined by Hebdige (1988:120) as:

> Parts of the consumer market process including "moments of design/production; and consumption/use and further, advertising strands between these two instances- a separate moment of mediation: marketing, promotion, the construction of images and markets, and the conditioning of public response.

To these moments, he adds the important moment of "time" in relation to imagined pasts and futures, often depicting different perspectives and purposes (Hebdige 1988). All of these moments create the cultural significance of the object as they become markers of identity and difference within cultural contexts.

My study of the Corvette includes a look at how these moments can be traced from design to consumption as integral to constructing the myth of this American sports car. A final step in the myth creation is "the dematerialization of the object; the conversion from consumption to lifestyle" (Hebdige 1988:135). Similar to Hebdige's lifestyle premise, many Corvette owners consider their consumption preference to be a lifestyle that is highly ritualized and significantly expresses values of patriotism and nostalgia.

Using the example of the Corvette, I will attempt to show how the shared script of car owners and the Chevrolet corporation produces, maintains, and eternalizes the myth of this American sports car. Like the works of linguists Saussure and Volosinov, Barthes' (1964) illustrates a particular way of carving up the world as a place that is deeply dependent on sign systems in order to create meaning. Human consciousness in direct relation with objects in the outside world are responsible for the composition of these sign systems that create meaning in our lives.

Preceding Barthes work on myths, Levi-Strauss pioneered myth as a language. Strauss saw myths as devices to think with, ways of classifying and organizing reality. Different from social institutions, myths are seen as "networks of communication or codes which permit the transmission of messages" (Eagleton 1983:90). The individual subject is not seen as the origin of the myth, but (inversely) myths think themselves through people. In other words, myths have somewhat of a collective existence where the individual is not the source or end of meaning. This collective existence will be explored further in the section on brand community.

Building on the concepts of “moments” and “myths”, the consumer literature contributes a notion of products possessing symbolic features that often depend more on their social meaning than their functional utility (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Levy 1959; McCracken 1986;Schouten, McAlexander and Koenig 2007; Solomon 1983). Consumption is a social behavior where the consumer experiences relations with an object.

According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981:1):

> Things embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape the identities of their users. To understand what people are and what they become, one must understand what goes on between people and things. What things are cherished and why, should become part of our knowledge of human beings.

Objects are used as symbols of differentiation, symbols of status, and symbols of social integration with the world around us. The concept of the self and one’s roles are cultivated through our relationship with objects (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). It is important to note that these relations of consumer to object only receive and maintain significance through the context of a culture. Here we see the interdisciplinary approach of my study of Corvette communities where both sociological and consumer marketing principles are equally important in moving forward.

According to Solomon (1983:321):

> Symbols acquire their meaning through the socialization process that begins in childhood. For this reason, individuals with a common history of enculturation should exhibit considerable overlap in their interpretation of symbolic meanings. In other words, the ascribed meanings of many symbols possess a high degree of consensual validation.

My study of Corvette owners notes the generational influences that are shared by car owners, many of whom were socialized in a post- WWII era where an exploding automobile culture was defining not only social activities and leisure, but rites of passage into adulthood.

How the consumer's experiences construct meaning through the object is important to take up. What a person has lived through generationally and relationally influences the consumer object of choice. The sacred meaning of the car as a material object is reflective of the institutional change in contemporary society where religion has become more secularized and often replaced with material objects of worship (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Hirschle 2014). Durkheim's (1896) classic sociological concept of the sacred is marked by the distinction between the sacred and the profane. His treatment of the sacred emerges from a collective experience when members of society remove objects from every day, mundane use and hold them to be more valuable. Similarly, cars are considered objects of worship by true enthusiasts, and are often removed from daily life only to be enjoyed during sacred times of leisure including car shows and vacations. This being said, the car is often enjoyed in everyday life as a convergence of the sacred and profane.

Durkheim (1896) saw the sacred as shared commitment by individuals that allows the world to take on greater meaning while also providing social boundaries. Similar to Durkheim, Weber (1905) 'disenchantment of the world' finds the substitution of science for religious beliefs. As religion provides a less than extraordinary experience in contemporary society, people look elsewhere in the secular world to transcend

everyday life. The concept has been a recurring theme in consumer research in order to analyze how sacred experience is achieved through consumer experiences (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; O'Guinn and Belk 1989; Rook 1985). Often the point of departure from the profane and the sacred begins at the purchase of the object.

The Sacredness of Objects

To continue our discussion of individual attachments to and relationships with objects, the concept of the sacred needs to be explored further, since it is the sacred that has the ability to transform mass produced goods into mythical objects that are maintained in historical contexts through narratives and stories told by the consumer. To determine the process by which the Corvette is assigned sacred value, I rely on qualitative interviews with consumers about their relationship with the Corvette, mining the narrative content for indication of the sacred meaning of the car.

According to Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989), there are several properties that secular objects assume to make them sacred including; sacrifice, commitment, objectification, rituals, myth, mystery, communitas, and ecstasy and flow. These properties assist in creating experiences that are highly emotional rather than rational and often cannot be understood cognitively. Belk, et. al (1989:7) describe the ecstatic experience of the sacred as "one standing outside of oneself." Flow (Csikszenthmihalyi 1990; Privette 1983) is described by Schouten et al. (2007: 357) as a "total absorption in an activity, a state of transcendence, a suspension of temporal reality, a sense of separation from the mundane, and a sense of unity with some higher plane of

experience." The flow experience offers the opportunity for a loss of self where the activity is its own reward. While flow is somewhat transitory, the "peak experience" (James 1902; Laski 1962; Maslow 1962; Maslow 1964) is also transformative while "leaving deep tracks in the psyche" (Shouten et.al 2007:368). Both flow and peak experience constitute a transcendent experience that shapes consumer attitudes, behaviors, sense of self and relations with others (Belk, et al. 1989). This flow and transcendence seem to be an intricate part of the appeal of the Corvette for owners. Such a high involvement object offers mobility, exhilaration and adrenaline that everyday objects perhaps cannot.

Not only are objects experienced, they may constitute our identity. According to Belk (1988), we regard possessions as part of ourselves, also known as the extended self. "The basic premise of consumer behavior is defined as we are what we have" (Belk 1988:139). This ideal resonates with many in a postmodern society where the market is the center of social activity (Firat and Dholakia 1998). Thus, an investment in an object, is an investment in ourselves and who we are. The extended self is achieved through the mechanisms of buying, owning, controlling, and knowing an object (Belk 1988). Often, males consider their automobiles to be an extension of themselves. In my study, Belk's mechanisms are reflected through the activities of purchasing, restoring, cleaning, driving, racing, and having knowledge of Corvettes. The sample of car owners includes consumers who identify themselves through Corvette ownership.

Rituals

Identity through possessions is not just achieved individually. Transcendent experiences are aided by social contexts that involve fellow believers. Rituals are central to the sacred experience of an object and may be public or private, individual or collective. Rook (1985:252) defines ritual as:

> A type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviors that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time. Ritual behavior is dramatically scripted and acted out and is performed with formality, seriousness, and inner intensity.

Ritual behaviors include repetition of sequenced events over time. This repetition elicits similar feelings and sentiments each time it is performed. Individual rituals of restoration and cleaning of an object reflect human investment of the object as well as help to maintain the sacredness over time. These practices are a large part of caring for and restoring the Corvette as an object of history and culture.

The involvement with rituals ensures that the object will remain sacred, and that in a collective sense, the group will remain intact. The ritualistic practices of a group offer valuable social and organizational experiences that suggest the group can continue even after the members are gone (Bishop and Haggett 1986). Therefore, the sentiment and sacred status begins to exist outside of the individual and may be transferred onto new members even once old ones have gone.

Pilgrimages

Sacred objects may also be experienced through pilgrimages. Places may be seen as shrines instilled with historic meaning and are often sacralized through trips where the journey to the destination is considered a mass pilgrimage to the sacred place. These

points have relevance for this research, the movement and flow in driving the Corvette is marked by a pilgrimage of multiple Corvettes to a desired location. Often the pilgrimage of old Route 66 marks the pinnacle journey for Vette owners as they experience the sacredness of the automobile through this ritual that is marked by a sense of community bonds and historical treasures of the past. There is a sense of preservation and a temporal capture of moments that roots people in ritual practice. For the individual, this experience is grounding and provides a continued sense of self.

The process of sacralization of an object often occurs when one acquires the object and begins to divest meaning into it through repeated use. A particular focus of my research is process of sacralization that occurs as attachments to objects represent connections to particular people. Often, family heirlooms represent the sacred bond between generations of kin that have not been broken (Belk, Sherry, and Walendorf 1989). The sacred object often mediates emotional ties between people from the past or present. It may also serve to connect people to a personal past or a place in time that is preserved in tangible form. Connections that people have to a desired past is the topic of our next section of the literature, nostalgia.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia for a past of familiarity has been considered a response to a rapidly changing society that is wrought with ‘fast capitalism’ according to historian, Gary Cross (2015). In other words, just as individuals have responded to modern industrialism with adaptation to community and self, they also are longing to hold on to comforts of the past including relationships with people and objects, places of leisure, and activities that hold

emotional sentiment. According to Davis (1979), the pleas for continuity and the comfort of sameness in our lives is what nostalgia attends to.

The concept of nostalgia has been used in Corvette marketing strategies for decades, perhaps preserving this sense of 'sameness.' Corvette advertisements over the last five decades have prompted consumers to look back at what the Corvette was when it began, thus reifying the original Corvette spirit in the marketplace. The following advertisement was to promote the 1973 Corvette C3 model:

> It all started in 1953. As soon as you saw that feisty little white convertible with the screened in headlights, you knew this was the start of something special. It has been that way ever since. When Chevrolet produces something new, Corvettes usually have it first.

By consistently looking back at the inception of the car, tradition and a clear history of this 'special' car is created, thus calling on nostalgia to touch the emotions of the consumer.

Davis (1979) states that the concept of nostalgia cannot exist without a personal history, proper sentiment, and connection to a particular place in time. In fact, Davis (1979:16) claims that nostalgia only forms from "lived experiences." Early life experience with the Corvette is something that will be evaluated among Corvette owners and communities as a form of nostalgia that people reach back for later in life. A car that transports the driver may symbolically transport him back through time as well. Yet, what purpose does nostalgia serve in the life of an individual or a community? The idea of looking back is unsettling for some, but for many it provides a grounding of personal history and culture. Let's take a look at how nostalgia is shaped.

According to Cross (2015:7), “the word nostalgia was coined in 1688 by a Swiss doctor and means literally ‘longing to return home.’” The literal meaning of the term has been used to construct different forms of nostalgia over the last three centuries.

Cross (2015) categorizes four different types of nostalgia; nostalgia for lost communities (often manifested in museums, monuments, ancient neighborhoods and battlefields), nostalgia for family heirlooms and possessions, longing for past fashions or styles that represent a former era, and the twentieth century form of ‘consumed nostalgia.’ Cross (2015:10) defines consumed nostalgia as “a longing for the goods of the past that came from a personal experience of growing up in a stressful world of fast capitalism.” Social and technological change has rapidly sped up over the last century and nostalgia helps individuals cope with the extraordinary changes by affording the chance to revisit their own childhoods (Cross 2015). All of these forms of nostalgia are rooted in objects that (like the concept of the sacred) keep people grounded in culture, society, and family life.

Literature on the use of material goods in nostalgic activity proclaim that memory doesn’t exist just in the mind (DeMarrais 2004; Lowenthal 1985; Morrison 2010) DeMarrais (2004:174) describes nostalgia as “remembrance that occurs in the dialogic (and bodily) encounter between person and world.” Nostalgia develops in concert with a complex network of social ties, objects, places and practices. The practice of nostalgia is one that is described as a creative form of engagement with the world (Lowenthal 1985). Morrison’s (2010) study of transactions between collectors and collectibles also finds nostalgia to be a productive activity that is festive and fun where people long to collect

relics and celebrate their virtues and are less concerned with finding or yearning for a past.

According to Cross (2015:11) a very important part of nostalgic sentiment is rooted in the formative years of consumers- childhood and youth. This includes memories of play and often toys and objects experienced through play. Morrison (2010) states that nostalgia is a means by which objects become valuable to the owner. The generational influences, early childhood socialization and brand recognition that were discussed earlier in this dissertation all provide a foundation for communities built around nostalgia.

According to Schindler and Holbrook's (2003) research on nostalgia and consumption, an early-experience phenomenon (analogous to imprinting that occurs biologically in birds), provides a critical period for learning and can be considered an example of the influence of nostalgia on consumer tastes. Holbrook's (1993) research evaluates patterns of preferences toward products that provide nostalgia related consumption experiences. While Holbrook (1993) acknowledges that nostalgia proneness may vary according to personality and individual character, he finds age and gender to be strong correlates of nostalgia. Interestingly, Schindler and Holbrook find that men are more nostalgic than women. The research upon which this claim is based, studied the effects of early experience on consumer preferences for automobile styles and found that nostalgia involves preferences for things/experiences that were more common when one was younger (during the time of these early-experience phenomenon) (Schindler and Holbrook 2003). The sentimental bond that is formed with cars during early childhood

socialization is remembered as these men age and have the resources to purchase these cars from their childhood daydreams. Other gender-related findings in Schindler and Holbrook's (2003) study of nostalgia include the fact that men appear to be more sensitive than women to automotive consumption symbolism and males show a greater tendency than females to use cars to enhance self-expression and feelings of self-efficacy. These findings will prove important to my research on the male dominated Corvette community.

In her work, *Nostalgia-A Polemic*, Kathleen Stewart (1988:232) finds nostalgia can sharply point to the place where "a person's life turns most clearly knit into a bigger fabric of experiences common to others in similar locations." Stewart (1988:232) states: "Nostalgic people experience this as structures of feeling where there are no public or private spheres, but public spaces built as fantasy environments to roam around in." Often, the public spaces where car communities meet and organize activities such as car shows emote a fantasy and timeless feeling where participants call on these past experiences through the cars.

While the nature of community has changed over the last few centuries, today, nostalgia binds together scattered individuals around ephemeral things that are meaningful to them personally (Cross 2015). The idea of nostalgia as a sentiment that communities can be built on will be explored in this research and furthered in the section on brand community.

Today, organizers of nostalgia are often marketers, while consumers are the participants (Cross 2015). Evidence of this can be seen in popular television shows

Graveyard Cars, Pawn Stars, and *Antiques Roadshow*. Several companies have introduced a concept of 'nostalgia engineering'- the effort to simulate the experience, the gestalt, of an obsolete technology in a modern product (Neil 2014). Today's nostalgia is linked to special emotions and sensuous feelings from the past that are evoked through our relationship with things. For the Corvette enthusiast, nostalgia is often evoked through the aestheticism and sound of the vehicle as well as the early youth experiences and memories of the car.

The larger institutions surrounding this subculture of car enthusiasts (leisure, markets) signify the tensions of mass production in a dynamic society of consumption that shapes who we are becoming. At the same time, the social capital generated through consumption of the Corvette reflects how values from the past may be reinvented today to mitigate social trends toward isolation. Now we will take a look at how the community is created around consumption of the brand.

Brand Community

Classical sociological research reflects concern over the dissolution of community as defined by Weber, Tonnies, and Simmel. Resulting from modern commerce and mass production. Weber's ([1903] 2010) idea of 'disenchantment' of personalities within modernity is similar to Simmel's blasé urbanite ([1903] 2010), while Ferdinand Tonnies ([1887] 1957) distinguished rural kinship ties from the impersonality of urban life. Simmel's ([1903] 2010) description of modern life focused on the need for specialization that propels the individual personality of the metropolis to be different, make oneself noticeable, and save oneself through attention gained from others. The blasé attitude is a

protective mechanism-an ironic stance of indifference to ward against the emotional vagaries of modern life. Due to the brevity and infrequent social intercourse in the busy, frenzied metropolis, the presentation of individual identity must "get to the point" during brief encounters. Hence the impersonal nature of most of our social contacts is shaping how we define ourselves often through conspicuous consumption.

In addition to making ourselves noticeable to strangers, contemporary research is often influenced by Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined community. Imagined communities include memberships that are established through mental constructs that assume an understanding of others not yet met. The emergence of the brand community in marketing emerged out of the literature on consumer culture in the 1990s and is considered relatively new. Brand community influence on social behavior has been studied even less from a sociological perspective.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001:412) define brand community as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand." Brands are the epitome of Simmel's metropolitan life in which the demand for specialization in transactions between producer and consumer create unique desires. Brands have the power to convey cultural meaning and the consumption of objects becomes a vehicle of interaction between producer and consumer (Kilambi 2013). "Unlike subcultures, brand communities do not typically reject the aspects of the surrounding culture, they embrace them" (Muniz and O'Guinn. 2001:414). Obviously not all brands are strong enough to form communities that are sustained in the marketplace. The brand communities that are successful are usually formed around brands with a

strong image, lengthy history, and threatening competition (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). The Corvette brand community is one that exists worldwide with thousands of members who recognize the history and strong iconic image of what this car represents: American.

Three core elements of traditional communities existing across different history periods are identified as a framework by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) to construct contemporary brand communities: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility. These three elements will be applied to the Corvette community in order to describe how the members socially construct this modern community. *Consciousness of kind* includes the consumer's need for unity within a group in order to shape identity. This consciousness is a collective identity that arises from being members of the same brand community.

The more knowledge that one has of the brand, the more they build consumer agency. "In fact, the members feel that the brand belongs to them as much as it does to the manufacturer" (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001: 424). While many brand communities today are formed and financially supported by the brand company itself (Harley Davidson and Saab being examples), the Corvette brand community is unique, it was created and sustained by the loyal consumers themselves. In their contemporary study of online brand communities, Dholakia and Vianello (2009) find that the more successful communities are usually run by enthusiasts and consumers of the brands as opposed to the companies themselves.

The grassroots development of the Corvette community is similar to what Muniz and Schau (2005) found in their study of the Apple Newton brand where loyal consumers

find camaraderie through their passion for the brand. In contrast to traditional communities, brand communities are often seen as more democratic. The acceptance of others based solely on their consciousness of kind (ownership of the same car), may serve as an 'equalizer' to class, race, and gender differences that keep people stratified in traditional communities. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) find that the members within specific subgroups of the Harley Davidson subculture are committed to the same set of core values. Members have found that the ethos and cultural principles of the motorcycle group embodies their own needs and values. This finding suggests that the brand community is not formed solely because of the object. Perhaps the pre-existing values and cultural identities within the lives of the motorcycle enthusiasts guide them toward the product and the lifestyle. The value of patriotism and American heritage are strongly displayed within the Harley brand community and reflect the ethos of the motorcycle as an American icon. In fact, the members' patriotism is expressed through the buyer's behavior in purchase of the bike. The Corvette brand community's ethos of patriotism and American icon status is strikingly similar to the Harley Davidson ethos and will be used as a theme in my research.

A second element that defines and secures the brand community is *rituals and traditions*. Through these practices, the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). These rituals serve the function of perpetuating the consciousness of kind and reaffirm collective identity. Communal values are reinforced through the frequency of rituals.

The ritual of group riding among Harley Davidson riders is described by Schouten and McAlexander (1995:59) as "a transcendental departure from the mundane." Riding in organized formation for long distances allows the individual's identity to be subsumed by the group. This same ritual of mobility is found within many Corvette communities and is an activity that provides personal freedom while bonding the group through movement and flow that takes them out of the realm of the mundane and into sacred territory.

A sense of *moral responsibility* contributes to group cohesion and helps to produce collective action by community members. Reciprocity develops as the community members realize that they can derive personal satisfaction in helping others. Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrman (2005) found that identification with brand community leads to greater community engagement. A recurring theme in the brand community literature is identity formation for both individuals and brand identification of the group (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Kilambi, Laroche, and Richard 2013; Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006; Luedicke 2006; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Shulz 2006). According to Algesheimer et al. (2005:4):

> Community engagement refers to the positive influences of identifying with the brand community. Community engagement suggests that members are interested in helping other members, participating in joint activities, and otherwise acting volitionally in ways that the community endorses and that enhances its value for themselves and others.

It is important to note that the intrinsic value received by members includes an overlap of their own unique self-identity and their group-based identity and is also consistent with the notion of organization identification (Algesheimer et. al 2005). Similar to the concept

of social capital discussed earlier, community engagement in the brand community spurs civic participation into larger, local communities.

Distinctly different from the argument that society has become hyper-individualized (where consumers are motivated by the use value of objects consumed), is the notion that today's consumers are 'tribal' comprised of a small, ever shifting collective in their pursuit of social experiences that are ephemeral, fluid. The concept of tribes as the basis of group affiliation over community reflects shifting identities within a postmodern consumer society (Maffesoli 1996). Cova (1997:300) uses the term neo-tribalism to "refer to a possible re-emergence of community archetypes of the traditional village that may be defined in terms of a local sense of identification, religiosity and group narcissism." This suggested return of community through consumption is defined by the consumer's need for social links to others that have been lost amidst a mass consumption society. The context of this tribal community includes goods being valued more for their 'linking' to other people, in lieu of their use value in the market place. For individuals seeking meaning, the "link is more important than the thing" (Cova 1997:307). The concept of tribalism offers explanation of individuals' entrance into brand community as a search for identity in a multiplicity of brand choices in consumer society.

Cova, Maclaran, and Bradshaw (2013) declare an emerging era of consumerism marked by productive consumers who exercise creativity and symbolic interpretation over the array of brand choices they are faced with in the market. This era reflects a postmodern collapse of production/consumption binaries and foregrounds the consumer

as a meaning making subject (Cova, et al. 2013). Here, the lived experiences of consumers impact their purchases, lending the opportunity for collective sentiments held by multiple consumers to form grassroots communities.

Matzler et al. (2011:875) find that brand communities are defined by a suitable "fit between person and brand." Brands often represent something familiar that people know and can trust which in turn instills confidence and desire among the consumer (Firat and Dholakia 2016). Matzler, et al. (2011) found that personality traits of extraversion and agreeableness predicted identification with the brand community of the Volkswagon Golf. Thus, this study acknowledges that the relationship of customer to brand is essential to the construction and maintenance of the brand community itself. Matzler, et al. (2011) findings also suggest that a consumer's individual values, experiences, childhood socialization may be influential in their purchase.

Relating back to the earlier discussion of objects as sacred, the emotional value is what keeps our attachment to objects. The car is highly capable of communicating aspects of our personality and self-image and is related to product attachment (Matzler, et. al 2011). For marketers, profiling consumers' personality traits can guide tailoring of a product. For the consumer, consumption of the object becomes the vehicle of interaction. According to Kilambi et al. (2013:46): "The brand community sits at the cross-roads of emotional and rational values." This suggests that a practical purchase is made for instrumental purposes while an expressive need is satisfied.

The concept of the myth that was discussed earlier, resurfaces as an important component of brand community structure. Through advertising, the cultural myth of a

product is created and provides parameters of community membership. In fact, Kilambi, et. al (2013:49) state that "the community is not a product of the myth, but a response to it." A character is created for the brand itself, just as the icon of the eagle on the Harley Davidson emblem stood as an icon of the American dream (Kilambi et. al 2013). "The most powerful brands have built their own mythology, or rather have helped their loyal customers to build their own mythology" (Kilambi et. al 2013:59). Myths become embedded into consumer's psyche and are maintained through brand community rituals and activities.

Building from the consumer culture literature, this study will evaluate the mythical status of the Corvette as "America's sports car" where the ideals of freedom, individuality, history, progress, and patriotism are deeply embedded and enduring to the community. The Corvette lifestyle reveals the relational aspects of consumer to brand, consumer to consumer, and consumer to community that are reflected in the institutions of leisure and consumer culture.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The Selection of Research Approach

This research seeks to understand individual consumers' engagement with the cultural icon, the Corvette, and at the same time investigate the construction of this brand community as it is shaped by broader historical shifts in institutions of leisure and work. Given this dual aim, the research demanded a mixed-methods approach employing in depth interviews, surveys, and observation research to examine the individuals participating in this form of leisure activity. The concept of social capital is central to this research as it provides a framework for the membership to this leisure community. For purposes of this study, Putnam's (2000:20) definition of social capital was employed; "the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties." Specifically, the 'bridging' form of social capital is the focus within this brand community also known as the 'weak social ties that link people to distant acquaintances that can be good for getting ahead (Putnam 2000:23). Through mixed methodologies, the broader patterns of cultural participation and civic engagement among Corvette club members were revealed.

According to Creswell (2014), the core assumption of the mixed method form of inquiry is that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides both depth and breadth, and thus a more complete understanding of the research problem than either approach alone. In turn, using mixed methods of research can strengthen the weaknesses of each method. The limitation of qualitative fieldwork is that only a

selective sample of individuals can be studied, thus limiting generalizability beyond the case. While quantitative methods are reliable and can often be generalized to a larger, representative population, the approach limits an understanding of the context of the phenomenon being studied and is less robust than qualitative in explaining complex processes or identifying mechanisms linking meaning and action. The decision to use quantitative data in this study is based on the availability of large samples of a population of Corvette club members throughout the U.S.

The goal of the research is to place at center the points of view of the Corvette community participants. Open-ended questioning yields more in depth findings of the people and how they construct meaning in their social world. As previously stated in the review of the literature, the deep meaning of the car is highly subjective and personalized. It is a manifestation of the owner's success, dreams, and desires on the one hand, and on the other, it is a cultural object that carries mythical status through sentiments of American patriotism and nostalgia. The best methods to capture these sentiments is through the narratives of the car community members themselves and through participant observations in the settings where the members gather. Through in depth interviews with car owners, the socio-cultural history and biography of the individual is spoken in his own words tracing a pathway to involvement in this leisure practice. The value of ethnographic field work is placing the researcher in the center of the activities and rituals of the group in order to understand how members construct and maintain meaning through membership activities and actions.

This research uses constructivist perspectives which focus on the emergent and generative dimensions of reality to understand the complex process of meaning making in the leisure world of Corvette car communities. It also seeks to demonstrate how engagement with the community fosters social capital. According to Creswell (2014), social constructivists argue that individuals seek understanding of the world where they live and work. "Individuals develop deep subjective meaning of their experiences that are directed toward certain objects or things" (2014:8). The focus of this approach for the project is the specific contexts in which people live and participate in leisure activities. As Crotty (1998:9) argues, "Humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspective- we are all born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture." The focus on cultural values in this research includes objects and ideas of importance that have been created through generational experience, consumer advertising campaigns, and early life- course experiences in family and community. These influences are considered points of departure in constructing involvement with the leisure experience of the Corvette.

To examine the historical and social perspectives in leisure experience, the research design also uses Institutional Ethnography, first articulated by sociologist Dorothy Smith. This mode of inquiry works to situate personal meaning within a broader historic and material context, identifying the subjective meaning and the concerted social organization through which meaning is produced. According to Smith (2006:17):

> The aim of the institutional ethnographer is to explore particular concerns or strands within a specific institutional complex, in ways that make visible their points of connection with other sites and courses of action.

In Institutional Ethnography, the extra-local, (the complex of institutional, administrative organizations of power), are recognized as playing a central role in shaping our routine, daily life activities (known as the local), present but not easily visible to us. In this study, the extra-local of leisure and consumer institutions will relate to and attempt to organize the local world of car collecting and club membership.

The sacred meaning of the Corvette and its mythical status will be examined through the individual narrative and also through group activity. Institutional ethnography moves beyond individual experience and subjective understanding to determine "how things work" and "how they are put together" (Smith 2006:1) to establish how the inner workings of everyday life activities are influenced and determined by larger social forces.

My research identifies the primary institution of leisure as centrally important to the development of meaningful social bonds with others as they search for and establish community. According to Frey and Dickens (1990), the increasingly organized nature of contemporary leisure and the search for communal bonds contribute to the establishment of leisure as a major social institution in postindustrial society. For many people in today's society, the network of organizations found within leisure activities have replaced the traditional associational ties of family and church as a major provider of recreational experiences (Frey and Dickens 1990). The rituals and practices of this brand community are evaluated in the context of individual and small group activities while identifying linkages to broader structures of influence that shape the specific coordinates of this community, including consumer markets.

Consumer markets as a broader institution are recognized here to be central to postmodern society where consumer interactions in the marketplace and the objects are critical conduits through which identify is forged (Cova 1997; Arnould and Thompson 2005). The consumer experiences relationships with the object that embody goals, skills, and shape the identities of their users (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). While consumption can facilitate identity construction for the individual, it can also establish sacred status and be shared by a collective group. Durkheim (1896) claimed the sacred was a shared commitment by individuals through which the world assumes greater meaning while also providing social boundaries. The collective meaning of the Corvette and its mythical status foregrounds this research by analyzing group attachments to the Corvette. While the car as consumer object is highly significant, the myth of the Corvette is constructed in the minds of owners through group action, the brokering of images and rituals that surround the car. The consumer lifestyle of Corvette owners is suggested to be a voluntary practice similar to the collective affiliation with religious institutions. Through this affiliation, social cohesion and transcendence from the mundane is provided for those who participate. The Corvette lifestyle as a leisure practice may reveal significant changes in how the composition of community and social ties are formed.

This project interprets social changes in the institutions of family and traditional communities based on geographic proximity and similar value schema. The personal narratives of respondents' life course highlight their formative years and shared leisure practice as pathways to their involvement with the Corvette clubs today. The shifts in labor and production (extra local) are noted as significant in the generational experience

of many participants. The deindustrialization of labor markets had a reverberating effect on leisure practice in the late twentieth century and played a role in how these consumers became attached to the car through manual and technical skills. In other words, their attachments to labor and consumption provide agency for the individual and create social bonds between Corvette club members. In turn, the strong sense of family structure that was part of early socialization is also recreated through relationships in this car community where many perceive fellow owners as 'Corvette family members.'

Research Questions

In order to understand the origin of my research questions, it is important to say a bit about the experience that led me to this field study. In 2013, I conducted a preliminary study of street rod car owners in Manassas, Virginia as part of a critical ethnography course. The study included multiple observations at a local, weekly cruise in on Saturday afternoons, semi-structured interviews in the field, and joining the local street rod club. To embed myself in this car community, I took on a volunteer position as secretary of the club and participated in regular events including cruises, car shows, and fundraisers. While the members of this street rod club share some similar traits with the Corvette owners (technical skill, work ethic, patriotism, nostalgia, and cars as status symbols), the average age of these street rodders was a little older and they were not necessarily loyal to one brand of car. During this study I observed the participants' strong sentiment of nostalgia through their relationship to cars and their peers and I wanted to explore this concept further. Older generation Corvettes were frequent visitors of these spaces where car enthusiasts gathered and I was particularly taken with the owners' strong sense of

patriotism and nostalgia that surrounded owning this car. My ownership of a 2000 Corvette convertible (a purchase that was part of my research methods for the study) led me to narrow my research to Corvette clubs specifically. The history of the Corvette brand is central to making this car community unique and distinct from other car clubs I have observed and it helped shape the design of this research.

After preliminary observations of Corvette car gatherings, several research questions emerged. The main question that guided this inquiry is:

> *How do the socio-historical experiences of consumers construct and maintain Corvette (brand) communities?*

The nature of community in America has evolved from a structure based on the interdependence of family and neighbors to an increase in 'lifestyle enclaves' where members anchor themselves through shared patterns of appearance, consumption and leisure practices (Bella et al. 2008) despite broader societal changes in institutions like religion, labor, and consumer markets. I suggest that the Corvette brand community is built on a shared set of values and generational experiences that are not driven by markets alone. The marketing of Chevrolet products through emotion based advertising helped to seal customer attachments throughout their life course and I point to this factor as influential in embedding the mythical status of the Corvette in the minds of loyal consumers. The Corvette is unique in that the brand community is one of the few created by the consumers, not the corporation. This grassroots community provides a strong sense of consumer agency that helps to solidify this lifestyle enclave.

A second research question asks:

How does the sacred meaning assigned to the Corvette by Corvette club members facilitate a willingness to participate in community?

The literature suggests that nostalgia and emotional ties help to create sacred meaning of objects. Nostalgia is the deep emotional feelings for past lived experiences (Davis 1979). Making use of this concept, I suggest that when this sacred meaning is collectively practiced and organized in a brand community, the result is increased social capital and renewed community engagement. This follows Putnam's premise of "doing with others, leads to doing for others." (Putnam 2000:23). In other words, by fostering strong associational ties, we begin to look outward to address the needs of others. The civic engagement of Corvette owners who are members of the community was evaluated through their involvement with community projects such as fundraising for charitable organizations and active citizenship in local communities.

There are several hypotheses that were tested in order to answer these research questions.

H1: *Early childhood/youth experience with the Corvette creates consumer preference.*

This hypothesis guided questions and interviews and is explained by both the consumer and nostalgia literature. The hypothesis was tested through the use of qualitative interviews with Corvette enthusiasts and also through participant observation methods at conventions and car shows.

H2: *The Corvette community shares a high level of nostalgia sentiment.*

This hypothesis was tested by replicating Holbrook's (1993) nostalgia scale through the quantitative method of survey. The survey completed by 593 Corvette owners was measured against a population of non-Corvette owners. Qualitative interviews and

participant observations also focused on notions of nostalgia and generational memories as significant to the individual and the collective group.

H3: *The Corvette community reflects the shared sentiment of patriotism.*

Levels of patriotism were tested by replicating a eight- item patriotism scale used by Morse et al. (1991) in their mixed methods study on patriotism and citizen participation. Like the nostalgia scale, the survey measured if the Corvette community has exceptionally high levels of patriotism and whether they are correlative with ownership of the car. This was tested against a population of non-Corvette owners.

H4: *Membership in Corvette communities leads to high levels of civic engagement.*

This hypothesis is informed by the literature on social capital and community. The assumption is that social networks based on weak ties builds social capital and by doing for ourselves, we begin to do for others (Putnam 2000). This hypothesis was tested through qualitative interviews with owners, participant observation at Corvette community events, and analysis of Corvette club websites.

Mixed Methods Research Design

A Convergent Parallel mixed methods design was used in order to implement the study. The key assumption of this approach is that both quantitative and qualitative data provide different types of information- often detailed views of participants qualitatively and scores on instruments quantitatively- and together yield the results that should be the same (Creswell 2014). It is presumed in the case of convergent parallel method that samples within qualitative research and quantitative research are unequal in size and so the qualitative cases will not be weighted. Each method has a different intent- one to gain

an in-depth understanding and develop conceptual scaffolding and the other, to generalize to a population (Cresswell 2014). The sample of qualitative participants was also used in the larger quantitative sample. The purpose being, a comparison of two databases that should look similar for data analysis. When possible, both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered at the same time (during participant observation and field interviews). The quantitative sample is much larger and therefore, a majority of the sample was not gathered simultaneously with qualitative data. Both methods of research were gathered concurrently during the time frame of this study. The methods and research design for this dissertation were evaluated by the George Mason University Institutional Review Board in May of 2015 and were approved with a determination of exempt status.

Qualitative Methods

The qualitative methods for the study are ethnographic and include both participant observation and in-depth interviews. This part of the study focused on the shared patterns of behaviors, language, and actions of the intact cultural group (Cresswell 2014) over a period of sixteenth months between June 2015 and November 2016.

Participant Observation

The participant observation method involved immersion in the leisure spaces of car shows, club meetings among several different Corvette clubs, club activities and fundraisers at both local, regional, and national levels. Over the course of the sixteen-month period I joined a Corvette club in Northern Virginia and attended monthly meetings. Owning a 2000 Corvette convertible granted me immediate “in-group” access to the club and other Corvette community gatherings that I otherwise would not have

been able to participate in. I attended monthly club meetings held at the local Chevy dealership where members gathered to discuss club business, fundraisers, and planned social activities. The structure and organization of this leisure space revealed the more formal side of the community in its ability to organize themselves around their enthusiasm for the car.

In addition to meetings, I attended the annual club dinner and car shows sponsored by the club where proceeds often funded charitable organizations such as the Special Olympics. Other club activities included volunteer participation in a teen car clinic in order to help teens become safe and responsible drivers. I participated in car rallies (see glossary) with my Corvette and won two trophies in the competitive event. I also participated in a safe driving car clinic at a regional race track in Summit Point, West Virginia.

Outside of this local club, I was a guest at several Corvette club meetings throughout the country including clubs in California, Tennessee, South Carolina and Virginia. These visits allowed me to observe both similarities and differences in the organization and activities of various Corvette clubs in the U.S.

My participation extended outside of the local car club to regional and national events I attended with my Corvette. I attended two annual "Corvettes at Carlisle" conventions at the Carlisle, Pennsylvania fairgrounds where thousands of Corvette owners gather each year to socialize, buy and sell parts for cars, attend lectures on restoring and fixing cars, and take part in a parade with hundreds of Corvettes through downtown Carlisle. During the August 2015 Corvettes at Carlisle I participated in the

field size American flag formation of 156 red, white, and blue Corvettes that came from different states across the country. This flag formation of Corvettes was ranked number three for the car showing the most patriotism for all time by the Corvette Forum online social media site (http://www.corvetteforum.com/how-tos/slideshows/7-times-the-corvette-showed-its-patriotism-437253#3-the-carlisle-corvette-american-flag).

The structure and organization of these leisure spaces were analyzed to determine how they shaped collective behavior, civic participation, and in group attachments. Attention to symbols, exchange of knowledge, and social interaction were noted for patterns that were recorded for data analysis. As a fellow Corvette owner, I engaged in semi-structured interviews with participants and attendees during these events including the 2016 National Corvette Restoration Society annual convention in Warwick, Rhode Island. Organized activities, car shows, dinners, and receptions were attended with the intent to observe the social capital and networks of Corvette owners nationwide were observed in these leisure spaces. Through methods of participant observation, I sought to understand how the rituals surrounding the Corvette reaffirms meaning and maintains the life of the community. Relationships with the car and fellow Corvette enthusiasts were analyzed as forms of social capital. I also wanted to develop an understanding of how club memberships are an important part of maintaining collective behavior and group identity. Many clubs from all across the country traveled in caravans for hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles to gather at this annual convention. I participated in the social activities that were offered at the convention including historical tours and outings for lunch and shopping. I was able to observe how the car brought people together and

led to other social, leisure activities. These extra -curricular events provided additional social cohesion and were scheduled in between the judging of cars and awards ceremonies.

Another site for observing group membership of this community was a four- day observation at both the National Corvette Museum and Corvette Assembly Plant in Bowling Green, Kentucky in August of 2015. The non-profit museum is the only museum dedicated to a single brand of car and was founded by the Corvette consumers. I interviewed several staff members and volunteers and took a private plant tour in which I observed the assembly of the C7 Corvette, and the United Auto Workers union employees working on the line. While it was not a focus of my research, observations of the auto workers revealed that they too are a part of the Corvette family as their jobs are dependent upon loyal Corvette consumers.

Interviews

In addition to participant observations, in-depth interviews were conducted with Corvette owners and also Marketing and Sales directors in the Corvette industry. Referring back to the institutional ethnography research method, the interview questions were constructed to identify the larger social forces (deindustrialization, and social changes in family, religion and community) that shape both involvement and the organization of community surrounding this cultural object. Generational influence and early consumer experiences were a focus of the interviews to reveal the relationship of the individual to the car. The open-ended interview protocol (Appendix B) was divided into three sections; 1) Nostalgia and Early Experience for Consumer Preference, 2)

Constructing Meaning through Consumption, and 3) Social Capital and Leisure Activity. These three sections of interview questions were formulated from the recurring themes that emerged during my preliminary observations with Corvette club members. The attachment to Corvette history and childhood dreams of the car were a recurring narrative that seemed to underscore club membership. A lifestyle was observed in Corvette spaces that included rituals, the American flag, and collections of memorabilia that all were symbolic of owning a Corvette. Thus, a section of questions on constructing meaning through consumption was structured. Finally, the ubiquity of social activity and philanthropy that the car clubs offer led to a section of questions on social capital.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed as part of the data collection process. A different set of interview questions was constructed for the three interviews conducted with Corvette Marketing and Sales professionals and this structured interview set was approved by the George Mason Institutional Review Board in June of 2016. The decision to add interviews with these professionals came from the opportunity to do so through the overlapping of these professionals into the voluntary participation of Corvette consumers in leisure activities surrounding the car. These professionals work at independent Corvette dealerships and at the non-profit National Corvette Museum. Their role in the brand community was found to be integral to the Corvette family and offered a different perspective on consumer agency and trust within the circle of consumption and leisure. The interview questions (Appendix C) were divided into three sections; 1) Market Segmentation, 2) Social Capital within the Brand Community, 3) Constructing Meaning of the Corvette. The addition of the marketing professionals to this study

contributes to the institutional ethnographic framework by providing in depth perspectives on how consumer markets have shaped both leisure and communities around the brand.

Quantitative Methods

The quantitative portion of the study included a survey instrument (Appendix A). The survey instrument was developed based on themes that emerged in preliminary observations at Corvette events around values and ideals of community. These values include patriotism and freedom to consume and leisure as one wishes in their private time. The value of community was defined through shared experiences of common interests in leisure spaces. Nostalgia was a sentiment that was reflected in the old music played at car shows, the mid-twentieth century advertisements that are sold second hand along with Corvette collectibles from fifty years ago. I was interested in learning if the Corvette owner was in fact more nostalgic than those who don't own the car. The survey was designed as an extended replication of Holbrook's (1993) nostalgia scale and designed to measure "nostalgia proneness." The thirty-two question survey entitled "Leisure in your Life" was created in Survey Monkey. The scale has proven reliable as it has been replicated multiple times in peer-reviewed journals since its original 1993 design. Research evidence suggests that targets of nostalgia are generally those things experienced in one's late teens and early 20s (Mowen and Minor 1998). The eight- point nostalgia scale is designed to measure how the sentiment of nostalgia may be a value that is embedded in the Corvette community.

In addition to the nostalgia scale, a seven-point patriotism scale used by Morse et al. (1991) in their mixed methods study on patriotism and citizen participation was replicated to measure the sentiment levels of patriotism among Corvette owners. Like the nostalgia scale, the survey measures if the Corvette community has exceptionally high levels of patriotism. Preliminary research suggested that consuming the Corvette might be seen as a patriotic purchase in and of itself. The repeated statement by owners that it is 'The All American sports car', 'the American Dream,' and 'classic Americana' reflects how the car is equated with American exceptionalism. The measurement of both nostalgia and patriotism may reveal the symbolic meaning of the Corvette, its tie to national identity for these communities as well as identify sentiments that are exercised through the consumption of and involvement with the car. In addition to the two survey replications, original survey questions including demographics of age, race, gender, marital status, military service, and education level were asked. Specific questions about personal ownership of the Corvette were included and two open- ended questions allowed respondents to record two words that they most closely associated with the Corvette. The design of these questions was intended to be used in the convergent parallel method to compare the qualitative responses of participants through observation and interviews to the larger sample of quantitative data.

Sample

The National Council of Corvette Clubs boasts up to 17,000 members in 270 different clubs nationwide. Most of these Corvette clubs have websites and there are also online chat rooms for Corvette owners that serve as 'virtual' car clubs. Such a large

population of Corvette owners with public websites offered an opportunity to sample Corvette car owners from across the country and capture attitudes held by the larger population of Corvette owners. Respondents were identified through the online websites of the Corvette clubs nationwide with permission of the club president. Twenty- two clubs were contacted nationwide from states representing all regions of the country (South, Northeast, Midwest, Pacific Northwest, and Southwest). Contact was made via e-mail with a link to the survey provided to club officers in order to forward the survey to members of their club. Over half of the clubs contacted responded to my email and agreed to forward the survey to their club members. Three online Corvette forums or 'virtual communities' of Corvette owners were contacted and the director of the site agreed to post the survey for members to take. In addition, paper forms of the survey were distributed at approximately three different club meetings and activities that I attended in multiple states.

The survey was launched in June of 2015 and remained open until October of 2016. The total number of respondents received by October 2016 was 683. Of this entire sample, 53 respondents submitted a partial survey. These surveys were removed, leaving the entire data sample to be N=630. The total sample of Corvette owners was N=437 and non-Corvette sample was N=193. The non-Corvette owners were surveyed to test sentiments of nostalgia and patriotism of Corvette owners against a general population. The non-Corvette sample was a convenience sample disseminated to students and graduate students at two Northern Virginia colleges. In addition, the Corvette owners I

met and spoke to were often asked to forward the survey on to friends who do not own a Corvette. Hence, the sample yielded respondents from various regions of the U.S. as well.

The qualitative sample of interviews was N=30. Following Small's (2009) premise that a qualitative sample of three dozen interviews may be too small to generalize to the larger population, "there is a place for a small interview study to make meaningful contributions to knowledge, provided the language and assumptions through which it is interpreted differ" (2009:15). Therefore, the thirty interviews conducted from here on out may be called, "a set of 30 case studies" (Smalls 2009:15). The findings of the case studies will be analyzed with the findings of the quantitative data to reflect the sentiments of nostalgia, patriotism, and the subjective meaning of the Corvette to the consumers.

The qualitative sample of case studies was obtained through various methods of purposive non-probability sampling, sampling for range, convenience sampling, and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling was conducted in Northern Virginia where I became a member of a local Corvette club and also was introduced to another regional club. Convenience sampling was conducted during my participation at national car shows in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island where I was able to talk to fellow owners and solicit interviews from those present at these events. These Corvette owners lived in different states including Ohio, Massachusetts, and Texas. I was able to diversify my case study sample to include women and minorities.

I used different methods to build my sample. One method I employed was placing my business card on Corvette windshields in public parking lots. The card had a

brief note about my research on the back and asked the car owner to contact me if interested in setting up an interview. This method yielded two case studies, both were two of the youngest males in the sample. Other contacts were made on the public websites of car clubs contacted for surveys. This method of sampling led to case studies in California and Tennessee.

Snowball sampling began with a contact I made at a car show in South Carolina and led to multiple case studies in three other states. Many of these interviewees were very helpful in referring me to other potential cases that I eventually had to choose from these referrals, leaving many more available for future research.

There were twenty-seven Corvette case studies conducted and three case studies with Marketing and Sales professionals at an independent Corvette dealership and the National Corvette Museum. These case studies were chosen randomly after learning about them through Corvette documentaries on cable television. I contacted the director of both businesses in Kentucky and California and I was received very warmly with a willingness to be interviewed. I will note that the hospitality expressed by the marketing and sales professionals is reflective of the Corvette community as a whole which I experienced during this entire project. In other words, the business professionals acted as part of the leisure community and often referred to the consumers and fellow co-workers as ‘family.’

Positionality

As part of my preliminary research, I embedded myself as an active member in a local Corvette club in Alexandria, Virginia, as well as a member of the National Council

of Corvettes, and the National Corvette Museum. These memberships were vital to my role as a participant in multiple Corvette community activities that I took part in with my Corvette.

A researcher's perspective always contributes to the body of research. As a female, I am a minority among the majority male population of car collectors being studied. I also note myself as similar to many of the women involved in this car culture in that our attachment to cars finds a pathway back to a relationship we have with a man in our lives. By way of my father during my childhood, and later my husband in adulthood, my passion for cars and involvement in the car culture was formed and sustained. The purchase of my Corvette was a transaction that my stepson helped to facilitate. Like many of those being researched, my early life experience with cars (including familial bonds surrounding the car), are generational influences that have created a sense of value and perhaps nostalgia toward the Corvette.

Following Arendell's (1997) work on women interviewing men, the interaction between researcher and the researched pose questions of reflexivity that include but are not limited to the histories and identities that each bring to the research process. In other words, both the researcher and the researched bring personal 'baggage' to the interview process that has an impact on knowledge production. Acknowledging that my status as a female who has little technological and mechanical knowledge of cars is important to note as a potential influence upon the data collection process. Knowing the language of the car (i.e; performance technology, engine size, after- market modifications, and mechanical processes) is an important part of understanding the mystique of the Corvette

in contrast to other automobiles. While I am familiar with many of these terms, my lack of technical/mechanical understanding of cars and how they work means a loss in my ability to translate how this aspect of the car contains sacred meaning to owners. It is important to note that the emphasis of my interviews was getting the respondents to talk more about the personal stories that surrounded their experience and 'awe' of the car's performance in order to capture the mystique behind the car. My approach was to solicit the sentiments and feelings that the car evoked on a personal level and how these feelings were shared with fellow community members.

The personal inquiries and stereotyped assumptions about females that Arendell (1997) experienced while interviewing divorced fathers may be a potential for conflict of interest between the researcher and the researched. Arendell found her female status at times was greeted with contention regarding the subject matter of ex-wives and unfair play during divorce. I would like to suggest that the research topic has a profound impact on how the interviewee responds to a female researcher. I propose that a male researcher would have solicited a different tone among male interviewees and their response to questions about cars. These responses may have included more 'shop talk' about car performance, mechanics, and technology in order to convey meaning. Meanwhile, as a female researcher I am able to draw upon the sentiments that are embedded within the personal relationship to the car. It was apparent to me throughout this interview process how comfortable the men in this study felt relaying deep sentiments about the car that were linked to early childhood socialization and boyhood dreams. The car was described as an extension of self, and therefore made it very easy to put into words who they are.

In her study of youth and their cars, Best (2006:4) found that 'cars are a space where men can be men, and in many instances provides one of the few opportunities for men to forge emotional ties with other men.' Hence, cars allow men to speak openly about personal sentiments in connection to things and people that they may not feel comfortable expressing in other contexts. Talking with me about their cars, (their passion) was something that acknowledges their status and masculinity that is equated with owning and driving the car. I also think their willingness to reveal these feelings are attributed in part to my being a woman and not a man.

For sociologists, reflexivity is an integral part of validity in qualitative research. Early on I recognized my position in relation to the subjects of my research. My own Southern roots and abiding respect if not deference for tradition in terms of family and community make me similar to many of the men and women I researched. I grew up in a small town with memories of neighbors and friends who were very close-knit just as most of these interviewees did. While I believe in equal rights for women and everyone else, I would not identify myself as a feminist and so the viewpoint from which I stand may be different from other women who would conduct this study if they were to identify themselves as such. I did not in any way approach this project with the intent of addressing gender inequalities, but was interested to understand gender as an organizing principle of cultural practice. I used the sociological perspective of symbolic interaction in order to understand how meaning is constructed through consumption of the car and shared leisure practice with others.

In the development stage of my research, I found that being a younger female (compared to the average age of the male members) was also an advantage to data collection. By showing a genuine interest in learning about the car culture, and also owning a 2000 Corvette myself, I was able to gain access to several car collectors. Often, my presence was received with curiosity and interest as a 'woman who wants to study Corvettes.' Owning a Corvette has offered me an entrée into the community that I am studying. Corvette ownership is a requirement for membership and participation in any of the local clubs across the U.S. Hence, without the financial capital to buy my own Corvette, full participation in this research project may not have been possible. Sharing a similar socio-economic status with the group I am studying also contributes to access and participation with the Corvette community. In short, the intersections of age and social class were found to be most important for me in making connections with participants in the research.

Figure 1 My C5 2000 Corvette Convertible

Limitations

This research is limited by a sample of Corvette owners who may not be representative of the entire Corvette consumer population. While the survey was taken from a volunteer sample of Corvette club members in different regions of the U.S. and the traits and values that are revealed may be reflective of characteristics of those who prefer to join organized clubs. There are thousands of Corvette owners who do not join leisure clubs and their values and experiences may be different from those in Corvette communities. Owners who join clubs may be more inclined to volunteer and participate in community building than those who don't join.

Another limitation of the study is the nostalgia scale that is being replicated may not accurately measure nostalgia in the sense of consumers experiencing a sentimental feeling about the past through the car itself. In other words, owners may be prompted to purchase the car due to sentiments of the past or memories of the Corvette that are

inspired by advertisements or personal relationships and these are not scaled in the nostalgia survey.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the understanding of community life in the twenty-first century as it is shaped by consumption and leisure. The relationship between consumer and object, consumer and consumer, and consumer to community will all be considered part of how individuals create social ties through the consumption of meaningful objects. How these social ties are sustained and constructed through participation in brand communities is an important part of community engagement at this moment in time and may reflect the shifting relevance of the institutions that provide interdependence and social support for one another.

Social capital theory as described by Putnam (2000) and the 'strength of weak ties' by Granovetter (1973) are used as theoretical frameworks for social networks. The ingredients of influence, information, mobility, reciprocity, trust, and community organization are integral to the evaluation of how individual social capital leads to renewed civic engagement and in a broader context, more stable and democratic citizenship participation.

The implications of this research suggest that the consumer sphere is very complex in its ability to engage with leisure practice for the purpose of renewed civic engagement. While the market offers a multiplicity of consumer choices for individuals, most seek meaningful objects that provide linkages to others who share similar emotions and passions. These patterns of consumer behavior often morph into lifestyle enclaves

(Bellah et al. 2008) where the shared passion for cars offers a collective experience that provides functionality and social benefits to those involved. The result of consumption communities may ultimately and (at times) ironically, be our modern connection to keeping American society socially adhered.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE TIME MACHINE

> *My first vivid memory about Corvette didn't really happen until I was seventeen and we were hanging out at McDonald's. In New Jersey, we had one of the first McDonald's in the country, and the manager would let us hang out in the back of the lot with our cars as long as we didn't cause problems. A friend of mine's dad had a lot of money and showed up one day in a '67 Corvette- dark green, tan interior convertible. I remember going with him in that car, and I always said, 'Someday I'm gonna have a green Corvette. It wasn't until 2000 when Corvette came out with the dark Bowling Green color that I said, 'I gotta have it.' And that was when I bought my first Corvette* (Harry, interview, June 25, 2015).

Many young men like Harry of the Baby Boomer generation grew up in a time when cars and cruising were not only forms of teenage leisure, but the stuff of dreams and imagined adulthood. For many car enthusiasts, the imprint of these youth adventures remains in the psyche throughout the life course and as time passes, these strong memories turn into nostalgia. Nostalgia comes from the Greek word 'to return home' Davis (1977). According to Davis (1979) nostalgia cannot exist without a personal history, proper sentiment, and connection to a particular place in time. For many Corvette owners, the car connects them to a place and time in both their own personal history and a collective one. It is this connection to the past or idea of the past that I was interested to better understand.

This chapter presents interview and survey findings in answer to the research question: *How do the socio-historical experiences of consumers construct and maintain Corvette brand communities?* Specifically, two hypotheses from the study are answered

in this section; H1: *Early childhood/youth experience with the Corvette creates consumer preference*, and H2: *The Corvette community shares a high level of nostalgia sentiment.* The results of these hypotheses will be discussed through an analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data. It is important at this point to recall the research method design as an institutional ethnography. The data will not only be evaluated through the analysis of responses and observations, it will be situated within a broader context of transformation of leisure and consumer markets, recognizing these as central to shaping relationships and community formations.

The sentiment of nostalgia has been studied across various academic disciplines, history (Cross 2016); psychology (Proust 1913); (Zimbardo and Boyd 1999); marketing (Holbrook 1993; Schindler and Holbrook 2003); sociology (Mannheim 1953; Davis 1979; Morrison 2010) and anthropology (Stewart 1988). The explications of nostalgia within these disciplines were all influential in the analysis of this research data on Corvette communities. For the purpose of this research, I recognize nostalgia as a sentiment that develops in concert with a complex network of social ties, objects, places and practices. The practice of nostalgia is one that is described as a creative form of engagement with the world (Lowenthal 1985). Instead of longing for the past, nostalgia may be considered productive for these Corvette owners as 'the past makes the present meaningful' (Routledge et al. 2011) through shared leisure activities where overlapping generational experiences tie the community together. Early exposure to the Corvette through family members, childhood play, and Chevrolet advertising were all found to be influential in constructing nostalgia.

A mixed methods study offered two methods of measuring the sentiment of nostalgia among Corvette owners that could be contrasted with non-Corvette owners. The quantitative study was conducted through survey replication and allowed nostalgia to be measured among a large number of Corvette owners. The qualitative methods included individual case studies and participant observations conducted inside Corvette club community activities and gatherings. The discussion of H1(early life experience) will follow the discussion of H2 (nostalgia).

Quantitative Analysis on Nostalgia

According to Hallegatte and Marticotte (2014:84), Holbrook's (1993) Nostalgia Index is "the most popular nostalgia proneness measurement scale in marketing." The psychographic variable of 'nostalgia proneness' is measured through a nostalgia index that assesses people's positive associations with the past versus the present. Holbrook's (1993) previous test of this nostalgia index found empirical support for the link between age and the development of consumer tastes (over time) and the relationship of nostalgia proneness to patterns of consumer preference. My interest in understanding the role of nostalgia among these Corvette club community members began with early observations. My preliminary participant observations indicated that the Corvette was an especially desired automobile for those over fifty and that those who owned a Corvette also spoke nostalgically about their first encounter with a Corvette. I had also observed that the Corvette venues and leisure spaces were heavily laden with nostalgic memorabilia including mid-twentieth century car magazines, Chevrolet advertisements, car parts, and owner's manuals that commemorated the car as a classic. For these reasons, Holbrook's

nostalgia index was chosen for replication as part of the survey instrument to measure nostalgia proneness of Corvette owners against a general population (Appendix A).

H2 *The Corvette community shares a high level of nostalgia sentiment* was measured using the Holbrook Nostalgia Index (Table I). The eight question nostalgia index measures nostalgia proneness via a nine point Likert scale in which respondents rank their sentiments about a preference for the past from the range of 'strongly disagree'(1) to 'strongly agree'(9). Four statements on the nostalgia scale (items 4,5,7,8) that expressed positive feelings about the present and future were then reverse scored for calculating scale totals. The highest possible score for nostalgia (most nostalgic) is 72 (8x9). The statistical mean for the nostalgia scale (sum of scores for each question) of Corvette owners was 37.8673 with a standard deviation of 10.70286. The statistical mean for the nostalgia scale of non-Corvette owners was 38.4041 with a standard deviation of 9.29899. The T-test for the statistical mean of nostalgia showed Corvette owners as being a bit less nostalgic (Table I).

Table 1

T-test Results of Holbrook's Nostalgia Index

Nostalgia questions for Corvette Owners vs. Non- Corvette Owners			
Question Number	Corvette Owners N=437	Non-Corvette Owners N=193	Mean Different at 5% level
Q1-They don't make 'em like they used to	5.4508	5.5130	No
Q2-Things used to be better in the good ole days	4.9268	5.3109	Yes
Q3-Products are getting shoddier and shoddier	4.6636	5.0984	Yes
Q4-Technological change will ensure a brighter future	3.4828	3.2850	No
Q5-History involves a steady improvement in human welfare	3.8902	3.7409	No
Q6-We are experiencing a decline in the quality of life	5.2654	5.1658	No
Q7-Steady growth in GNP has brought increased human happiness	5.5652	5.4974	No
Q8-Modern business constantly builds a better tomorrow.	4.6224	4.7927	No
Composite Score for Nostalgia	37.8673	38.4041	No

While I had hypothesized Corvette owners would demonstrate nostalgia proneness, six of the eight questions did not show any statistical difference in the levels of nostalgia proneness between Corvette owners and non-Corvette owners. Two items did show statistical difference and showed non-Corvette owners as more nostalgic. The two index items that had significant statistical difference between the two populations were item 2; 'things used to be better in the good ole days' and item 3; 'products are getting shoddier and shoddier.' The first item about the good ole days presumes 'things' (an ambiguous term) of the past were better than those of today. The second index item suggests that products of today are flimsy and less sophisticated than those of the past.

What to make of these unexpected findings regarding nostalgia? Are Corvette owners less nostalgic than others or is something else in play? While Corvette owners may be nostalgic for the history of the car, relationships tied to the car, or even the time period when the car was conceived, the technological innovations captured in each generation of the Corvette also help to maintain brand loyalty. My preliminary research had revealed that the Corvette consumer has a strong connection with the car as a technologically progressive piece of machinery. In fact, the inception of the car's concept as a high performance vehicle that rebels against other standard vehicles on the road was intentional through the ingenuity of engineer, Zora Arkus Duntov[4]. The spirit of this ingenuity is what many say lives on in the design and capabilities of each new generation of Corvette, thus adding to the Corvette's sacred status.

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[4] The emotional appeal of the car was the design intention of the talent and ingenuity of Zora Arkus-Duntov, a Russian engineer born in Belgium referred to as the "godfather of the Corvette." (Leffingwell 2012). Duntov believed the car's purpose was not to be rational or material, but to touch human needs and desires. Hired by GM, Duntov breathed life into the Corvette by creating its alluring V-8 engine power and speed with which drivers could experience the exhilaration of performance similar to cars of the racing world. Despite what GM wanted, Duntov went against the grain to create a sports car that pushed the limits of what auto industries and consumers themselves were ready for. Similar to the rebelliousness of the Harley Davidson, the Corvette was infused with defiance. Thanks to Duntov's rebellious contribution, the performance, styling, and technology of the Corvette became a cultural object with personality and a mystique that created wider and deeper connections for people and to possibilities for America as a nation. Today, Corvette develops technologies through racing that carry over to production vehicles in order to make the safest and most advanced Corvettes for customers (corvetteracing.com) For sure, the continuous advancements in technology and safety have secured a corner in the marketplace for loyal consumers while contributing to the cutting- edge needs of American exceptionalism.

Given the consumer's affinity for technological performance, I concluded that Corvette owners would more than likely not consider the car as a product that gets 'shoddier and shoddier' or 'used to be better in the good ole days.' To support my analysis, one interviewee commented on the index item 'they don't make 'em like they used to:

> That question that you had on there, 'they don't make-em like they used to'(and you hear that all the time), but I've told my wife many times, you know, today the older cars just wouldn't hold up to what they can do today. I mean you get on these highways going 80 miles an hour and you don't even feel you're doing anything. You get in a 57 Chevy or even my 63 Corvette, you go down the highway at 80 miles an hour, you feel like your goin 80 miles an hour! So I don't know if I agree with that 'they don't make em like they used to' (Larry, interview May 30, 2015).

Larry confirms that his '63 Corvette in no way outperforms the cars on the road today and suggests a rationale for why Corvette owners in the survey did not score high on this index item. The Corvette owner's affinity for the latest technological innovation in performance will also be discussed in the qualitative findings. Before discussing the qualitative findings, further discussion of the quantitative data and its possible limitations is needed.

The Holbrook Nostalgia Index has been recognized for its conceptual limitations in a recent study by Hallegatte and Marticotte (2014). The main critique of Holbrook's scale is that nostalgia is measured as a preference for the past in opposition to the present and future. Hallegatte and Marticotte (2014) have argued the index does not measure nostalgia proneness but a belief in decline that (falsely) is synonymous with the passage of time. Particular items on the nostalgia index (Holbrook 1994) such as 'we are experiencing a decline in the quality of life,' and 'products are getting shoddier and

shoddier' reflect a pessimistic attitude toward the future and its products and not a desire for innovation and progress. In other words, nostalgic sentiments for the past or consumer products of the past are not necessarily synonymous with a dislike of the present or future.

This point is supported by definitions of nostalgia that acknowledge a desire to go back to the past or to relive the past (Davis 1979) as emotions that can prove positive for personal well-being in the present. An individual's longing to relive the past does not have to be an exclusive emotion. Zimbardo and Boyd (1999) propose that nostalgia can be balanced by positive perceptions of the present and future and an orientation toward goals that help to shape a person's identity while keeping them rooted in the pleasures of familiarity. This balance is captured in nostalgia for the car's familiar military warship body style that has maintained continuity in production for over sixty years. Karen, a member of the National Corvette Restoration Society (NCRS) explains Chevrolet's original intention:

> The goal was to morph the car, to make it evolve but make it remain a Corvette. Fifty years ago and still today, one goes down the road and people know by the style, that is a Corvette. Aesthetically? Iconic. A desirable car (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016).

The passion for technological innovations that constantly push the limits of what a sports car can do is also a part of the draw of the Corvette. To illustrate this point, here is an excerpt from my personal field notes based on my own encounter renting a 2015 Corvette Stingray:

> As I climbed in to encapsulate myself, I was far removed from the world of cars and drivers around me, like I was climbing into another dimension. The car felt

like I was in a rocket, a spaceship with a futuristic feel. The dash resembled a computer generated control room like on Star Trek. Sitting behind the wheel was intimidating, not knowing what all the gadgets and buttons were. How will I operate this vehicle? After driving the car from Nashville to Bowling Green, I now understand the aeronautical feel of this machine. Having the car at ninety miles per hour felt like I was coasting through the air (field notes, August 11, 2015).

Figure 2: My 2015 Stingray rental

Like many of those I interviewed, I was drawn to the Corvette mystique, constructed through the expectations of design and engineering innovations that allow

consumers to experience the futuristic feel of an automotive industry that resides in the future, not the present or the past. Another part of the mystique is captured through nostalgia for what the Corvette represents- ‘freedom, childhood, and excitement’ (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016) from the carefree days of one’s youth. In this sense the Corvette is both an object representing past and future; what was and what could be.

While H2 shows through the quantitative data, that there is little to no difference in the two populations, the findings of Hallegatte and Marticotte (2014) suggest that the Holbrook index items measured a belief in the decline in quality of life over time that Corvette owners may not have identified with. The qualitative data helps us understand this unexpected finding. The sentiment of nostalgia for Corvette owners was described in different terms in the observations and interviews. These methods reveal the Corvette as an object that represents deeper connection to the past through childhood generational experiences and memories tied to consumer advertising. Let’s take a look at how nostalgia was expressed through involvement in leisure activities and storytelling from the narratives of Corvette owners.

Qualitative Analysis on Nostalgia

While the hypothesis of Corvette owners as nostalgic was not supported by the quantitative data (which may reflect the limitations of the Holbrook nostalgia scale), the qualitative findings suggest high levels of nostalgia. The qualitative findings also support Lowenthal’s (1984) claim that nostalgia is a form of creative engagement with the world. This engagement was expressed through Corvette owners’ talk about their collections of objects belonging to the past and nostalgic trips to historic destinations in their Corvette.

Much of their leisure time was organized around nostalgic themes and is analyzed as productive forms of historical preservation and the reclaiming of personal memories linked to the car.

Nostalgia as 'lived experience' as defined by Davis (1979) was found to be one of the most prominent sentiments expressed by Corvette owners and observed within the communities of this study. It is important to note that both the individual, personal experiences of Corvette owners as well as the collective experiences of the group are intertwined and mutually constitutive of the sentiment of nostalgia. In other words, this brand community shares similar personal histories with the car that are reactivated through collective activities, rituals, and the sharing of stories. Together, these fortify nostalgic sentiment.

The Corvette is a cultural object that often connects people to a particular time and place in the life course. This was evident in both interviews and observations where people seemed to be connecting with the community experiences of their youth. Many observations were conducted at Corvette venues and festivals that occupied large fields of fairground with a sea of colorful, candy painted cars, many with the shiniest of chrome that compete with the sun they lay under. The American flag is not hard to find, for there are many posted and stationed at vendor tents who sell parts, plugs, wheels, and even car ancestry information. Music from another era, mostly 1960s is pumped from speakers that sit high above the crowd and emit the sounds of the Beach Boys, Chuck Berry, and The Rolling Stones that create a time warp for the duration of the festival. Couples, families, gearheads, and car nuts can all be found perusing the seven generations of

Corvettes that represent a part of America's consumer cultural heritage. The smell of barbeque, funnel cake, and hot dogs grilling transport festival goers back in time to neighborhood baseball games and the county fairs that were once part of small town America and in some corners, still exist. These venues are a re-creation of youth past times and serve as linkages to early life experiences that were found to be a central part of this research and the personal attachment to the Corvette among Corvette club members.

Schindler and Holbrook (2003:275) found that "styles popular during a consumer's youth can influence the consumer's lifelong preferences." Out of 30 case studies, 28 respondents described in vivid detail the first time they saw or rode in a Corvette during the interview. Descriptions of body style, sound of the car, interior design of the car, and simply the 'way it made me feel' all told a story of youth memories that connected them to the car. Most of these early memories were created before age twenty-one, thus bracketing a period in the life course between adolescence and adulthood where the mystique of the car was first introduced symbolically, defining the Corvette in the form of an aspirational object. These early Corvette memories were found to be extremely powerful in creating a bond between owners and the car that continued to endure within their imagination throughout different periods in the life course.

Corvette memories seemed to anchor many owners despite the fast pace of social and generational changes around them. As a response to the 'fast capitalism' of mass consumption, historian Gary Cross (2015) argues that 'consumed nostalgia' objects help root us in our experiences with the world around us and can also be quite complex in their

network of social ties. While the nostalgic experience varies for members of the Corvette community, what is shared is the matrix of generational experience, engagement with consumer markets, and structured leisure as influential in their involvement with the car. Diane (age 66) provides an example of how her earlier childhood experience in consumer car markets influenced her attachment to the Corvette:

> This will kill you- I learned to drive when I was 6 or 7 years old in a Corvette bodied go kart! We were living on an Air Force base and we had a lot of space in the housing area. My daddy bought me a little Corvette bodied go kart and we kids in the neighborhood learned to drive in that go kart. Our neighbor bought a T-Bird go kart for his child. I have no idea where it came from, it just showed up one day (Diane, interview, August 6, 2015).

Figure 3 Diane (1961) in her Corvette Bodied Go Kart

This memory illustrates how toy go karts (branded by Chevrolet and Ford), provided a shared leisure experience among neighborhood kids and reveals the origins of the Corvette brand memories rooted in childhood nostalgia as central to Corvette purchase in adulthood.

These go kart toys are objects that belong to post World War II youth culture, were largely branded by GM and Ford to entice future drivers and shape an entire generation's relationship with cars.

Generational Influence

Sociologist Karl Mannheim discussed the sense of belonging that comes from those who inhabit the same generation. Those of the same generation are endowed with a common location in the social and historical process, thus predisposing them to a shared mode of thought, a common set of experiences, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action (Mannheim 1952). The research findings suggest that what unites Corvette owners is not only a passion for the car, but also a predisposition to membership in the brand community based on shared generational experience.

Corvette history is positioned in mid-twentieth century America as part of the Baby Boomers generation. Many enthusiasts interviewed in this study recalled coming of age during generational events such as the Vietnam War, the Space Race, The Civil Rights movement, the introduction of television, rock and roll, and advertising into popular culture. These generational events influence how participants see the world and their hopes for American society. They came of age during a period of a rapidly expanding middle class, the emergence of the U.S. as a super power and a boom in housing ownership. It is perhaps not surprising then that for them, the Corvette represents both American exceptionalism and personal achievement. The following are three descriptions from Corvette collectors of their generational experience:

Don, a 70 year- old Corvette collector from Southern California:

> I think because of the age that we're at, many of us, even some of the older ones remember, (probably very young) but World War II and the Korean War. And then you get a break, because all of us Baby Boomers, we were coming of age during Vietnam. A lot of us went over there and we lost friends in that. And knowing how the country was after that, it seemed a big turnaround after 9/11 and, all of a sudden, the military's recognized. Well, you know, we've always been patriots, but we just didn't express it the way we do today (Don, interview, November 5, 2016).

Karen, a 68 year old Corvette collector from Massachussetts:

> I would say anyone born in the 40s or 50s during WWII, Korean war, who lived through Vietnam and now todays wars. You understand 9/11 (the terrorism) you are old enough and adult enough to understand what it means and what the freedoms mean, having been through it. And the fact that we can do what we want to do when we want to do it, and own this car and enjoy it. I think that ties in and has become more and more forward in your thought process. The tie in of course, yeah the Mustang is made by America, Ford. But the Corvette truly represents- You see it, you know it is USA. The red, white, and blues the "Heartbeat of America" was probably the best, best way to explain it. You know "See the USA in your Chevrolet" with the Dina Shore ads, its all been incorporated promotionally from Chevrolet (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016).

Jerry, a 72 year -old Corvette collector captures his generation well:

> It probably goes back to the first ride I had in a '61 Corvette. In Southern California, the Corvette has always had this mystique about it, and it probably has to do a lot with surf music and the car music of the early 60s. The tv show,Route 66 too. When I was a kid, all of us loved to watch them race on tv. It was pretty exciting (Dick, interview, August 2, 2016).

These testimonies suggest that living through the generational event of war and political unrest contributed to the symbolic meaning of the Corvette for consumers. In addition, consumer markets including advertising, television, and music that reflected car culture were specific to this generation's view of the Corvette as an iconic consumption object. The similarities in these descriptions support Mannheim's concept of generations

sharing a social location and common mode of thought suggesting that attachment to the Corvette is generational.

How does a generation adapt as it ages? When social change occurs at an institutional level, members of a generation begin to experience events that lie outside of the mainstream of their lives as if they were suddenly made aware of their rent in the larger existential fabric of their being-in-the-world, where formerly they perceived a whole (Davis 1979). As a generation progresses throughout the life cycle, new groups emerge to form new generations and this can result in the loss of accumulated cultural possessions for the previous generation. As a response to this cultural change, past experiences may be 'virtually' contained in specific forms of social remembering or sentiments (Mannheim 1952:73). By this I mean to suggest, for many Corvette owners, the brand community 'contains' the lived experiences of this generation through the revering of the car as an object that holds sentimental value and provides the comfort of continuity in a changing world. An important key to holding the sentimental value of the Corvette has been through the manufacturing of different generations of Corvette. This has perhaps been pertinent to Corvette's survival in the marketplace for over sixty years.

The Chevrolet Corvette brand has produced seven different generations (models) over the last six decades, each generation marking a specific time period in history that captures the technological advance of the period through engineering, aerodynamics, and changes in body style (see Glossary). According to Andrew, a twenty-two year -old Corvette owner, there are different classes of Corvette generation owners:

> So this is what I have observed by going to car meets and cruise ins. C1, C2 owners are the garage queens who just drive their cars on Sundays because they

> have the antique tags on them. They are the wealthiest. C3 owners are kids that in high school they get hand-me-downs. .C4 owners are usually, (not to use it as a derogatory term), but, like, trailer park people, that's what I've seen. They're usually loud and noisy people. C5 owners are usually a little more mellowed, older generation of Corvette owners. They just try them for fun, usually on the weekends, or occasionally they'll be their dailies. C6 owners are business men that want to say they drive fast cars, and I've found they are the douchiest ones of all Corvette owners. C7 owners are just new wealth, I guess. They don't understand the Corvette culture yet, they just bought them because they saw them on the showroom floor in the dealership (Andrew, interview, Sept.15, 2015).

While generation appears to pattern consumer preference, interviews suggest class plays an important role as well. This analysis of the different Corvette generation owners may be more reflective of socio-economic status rather than consumer preference. However, it does suggest that the Corvette appeals to a wide range of social class among consumers. The relevance of social class in relation to Corvette ownership will be discussed more at length in Chapter five.

The ownership of different generation models of Corvette was often found to be correlative with age. The mean statistic age of the Corvette respondents surveyed was sixty. The mean age among the twenty-eight case studies of Corvette owners was fifty-eight. This finding was consistent with an Autoweek survey of Corvette consumers that found the average age to be 59 (Stoy 2013). With an aging population of Corvette owners, the desire to pass down the nostalgia for the Corvette and its history was found to be a concern among many, and illustrates Mannheim's generational concepts of accumulated and appropriated memories.

The social life of a generation of people is short-lived; members of any one generation can participate only in a temporally limited section of the historical process.

Strauss and Howe (1997) define the length of a generation as about two decades long. Soon, another generation emerges, pushing aside the former. Whether one has "'acquired memories" for self in the process of personal development, or whether one has simply taken these memories over from someone else is quite a distinction (Mannheim 1952:175). Therefore, the transference of these generational memories to younger generations is possible through 'appropriated memories' or knowledge that is transferred from someone else (Mannheim 1952:174) through value schema. The importance of passing on the historic value of the Corvette as an American icon is great to the former generation as they are then able to see the car they hold dear immortalized. The hopes invested in a vision for American society and community are contingent upon this transference. Gary, a marketing specialist at the National Corvette Museum expressed the importance of transferring the value of the Corvette to younger generations:

> I travel around the country to talk to Corvette clubs and I tell them I am not here for you, I am here for your grandkids. I want our museum to be here for your grandkids. We've got to make it strong so that your grandkids can walk up and see a brick and say 'that was my great grandfather.' I want them to understand this has to carry on. We've got to keep it going. Even if we stop building the Corvette, this is always going to be history (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015).

For Corvette owners, the transference of appropriated memories of the car is a way to immortalize themselves through preserving the history of the car. Similar to the old estate system or family inheritance, the attachment to property and what it represents forms legacy among family members or whoever inherits the car. For older generations of Corvette owners, preserving Corvette history includes cultural transmission of value schema including community, patriotism, and technological innovation, down to newer generations as forms of cultural heritage that can be reinstated in the present. Through this

appropriation, the person's attachment to the car is transferred onto another, and the community continues. Now that we have discussed the generational aspect of nostalgia, it is worthwhile to examine how early life socialization contributes to the symbolic meaning of objects and the construction of nostalgia as it relates to the Corvette.

Early Life Experience

The early life experiences of Corvette owners growing up with cars as objects that hold aesthetic value, represent American exceptionalism, technological innovation, and desire are very important to understanding how the sentiment of nostalgia is shaped throughout the life course. Similar to Mannheim's sociological perspective on generations, researchers who study consumer behavior have argued the symbolic meaning of material objects is acquired through a socialization process that begins in early childhood (Solomon 1983; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). "For this reason, individuals with a common history of enculturation should exhibit considerable overlap in their interpretation of symbolic meanings" (Solomon 1983:321). The common socialization as youngsters around car culture transcended age and gender among the subjects studied. Many of the Baby Boomers grew up in a world where cars were distinct and identified by heavy chrome and muscle powered engines. Diane, the owner of three Corvettes recalls:

> I have a fascination with chrome, in fact I collect chrome pieces. I think it is because I miss them from the earlier ones. The 1973 had chrome on one bumper and after that, there was no more chrome. I thought without the chrome they looked so bland (Diane, interview, August 6, 2015).

Diane is nostalgic for the older generation Corvette models before 1973 federal standards that mandated cars must withstand impacts of 5 miles per hour in front and 2.5 miles per

hour at the rear without damage to safety related systems (head and tail lights) (Blumberg 2003) which made chrome a safety hazard. Chrome represents the cars of her youth, and its absence is recognition of the change in the automobile industry as well as the passage of time.

Meanwhile, the younger twenty-somethings who were part of this research reflected Mannheim's premise of 'appropriated memories' that had been transferred through primary relationships such as father to son or older brother to younger sister. The young Corvette owners in their twenties exhibited nostalgic tendencies through acts of symbolic interaction and in relationships formed to and around the car. In support of this point, Joey, a twenty-four year- old owner of a 1986 Corvette described his affinity for 1980s heavy metal and glam rock music that he associates with the car:

> I actually have a playlist on my Iphone called, 'Corvette' for when I drive it.It has all the 80s rock I like- AC/DC, Motley Crue, Def Leppard,Vanhalen, all those big hair metal bands. That's the right era of music for that car (Joey, interview, October 4,2016).

While he was not even born in the 1980s, Joey has 'appropriated memories' from his Dad who listened to the music and also owns a 1985 Corvette that he remembers riding around in when he was little. He further explained how this nostalgia for the 1980s era is part of his 'Corvette identity':

> I made that playlist specifically for if I'm rolling into a car show. I'm going to be the one 24-year old kid rolling in a 30 year old Corvette listening to Motley Crue, and everyone is going to be like, 'Alright….he's alright.'(Joey, interview, October 4, 2016).

This case study illustrates how nostalgic sentiments can be transferred from those who have acquired memories to those with appropriated memories. The presence of younger

generations of Corvette owners with appropriated memories is significant as it reflects the social changes in car culture over time. These changes frame how car enthusiasts measure the authenticity of cars of yesterday versus today.

A repeated theme among respondents was the recognition of social change in the automobile market itself. Car markets sold ‘rolling pieces of artwork’ (Dick, interview, August 2, 2016) and now, they are seen as rational commodities of efficiency. Don, a seventy- year old Corvette owner recalls:

> The cars I grew up with-of course that encompasses the ‘50s-they had class. When you bought a Pontiac, you bought a Pontiac. When you bought a Ford, you had a Ford. Nowadays, they all look alike. I mean, they just had a certain panache back in those days. (Don, interview, August 2, 2016)

This statement is reminiscent of the Holbrook nostalgia index item, ‘things used to be better in the good ole days.’ Don is longing for the cars of the past that had a certain class that cannot be found in the present. This permanent loss of the cars he remembers when he was younger creates a yearning to recapture the distinct aesthetic in his acquired memories.

Similar to the recognition of change in the distinction between automobile makes and models, other Corvette owners discussed these changes in a broader context, pointing to larger institutional influence in the changes of symbolic materialism relating to industry standardization and rationalization. Many identified the standardization as having contributed to a trajectory point in auto industry history. There is some amount of debate as to when the turning point of car standardization occurred. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the “Big Three” American auto companies GM, Ford, and Chrysler dominated the world’s auto industry via production and consumption of automobiles. In

1965, Ralph Nader's book "Unsafe at Any Speed" shined light on the automotive industry's resistance to safety features such as seat belts and tire pressure (Jensen 2015). A year later, Congress (begrudgingly) created the federal safety agency that became the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration whose charge was saving lives and reducing traffic incidents (Jensen 2015). This agency was the beginning of government regulations on the safety features produced in automobiles that many car enthusiasts say changed the style of cars forever. Not too long after this government agency was formed to insure greater safety behind the wheel, the geo-political event of the 1970s occurred that threatened a gasoline shortage. The OPEC oil crisis of 1973 changed the stability of the American auto industry due to a decline in oil production in the U.S. combined with rationing of oil exports by Arab nations as a political response to U.S. backing of Israel in the Yom Kippur War (Ingrassia 2010). The heyday of large, high performance vehicles in America that had dominated since post WWII was replaced by Japanese competitors who offered smaller, more fuel-efficient cars.

Many Corvette owners remembered these monumental generational events that impacted the automotive industry they had grown up with. In some ways, the standardization of the unique 'Big Three' cars they had known was similar to constricting the freedoms they had experienced when riding in these fast cars with big, loud engines. Mark, a 56-year old Corvette owner describes this change:

> Today cars are more like appliances, refrigerators, for transportation. Back in those days (60s), it seems to me that people identified more with the car. It represented something, it filled something in their life that was missing somehow. It changed a lot with auto regulations. By the 1970s you couldn't tell the difference between cars anymore. When I was a kid you could get 7,8 different

> engines. Today? Maybe 1 or 2. The cars are homogenous, they are less unique. Too many regulations and emissions. (Mark, interview, November 17, 2016)

Notably, feelings of the car's lost meaning resulting from standardization of the car market reinforces Mannheim's concept of generational influence as timebound and significant in creating symbolic meaning. Many Corvette owners expressed mixed emotions on the change in auto markets from 'the big three' production of GM, Chrysler and Ford to the globalization of the automobile with foreign cars like Hondas and Toyotas. Often the decision to purchase a Japanese car was one of practicality, not taste as detailed by one Corvette respondent:

> The foreign cars set the standard for what a car should be. I wasn't in to Hondas, but I had a family and they were just fantastic cars and going from a Ford to a Honda and seeing the fit and finish and the difference in interior and all, it just..we had to catch up. So now, the American cars are paying attention to that, the detail (MaryAnne, interview, July 7, 2015).

In contrasting the foreign market to domestic, a different set of values is described. While the cars of their youth were powerful, exhilarating, bound to identity and objects of freedom, (an expressive object) the foreign cars represented a sense of thrift by providing fuel efficiency and practicality for a family (an instrumental purchase). The dramatic shift in the automotive industry following the Baby Boom generation marked a loss for people who grew up so connected to cars that helped them form identity in their youth.

For many Corvette owners, the purchase of the car triggers nostalgic sentiments and longing for the personal connection to cars created by their first experience with the Corvette during their youth. One avid collector attempted to describe this process through the life cycle of ownership:

> You know all of the Baby Boomers, they're in their 50s and 60s, it's the car that they wanted when they were young and couldn't have it. The average age for a Corvette owner is probably 55. It's not a young man's game. And it's a way of invigorating what you missed back then when you were having babies and had a van, a pickup truck, you know or four doors. Now that you are older and kids are outta the house, you don't need four doors anymore. Just two doors, it's me and my baby. (Clayton, interview, September 16, 2015)

How attachments to consumer objects are formed may reflect differences between men and women. Recall the chapter two reference to cars as "gendered" objects where the car is a prosthetic for men while it maintains aesthetic female traits such as sleek body and curves. Gender is relevant to any study of cars as they are omnipresent as masculine objects. Let's take a look at early socialization to car culture to determine how the Corvette as a sacred object is constructed through childhood engagement with it.

Gendered Socialization in Childhood

The qualitative sample was comprised of twenty-one males and nine female case studies. While early experience with the Corvette was described in many of the same terms by men and women (aesthetics, body style, power, performance), the socialization into the car culture was gender distinct. For men, their passion for cars was often described in essentialist terms in order to authenticate complete identification with the car. Some of these statements included; "I inherited being a car guy from my father and grandfather before him", "a love of cars has always been in my DNA," "my nickname as a young kid was Wheels" and as one Corvette owner who works in Corvette sales related, "My mother told me my first word was literally, car" (Jeff, interview, July 26, 2016). The socialization of young boys into car culture was reflected in the traditional masculine activities of playing with hot wheels, reading Hot Rod magazines, putting together model cars, building

go carts with sheet metal and rope, and riding on Dad's lap while steering the wheel. One man recalled driving his sister to school in the 1950s when he was just ten years old and jokingly said, "you can imagine there was not a lot of parking at the elementary school!" (Ron, interview, July 26, 2016. The construction of model cars seemed to parallel their own self construction from young boys into men.

Two of the youngest men in the sample described their Corvette purchase as a 'subconscious choice' replicating a toy they held dear before age ten. Joe, a 24- year old Corvette owner relays:

> I was seven or eight and my brother was nine or ten. With my dad, the three of us put together this 1986 model toy Corvette. My brother chose to paint it gold, and this just happens to be the exact color and model Corvette that I bought almost twenty years later. I wasn't too fond of the gold when I first went to buy it, but something drew me to it. After I bought the car, my Dad showed me that gold, toy Corvette- he had kept it all these years. So what are the odds that my Dad would pick the toy car that I would one day get as a young adult? (Joe, interview, October 3, 2016)

For the men in this research sample, the earliest memory of a Corvette came as young as age four and as late as twenty-one. Seeing the car for the first time and sometimes being lucky enough to ride in one was a 'peak experience' that left 'deep tracks in the psyche' (Shouten 2007:368). This first contact with the object was described in visceral terms signifying a transcendent experience that shaped the young boys' consumer attitudes, behaviors, and sense of self (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). This peak experience translated itself into an aspiration that many chased for decades into their adult lives. One Corvette collector reflected on his first ride as a sixteen-year old:

> It was a beautiful car. It belonged to an Air Force officer, and he'd wrecked it and it only had like a thousand miles on it. It was a beautiful car, it was one of those silver ones with red interior. It was a 1961, a 315 fuel-injected four speed, which

> was the hottest Corvette of the day. And so he took us for a ride in it with half the front end still off of it, and three of us idiots in the car. I swear to God, it was the fastest car I ever rode in in my life, and I've been just enamored since. (Don, interview, August 3, 2016).

The first Corvette experience is something that the owner does not forget, and the feelings it evoked seem to supersede anything mundane. Ron, the son of a strict, southern Baptist preacher described his childhood as 'not being allowed to do anything fun.' He recalled his introduction to the car:

> My first Corvette experience was through my brother in law. My sister got married when I was in the eleventh grade. My brother in law had a friend who owned a 1960 Corvette and one day he let me drive that 1960 around the block-and I thought I had died and gone to heaven. So I always wanted one, I never really thought I would be able to afford one, but always liked it, always loved cars (Ron, interview, July 26, 2016).

The first ride was emotionally significant to these men right on the cusp of manhood and signified a rite of passage and the formation of aspirations in adulthood. While the car reaffirms ideals of masculinity through the power it has, it also acknowledged the feminine concept of beauty. Dick, a retired Air Force officer recalled:

> I worked my way through college working in the oil fields of Louisiana, my boss had a 64 Corvette. I am not sure I badgered him enough, he let me drive it one day and it was such a magnificent machine, it was a 64 coupe, four on the floor, a 327. It was a beautiful car and it was more power than I could ever have (Dick, interview, June 16, 2015).

These early Corvette memories serve as markers of place and time for many men who identified this experience as the beginning of a dream that would last for decades. This powerful machine reunites their self-described genuine connection with the car that is unparalleled by anything else. Simply summarized by one collector, "maybe it's something that every little boy wants some day" (Doug, interview, August 21, 2015). For

these men, the car is seen as a universal connection shared with other men and central to being men.

The structured interview process asked each case study participant about their connection to old things and collections more generally in order to further the inquiry into nostalgic sentiments that may extend beyond the Corvette. Using the NVivo data analysis software, a matrix query on nostalgic themes was conducted for all qualitative interviews. The query ran results of men and women's responses to nostalgia questions (Appendix B). The coded qualitative data revealed that the male Corvette owners expressed more sentiments of nostalgia. This finding supports Schindler and Holbrook's (2003) and Davis'(1979) findings on nostalgia and gender. Schindler and Holbrook (2003:281) concluded that nostalgic preferences for automobiles were gender related. This finding would be expected since boys tend to play with cars more than girls, can recognize automobile types more accurately than can females, and also visit car show rooms more frequently than females. "This greater involvement with automobiles makes young men more likely than females to be intense emotional consumers of automobiles" (Schindler and Holbrook 2003:281). Davis (1979) pointed to early twentieth century anthropological research on American males. The more frequent status disruptions of males that occur outside of the home through career changes, military, unemployment were noted as sources of identity discontinuity and helped to explain gravitating toward the needs of sameness that nostalgia fills. The cultural interpretation of women's status passages remaining in more familiar contexts of home, family, and kin led to less abrupt shifts in lifestyle, thus lending themselves less to nostalgia.

The qualitative data on nostalgia yielded 35 references that men made to ‘old things’ they are fond of compared to 10 references by females. For the coded theme of Corvette nostalgia (specifically), men made 20 references while women made just 4. Collections of old objects such as Hot Wheels cars, antique guns, Indian arrowheads, knives, coins, baseball cards, and stamps were talked about as objects that had sentimental value either for the history, rarity, or enjoyment of the process in completing a collection. A former Air Force pilot collected old owner manuals of particular planes that were flown in wars because he likes ‘collecting pieces of history’ (Dick, interview, June 6, 2015). The properties of these objects represent masculinity in a historical sense (weapons, war related) and also are reflective of childhood socialization to boyhood toys and activities (sports and memorabilia). The collections of old things were found to be more prominent among men than women. The sentiment of nostalgia seemed to be expressed through the meaning bestowed upon these old objects. One Corvette enthusiast remarked, “I just prefer older stuff. I can’t really tell you why” (Don, interview, August 3, 2016). Speaking about the affinity for old things was often supplemented by a perception of historical value. Another collector explained; “I collect stamps and coins big time! I like that its historical, I like that it has value and meaning-it reminds me of the past, I really like that” (Mark, interview, November 3, 2016). Several men explicitly spoke of the connection with the past that certain objects provided. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), owners’ relationships to things seem to embody goals and shape identity of the users. For example, Mike, age 68, self-identifies through his collection of fishing rods that connects him to his father:

> I collect fishing rods and reels. I have about 50 rods and reels. My dad was a fisherman, I been fishin since I was 3 years old. Fishin is ahead of Corvettes, believe it or not! (Mike, interview, July 24, 2016)

The meaning of old objects also represented a different quality of product in which building things with one's hands was perceived as having greater value. Another example of nostalgic consumption was described by Clyde, age fifty-one:

> I just think things that were built way back when were just a higher quality and when you consider the tools they didn't have to make these things with, the craftsmanship is so impressive. And then I also tend to buy things that remind me of my childhood (Clyde, interview June 6, 2016).

This preference for things from the past is made in stark contrast to the Holbrook nostalgia item "products are getting shoddier and shoddier" that proved to have statistical difference in responses between the two populations. The value of manual labor is discussed further in Chapter five that analyzes the skills of the Corvette owners.

For the women in the study, the early Corvette experience was significant in creating attachment to the object and establishing consumer preference, but it was felt and described in different terms. Unlike the men who often felt a biological 'coding' to the car, the women recalled their first Corvette experience through intimate relationships in their lives-usually a male relationship (boyfriend, father, uncle, brother). While similar 'peak experiences' and sense of identity were described through the mystique of the car, for most, the car represented an attachment to a particular person. Mary Anne, a 55- year old Corvette owner recalled:

> I looked up to my older brother, I didn't get to see him a lot because he was away at West Point. After he graduated, he came home with a 1970 Corvette, dark green with a black top, 350 horsepower, manual. He took me for a ride, took me to the mall and doted on me. We put the top down, that was just a great memory,

> it was a link to my brother. I think that's pretty much when it started because I thought he God and then the car was just so cool and then he was cool because he had this car. I think that's what started it right there. (MaryAnne, interview, July 7, 2015)

All of the women in the study told a story of how the Corvette was introduced to them in their youth by a man in their life. Stephanie recalled her earliest memory of a Corvette through her father:

> The earliest memory I have is my dad's 1973 Corvette. I loved that car, I had a toy poodle and he and I would sit in the back with Mom and Dad up front. I remember him coming home one day (I was four years old) without the car and he had a '72 red Nova with side pipes and Mom swears I didn't want to have anything to do with Dad for a week after he traded that Corvette. Later, when I was 13 Dad purchased a '69 for us to rebuild together as my first car (Stephanie, interview, August 12, 2015).

While generational influence seemed to shape nostalgia for men and women, the female Corvette owners spoke of participating in masculine activities surrounding the car through the men in their lives. Several women recalled entering autocross races, drag races, and winning 'powder puff' trophies in all female events as teenagers. One female who revealed that she 'collects Corvettes and husbands' won multiple trophies for autocross racing and remembers "women had to be in an all -female separate division but in our minds, we raced the men and won many times!" (Marsha, interview, March 9, 2016). Several women reported feeling an increased sense of independence and freedom in knowing how to do basic maintenance on their cars and understanding how the engine works. Women involved in Corvette communities seemed to be both reflective of the broader group of Baby Boomers and socialization to car culture while simultaneously proving to be an anomaly for women of this generation who were not as financially

independent as men. The gendered divisions in this leisure practice were sometimes more pronounced than others. Based on both interviews and observations at national Corvette conventions, there are more women who join Corvette communities on their own than ever before, but most still participate as a couple or partner with their husband.

Traveling through the Past

For many of these Corvette owners, the car was described as a means of transport- not just down an open road, but through their own personal history. Dick, a 69- year old Corvette owner of a 2014 Stingray reflected:

> In my Stingray I have Sirius XM radio and I listen to 60s,70s,80s the entire trip. I love to whistle and sing with em and hum and stuff. Not having my wife with me I could just rock out as much as I want…to be a 20 year- old again. It is nostalgic for me. (Dick, interview, June 16, 2015)

For some, the car is not only representative of early life experience, but it provides a means of 'going back' through the encapsulation of oneself inside the machine. This is aided by music to reconstruct the driver into their younger self. The experience of driving older models of the Corvette were often described as time machines. Larry, a 68 year -old owner of both a 1963 and a 1968 Corvette described it like this:

> Well, the '63 is just so enjoyable to sorta go back in time like 50 years ago. Matter of fact, I keep all 60s music in there and it just takes you back in a different time (Larry, interview, June 1, 2015).

The temporary suspension of time and place was most pronounced in the stories told by many Corvette owners who traveled to see American historic landmarks, national monuments and parks, and the infamous Route 66.

Route 66

Route 66 development began in 1926 as a main artery of travel from Chicago to Los Angeles. Public planners intended U.S. 66 to connect main streets of rural and urban communities along its course with the purpose of providing small towns access to a major road of transportation (National Historic Route 66 Federation 2017). By the late 1940s, this stretch of highway known as "The Main Street of America" had increased mobility for many Americans in underpopulated towns who could now travel the interstates with ease. During the postwar automobile boom the route became a road of adventure for motorists offering cottage campgrounds, motels, famous roadside architecture, and distinct service stations where motorists could 'get their kicks' (National Historic Route 66 Federation 2017). By 1970, all of the small roads of Route 66 had been overshadowed by the effects of the Interstate Highway Act that offered a safer and more rapid path of transit across country. Today, Route 66 is traveled only by the adventurous driver who is committed to following detailed road maps and weeks of planning a trip that is nearly impossible to navigate driving solo.

Figure 4 Dick (Corvette Owner) on his Route 66 Trip

The Route is a weathered path of road work that provides an excursion back in time to see the nostalgic landmarks along the way, offering a trip through a simpler past and smaller road of American leisure. This road, like the Corvette is considered (in a broader context) to be a part of America's social and cultural history, having helped form communities and associations of preservation and restoration.

Corvette owners are often linked to Route 66 by the same nostalgic sentiment they experience with the car and the connection to America's history from the Baby Boom, a time where the opening of roads across America invited long distance travel. The mystique of traveling along this road was enhanced by the 1960s television series,

"Route 66." The show starred two young men, Todd and Buzz who rode around the country in their Corvette in search of adventure and themselves. The entire series took place on the road and in towns across the country. The idea for the Route 66 show was inspired by Jack Kerouac's book, *On the Road* ("*Route 66* (TV series)"). This hit television series that ran from 1960-1964 was remembered nostalgically by many of the male respondents during interviews as responsible for making the car 'cool' and something they wanted to have. Clayton, a 66 year- old president of an African American Corvette club recalled:

> The first Corvette I purchased was a 1962 Corvette, which I still own, and I bought it because I have always been fascinated with cars; and there used to be a show on back in the 60s, 'Route 66,' and I fell in love with that car. I never missed an episode. As a matter of fact, I have to watch it now on classic tv. I record every episode, and I will watch them over again, it's like watching Bonanza, I have seen every episode, and I will just go and watch them again (Clayton, interview, September 15, 2015).

Like Clayton, many male Corvette owners reported growing up with this show, watching the characters race down the road in each episode, and wanting to experience the same adventures as the two young men. One Corvette owner spoke of meeting the actors that played Todd and Buzz some forty years later when they made a guest appearance at the grand opening of the National Corvette Museum. Like the model toy cars and hot rod magazines, the placement of the Corvette brand in the entertainment industry proved to be a strong agent of socialization to manhood that still exists in the form of nostalgia today. I would argue that the link between man and machine is still found in the form of freedom and adventurous travel that driving in the Corvette down an open road has to offer.

A majority of the interviewees reported stories of taking extensive road trips in their Corvettes either with a spouse or with a large group caravan of up to twenty people. Route 66 was often the peak experience for Corvette enthusiasts and a bucket list for some. Stephanie recalled her two- week drive on Route 66 in her 1990 C4 as the trip of her lifetime. She spent six months learning about the route, planning her trip and joining the association. She shared why she wanted to do this:

> Just being around the Corvette culture and seeing that part of Route 66 and the significance of the road, connecting the East coast to the West coast and all the Americana that was along the way that you just don't get anymore (Stephanie, interview, August 15, 2015).

To have the full nostalgic experience, the trips down Route 66 were reported as something that could only be done in a Corvette. Gary, a 58 year- old self-described Corvette 'nut' who works at the museum recalled:

> We came out of the desert on Route 66 to Kingman, Arizona at lunch time. There was this little diner that had the exact car I was driving on the billboard so we stopped and ate lunch. Most people never do that. Never get a chance to do that- to ride across country, Route 66, in a '57 Corvette. I've been blessed with this Corvette business a lot (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015).

Driving on the road was described as a majestic journey that included stops at esoteric and iconic places that make the route so unique. Dick's trip on Route 66 included; 'the Wigwam motel and 'standin on a corner in Winslow, Arizona' (made famous by the Eagles song, 'Take it Easy') that were must see nostalgic stops along the way.

Corvette clubs across the country frequently plan a caravan trip for members that take 2-3 weeks to complete. One trip taken by a Corvette club in Kentucky covered 6,500 miles in two weeks. Thirteen cars caravanned through Route 66, Painted Desert, Petrified Forest, Meteor Crater, Grand Canyon, Hoover Dam, and the bombing site of the Oklahoma

City tragedy that was described as very emotional. Here is an excerpt from a Corvette traveler's road journal:

> Day 12 - 4 May - Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum
> All I can say is Powerful. The Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum is amazing, sobering, and very well done. The bombing claimed 168 lives, including 19 children under the age of 6, and injured more than 680 people (Dick, e-mail message to author, May 15, 2015).

More travels through Malibu, San Francisco, Tahoe, Devil's Tower, Spearfish, and Mount Rushmore left the travelers feeling a sense of awe and transcendence that was similar to the 'peak experience.' Members of the group, like kindred spirits, bonded to one another through this extraordinary journey. This trip created a sense of interdependence on the road and constructed nostalgic memories for years to come. When asked years later about the trip, the thirteen couples would reminisce and smile, revealing their shared sense of emotions about this once in a lifetime experience. The trip was not only reported by participants who went in the form of a group caravan, several told their Route 66 adventure as a trip for two. Dick kept a daily log of his Route 66 travels and summed up his road trip that he took with his wife:

> Epilogue.....Sixty-one days on the Road, 10,273 total miles, 27.9 mpg average (not bad for a 350 hp V-8), and Denise & I are even still friends. In fact, my Dream Trip would have been meaningless without my bride of 40 years to share the priceless memories with as well as those old and dear friends we visited along the way. Those 17 days traveling with Frank, Mary, and OTTO, were the best! Thanks to all for following our Most Excellent Adventure! Hope you enjoyed it as much as we did! Mission Complete! (Dick, e-mail message to author, May 15, 2015)

Figure 5 Dick and his Wife at a Roadside Attraction on Route 66

The shared adventure of the road trip proves to further cement a bond between couples as it creates memories in a Corvette that seats two. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2003), the *consciousness of kind* shared by members of a group through experiences like the Route 66 pilgrimage is a main ingredient for building brand community.

Pilgrimages on Route 66 and other destinations of American historic treasures are a form of ritual practice that many Corvette owners do repeatedly. This practice helps to create trust among community members who rely on one another while thousands of miles away from home on an open stretch of road. The extensive use of the Corvette itself creates a sense of trust between car and owner as it is relied upon to transport one

through these historic places that hold great meaning. One female recalled "I never even knew there was a high desert in this country, I mean you are above the tree tops and it is so hot! You are driving on this road and there is a desert up there" (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016)! Discovering parts of the nation that are considered 'untapped' by modern development offer the rare opportunity to see things as they existed in a past that remains untainted by the present. Just as Route 66 is preserved as part of the past, the national landmarks and parks hold majestic beauty of America that are timeless like the car. The Corvette metaphorically is a time machine as it travels through these sacred spaces. The pilgrimage is a nostalgic trip that provides comfort to the individual and to the group who share similar consciousness amidst a world that is rapidly changing. The road travel is an escape from family, obligations, and reality that signifies the increased relevance of leisure as a primary institution that provides a sense of well-being, meaning and purpose in everyday life. A similar type escape was described in Janice Radway's classic study of Mid-western women who read romance novels. Radway found the leisure practice of reading romance novels offered an escape from the demanding and often tiresome routines of their mundane domestic life (Radway 1984). Like Radway's Midwest romance readers, many Corvette owners described the escape from reality that the car brings. A female Corvette owner explains: "It's the best stress reliever in the world. Especially when you put the top down. Anything that has stressed you or worried you just flies right out the back of the car, down the road" (Stephanie, interview, August 13, 2015). In addition to leisure, consumer advertising was found to be integral to memories

of the Corvette, instilling sentiments of nostalgia and promoting the emotional experience of the road trip among Corvette owners.

Advertising the USA

The analysis of the qualitative data would not be complete without discussion of the impact of consumer marketing on the construction of this nostalgia sentiment among Corvette owners. Hebdige's (1988:120) study of the Italian motor scooter looks at the larger networks of relationships between objects and consumers that are created in what he calls 'moments.' These moments between design/production/and consumption are very important in solidifying a permanent space in the mind of the consumer as well as in the market place as a mythical object that stands out from other consumer objects. For Chevrolet, the moment following production began with the ad slogan,"See the USA in your Chevrolet" that launched in 1951 as part of the Dinah Shore show (Johnson 2011). Several female case studies in the research recalled this advertisement that ran for ten years at the end of each episode of the show. Perhaps this was a gendered advertisement that spoke to women through the famous female host. Diane, a female Corvette collector recalled early exposure to the power of advertising:

> Well I remember there was a "See the USA in your Chevrolet" ad and I also remember there was an advertising campaign on tv that said, "See America First" and everybody was talking about 'oh I want to go to the Bahamas and I want to see this island' and I thought, gee, why not see this country first? (Diane, interview, August 6, 2015)

Diane's leisure experience as a Corvette collector was described by her lifestyle that includes frequent travel all over the United States in one of her three Corvettes. Now in her sixties and having never forgotten the ad slogan, she believes in 'seeing all there is to

see across this great country.' Now that she is retired she travels quite extensively in her car often for weeks and months at a time.

Advertising themes of patriotism, freedom, and independence rooted themselves into the Corvette brand as the classic American sports car during this generation and for generations to come. The longstanding relationship that GM had with Campbell Ewald Advertising from 1911 to 2010 proved instrumental in the success of creating the mystique of the Corvette and the emotional appeal to consumers (Johnson 2011). For Chevy, the Corvette is a halo car that sits at the top of all of the mass market vehicles they produce. According to former Corvette plant manager, Will Cooksey, Jr., the 'Corvette halo represents the top of the line in performance, value, and safety' (Cooksey 8/29/2015). This halo effect contributes to the mythical status of the Corvette in the automotive world and is actively reinforced through its marketing.

Content analysis of Corvette print advertisements from the 1950s to the present revealed that nostalgia was embedded in the messaging for the car. For example, an ad for a 1973 Corvette states:

> If you've wanted a Vette since you were a kid, you've waited long enough. Remember the first time you saw a Corvette? How it looked? How you felt? Remember the first time you got a ride in a Vette? And remember (if you were really lucky) the first time you actually got to *drive* one and discovered how it performed and handled? If the kid in you still gets a little bug eyed every time a Vette goes by, maybe its time the adult in you started paying attention….
> After all, if the kid who always wanted a Vette doesn't deserve one, who does? (Chevrolet Motor Division 1973)

According to Kilambi (2013), brands have the power to convey cultural meaning; the consumption of objects becomes a vehicle of interaction between producer and consumer. This advertisement connects the consumer to early childhood experiences with the car, a

point recalled by the majority of interview respondents. The advertisement uses nostalgia to evoke a time and place from the past to where only the Corvette can transport them.

Another Chevrolet marketing approach that used nostalgia to captivate consumers was the special production of limited anniversary editions of the Corvette made every 25 years. The advertisement for the Silver Anniversary Corvette (see appendix) states:

> The Silver Anniversary Corvette: 25 years of men, machines, and memories. It stands alone today as it has since the summer of 1953, a truly unique and finely machined two-seater, America's only true production sports car. The legend lives on and improves as legends do, with the passage of time (Chevrolet Motor Division promotional advertisement 1978).

Similar to Hebdige's (1998) 'moments' between production and consumption, this ad enables the consumer to revisit the Corvette's unique space in the auto market. The marketing approach is to immortalize the car by evoking memories of the car's inception, longevity, and consistency.

Corvette was marketed as a cultural object with personality that created wider and deeper connections for people and to possibilities for America as a nation. Recall the earlier discussion of American exceptionalism, as it relates to space travel. Jerry, a 72 year -old collector recalled:

> GM did a real good marketing thing back in the Apollo days where they gave every Apollo astronaut a Corvette. They really connected these guys to the aeronautical appeal of the car's technology (Jerry, interview, November 3, 2016).

For young boys in the sixties, the link between astronaut and Corvette embedded the ideal of the car as a powerful hero. Chevy advertisements were recalled by most participants as having a profound effect on the emotional connection to the car and to early forms of brand loyalty among community members. Since the early days of the

Corvette, GM has offered the consumer performance parts options at an extra cost so the car enthusiast can build their desires into the car. This production option still exists today and is a way for the consumer to personalize his car. A 1964 ad for the Corvette Stingray boasted, “You can’t fit the people to the car, so we fit the car to the people.” (Chevrolet Division of General Motors, Detroit Michigan, ’64 Corvette Stingray). The advertising markets are also functional markers of generational influence that created the iconic status of the Corvette in the minds of owners at an early age. The 1960s have been called the ‘creative revolution’ in advertising as the decade depended less on research and more on creative instincts to connect with consumers. ‘Eschewing portrayals of elitism, materialism, authoritarianism, reverence for institutions and other traditional beliefs, ads attempted to win over consumers with humor, candor and, above all, irony’(AdvertisingAge 2003). By the mid -1960s, almost half of the population was under age 25 (AdvertisingAge 2003). Advertisers used this population ‘boom’ to connect with youth culture. I suggest here that this generation of Corvette enthusiasts formed strong relationships to products through advertising and consumer messaging during their youth.

Conclusion

While the impact of creative advertising helped to construct nostalgia in the minds of many Corvette owners studied, it was a backdrop to their stories. Nostalgia as a sentiment was foregrounded in the form of early life experiences that evolved from toy cars, hot rod magazines, and TV adventure shows like “Route 66;” all part of the mid-twentieth century car culture generation. For women, primary relationships with men in

their lives fortified nostalgia as the car linked them to these special people from their past. For men, the connection to the car was made on the brink of manhood through relationships with male peers and activities surrounding the car such as cruise-ins, drag racing, and early escapades of driving.

Nostalgia provides a shared consciousness of kind for many Corvette owners who belong to the same generation and share the same generational appropriated memories. These generational connections arguably exist as a form of cohesion for this brand community. Rituals of driving on old Route 66 as well as America's open roads where stoic monuments stand timeless reflect this group's nostalgia for a place in time that can only be revisited by driving in this classic car. In the next chapter, I examine how the ethos of the Corvette community is created and the value systems that support and sustain its members.

CHAPTER FIVE: MANUFACTURING THE CORVETTE COMMUNITY

The Tocquevillian perspective of nineteenth century American community life was that "American citizenship was anchored in the ethos and institutions of face-to-face community of the town" (Bellah et al. 2008:39). Community was defined as the way people in a given social environment organize and give meaning and direction to their lives (Bellah et al. 2008:39). This chapter takes us from mid-twentieth century into present day twenty-first century ideals of community through the lens of twenty-seven members of the Corvette brand community. This analysis includes a look at the personal biography and socio-cultural history of the participants in order to reveal what the Corvette represents to both the individual and the brand community. This chapter will identify the ethos that anchors members of the Corvette community. Through analysis of interviews and observations in the field, I will identify and discuss the value systems that members bring to the group that provide social cohesion for this brand community. The values formed in early community life including technical skills, work ethic, and value of a dollar all constitute the character building that is brought to membership within this voluntary association. Membership in Corvette clubs is also recognized as the embodiment of social class that helps structure this community's activities and participation in ritual practices. The analysis in this chapter will contribute to answering

the research question; *How do the socio-cultural experiences of consumers construct and maintain Corvette brand communities?*

In his seminal work, *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville (1838) found what fills the gulf between the individual and the state is active citizen participation stemming from family, religion, and voluntary associations; this came to be known as civil society (Bellah et al. 217). As America moved more toward a culture of individualism, Tocqueville ([1840] 2003) claimed citizenship was important amidst the material pursuits of self -interest. He claimed the civil spaces of society offer citizens an arena to organize interests and the freedom to participate according to these shared interests. The field of this ethnographic project included designated spaces of fairgrounds, car dealership coffee rooms, people's homes, public car shows in parking lots, convention centers, and Corvette dealership showrooms and garages. These spaces are where people organized around their enthusiasm for cars as part of a desire to play while also wishing to establish themselves as part of a social, cultural, and organizational setting (Biship and Hoggett 1986). The involvement offers participants a unique form of community in society where they can engage in citizenship through consumer activity.

In these corners of civil society, qualitative interviews were conducted with Corvette owners who were asked questions about early life including "where did you grow up and what was the community like?" and "how do you remember spending your free time and weekends as a teenager?" These questions were used to probe into the early socialization, practices, and values of consumerism and leisure as well as group membership in community (Appendix B). Other questions centering on involvement in

voluntary associations and hobbies while growing up were asked to determine the early forms of social capital that were built. Through stories of family, neighborhood, and labor, the social class of the participants revealed a pathway to mobility and also to the purchase of the Corvette.

While generational experience was a strong influence in shaping passion for the Corvette, the characteristics of these car enthusiasts reflected similar biographical data including involvement in early community life, shared leisure practice, and values that shaped their involvement with the hobby later in life. Identifying and analyzing these attributes is significant in that it constructs pathways these consumers took to identify their present- day involvement within this leisure institution and gives clues to how the (early) moral life of the Corvette community and its members was part of the construction of their adult selves.

Demographic Data

Before discussing the ethos and community life of Corvette owners, it is useful to present some demographic data collected from the quantitative survey sample (Table 2) that define members of this brand community. The importance of this demographic data is that it reflects patterns that emerge among this group of car consumers that exist outside of their passion for the car. While the quantitative sample is much larger in scale than the qualitative, this data may be generalized to the population of Corvette owners as a whole. The respondents were predominately male (82.8%) and white (92.9%). While the majority of Corvette owners in this study were white, it should be noted that a National Afro-American Corvette Club exists with six regional clubs in the United States

including chapters in Houston, Texas, Philadelphia, San Diego, Oklahoma City, and Queens, New York. These national chapters were founded in 2003 and are currently growing in numbers. The development of this national organization suggests that the racial diversity among Corvette owners is growing and that the Corvette may have appeal for African Americans as a distinct American group.

Figure 6 Members of National Afro-American Corvette Club

The age group of 65 years to 72 years constituted the largest percentage of the sample (33.6%) with the second largest portion of the sample between the ages of 56-64

years old (30%). According to the Strauss-Howe generation theory, Baby Boomers are defined as people born between 1943 and 1960 (Howe and Strauss 1997). The generational influence previously discussed in chapter four will be referenced throughout this chapter as pertinent to the ethos and development of community values.

Thirty three percent of respondents hold a bachelor's degree and over 24% hold a Master's degree or higher, suggesting that Corvette owners are more educated than the overall U.S. population. For this sample, education level will be discussed as a form of social mobility and status among brand community members. The sample also reflected that 34.3% of respondents served in the military with the largest service in the Army followed by the Air Force. The significant sample of military service members may be reflective of the time period of the Baby Boom generation and U.S. conscription prior to 1973.

Finally, the average annual income based on a total of 219 respondents who answered this survey question was $123,022.21. This income level fits the definition of the upper middle class in American society. According to C. Wright Mills (1951), the term is distinguishable from middle class based on factors of being highly educated, salaried professionals whose work is largely self-directed and whose household incomes commonly exceed $100,000. Both occupation and income were found to shape the consumption of the Corvette, Corvettes were often labeled as a "middle class car" that yields "the most bang for your buck." The occupation reported most frequently from the qualitative data was accountant, followed by professions that ranged from engineering, military careers, management, mechanic, to small business ownership. Many of these

professions fit Mills' (1951) description and were important occupations for the upwardly mobile. Others, such as car mechanics reflect high paid blue-collar work.

The qualitative interview data included demographics that were similar to the larger quantitative sample. Out of 27 interviewees, there were 18 males and nine women. The most frequent age range was 55-70 years old. The racial composition of the interview sample included 23 Whites, 1 African-American, 2 Hispanics, and 1 Asian. Out of the 27 qualitative interviews, one third held a bachelor's degree. One-third of interviewees also served in the military and like the quantitative data, Army was the most frequent branch of service reported. The qualitative sample parallels the quantitative sample of data and may provide a deeper analysis of values and traits that the larger sample of Corvette owners share. Analysis of both data sets offer clues as to how systems of value are transferred from the individual onto the larger Corvette community.

Early Community Life

For all interviews analyzed, family life, neighbors, church, and friends were pieces of the narrative to construct a description of early community life. These narrative items were used to explain how people felt anchored by a past that contributed to who they are today. Ideals of community, social interdependence and shared practices were rooted in leisure experiences of working on cars and developing automotive skill sets that translated into the car culture as a hobby in adulthood. While the development of these values constructed individual autonomy, they also created practices that could be shared in social spaces of recreation.

Several men and women in the qualitative sample were raised as what is commonly called, “Air Force or Army brats” who moved multiple times during their youth. A majority of interviewees lived most of their formative years in one community. A strong sense of family and time organized around leisure were recalled fondly by all participants. Road trips with the family, hunting, and fishing trips were described as frequent activities that one looked forward to. Friends made through church and scouts were common practice as the norm of childhood socialization. Life was lived in groups and memories centered on sound relationships and community ties regardless of a particular region of the country where they grew up.

About half of interviewees reported growing up in a small town of no more than 12,000 people. Some were from one stoplight towns that were reminiscent of Mayberry from the famous Andy Griffin Show. One Midwestern woman compared her home town to something out of a John Cougar Mellancamp video. These community structures are defined similarly by sociologist, Ferdinand Tonnies ([1887] 1957) who categorized the social ties of *Gemeinschaft* as a community that was tight knit and based on shared values and morals. These societies breed thick forms of trust internally, but distrust of the wider society. This structure of a community of people with strong social ties foreshadowed the structure of the Corvette brand community that exists today.

About half of the interviewees were raised in larger suburbs, post WWII planned communities similar to Levittowns, “the most perfectly planned communities in America” (State Museum of Pennsylvania 2003). One car collector raised in a segregated community in Houston described it as “‘a nice neighborhood that was set aside for

colored people." While the communities described varied geographically and demographically, all were tied by a similar narrative of recreational spaces that allowed the independence and freedom to be kids without the direct supervision of adults.

Larry, a 68 year-old Corvette collector described his community as follows:

> I grew up in a small city by the name of Bridgeport, West Virginia. It consistently gets one of the top 10 best places to live in West Virginia. It was a community that was really family oriented, a lot of pride in your community, matter of fact they won about 8 state championships in football. I was a quarterback on the high school football team, and some people still remember that (Larry, interview, May 30, 2015).

Community was defined by all participants not just as a geographic location, but more as an idealized shared morality that connected the individual to society. This early socialization to community as a forum for collective well-being proved very significant in relation to brand community building and formation of social capital in later adulthood. As teens, interview participants reported the recreational leisure spaces where they congregated including McDonald's parking lots, ice cream stands, and drag strips all of which had value in being able to facilitate face to face interaction with others, opportunities for sharing knowledge of cars and articulating dreams for the future. Here are a few examples of teenage memories that centered around cars:

Doug, a 68 year-old Corvette owner:

> I would say we did a lot of cruising in cars, and the town of Monroe had what you call a town square, with the courthouse in the center. Every Friday and Saturday night we would just drive around the circles all night long. We'd park for a while and watch other cars drive around and then we would drive around again (Doug, interview, August 21, 2015).

Don, a 70 year- old Corvette owner:

> We'd go to the drive-in or go to McDonald's for the 15 cent hamburgers and what not. The nearest McDonald's was 17 miles away for us. Like I said, Webster was a small town, it didn't have much back then (Don, interview, November 3, 2016).

Christine, a 50 year -old Corvette owner:

> I grew up in a small town called Hadden Heights, New Jersey. It was a mile square. It is a small town in the center of suburbia. That's where I grew up, my entire childhood. It was middle class families. When I was a teenager I was either hanging out with somebody who had a muscle car or a motorcycle. I was into racing. It kind of is in the family blood. My father used to build muscle cars and race them. He worked for GM. My grandad was a sales executive for the east region of GM. So cars kinda ran in the family (Christine, interview July 27, 2015).

Gary, a 58 year-old Corvette collector:

> Every town has this little road you ride, and you do that for hours. Then you go park in a parking lot somewhere and talk to people. I was fortunate that my uncle worked at a drag strip, and so I went to the drag races a lot. So I was around those cars and I knew those guys and they knew me, so I've always enjoyed that (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015).

These personal narratives reveal teenage years that were defined not only by their residential community, but the community they created with their peers centered on the car. It is also important to note that each respondent described leisure time in terms of 'we' and group activities, not in terms of individual past times.

During the time period of this post-WWII generation, a transformation of American community life was underway. Reisman (1961) described the changing character of Americans that developed as a result of the rising middle class and a mass consumption society after WWII. The individual who was once defined by tradition, (conforming to family values and the religious values of his childhood) now defined himself by the way others lived. Reisman (1961) called this personal character 'other directed.' The 'other directed' person is malleable to those around him in society and

seeks emotional approval. Many of the Corvette interviewees were coming of age as this shift in the small- town ideals of American community life began to intersect with the urbanization of society. Through social mobility, many of their lives were uprooted from these close-knit places, but the value systems (perhaps) from these Gemeinschaft communities were already strongly embedded in who they were. Doug, recalled his own migration from a small town for upward social mobility:

> I grew up in a small town of Monroe, Wisconsin. At the time, I think there was maybe 10,000 people in town. It was a nice, friendly town. The wages weren't good in town. At the time, we had the lowest wage scale in the state and the highest cost of living. So when I got old enough to leave town, I left (Doug, interview, August 21, 2015).

Doug moved on to Belvedere, Illinois where he worked for the Chrysler plant for twenty years before opening a small business of his own. He spoke of the values he learned from his parents and community such as ethics in business, money management, and working hard to get ahead. In what follows I examine some of the same value systems that shaped these young Corvette "owners to be" in order to understand their pathway into the "other-directed" space of the brand community today.

Fix It Skills

One of the most significant skills learned in this youth culture of community came from tinkering and fixing cars. In fact, participants reported spending endless hours tinkering with cars. While some of this was a solo activity, much of this time (for men) was spent in the company of other men as a collective activity. Working on cars was a skill that developed through doing, not by formal education. Many male interviewees of the Boomer generation reported learning these skills "on the job," by "curiosity,"

“reading hot rod magazines,” through “trial and error,” or via “observation” and “osmosis” of watching their father or friends fix cars.

While these skills were transferred within families, most men and women reported learning by tinkering and fixing cars on their own through trial and error. The interest in taking apart an engine to see how it works and then putting it back together again was a leisure time activity that was shared by the men and several women of this generation.

Don recalled:

> I used to just kind of watch. I really never had anybody that taught me how to work on cars. I guess I am mechanically inclined, so I wasn’t afraid to delve into things. I always tell people (when I bought my first Corvette), I says, “If you can read, you buy an assembly manual, you read the manual. If you have some sense of how to pick up and handle tools—so I guess you’d say I’m pretty much self taught on most of that (Don, interview, November 3, 2016).

Through these productive skills, the habits of self-reliance and determination were formed. These skills would carry them into adult lives that were determined by independent means. On the day of his interview, Don (now seventy years old), had just picked up his brand new 2017 Corvette Sting Ray from the National Corvette Museum. He had spent the first night reading almost the entire owner’s manual in order to understand how things on the car worked.

According to historian Steven Gelber (1997) the term ‘do it yourself’ became part of the definition of suburban husbanding in the 1950s. The growth of ‘do-it-yourself’ paralleled the growth of the suburbs and was connected to increased home ownership among an expanding middle class. Spheres of masculine domesticity were created in

garages where men could fix houses and cars. Part of mid-twentieth century middle class leisure culture was defined by" men embracing this "do-it-yourself" concept that embraced voluntary work-like household projects as forms of leisure" (Gelber 1997:69). These forms of leisure that blurred the lines between labor and play had theoretical economic value in the home and also legitimated masculinity during a time when many men were moving away from blue-collar work into white collar professional careers. This affirmation of manual skill was described by Donald Katz (1992:29) as "see what a homeowner could do with old-fashioned, all American know-how through the agency of his own hands." This hands on, more direct male control over productive activity was a recurring pattern throughout this research and connected men in the study very intimately to their cars. In addition, the occupations of most of the male interviewees reflected Gerber's (1997) assessment of the masculinity shift from blue to white-collar work.

The youngest man in the study Andrew (twenty-one) relayed what it takes most of when working on cars: "Working on cars you have to have a lot of patience. Things are going to not go the way you planned them. Things are going to be more expensive than you expected" (Andrew, interview, September 24, 2015). Through watching and a willingness to learn, young men and women gained a life skill that signified the 'do it yourself' ethos of hard work and self- reliance that was gleaned from working with your hands.

Most respondents report that the cars of today (particularly the Corvette) are too complex and technologically advanced to be able to fix without a trained professional. The human connection to the car and the autonomy in being able to work on them has

faded. While all expressed admiration for technological complexity, there was a sense of loss which carried forward as a latent consequence of progress. A car collector in his fifties described this social change:

> The cars I grew up with were all carbureted, mechanical fuel pumps. Not necessarily easier to work on, but less complicated. More people were able to do things themselves. Today, with all the computer controls and all that, you really have to have a high level of knowledge, and very expensive equipment to do anything. Anybody can change spark plugs, but I see fewer and fewer people even attempting to (Clyde, interview, June 5, 2016).

All of the participants expressed the feeling of detachment in personal ability to work on cars due to technological advancements in automobiles during their lifetime. Another social force that contributed to this decline in fix -it skills was the disappearance of vocational training in public education systems. Tucker (2012) points out the demise of these programs in the early 1970s when U.S. education systems were falling behind other nations academically. During the post-industrial economy of U.S. society, the loss of manufacturing jobs shifted occupational and educational priorities. The vocational skills such as wood shop, truck driving, road building, and diesel mechanics were replaced with programs to increase students' academic skills in order to make the U.S. education system more competitive. Prior to this period, schools and community colleges had reciprocal relationships with business and industry that fit trained students with the job needs of the community (Tucker 2012). Ironically, the demise of vocational programs has contributed to the decline of the middle class as these programs were often pathways of social mobility for non-college educated, working class people. The Boomers were on the cusp of this decline in vocational education, and possibly felt the reverberations of it.

During this same time period of vocational change, the automation of industry was proliferating across the globe. This automation had a profound effect on car production and consumer involvement with the car. Recall from Chapter four our discussion of both government regulation on vehicle production beginning in the 1960s as well as the oil crisis of the 1970s. While cars decreased in size, offering fuel efficiency, they grew in technological complexity through computerization.

Despite such monumental institutional change, most Corvette owners would agree that forsaking technical ability to work on cars is outweighed by the advanced, modern performance that the car has. Or as one man pointed out, "today's Corvette has more advanced technology than the space shuttle had when it landed on the moon in 1969" (Dick, interview, June 5, 2015).

Aside from the practical value of technical skills, knowing something about cars served as a form of social capital among peers and connected them to others. Many a garage was used as an auto 'drop in' for young men for fellowship over an open hood while passing wrenches, shooting the breeze, and drinking beer. The garage served as a conference room (or locker room) of sorts where young men often worked shoulder to shoulder and felt quite at home while helping one another with auto projects. These spaces allowed them to work through leisure by fixing and figuring out problems with a car and (perhaps) life problems as well. This leisure space was a productive space where masculinity was affirmed by creating a positive sense of self and is reflective of Gerber's (1997) spheres of masculine domesticity. Marsha, one of the women I interviewed reported learning about cars by hanging out with boyfriends in the garage:

> It was so typically redneck it's ridiculous. The teenage girl who hangs out at the shop with the boyfriend who's always changing the plugs or the oil or something and he's got the white t-shirt with the Marlboro's rolled up the sleeve. If you wanted to see your boyfriend you learned how to drink beer, smoke cigarettes and sit at the shop or in the driveway or carport and hand him the tools. Everything involved working on cars (Marsha, interview, March 9, 2016.

These community memories reveal a lot of recreational time spent with peers that centered on cars. Marsha's narrative describes how teenage dating along with acts of rebellion included relationships that revolved around cars.

A few men recalled forming car clubs as youngsters, including Clayton:

> I got ready to graduate high school and got a Pontiac GTO. All of the guys, I guess we were gearheads in a way. We would swap parts. As a matter of fact, the National Afro-American Corvette Club is not the first club I have organized. I organized a car club after I graduated from high school called Sunnyside Eliminators. Sunnyside was the neighborhood we grew up in. We went to the city of Houston and petitioned a city councilman for our area to allow us to race on a city street that was a dead- end street about half a mile long. We would run out one car at a time against the clock and we had police out there and everything. It was cool (Clayton, interview, September 16, 2015).

For this generation, cars were embedded in community life as forms of recreation and also participation in public life. Cars served as a medium for organized activities that provided young people opportunities for the development of skills, and to gain respect from peers and adult men. Their involvement in this subculture constructed early forms of social capital that were revisited in adult life through brand community membership.

A Different Kind of Leisure Class

It is important to note the Corvette community is a distinct social class within a constructed hierarchy of car collectors in general. Much literature has been produced on car culture identifying the different sects of car enthusiasts including Hot Rodders, Street Rodders, Lowriders, Antique car collectors, Muscle car guys, and luxury high end sports

car enthusiasts. Each subculture contains similar socio-economic status of car owners that often includes similar occupational roles, personal values, and aesthetic tastes that define a car group in relation to others. One Corvette owner reflected on the social location of fellow Vette consumers in relation to other car enthusiasts:

> Certainly one of the images that some Hot Rod owners and other people who show up at car shows think is that Corvette owners are snobbish. It's that they really feel that Corvette owners believe they are better than most folks. They don't like Corvette owners in general, because they think they are snobs. That's certainly not the case, we are a very friendly bunch (Clyde, interview, June 15, 2016).

The interests of Hot Rod owners may be significantly different from that of Corvette owners in the activities they pursue (drag races versus safe driving car clinics). Meanwhile, the interests of Ferrari owners are typical of what Veblen would call 'the leisure class' elites whose leisure practices are more insulated, exclusive, and less visible from the middle- class sports car owners. While certain activities may overlap between these various car groups, such as autocross racing, road trips, and car shows- the nuances that reveal class distinctions are present in how these activities are arranged and organized.

Organization and Meaning of Corvette Activities

In their study of leisure groups, Bishop and Hoggett (1986) claimed that the desire to play follows from a desire to establish oneself as part of a social, cultural, and organizational setting. They explained why enthusiasts join voluntary hobby groups and the functions that the leisure serves. The motivations for joining groups include: competition, recreation, involvement (dividing the world into joiners and non-joiners),

production and consumption (Bishop and Hoggett 1986). The Corvette club members studied showed all of these motivations through the structure of their organized leisure activities.

Aside from the loosely organized events like weekend cruise-ins at a Dairy Queen or meeting for dinner at a local restaurant, Corvette club activities exhibited a high level of organizational skill by the club officers and members. The structured leisure activities reflected the technical competence and professional orientation (professional, middle class occupational skills) of many members that I have previously discussed. In other words, skills that these educated professionals possess in their labor were often utilized to organize their fun.

A Corvette club sponsored event that integrated the values of recreation, technical competence, safety, and community responsibility was a two-day street survival training. I volunteered at this semi-annual event with a local Corvette Club in Virginia near my home that provides both classroom and road training on safe driving for teens under the motto, "It's about more than driving, it's about living!" and is an example of these skills (Northern Virginia Corvette Club. This event is a joint effort of the local Corvette club and partners; BMW, Michelin, Enterprise, and Sports Car Club of America that together sponsor events in regions across the country in order to educate teens about safe driving on the road. A main learning objective of this training is to educate young people that driving is "90% autopilot and 10% tactical decisions such as when to pass, turn, get out of the way" (field notes from Street Survival, November 8, 2015). The volunteer efforts

made at Street Survival training reflect the character of the Corvette owners through a sense of responsibility to young drivers in promoting a healthy respect for handling the machine. The focus on safety is a fulfillment of the GM product's representation of the Corvette as a halo car in the marketplace along with performance and value (Cooksey 2015). The responsibility of the manufacturer is in turn being transferred onto the consumer with the goal of maintaining road safety and protecting the car's halo reputation. This kind of ethical business practice also provides free marketing of the cars and shows how markets benefit from this kind of practice.

While Corvette club members are able to draw from both their fix it and professional skills for this activity, their participation promotes an intergenerational transfer of knowledge on safe driving practice and respect for sharing the road, a collective space if there ever was one. This effort reflects in a larger context the democratic nature of driving on public roads and how sharing this automotive safety knowledge with others contributes to the overall social good of the community by saving lives and preventing accidents.

Another activity that Corvette clubs engage in for fun and friendly competition is the car rally. As part of my participant observations, I participated in two gimmick car rallies with the same local Corvette Club. The National Council of Corvette Clubs has set national standards for time and mileage that one must meet in order to earn points during car rally participation. These events are honored by the NCCC if participating clubs meet the national guidelines and standards established by this national organization. The NCCC also insures all members and their cars who participate in these events with their

clubs as part of the annual membership fee. Again, safety as a priority is built into these recreational events.

The rally events require careful planning by a rally master who maps out a course over several miles of public roads for the participants and provides clues of landmarks they should be watching for (a car scavenger hunt of sorts). The object for both driver and navigator is to look for clues, record them on the rally worksheet, and avoid being tricked while meeting the finish line under a timed deadline. I participated as the navigator in the passenger seat of my Corvette while my husband was driver. This exercise tested how well we could work together in the moving car, finding the designated path back to finish by following the rally master's often 'cryptic' clues. In the end, we won a first place trophy after finishing in the least amount of time with the most amount of clues answered. My reaction to the win was that it was beginner's luck, but perhaps the contest was testing skills that we already have (detail oriented, problem solving skills, and analytical ability). Like the members of the Corvette club, we have similar occupational prestige as college professors and share similar value systems as these upper middle -class cohorts.

Many Corvette club activities like the rally are organized by designated club officers who structure these contests. The National Council of Corvette Clubs encourages different regions of Corvette Clubs to organize rallies, auto cross, and drag races in order to "encourage interactivity between individual Corvette Clubs within the National Council of Corvette Clubs" (Northern Virginia Corvette Club). The winners of these regional contests are published in a national magazine, "Blue Bars" for Corvette Club

members nationwide. These leisure events designed by the NCCC are "sporting events to be conducted in a sporting spirit- all events are organized and managed by amateurs who cheerfully give their time to do their best" (National Council of Corvette Clubs 2017). Through interregional competition, these club activities transcend the local, creating larger networks of Corvette owners and stronger cohesion for the community.

While the above contests are created for fun, they can be defined as what I would call "competitive leisure practice." Social ties are encouraged and formed through inter-club participation with others and the competition that many of these Corvette owners experience in their professional lives is being transferred over into their recreational practice. Here, leisure has become commodified and linked to market behavior of competition, performance, and rewards earned through merits. These traits are also reflective of social class, which was found to be an important ingredient for consumption of the Corvette versus other luxury sports cars.

In terms of understanding how social class influences consumer preference and determines aesthetic tastes, let us take a look at sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) work on the social construction of tastes and the role of class in forming habitus as this further contributes to consumption of the Corvette. According to Bourdieu (1984:466), "schemes of habitus are forms of classification that function below the level of consciousness and language." Habitus is a set of orienting practices (similar to what we call values) that embed themselves in the most ordinary of our gestures (the way we eat, talk, judge objects) and how we evaluate the social world around us. Taste is a part of habitus that is an acquired disposition to "appreciate" and mark differences through a process of

distinction (Bourdieu 1984). Tastes are embodied schemes acquired throughout our individual and shared class history that function through practices. For the purpose of this study, Bourdieu's construction of taste is applied to the consumptive practice of Corvette ownership and the activities that surround it. The aesthetic taste for the car is a practice that is propelled by deeply embedded habitus that was formed in childhood socialization. Tastes are a form of cultural capital reflecting one's cultural knowledge that pays off by way of financial and social advantage during interactions in society.

I found Bourdieu's (1984:337) term, "petit bourgeois" useful for my project as most participants were part of this group defined as "ideal clientele of the bank or the school: having cultural goodwill and financial prudence, seriousness and hard work." While a majority of the interviewees came from lower middle or skilled working- class backgrounds, their parents were not far removed from the working class. The interview data revealed patterns in the occupations of the fathers of these future Corvette owners. These occupations included church pastors, mechanics, military careers, and mid-level management for GM. A majority of the interviewees stated their mothers stayed at home with the exception of a few who occasionally worked part-time. These jobs reflect what Joseph Howell (1973) calls the settled working class. Contrary to the 'hard working class' that lives with the mentality, "you better spend it before someone takes it or swindles it away" (Burnside 1973), the settled working class include people who believe "what you've got is what you are going to get" (Burnside 1973:446) Members of the settled are described as minimally happy with blue collar jobs such as mechanics. Aside from income, the settled working class holds a set of values that keeps them in ritualistic

practices where labor and family define one's identity. Only two interviewees described their childhoods as "growing up poor" so I would apply the term "settled working class" to a majority of the interview sample.

Interestingly, the military proved to be a pathway to upward social mobility for about one third of the interviewees. The institution may have helped many to rise above the settled working class to upper middle class. A Corvette marketer observed that pilots constitute a segment of Corvette consumers. The aeronautical 'feel' of the car and the autonomous technology can be experienced when driving the car and is not entirely unlike the feel of piloting one's own plane. The military influence is present in this example of aesthetic taste and perhaps reflects the lingering association between space astronauts and the Corvette that Chevrolet marketed during their youth in the 50s and 60s. If this finding is considered in the broader context of generational influence including the draft and the introduction of the GI Bill (post WWII), movement into the upper middle class was possible through higher education and high skilled training that the military offered. After having reached this social status, the habitus and tastes of their lower middle- class backgrounds remained embedded. The fix it skills that offered agency through work with one's hands and financial prudence had been constructed in early childhood socialization through the family. These forms of cultural capital contributed to the aesthetic taste for the Corvette and its technological complexity.

A form of objectified cultural capital that described a majority of Vette owners as higher income professionals was higher education. The quantitative sample showed that 33% of Corvette respondents have a bachelor's degree. This percentage is slightly higher

than the national average for the median age range (59 years) of my quantitative sample (census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p20) The sample also showed that 24.2% of the respondents had a Master's degree or PhD (Table 2). The figure of bachelor's degrees aligns exactly with the percentage of all Americans that hold this degree (33%) and the percentage of graduate degrees among Corvette owners is more than double the 12% nationwide reporting. (https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.pdf). Overall these Corvette collectors are an educated bunch.

Many interviewees self-identified as middle to upper to middle class. One collector remarked, "My assumption of Corvette drivers is they are professionals- upper middle -class professional is really probably the crux of the perception there. Somebody like me!" (Clyde, interview, June 1, 2015). For Corvette consumers, it is considered an insult to be identified as a muscle car guy. Vette people see the car as a more sophisticated leisure car that is symbolic of status. Stephanie, a lifelong Corvette collector stated: "There are the Mustang owners and the muscle car owners and they have their clubs too. But I think there is a certain level of sophistication that the Corvette owner has that puts him in a different class" (Stephanie, interview, August 15, 2015). The level of sophistication identified by the Corvette owner is a form of symbolic capital among their peers and distinguishes them from the higher end Mercedes or Jaguar owners and above that of the muscle car owners. Hence, the Corvette as a consumer object, places them in the 'middle' of these leisure cars that are symbolic of social class and prestige. In addition, the Corvette is representative of a sports car that is distinctly American. This

American car is symbolic of mobility, perhaps the social mobility that many owners have achieved. Jeff, a Corvette marketing representative described the Corvette consumer demographic like this:

> On a norm, they are more educated. They are very, very business savvy or street smart. You don't really find dishwashers or anybody like that. Because of the cost of the cars, they are definitely higher income people. Overall, these are people open to each other and that's why they form these clubs- because they aren't over the 100k to 150k a year threshold. Why do people that make over 200k live in a gated community? They don't want outsiders (Jeff, interview, July 26, 2016).

Jeff describes the virtues of this Corvette community as non-exclusive with an openness to others; decidedly unsnooty. This American car is symbolic of the American virtue of openness to welcoming others to our nation. This virtue was captured by Putnam's (2000: 61) description of Americans as a "nation of joiners" and will be used later to illustrate how the car facilitates membership in voluntary groups. This middle- class distinction illustrates the intragenerational social mobility that many of these consumers experienced through individual effort and a strong work ethic that was developed early on during their childhood. These traits are considered part of the character building of Corvette owners that manifested itself in the form of habitus that will be discussed in the next section.

Habitus and Citizenship

In the early twentieth century, classical sociologist Emile Durkheim wrote morality, something previously assumed to be universal in form is deeply social as it shaped human beings. For Durkheim, society was the source of morality and was composed of three elements; discipline, attachment, and autonomy (Ritzer and Goodman 2017). These three elements formed the moral foundation of a person through constrain

on egoistic impulses, a willingness to attach to groups, and individual responsibility (Ritzer and Goodman 2017). These elements have helped to describe the sample of Corvette owners through the narratives of their early childhood experience. Durkheim claimed:

> In each one of us in differing degrees, is contained the person we were yesterday, and indeed, in the nature of things it is even true that our past personae predominate in us. It is just that we don't directly feel the influence of these past selves precisely because they are so deeply rooted within us. They constitute the unconscious part of our selves (1977[1912]:11).

According to Durkheim, the importance of past selves is claimed in the present as part of a person's moral character. Doug, a Corvette collector described the profile of Corvette owners as similar to himself: "When I see Corvette owners out on the road, I think that they must be successful and know how to manage their money. I also think, they must be a 'car guy' like me" (Doug, interview, August 15, 2015). Doug explained his childhood experience of working at a young age in a restaurant washing dishes and also being self-taught in rebuilding car engines. The work ethic and technical skill of his past self is reflected in the car collection he has amassed in adulthood.

In this project, the lives of adult consumers and their involvement in a brand community have significant signs of past selves that were created through 'habitus.' Recall that Bourdieu (1990:57) defined 'habitus' as: "an infinite capacity for generating products, thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions- whose limits are set by historically and socially situated conditions of its production." This term can be applied to situate the Corvette owner's preference for the car and club membership as actions that embody expressions of nostalgia, patriotism, and community building. Borrowing from

Bourdieu, the concept of habitus can be seen through the social class and conditioning of an individual that shapes choices through accessible resources and structures. Thus, the choice of the Corvette as a consumer object is a manifestation of a set of embodied dispositions from their working- class youth that valued technological complexity, responsibility, achievement based on merit, and financial practicality.

While this research is limited by its sample size of twenty-seven qualitative interviews and fifteen months of participant observations thereby raising questions of generalizability beyond the case, the findings revealed emerging themes surrounding who the typical Corvette owner may be and what leads him (or in a fewer number of cases, her)to participate in the brand community. Aside from social class previously discussed, three forms of habitus or values that the Corvette owners in this research had in common included; work ethic, financial prudence, and voluntary membership in Boy/Girl scouts of America. Each of these three habits were constructed within local community structures in childhood and seemed to shape the pathway to club membership for these car collectors.

Work Ethic

Repeatedly, the phrase, “I went to work fairly early” emerged as the men and women of this study reported working between the ages of 10 and 15. They embraced adult responsibility by means of newspaper delivery, grocery store clerks, lawn mowing, working at the bowling alley, retail service work, and washing dishes. All of these jobs were reported as a means to saving one’s own money often to buy that first car. An ethos of hard work and responsibility formed from these early experiences and structured the

habitus of these young men. Here is a story of early childhood work from Clayton, age 66:

> My dad gave me a challenge, he said you can buy any car you want, you come up with half the money and I will put up the other half. So I came up with about $300. I was working at a bowling alley, mopping the floors, rubbing the lanes, stuff like that. Made money by selling newspapers. I came up with about $300 and he took me over to a street in Houston called Washington Avenue where there were used car lots next to used car lots, next to used car lots and we bought a 56 Ford for $500 and I think they thought something was wrong with it. Once we fixed that clogged fuel filter, the car ran like a scalded dog. A lotta fun, three speed on the column (Clayton, interview, September 16, 2015).

This example shows Clayton's father was socializing him to understand the value of work. The story also reflects the ethos of achievement based upon incentive and the satisfaction that comes from delayed gratification once the hard work has 'paid off.' The '56 Ford was a consumer choice that was earned by means of a verbal contract between father and son and reflects the importance of keeping one's word.

Consider the personal narratives from interviewees that reflect similar character building blocks during childhood:

Clyde, age 49:

> I was around twelve and started mowing the neighbor's lawn and then another couple neighbors' yards, and that's when I started my entrepreneurship. A dollar a yard, a week. That was a lot of money. When we moved down to North Carolina, I continued my lawn mowing business. Bigger yards, more money, we had a neighborhood of about fifty house and I probably did ten of them. I was charging $5 a yard, and it went to $8 then $10. One of my customers had a 67 MGB, wanted to sell it, $300. So he put a lien on the title and I mowed his yard for $300 worth and then he released the lien (Clyde, interview, June 5, 2016).

Don, age 70:

> I was probably 12 when he first gave me a little job for the wage of $2 a week under the table. But actually, you couldn't work until you were 14 and you could

> only work from four until six o'clock at night or something like that until you were 16 (Don, interview, November 3, 2016).

Mark age 56:

> I started work at age 12 in a coin and stamp collection store. I saved most of the money that I made. I remember feeling like a grown up having that job. I wanted to work so bad (Mark, interview, November 17, 2016).

Andrew, age 21:

> I worked at Merchants during high school, stocking tires. Saved my money. I didn't see much light when I was there, but it was worth it. I finally had enough money to buy a used ZR1 Corvette (Andrew, interview, September 24, 2015).

While other kids were playing outdoors, riding bikes, and camping, these youngsters voluntarily spent their recreation time in productive labor. The ethic of working hard that was developed through family socialization that was supported by others, contributed to the entrepreneurial character of many of these young people. This early development of morality symbolically speaks to the American dream ideology that the Corvette myth is built upon. Some contemporary critics perceive the work ethic to be in decline in the United States while a narcissistic concern with the self emerges in its place (Bellah et al. 2008). The generational experiences and attributes that influenced these young 'Corvette owners to be' speak to an individualism that was propelled by a set of ethics gleaned from early community life.

Self-reliance was observed to be a character trait that dominated this group of car collectors that fed the masculine drive to work and provide for oneself and family. The inherent integrity of work was discovered through individual pursuits that produced rewards through consumer objects that held meaning for them. The meaning of the consumer object represented part of themselves and the fruits of their labor. These ideals

about work and productivity are symbolic of perhaps the most important principle woven throughout American idealism: “the chance for an individual to get ahead on his own initiative” (Bellah et al. 2008:33). This principle formed the sacred foundation of American aspirations (Bellah, et. Al 2008) and helped to center these young car enthusiasts around initiative and productivity in order to claim success for themselves later in life.

Clearly, these young people were shaped by the ‘habitus’ of social class and the initiative to create their own opportunities. As one female case study relayed: “You are a lot more protective of it when you have invested money in it. You’re not screaming up the interstate with the needle pegged” (Stephanie, interview, August 13, 2015). For these youngsters who were enamored with cars, the concept of work was a means to an end for car ownership and provided an anchor for the self that would always be associated with achievement. The social forces of consumer culture and a growing leisure class during the Baby Boom generation spurred this ethos of hard work. The intrinsic value of self-reliance constructed through labor was coupled with an earned knowledge of finance and money management that translates today into the purchase of the Corvette as a practical choice of leisure vehicle.

Value of a Dollar

The value placed on fiscal responsibility of these consumers was omnipresent in the stories and narratives and through multiple observations at car shows and events. Twenty-five out of twenty-seven interviews were identified as being financially prudent through narratives of delayed gratification in consumer spending during various periods

of the life course, a proclivity to saving, and getting ‘the most bang for your buck’ mentality. According to Hagerty auto magazine for the term “bang for your buck” is a “generally accepted term for those classics capable of putting the biggest smile on your face for the smallest price” (Hagerty summer 2017:18). This description fits well with the sample of Corvette consumers who are very satisfied with the performance and price ratio the car produces. In fact, within the classic Corvette realm, dollar value was measured against individual horsepower each generation model has. The winner was the C4 Corvette (produced from 198-1996) that averaged a cost of $20 per each of the 312 horsepowers of the engine (Hagerty summer 2017:18).

The decision to purchase the first Corvette was found to be one that was methodical, not whimsical. One’s position in the life course (becoming a mom or a parent) dictated the delay of purchase for years, if not decades. The needs of family and mortgages came first, the pleasure purchase came second only to a sense of moral obligation to self and others. Financial debt was not mentioned by any of the case studies and this is a significant finding as the impression left was that most Corvette purchases were out of financial freedom to do so after sometimes a lifetime of waiting and saving. Harry, age 69, shared how he responds to friends who question whether or not he can afford his Corvette:

> I say, you know what? I have been working since I was 12 years old. I started cutting grass and shoveling snow, I haven’t had a day off til I retired. I saved wisely and I invested wisely and that’s how I have this car. Nobody left me money to buy that car. Mom and Dad didn’t have any money when they passed away and I didn’t get any money (Harry, interview, June 20, 2015).

Symbolically, the Corvette represents the accumulated efforts of a lifetime of work and financial prudence that many owners equate with success. While a majority of the interview participants reported delayed gratification until middle to late adulthood (after experiencing career success and raising kids), some who did not have children structured their purchase around other life goals. One fifty- six year -old male with no children recalled:

> I worked as an electrician for a little while out of high school. I told my wife before I get married I want to own my home, I want to have a Corvette, and I want to have my boat all there before I get married and I did! I just planned and did it (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015).

Here the consumer objects signified individual achievement that was an important part of Gary's identity outside of the marriage. For him, the personal satisfaction of earning his own merits was something that he wanted before entering into a lifelong union.

Establishing a family and becoming a parent seemed to be one of the most significant life events that hindered the pursuit of the Corvette hobby, (if only) temporarily. Marsha, who has owned 9 Corvettes during her lifetime recalled her decision to sell her beloved Corvette:

> It was the car payment, how much a car payment it was. Knowing that I was going to be off work some for maternity leave. My husband did not exactly have a great earning potential. It was fiscally irresponsible to keep that car payment and that toy because you can't even put a child seat in it (Marsha, interview, March 9, 2016).

The two -seater sports car seemed incompatible with parenthood so Marsha gave up Corvettes from 1984 until 2003 until her youngest son turned 18. She described the long hiatus as 'feeling like I lost a leg. I lost a part of my personality. Instead of draining the oil, it felt like someone drained my self-confidence' (Marsha, interview, March 9, 2016.

Clearly, the car has the qualities of a self-defining object where one sees it as an extension of self. The sacrifice made for family obligations and building a future seemed to make the eventual purchase of the dream car that much sweeter once it came to fruition. Ron, a seventy year- old collector remembered the feeling of buying his first Corvette during middle adulthood:

> When I bought it, I was making more money and the kids were grown and I could finally afford it. When I bought my first new one, 2000 red convertible-that's the one I wanted to sleep in that night that I bought it! (Ron, interview, July 26, 2016)

Like Ron, all of the Corvette owners in this study reported purchasing their Corvette after years of saving, giving priority to conventional adult obligations, and delaying gratification. However, for some consumers of the higher priced C1 and C2 generation Corvettes (see glossary of terms)- the purchase of the Corvette puts them in a higher social class of Corvette consumer.

Elite Corvette Consumers

Even above the higher priced older C1 and C2 generations, there exists a small, elite group of consumers who have the resources to spend into the millions. Troy, a Corvette marketing specialist in Southern California stated that a few select (elite) customers buy models that can be worth between $250-$600,000 for a nice restored one. Some of the rarest Corvettes such as the 1963 split window Z06, big tank owned by the famous Corvette racer, Mickey Thompson are worth $800,000. Others like the original 1962 C2 Grand Sport model reach the five million- dollar price range at auctions. These are a very select few models of Corvette, often one of a kind and they draw a consumer of a higher leisure class with different motivation for the purchase. The rarity and

authenticity of the model limits access to these cars from the ones that are available to the mass consumer population. Because of the rarity of these original vehicles, there is an exclusivity that contributes to this elite class of consumers being closed from a desire for Corvette club membership. Troy explained this class of Corvette consumer:

> Some of our customers will drop $20,000 on a dinner in Vegas for the family. When you start trying to understand how much money some people have- that is new money—so they have no respect for the money. If it's easy money, they feel they can get it again, so they don't respect it. It's the same reason lottery winners are worse off five years down the road than they were before they won it (Troy, interview, July 29, 2016).

The description of the elite Corvette owners as frivolous consumers is quite different from the hard working, fiscally responsible owners of this project. The motivations behind the consumption of these high- end rare models is in contention with the narrative of the Corvette owners of this research project who have worked and saved sometimes for decades to own the car. To them, it is not a frivolous purchase, it is symbolic of how far they have come in life and what it took to get there. My assumption is that the average Corvette fan would want to distance themselves from this elite group of million- dollar Corvette consumers in order to preserve the reputation of the Corvette as the American Dream car.

While the more elite class of Corvette owners is not the focus of this study, members of this class were observed at a National Corvette Restoration society convention. Observations included a 1953 original restoration worth $800,000. The owner stated he had two other Corvettes including a 1957 original. Combined, both cars are worth over a million dollars. Another attendee at the convention stated that he has ten cars that are collector items including a 1972 Stingray with just 59,000 miles on it and

original tires. He sees his cars as investments that will appreciate in value because of the rarity and authenticity of the models. Many cars like these are not road ready and are transported to conventions for judging on a flatbed trailer. These cars are considered "garage queens" and are rarely (if ever) driven.

Throughout many field observations at cars shows and conventions, I observed a difference in the Corvette owners who were into the restoration aspect of the hobby and those who were members of local Corvette social clubs that like to drive the car regularly. While there was mutual respect for each other, how they functioned within this leisure practice was distinctly different. Restorers want to have their cars judged for authenticity and originality. They believe in preserving the history of the car and are the founders of the National Corvette Museum, a non-profit museum that houses Corvette memorabilia and historical archives. Different from the activities of the restorers, Corvette social club members want to drive the car down winding back roads, push it to the limit, caravan with others, and compete in road rallies for fun.

A Vette is a Vette

An interesting find about the presentation of all Corvette owners (restorers and social clubs alike) was little variation in their demeanor and acceptance of other owners of a different social class. Whether a millionaire had a rare 1963 split window model or a young kid had a C4 worth $5,000- mutual respect was given among members of the brand community.

In the early stages of my research, a car collector at a cruise- in told me bluntly, "It doesn't matter what color you are, how old you are, if you have this car, you are

instantly accepted" (field notes 5/15/15). After having observed a dozen different clubs, I found members within the same club had various generations of the Corvette and varying price tags. I had difficulty documenting cases where something was treated as not belonging, based on the value of the car or if it was new or old. The car seemed to be an equalizer. Gary, a public relations director at the National Corvette Museum (NCM) remarked:

> The thing about the Corvette- you pull up at the NCM parking lot and you see a bunch of Corvettes pull in, you really don't know that the guy barely had enough money to get here or if he owns a multimillion dollar company, but he's in a Corvette. He's got his Corvette shirt on. He may have a Corvette hat on. He's a regular guy. He's a Corvette guy. He may be a billionaire, I've met many in the Corvette business (Gary, interview, August 15, 2015).

Whether the Corvette is worth $78,000 or $5,000, the car carries mystique for the brand community and is respected by this in group of loyalists. The sports car is ultimately considered to be the most practical by all members of this study. The price of an oil change on a Corvette is less than $100 and many owners can buy their oil filter at Walmart for under $20. As many Corvette interviewees boasted, "The Corvette is the best automobile in the world when it comes to bang for the buck- better than Ferrari, better than Porsche, better than Mercedes" (Dan, interview, July 25, 2016). As of 2016, Corvette holds eight wins at the 24 hour Le Mans race- a benchmark that measures the sports car's endurance beating out Porsche, Ferrari, and BMW. Competing in motor events of this caliber shows the 'efficiency, reliability, and ingenuity of the Chevrolet Corvette'(www.corvetteracing.com) The Corvette developed technologies through racing that carry over to production vehicles in order to make the safest and most advanced Corvettes for the consumers. These continuous advancements in technology and safety

have secured a corner in the marketplace for consumers looking for the most ‘bang for their buck.’ Anna, a 56 year- old consumer summed up the car’s value: “The Corvette can compete with the performance of a Ferrari, and with the affordable price tag, it doesn’t get any better. If someone offered me a Ferrari, I would still take the Corvette” (Anna, interview, July 26, 2016). Anna’s sentiments are similar to those of several other interviewees. The value of a dollar to these Corvette owners is something that was embedded in their character early on. The achievement of owning one is a reflection of this character. It is also representative of their identity as an American. This topic will be covered at length in Chapter six.

Figure 7 Corvette Collector with his 1996 Grand Sport and 2013 C6

Now let us turn to a final form of habitus that the Corvette owners were found to have, one that is also intertwined with American identity and is tied to a propensity to value voluntary associational ties.

Boy/Girl Scouts of America

A third form of habitus that emerged from the qualitative study was a set of value commitments that had been gleaned from early membership in voluntary associations. In his work on social capital, Putnam (2000) stressed the benefit of these social ties where one finds trust and reciprocity that help to lubricate social life. He argued that from these associational ties, a community arises, and in turn, civic engagement with the larger community.

Out of 27 Corvette interviewees, 25 reported being a member of Boy or Girl Scouts in childhood. Participating in this voluntary association was not only a product of generational influence, since all reported it being meaningful to them, it helped to form a habitus, a set of embodied dispositions toward associational membership as a basis of group ties. This finding is significant as it forms a foundation for the voluntary membership in the car community later in adulthood. The Corvette brand community has a strong philanthropic focus that mirrors the mission of both Boy and Girl Scouts in its outreach to local communities through fundraising and service work. The Boy Scout mission is 'to serve others by helping to instill values in young people and to prepare them to make ethical choices during their lifetime in achieving their full potential' (http://www.scouting.org/scoutsource/Media/mission.aspx) Similarly, the Girl Scout

mission includes “building girls of courage, confidence, and character who make the world a better place”(http://www.girlscouts.org/en/about-girl-scouts/who-we-are.html).

A focus on character building and morality were early socialization into citizenship and serving others. In other words, if every person is an upstanding moral citizen, the entire community will be stronger. Girl Scout founder Juliet Lowe described the organization as; ‘truly, a circle of friendships united by our ideals’(http://www.girlscouts.org/en/about-girl-scouts/our-history.html). Similarly, the Corvette clubs are structures where friendships form around the car and the values it evokes; patriotism, community, organized activities, and serving others.

Membership in Boy/Girl scouts were early forms of social capital that introduced youngsters to the benefit of forming social networks that extended out into communities and formed ideas about citizenship. This voluntary participation can be seen as part of the larger generational influence of the Baby Boomers. This was also a space where patriotic values were cultivated. Today, Boy Scout membership is waning. A 2010 Gallup poll revealed that men over age 50 (Baby Boomers) had the highest levels of participation in the Boy Scouts (45%) compared to just 27% of young men ages 18-24 (http://www.gallup.com/poll/145187/younger-generations-less-likely-join-boy-scouts.aspx). In addition, the relationship between Boy Scouts and higher levels of education and higher incomes was found compared to non-Boy Scouts. In a broader context, the findings of the Gallup poll on Boy Scout participation within this generation of men are strikingly similar to the data on higher education levels and incomes of Corvette owners in this study (Table 2). Recall that this Corvette group possesses more

degrees in higher education and higher incomes compared to their age demographic counterparts.

Leadership skill is a value that both Boy and Girl Scouts promote. While some interviewees described themselves as someone who joined the Corvette club, but didn't lead, about half discussed their positions of leadership in the club. For these members, joining the club offered an opportunity to be a leader within the group. One Corvette owner related his previous Boy Scout achievements:

> I'm an Eagle Scout, so that means I was Cub Scouts, Weeblos, Boy Scouts, I was a leader when I turned 18. My sons, one son is an Eagle, one is a Life, so have been involved in their scouting committees and those things. So boy scouts was probably the one voluntary organization that I was most involved in and then the Corvette club. I've been president, rally master, I've done stuff, I am the oldest, longest standing member of the Corvette club, so I joined in 1991 (Dick, interview, June 16, 2015).

This case exemplifies the pathways to leadership in adulthood that may have been derived from skills and character building that the scouts instilled as a youngster. For those who didn't take leadership positions, their scout membership had fostered an ethical orientation to others. The generational experiences of many of these Corvette consumers consisted of strong connections to community and neighborhood as opposed to organized, for profit after school activities that many children participate in today. Mid-twentieth century childhood consisted of social life that was organized around civic associations. Karen, (a former Camp Fire girl) described her childhood in the following way:

> I was a teenager in the 60s so it was still, Mom stayed home. You came home at 6 and had dinner there was no soccer practice, no rushing off to gymnastics, there was none of that. You played outside, they rang the bell for dinner, You came home. It was that kind of community (Karen, interview, July 19, 2016).

For many of the participants, being a part of the Scouts organization may have been one of their only voluntary association memberships. Membership in Boy/Girl Scouts provided an early introduction to citizenship that helped to situate the individual in society and the group. Identity was constructed through participation in civil society through a sense of civic responsibility on a local level. Duty and love for country (part of both Boy and Girl Scout motto) constructed the sentiments of patriotism that is deeply embedded in the Corvette culture, its members and helps to explain the car's mythical status.

Conclusion

Through the narratives of Corvette owners, the patterns of childhood socialization into distinct value systems revealed the ethos of the individual. This ethos formed a pathway into the Corvette club community in adult life. Early community life was the molding for the 'habitus' of fix it skills, work ethic, value of a dollar, and boy/girl scouts that were part of the Vette owners past selves that manifested into membership in the Corvette community as adults. The "habitus" is symbolically represented through the consumer choice of the Corvette in adulthood. In other words, for many of these owners, the car is an object through which they self-identify as one who has worked hard, delayed gratification, been prudent with their money, and wants to join in leisure practice with others similar to him or herself.

The embodiment of social class was found to be significant in the forms of cultural capital that shaped these Corvette owners' social mobility through military and higher education institutions. The social structure of family, neighborhood, and

community in which their early childhood socialization encouraged group behavior and collective experiences through leisure and voluntary associations. Today, these group behaviors are emulated through the organizational structure of the Corvette club, a voluntary association that fosters social ties, friendly competition, and opportunities for leadership, while providing benefit to the larger community within which they exist.

Ideals of community and citizenship are part of what Bourdieu has defined as "habitus", that is the set of embodied dispositions that pattern these Corvette owners' orientation toward consumption and contribute to the shared consciousness of the larger group. The existence of the brand community surrounding the consumer object signals significant changes in the concept of community over the last sixty years and reflects a commitment to history and tradition in order to maintain its livelihood. The sentiment of patriotism will be explored in the next chapter as I examine the sacred meaning assigned to the Corvette by club members. I explore how sentiments of patriotism that existed from the inception of the sports car shape the rituals and traditions within the Corvette club community and its members' investment in these ritual activities.

Table 2

Demographics of Corvette Owners

Quantitative Sample N=437

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	362	82.8
Female	75	17.2
Age* (434 respondents)		
20-28	7	1.6
29-37	7	1.6
38-46	38	8.75
47-55	72	16.5
56-64	130	30
65-72	146	33.6
73 or older	34	7.8
Race		
Asian	4	.9
Black or African American	12	2.7
Hispanic	6	1.3
Other	9	2.1
White	406	92.9
Education		
Technical/Trade Certificate Degree	101	23.1
Bachelor's Degree	144	33
Master's Degree	81	18.5
PhD or Doctorate Level	25	5.7
Other	86	19.7
Military Service		
Yes	150	34.3
No	287	65.7

***Average Annual income for Corvette owners = $123,022.21**

*****This average is based on a total of 219 respondents who responded to the income question.

Table 3

Demographics of Non-Corvette Owners

Quantitative Sample N=193

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	137	71
Female	56	29
Age* (respondents)		
19-28	27	14.1
29-37	20	10.4
38-46	18	9.4
47-55	17	8.9
56-64	38	19.8
65-72	47	24.6
73 or older	24	12.5
Race		
Asian	6	3.1
Black or African American	12	6.2
Hispanic	9	4.7
Other	7	3.6
White	159	82.4
Education		
Technical/Trade Certificate Degree	35	18.1
Bachelor's Degree	52	26.9
Master's Degree	45	2.,3
PhD or Doctorate Level	7	3.6
Other	54	28
Military Service		
Yes	74	
No	119	

***Average Annual income for Non-Corvette owners = $88,781.83**

*****This average is based on a total of 82 respondents who responded to the income question.

CHAPTER SIX: FOR LOVE OF GOD, COUNTRY, AND CORVETTE

> *The Corvette is the one true American sports car and it has stayed true to its heritage. America is really important to me and I really worry about the future of our country. The Corvette is one of the best parts of this country, it is something you can always depend on* (Ron, interview, July 25, 2016).

For so many Corvette owners like Ron, the Corvette is a symbol of what is great about America. Within the Corvette community, the car represents pride in not only what America has produced, but what it represents- freedom, individualism, and materialism. Ron's statement captures the concern that many Corvette owners express about preserving the brand community's sense of American ideals amid the winds of social change (an eroding domestic economy and a decline in practices of citizenship). To many Corvette community members, the preservation of the car and its heritage metaphorically secures the American ideals that they so strongly believe in.

During my research I became interested in how the Corvette owners' investment in American values is linked to the consumption of this car. Many interviewees described owning the car as "driving the American dream" and I wanted to understand how such deep, symbolic meaning was formed through their relation to this object. I have previously discussed the generational influence of the Baby Boomers, their social class, mobility, and value systems that shape the Corvette owners' lifestyle. Just as nostalgia was proven to be a cohesive sentiment to the Corvette community as a whole, the

sentiment of patriotism will be further analyzed as an emotion that helps seal social ties and shapes the community's rituals, activities, and mission as a voluntary association.

For the purpose of this research, I refer to Huddy and Khatib's (2007:65) definition of American identity as "a sense of being or feeling American that is empirically unrelated to self-described liberalism or conservatism." This definition is based on a sense of subjective attachments to the nation that may include values such as freedom, independence, American made products, and the honoring of veterans that have served the nation to protect these values. On a symbolic level, the American flag, the national anthem, pledge of allegiance, and other symbols are revered through ritual practice and analyzed as forms of expression surrounding the consumption of the Corvette.

The consumer literature contributes a notion of products possessing symbolic features that often depend more on their social meaning than their functional utility (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk et al. 1989; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Levy 1959, McCracken 1986; Schouten et al. 2007; Solomon 1983) So how was the social meaning of the Corvette created? The mythical status of the Corvette as "America's sports car" was constructed slowly over a long period of time through Chevrolet advertising campaigns and the framing of the Corvette as a cultural icon, unique among all other American products.

According to the famous linguist, Barthes (1957), a myth has its own history, a past, and a memory. Barthes (1964*)* illustrates a particular way of carving up the world as a place that is deeply dependent on sign systems in order to create meaning. According to

Barthes (1964), human consciousness in direct relation with objects in the outside world are responsible for the composition of these sign systems that create meaning in our lives. The individual subject is not seen as the origin of the myth, but (inversely) myths think themselves through people (Eagleton 1983). In other words, myths have somewhat of a collective existence where the individual is not the source or end of meaning. Thus, the myth is no longer just an object, concept, or idea, but a form that is appropriated by society (Barthes 1957:109). Evidence that the myth of the Corvette as "America's sports car" has been appropriated by society was found in data analysis of an open- ended question that was part of my survey instrument. The question asked respondents to write in *what two words come to mind when you think of or see a Chevrolet Corvette?* For both samples of Corvette owners and non-Corvette owners, the word "American" was one of the two most frequently used words to describe the car. Out of 437 Corvette owners, 68 (15%) used variations of the word "American" most frequently. These variations included "American," "America," "American made," "Built in America," "America's sports car," "Americana." Corvette owners also used the word "fast" 68 times (15%). The second most frequently used word by Corvette owners was "fun" used 60 times (14%). This word affirms the car as a leisure vehicle that supersedes the functionality of everyday vehicles. In other words, the social statement underlying the Corvette purchase is quite different than the purchase of a Prius for environmental reasons.

Out of 193 non-Corvette owners, 32 respondents (16%) used the word "fast" to describe the car (16%) and 27 used the word "American" (14%) most frequently. Again,

similar variations of the word “American” were found within this sample. This finding is significant as it suggests that the mythical status of the car is recognized not just among Corvette consumers, but non-consumers as well. The embodiment of this myth through historical context and consumer markets has been successful in reaching a mass consumer society.

The Corvette’s continuity in the marketplace has provided a reliable and albeit historical presence in American society while reifying the myth amongst car owners and arguably non-Corvette owners alike. The sleek style and design modeled after a WWII war ship has been so distinct and recognizable for sixty years that it has become a signifier for a sports car. In addition, the car is still assembled entirely in Bowling Green, Kentucky, USA. The stamp of “Made in the USA” brands the car with an authenticity that meets the needs and desires of the driver who want to express their love for America.

Through analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, this chapter will address the hypothesis H3: *The Corvette community reflects the shared sentiment of patriotism*. The analysis of the sentiment of patriotism will include the importance of “Made in the USA” to Corvette owners. Several key players will be analyzed as integral to this logistical process from engineering design, management, manufacturing workers, consumer marketing and consumer. I will also address the research question; *How does the sacred meaning assigned to the Corvette by Corvette club members facilitate a willingness to participate in community?* Just as nostalgia is a shared sentiment that surrounds this community, patriotism will be analyzed as a sentiment that provides social ties and a consciousness of kind for members. First, let us take a look at the survey data

that tested the strength of the sentiment of patriotism among a large sample of Corvette owners against non-Corvette owners

Quantitative Analysis of Patriotism

In their political analysis of citizenship and political life, Theiss-Morse et al. (1991) used a mixed methods approach to evaluate the variables of patriotism and participation in order to understand citizenship more broadly. This study used the symbolic patriotism scale from the Time Series Study of American National Election Studies that has been conducted during every presidential election year since 1948 (ANES 2015). The long-term use of this patriotism scale at a national level offered a reliable survey instrument to replicate, as well as a brief scale of eight items measuring levels of patriotism on a four point Likert scale.

Before going further, I will establish the definition of patriotism and its importance for the purpose of my research. According to political scientists Huddy and Khatib (2007:63), "there is much disagreement over the definition, measurement, and expected political consequences of American patriotism." Kosterman and Feshbach (1989:271) contend that there is broad agreement on the definition of patriotism as "the degree of love for and pride in one's nation." Conover and Feldman (1987:1) claim that there is broad acceptance on the meaning of patriotism as "a deeply felt affective attachment to the nation." While there is agreement on the definition of patriotism, there is often dispute about the way in which patriotism is measured. There are various constructions of its definition that frequently align with political ideologies. For example, Huddy and Khatib (2007) differentiate between "blind" and "constructive" patriotism.

Blind patriotism is defined as "'an unwillingness to criticize or accept criticism of the nation, or a 'my nation right or wrong' attitude" (Huddy and Khatib 2007:64) that is often linked to political conservatives. Constructive patriotism is conversely defined as a form of patriotism that has strong attachments to country that are characterized by critical loyalty. The constructive patriot (often linked to political liberalism) cares about the country and therefore wants to support positive change in order to improve it (Huddy and Khatib 2007).

For this research project, I was not interested in the political ideology of Corvette owners, but their symbolic representations of patriotism that were so omnipresent within this brand community; American flags painted onto the hood of Corvettes, flag caddies being flown off of the car, American pride t-shirts, the pledge of allegiance at club meetings, national fundraisers for veterans who have served our country, and all of the "Made in America" window stickers, emblems, t-shirts, and advertisements that are situated within this car culture. Therefore, the symbolic patriotism scale used by the ANES seemed to be an applicable scale to use in the quantitative study to address my hypothesis: H3: *The Corvette community reflects the shared sentiment of patriotism.* The sample of Corvette owners was tested against a sample of non-Corvette owners in order to test different levels of sentiment between the two groups.

Index items on the symbolic patriotism scale combine pride in being an American (Q3) with pride in the flag (Q5) and national anthem (Q8) (Table 4). Pride (Q1) and love of country (Q6) are index items that ask about the strength of one's patriotic sentiment. Other index items ask about how mad one feels about a person selling government secrets

(Q7), how angry one feels about flag burning in protest (Q4), how angry it makes one to hear the U.S. being criticized (Q2). Some limitations of this scale include the ideological bias that enters into the scale as some have expressed reservation about lingering historical consequences of opposition to the Vietnam war and flag burning being synonymous with liberal, anti-war sentiment (Huddy and Khatib 2007). Other limitations of the scale were expressed by Theiss-Morse et al. (1991) that the labels imposed by the researchers presume a unidimensional understanding of patriotism through emotions and nationalistic symbols while multidimensional understandings are not considered. The scale uses emotions of respect, anger, and pride in order to measure respondents' patriotism toward the country. Like the Theiss-Morse, et al. study, my mixed methods approach allowed the conceptualization of patriotism to expand through the subjective interpretations of it expressed in interviews and through participant observations. The qualitative methods provided a deeper look into what shapes the car owners' patriotic sentiments and how they are expressed through the consumption of the car.

Table 4

Patriotism Scale

Patriotism questions for Corvette vs. Non-Corvette			
Corvette owners N=437 Non-Corvette owners N=193	Corvette Owners	Non-Corvette Owners	Mean Different at 5% level
Q1-How strong is the respect you have for the United States these days?	2.9794	2.9481	No
Q2-How angry does it make you feel when you hear someone criticizing the United States?	2.778	2.4848	Yes
Q3-How proud are you to be an American?	3.5903	3.4455	Yes
Q4-How angry does it make you feel when people burn the flag in protest?	3.4324	3.145	Yes
Q5-How good does it make you feel when you see the American flag flying?	3.5263	3.3056	Yes
Q6-How strong is your love for your country?	3.5812	3.4145	Yes
Q7-How mad do people who sell government secrets make you feel?	3.5606	3.3471	Yes
Q8-How proud do you feel when you hear the national anthem?	3.5469	3.3937	Yes
Composite Patriotism Score	**26.9954**	**25.4818**	Yes

For the patriotism scale, the highest score (most patriotic) was a possible 32. The statistical mean for Corvette owners was 26.995 with a standard deviation of 4.55798. For non-Corvette owners, the statistical mean was 25.4819 with a standard deviation of 5.73739. Thus, the results show Corvette owners with a higher composite score on the patriotism scale. The T-Test showed that each of the eight index items had statistical significance with the exception of Q1 'How strong is the respect you have for the United States these days?' It is important to note that the Corvette owner sample was taken from every region of the United States. Forty-seven states are represented in the survey sample with the largest number of respondents from Virginia (68), California (37), Illinois (30),

and Michigan (29). The range of this sample offers validity to the idea that the patriotic sentiment is not concentrated in one particular region of the country.

While the quantitative data confirmed H3, the results were limited in explaining the depth of why each of these index items was statistically significant for Corvette owners. Let's take a look at the qualitative findings in order to understand the strength of this sentiment further and how it not only shapes individual Corvette owners, but structures the brand community as a whole in the form of shared consciousness through consumption, rituals, and civic participation.

An American Identity

During sixteen months of field research, the American flag was the most ubiquitous patriotic symbol within the Corvette community. The original 1953 Corvette set to debut at Autorama in New York featured a front emblem of an American flag crossed with a checkered flag. It was discovered that under Title IV of the United States code, using a U.S. flag on a product trade mark is against the law (http://www.sun-n-fun-vettes-archive.com/Sun_n_Fun_Vettes/C1_Corvette_Facts_1953-1962.html).Eventually, Chevrolet changed the emblem before the big debut in New York of 1953. This original design may have been physically removed from the car's design, but the spirit of the American flag remained heavily embedded in the Corvette throughout its history.

The backdrop of Corvette's birth into the auto industry was set by a generation of consumers who enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and the strength of a domestic economy that was largely driven by the "Big Three" American auto companies- GM, Ford, and

Chrysler. Post WWII American life promoted buying American as the conspicuous consumption of patriotism.

Many Corvette owners interviewed spoke of a childhood where patriotic sentiments were just part of everyday life as kids. About half of these interviewees had fathers or uncles that served in WWII. Karen, a 68 year- old Corvette owner recalls; "My father served in the Air Force in England during WWII and all of my uncles served in the war. All five of them." Another Baby Boomer, Harry (age 69) spoke of his patriotism and where it originated; "I am a very patriotic person. I have strong feelings for this country. I was in the Army, I was lucky enough not to go to Vietnam. The draft was not there. My dad fought in WWII and was a 100% disabled vet later in his life." Having a direct connection to family members who fought in world wars made a lasting impact on these children with an understanding of what freedom means and also what the flag represents.

Diane spoke about her childhood as an Air Force daughter and how deeply rooted her identity as an American is:

> My dad was in the Air Force with the Strategic Air Command who flew under General LeMay in WWII. He left college about a week after Pearl Harbor and within a month was enlisted in the Army Air Corps. He was a career officer so I have been, it has been my honor to be an American. I have lived overseas and let me tell you what- we have got it made. I am a HUGE patriot. I hear the "Star Spangled Banner" and I start to cry. I don't know where the patriotism comes from other than I was a military brat. When I was thirteen, I wanted for Christmas an American flag. On the military base we lived across the street from a huge flag pole and they always played reveille and brought the flag down and everybody stopped. I just wanted to be able to fly a flag on our house. I've got flags on my front porch right now. I have always been a patriot as long as I can remember (Diane, interview, August 6, 2015).

Memories of childhood that are so connected to the flag and what soldiers fought for in WWII reflect a personal identification with this symbol that has lasted a lifetime. Diane's identity as an American is described in terms of 'honor' and 'having it made' compared to how citizens of other countries live. These descriptions of the flag draw strong parallels to the patriotism survey question, *how good does it make you feel when you see the American flag flying?* Reverence for the flag seems to elicit a sense of comfort and security for many of the self-described patriots within the Corvette community.

"Grateful", "fortunate," and "blessed" were terms used to express how many participants felt when they see the American flag. Gary gives an emotional narrative of what the flag represents to him:

> I fly an American flag at home everyday. I have this neighbor who drives around in a golf cart and he stopped by one day with tears in his eyes. He retired from the Corvette assembly plant and he said, 'I am so glad that you fly that flag and that you feel the way you do about Corvettes.' And I don't do it so show off, it's just how I feel. We are blessed to be living in America and the Corvette is just the icing on the cake (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015).

This statement shows how the sentiment of patriotism is shared among fellow Corvette owners and the flag is a symbol that provides social cohesion and a sense of community for those passionate about the flag and the car.

Other Corvette owners described their patriotism through personal experience serving their country. One 67 year-old African American Corvette collector related his personal identity directly to military service:

> The military made a man outta me. I was flopping around like a fish trying to cross the street before that. I went into the military in 1969 and ended up in Southeast Asia. As a byproduct of that now, I have a fairly high level of patriotism for America. I don't think there is a country anywhere that comes close to America

> with regard to personal freedom, ability to rise above your circumstance, any of that (Clayton, interview, September 16, 2015).

Similar to other interviewees, Clayton distinguishes his patriotic sentiment by honoring America's exceptionalism compared to other countries. Political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset describes the distinction of being American as unique when compared to the rest of the world. He described America's "uniqueness as a 'mixed blessing' where religiosity coexists with individualism and optimism with high crime rates" (Pilon 2017). According to Lipset (1996:31), "being an American is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American." The affirmation of this ideology is what Corvette owners are committed to and this is illustrated through their respect and reverence to patriotic symbols. More importantly, the underlying values that these symbols represent are what makes these ideological commitments so strong.

Symbolic rituals and the flag

Paralleling the patriotism survey item, *how angry does it make you feel when people burn the flag in protest?* several interviewees spoke about the emotion of anger that arises when citizens reject these American values. Clayton commented further on people burning the flag:

> You know I think that people who do that really have not gained an appreciation for why they have the right to do it. Okay, you can do it because you're an American and you have freedom of speech, but its disrespectful, and disrespect is a terrible thing. I don't like disrespectful people, it sets me off pretty quickly. But disrespecting the flag, it's your right if you choose to do so, but you should know you only have that right because you're an American. You do that in other countries and it will be your last act" (Clayton, interview, September 16, 2015).

This narrative describes a feeling that a rejection of the American ideology is a rejection of American identity. The anger at others disrespecting the flag is reflective of a belief that freedom of speech carries a moral responsibility to action. The frustration over a loss of American ideology was expressed in similar terms regarding the ritual of the pledge of allegiance. A former Army service member commented:

> It used to be a daily thing in school. Why is it not? What? As Americans we cannot be allegiant to our country? Why are some Americans offended by the flag or allegiance to that flag? I understand if you have a different religious belief and you don't want to say 'under God.' Under God wasn't part of the original pledge anyway. But patriotism, being in the military, protecting and defending the flag, and not the flag specifically but what it represents. I say it's a big part (of being an American). Chevrolet and Corvette embodies and symbolizes Americanism" (Clyde, interview, June 3, 2016).

Like the flag burning, the refusal to say the pledge is interpreted as a rejection of what America stands for and threatens the unity of citizens under one ideology. The frustration with a loss of patriotism seems to mark a generational shift from those who were raised with the ritual of the pledge of allegiance in school. In 1954, the words "under God" were added to the pledge under great controversy partly as a cold war block to "godless" communism" (Jones 2003). As recent as 2004, the United States Supreme Court in a unanimous decision overruled a ninth circuit court decision to make the pledge of allegiance an unconstitutional endorsement of religion. The decision to keep the pledge intact as a national civil ritual was supported by both Republicans and Democrats. In a display of unity, representatives from both parties stood on the Capital steps and together recited the pledge (Jones 2003). This public rejection of the 9tn circuit court's decision showed that the patriotic tradition of the pledge of allegiance supersedes partisan ideology.

I attended a Corvette club meeting in Southern California and the meeting started with all forty members standing to say the pledge of allegiance. The Corvette club president had used the club as a forum to revive the patriotic tradition. Jerry, the Corvette club president recalls:

> I was on the board and I was a relatively new member. We had a meeting and I said, 'Let's just start saying the pledge at meetings.' And the other members said, 'Yeah! Hell, we never thought of that!'So we went out and we purchased a flag and we just started standing up and saying the pledge before we started the meeting. Most people thought it was a good thing to do. So we adopted it and will continue to do it (Jerry, interview, November 3, 2016).

The ritual of saying the pledge before each meeting helps to unify the group under a collective consciousness. Ritual behaviors include repetition of sequenced events over time. This repetition elicits similar feelings and sentiments each time it is performed. According to Durkheim (1912), rituals that are performed by a group surrounding a sacred object contribute to social cohesion, dramatize the sacred object, and link the present with the past. Ironically, the Corvette community has sacralized the Corvette by superimposing the same reverence for the flag onto the car.

Collective rituals surrounding the American flag were found to be an activity that Corvette groups participated in together. One particular ritual that was enhanced by a Corvette owner turned entrepreneur is the flying of "Flag Caddies" on Corvettes. I interviewed Doug, the proud of owner of the company who promotes his product "that will hold your flags tightly and securely to your vehicle even at speeds that exceed those of a parade" (flagcaddie.com). He shared with me the success of his business:

> It's been an amazing part of my life. The sale makes you feel good that you invented something that people are happy with. After 9/11, I couldn't get the flags made fast enough, they were selling out in minutes at Corvette shows. Now, when

> I do shows a staging area may have 2,000 cars and we go up and down rows selling the flags. Well the wind would be blowing and you'd maybe see 200 cars with flags on them. All sitting there- they'd just be blowing in the wind (Doug, interview, August 21, 2015).

Figure 8 Flag Caddies Displayed on a Corvette

Doug's successful business prospered under a generational event that renewed a sense of patriotism for Americans. His entrepreneurial venture was inspired by a desire he saw among Corvette owners anxious to fasten flags to their car, who didn't have the proper fasteners to hold them up properly or to withstand high speeds. The flag caddies are molded and made special for each generation of Corvette and coupe or convertible model. The flag flying on the car accents the patriotic statement the car makes when seen on the road and as Doug stated, makes a collective statement when a caravan or parade of Corvettes forms.

Participant observations conducted at national Corvette conventions produced some of the strongest examples of the community's collective consciousness of patriotism. In August of 2015, I participated in the Corvettes at Carlisle festival at the Carlisle, Pennsylvania fairgrounds. This annual gathering of Corvette enthusiasts hosted a Corvette American flag presentation in which over 200 red, white, and blue Corvettes from across the country gathered to create a field size American flag (Figure 9). As the owner of a white Corvette I joined in the flag formation as one of the six alternating stripes on the flag.

Figure 9 Flag Formation at Corvettes at Carlisle 2015

For promotion of the flag formation on the fairgrounds, Corvettes at Carlisle included this statement in their annual program:

> For over 200 years our flag has symbolized the unity and strength of our country. If is a source of inspiration and pride and has become the single-most viable icon in our nation's history. We are celebrating this great icon by pairing it with another great American icon- the Corvette (Corvettes at Carlisle official event guide 2015).

With this ritual, the iconic status of the flag is honored and well represented by the Corvette's status as an American icon. This event joined 200 people from all regions of the country, some of whom had driven thousands of miles to participate. The flag formation took several hours to organize as cars were directed into formation one by one. I asked several participants what this event meant to them and the responses include; 'It's great to be a part of something so much bigger than yourself." "It is my third time doing this over the years, they organize it about every seven years or so," "it's great to meet people from all over the country and have a picture to take home with you to show what you were a part of," "it's memory making that can't be replicated. Who else gets to do this?" "Mustangs don't do this." After hours of formation, an aerial photo was taken of the Corvette flag to commemorate the event. The Corvettes remained parked on the field flag for the entire weekend. Being a participant in this event was a unique experience that offered a rare opportunity that would be nearly impossible for one to duplicate on their own. Symbolically, the cars were embedded as part of the fabric of the American flag- the most iconic symbol of what is American. Socially, this event represented the shared ideology of Americanism that bond this brand community together.

The flag formation was the backdrop to a weekend theme dedicated to honoring heroes, those who serve or have served in the military, fire, or police departments. A display of Corvettes from all generations owned by service members was created in order to honor "those who fight for our daily freedoms" (Corvettes at Carlisle official event guide 2015: 26). A service that honored all veterans included the playing of anthem for each branch of the military and taps for those who had fallen during service. A ceremony marked the event with the swearing in of new Army enlistees and also allowed all former service members present who wished to reaffirm their oath. The master of ceremony stated poignantly, "There are generations of Corvettes on the field and generations of veterans renewing their oath on stage today" (field notes, August 23, 2015). As the national anthem was played, the crowd of approximately 500 people were reverent with emotion, many moved to shedding tears, including myself. My own emotional reaction to being part of this ceremonial crowd allowed me an "in group" experience of the visceral feelings that are evoked by the collective consciousness of this community. The patriotism survey item, *how proud do you feel when you hear the national anthem?* was explained with more depth as these observations were able to capture the sentiments of Corvette enthusiasts gathered together for the love of the car and for love of the country. The transformation of the fairgrounds into a ceremonial stage that honored the flag and the veterans seemed sacred ground for the attendees who were brought together by way of the iconic sports car. The ceremony was eulogized by a poem written by Michael Brown, a Corvette collector. Brown said the poem he wrote in 1973 entitled, "What is an American?" has a theme that is "closely connected to the Corvette hobby. Anyone who owns a Corvette knows that the car

gives you the feeling of ‘freedom’ on the road” (Corvettes at Carlisle official event guide 2015: 26). The poem’s message is that a true American has pride in a way of life marked by freedom. “What is an American you say? He is fortunate” (Corvettes at Carlisle official event guide 2015:27). The recurring acknowledgement of indebtedness and gratefulness by Corvette enthusiasts were reflections of their pride in being Americans, a concept they consider to be synonymous with being a Corvette owner.

The ceremony closed with the playing of Toby Keith’s country ballad, *Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue,* an appropriate anthem to round out the celebration that ultimately paid homage to American freedom. The irony of this large gathering? The Corvette festival was a manifestation of the constitutional right to freedom of assembly and knowledge of this right was not lost on the crowd.

Figure 10 Corvette Dedicated to a WWII Navy Veteran at Corvettes for Carlisle

Corvette Nation

Brown's poem captured the essence of what many a patriotic Corvette owner considers himself to be: fortunate. Feeling fortunate to own a Corvette was a sentiment conveyed by over half of the interviewees. The freedoms that are unique to America were identified through consumption of the Corvette. Christine, a 53 year- old car enthusiast described how the two are tied together:

> I believe in this country and I believe in what this country was built for: our freedoms and the ability to own the Corvette. The ability to do some of the stuff we can do today because we know in other countries they can't do those things. They don't have those freedoms elsewhere. They are told, 'this is the car you are going to buy because this is the only car you can own. I may not agree with everything our government does and says but it's where I live and you got to support it (Christine, interview July 27, 2015).

The freedom to purchase the Corvette that she wants is a representation of her freedoms as an American. The uniqueness of the Corvette marks the uniqueness of being an American. The ability to choose and purchase one's own leisure car is considered an exercise in flexing democratic muscle. Mike, a Corvette collector who lives in Tennessee described how he and his fellow club members feel about owning the car:

> You look at the socialist side of life and you start thinking, if everybody was equal and government took all the money and then doled it out so that everybody had equal amounts, we'd all be driving the same car. It wouldn't be powerful, it wouldn't be fun. So I think when it comes to politics, that's the kind of thing that we focus on. It's not that we want better than somebody else, we want to have the kind of life that we've grown up with, we enjoyed. We don't want that to change (Mike, interview, July 25, 2016).

This statement captures a strong belief in capitalism and the free markets that allow citizens to determine their own destiny via individual merits and consumption. Mike's nostalgia for wanting the kind of life he grew up with signals the changing social landscape of American ideology. The generation of Baby Boomers were socialized in an era of consumer culture that dictated "in making a purchase, you bought into a way of life" (Hine 1986). According to historian Thomas Hine (1986:60), "material democracy was not achieved through socialist redistribution of wealth, but rather through the workings of big business and its expertise in making people feel good about its products." During the mid-twentieth century, consumer optimism was rooted in unprecedented levels of economic prosperity that created great confidence in capitalism. This confidence persists for many as the car is a material symbol of the potential benefits of capitalism.

For the participants of this study, the consumer relationship to the Corvette is strongly connected to the formation of an identity that has become idiosyncratic to a

changing geo-political landscape during postmodernity. A concern about the changing tide of American values was also expressed by the director of the National Corvette Museum:

> I spoke at the Wounded Warriors event in Somerset, Kentucky about two weeks ago and one of my observations was that not too long ago, it was very comfortable and calming to say, "God" and "country," and you don't hear that much anymore. I just feel like we have moved away from the values and even our own interpretation of the Constitution, to where anything and everything goes. I don't know, we've got to keep praying, we've got to keep hoping and we can't give up. I sure hope we can get leadership in our country that can return us to some core values that are built around God and country (Wendell, interview, August 2, 2015).

For Wendell and others within the Corvette community, the striking change in not only ideology but the practice of American values is palpable. In her cynical examination of political conservatives in Lousiana bayou country, sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2016) labels people like Mike and Wendell as "The Rememberers." The Rememberers are described as people who are rooted in traditional values and geographic spaces that no longer exist in the environment in which they stayed. The Rememberers are beset by nostalgia and this nostalgia is proposed as getting in the way of economic and social progress. Hochschild's portrayal of the "Rememberers" as somewhat passive members of society trapped in an outdated value system did not fit my observations of Corvette community members. While most members shared similar values and sentiments of patriotism, nostalgia, and Americanism their concerns about change seemed to anchor the brand community around the Corvette as an iconic object that symbolically represents what is good about America. For this community, the strength of their value system proved productive in their approach to preserve the American ideology they believe in. This productivity was not only clear in the group's commitment to preserving the car and its

heritage, but in a larger context it translated into community engagement through civic duty and a renewed commitment to citizenship. These topics will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

In order to illustrate how the consumption of the Corvette as a cultural object embodies the American ideology I have discussed, we must take a closer look at how consumption of the Corvette is an extension of preserving the American ideals that community members feel are under threat due to the globalization of industry. I will show how both economic and labor institutions are integral to the Corvette community in preserving these values.

Made in America

Building off prior discussion of the Corvette myth in the marketplace and among loyal consumers, the made in America status of the Corvette must be evaluated to further the discussion. There are three key players that contribute to the success of Corvette's made in America continuity in the marketplace; the manufacturing and management within Chevrolet Corvette, the assembly plant workers, and the consumers. The majority of interviewees in this study stated that purchasing a Corvette was not a purchase of self-identity, but an important purchase in helping the US economy and American labor force. Don, a Corvette owner in California expressed his satisfaction with buying an American made product, "because I think it's important to support our economy, you know, and anything that you can do to support our economy, (I think), is patriotic quite frankly" (Don, interview, August 6, 2016). This statement suggests that buying an American made

car is a patriotic duty that is linked to being a good consumer citizen that is contributing to the nation as a whole.

According to contemporary international business and marketing literature, there is often home country bias in the purchase of domestic products versus foreign alternatives (Fetscherin and Toncar 2010; Verlegh 2007). Country of origin of a product or service has grown increasingly important as movement toward globalization of production has intensified, while an increasing number of products are manufactured in various countries (Fetscherin and Toncar 2010). Building on this notion, "buying domestic products may be conceptualized as a form of protectionism at the consumer level" (Verlegh 2007: 361). Purchasing products from one's country of origin has symbolic and emotional meaning to consumers, and can relate to feelings of national identity (Fetscherin and Toncar 2010). Other research suggests that home country bias in consumption is partly driven by a "need for self-enhancement, also known as consumer ethnocentrism" (Verlegh 2007:361). To support this idea of consumer protectionism, several Corvette consumers related their purchase of the Corvette as contributing to the protection of American jobs. Here are a few examples of their sense of responsibility:

Ron, a Corvette club president in Tennessee:

> I don't necessarily think American made is better quality. I hate to see our jobs leaving the country. If we buy all stuff from other countries, we can't blame anybody else (Ron, interview, July 25, 2016).

Troy, a Corvette marketing executive:

> Generally, I would say the average Corvette consumer is very patriotic. Now number one, they're buying American. That's very important to almost all these consumers. They're not buying a Toyota. They're not buying from the Japs. They're not buying from the Chinese (Troy, interview, July 30, 2016).

Marsha, a Corvette collector for forty years:

> I won't have anything else. I want my money to stay in America where it does Americans the most good. The assembly line and the plants- the people, the workers, the tire people, everybody involved every step of the way. I want them employed. I want them making good all American bucks. I personally trust the quality, more now than ever (Marsha, interview, March 9, 2016.

Gary, public relations director at the National Corvette Museum:

> I've owned a couple Hondas, owned a couple Toyotas. Probably won't ever again. We've got to keep America working. We've got to keep our people working. We've got to bring jobs back to the United States. Needs to be American made. We have the technology, we can do it. We can make things as good as anybody. We just got to get the companies back over here, and many are coming back out of China and Mexico and different places (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015).

Kim, a Corvette enthusiast in South Carolina:

> It's pretty important to me to own American made cars. I own a Cadillac and a Corvette. I'm 61 and it's important at this point in my life. America and supporting American workers. I have a strong allegiance to American made vehicles (Kim, interview, August 3, 2015).

These examples of domestic consumption are explained as acts of responsible citizenship and are aligned with the patriotic sentiments that the consumers of this study have expressed. The personal testimonies suggest that the consumers have adopted a lifestyle that advocates for the American values that they so deeply believe in. According to Tsai (2010:076), "In a demand driven capitalistic market system, the roles of good citizen and responsible consumer become closely intertwined." The moral responsibility that once centered around family and religion has now been transferred to consumer markets as a primary institution for value placement and action. Scholars have suggested that as a threat to nationalism grows, individuals' consumption behavior is more notably

influenced by ethnocentrism (Sharma Shimp, and Shin 1995). The Corvette consumer narratives suggest a concern related to the threats to American jobs and workers due to the globalization of industry. The consumers' identity has important cultural and social connotations that are related to national identity that is constructed through consumption of the domestic product. The Corvette consumers seem to reject the notion of being global citizens while emphasizing a commitment to national identity.

It is important to note that in a study comparing product categories, the preference for domestic products was found to be less pronounced when the manufacturing process is simple (i.e; clothing or shoes) than when it is complex (i.e; cars) (Ahmed, d'Astous, and Eljabri 2002). This finding is significant as it parallels the findings of preference among Corvette car consumers. Interviewees were asked about their preference for buying American made products and a majority of responses reflected a desire to buy American when they could, but a mundane conclusion that this was not always possible due to extra expense or a greater accessibility of foreign made products within the consumer market place. Corvette community members clarified a definite distinction of their allegiance to purchasing the Corvette specifically over other cars and an acknowledgement that the term American made is often ambiguous given the global supply chain of many products. Anna, a Corvette owner asserts this claim:

> I do try to buy American. The hard part about it is, and I do realize it even though you're buying an American made car, a lot of the work is shipped out but at least you are buying the most American that you can. If I'm looking at two products and one is American made, even if it's going to be a little bit more money, I'm going to buy that over the other product. I think I'm getting a better quality product and I'm hoping that I'm helping the economy by doing so (Anna, interview, July 25, 2016).

Like others, Anna is aware that an American car bought in America may have been manufactured in four different countries. The lack of confidence in what constitutes the Made in America stamp on products has become more befuddled since the 1990s as globalization blurred the lines of what products are made in America. The Buy American Act of 1933 created rules for government procurement, to be considered "American made," more than half the parts must be made in the U.S. (Schoen 2010). Rules for Automobiles were held to standards under the American Automobile Labeling Act that every car sold domestically must reflect what percentage of the content was made in the U.S. and elsewhere (Schoen 2010). These rules are enforced by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Finally, the term "Assembled in the USA" is enforced by the Federal Trade Commission and can only be used if you substantially transformed the product and most of the work was done in the U.S. (Schoen 2010).

Despite such confusion of what constitutes American made, the authenticity of the Corvette as an American product is not challenged by any other automobile. The car is 100% assembled in the U.S. In 1953, the first 300 Corvettes were built by hand in Flint, Michigan. The next year, the assembly plant moved to St. Louis, Missouri and in 1981, moved to Bowling Green, Kentucky where it has been manufactured ever since(http://www.corvetteactioncenter.com/history/bg.html). Today, 75% of the car is manufactured at the Bowling Green plant as well. According to American University's Kogod School of Business Auto Index, the 2014 Corvette Stingray was the most "American Made Car" produced in the U.S. (corvetteblogger.com). The Kogod Made in America Auto Index uses a criteria including where the body, interior, chassis, electrical

parts are manufactured, where the engine and transmission are made, site of inventory, capital, and other expenses, where research and development is done, where the car is assembled, and where the profit margin goes (Schaal 2014). The 2014 Corvette Stingray tied the Ford F-150 for the most American made car with a total score of 87.5 points out of 100 (Schaal 2014). The authenticity of driving a true American made car extends the loyalty of the Corvette consumers beyond just mere lip service that they believe in buying American. Andrew, a twenty- one year- old Corvette consumer describes this loyalty:

> I think Corvette owners know they're driving the epitome of an American car. It's just a box with a huge motor basically (chuckles). You almost feel like you HAVE to be patriotic driving that car, because it's a Corvette and it's American made and it's GM. It's just an American thing (Andrew, interview, September 24, 2015).

Like Andrew, many Corvette owners feel that driving the car is an expression of patriotism. The presentation of self as an American who participates as a consumer who supports American products is shown to other drivers on the road. Dan, a 70 year- old Corvette collector describes the brand community in similar terms:

> It's America's sports car. So those who want to buy American, it's the car to buy. And if you're trying to buy American, then you're a bit more patriotic than the general population anyway (Dan, interview, July 25, 2016).

The patriotic purchase of a Corvette is considered a form of unique consumption that sets the owner apart from the general population of mass consumers. This uniqueness is the basis of the American exceptionalism concept discussed earlier that constitutes part of the pride these consumers have in buying American and keeping America working. This pride is also reflective of their own individual work ethic that helped them achieve their dream of owning the car.

Building American Dreams

Labor and production is a very important component of maintaining Corvette's mythical status for so many years. The sentiment of exceptionalism is not only felt by the consumers, but includes a very integral part of the Corvette family- the United Auto Workers assembly plant employees. As part of my field observations I took a private tour of the Corvette assembly plant in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Corvette enthusiasts call this place, "mecca," or "the nursery for new Corvettes custom ordered." On the day of my tour, I had been granted permission to tag along with Bill and Callie, a couple from Montana that were picking up Bill's pre-ordered 2016 Corvette Stingray in Shark Grey. The car would be picked up at the National Corvette Museum nearby after having just come off the assembly line days before. A birth certificate for the car is given to each new owner as it waits in the "play pen" at the museum for the owner to bring it home (see photos). The personification of the car as a newborn baby is a brilliant marketing technique by Chevy that serves to bond the consumer on an emotional level with the car. Robert, a 39 year-old self-described Corvette fanatic explains:

> I spent about four days in Bowling Green watching my new 2013 Corvette get built. Chevrolet has a package deal that you pay for in order to have this kind of access. You get to see the entire process of your car being assembled, the motor put in, and the safety checks and tests they do at the end. The coolest part was the line technician let me fire up the engine for the first time…..that was great. I was able to bring the car to life (Robert, interview, October 24, 2016).

While most Corvette owners do not choose to pay for this experience, those who do, develop a personal relationship to the car that begins in the production process. The consumer is involved with the car's inception and for a fee of $5,000, can help a manufacturer build the engine. During my tour, Bill voiced his desire to come back and

build the engine on his next Corvette. He liked the idea of signing his name on the engine at the end. This desire struck me as gender distinct and perhaps men like Bill and Robert liked the idea of building their own adult sized Hot Wheels.

None of these consumer benefits would be possible without the cooperation of the plant workers. Will Cooksey, former Corvette plant manager from 1993-2008, and National Corvette Museum Hall of Famer states; "the greatest component to successful production is the people" (Cooksey at Carlisle 2015). A seminal part of Corvette history includes the persistence and passion of the design and production teams at GM that have been integral to the car's survival in the marketplace. Like so many of the Corvette club members I met, Will Cooksey was a Vietnam veteran. According to Corvette history, he was instrumental in changing the work culture at the Corvette assembly plant during the 1990s when sales were low and the car faced a grave threat of extinction. His work ethic was not unlike the character of the many Corvette enthusiasts I have previously discussed. His tenacity is expressed in his autobiography about his career climbing up the ranks of GM production and management:

> I had built-in, inbred motivators. I grew up knowing the value of doing what I had to do to survive. I was back again to the same mantra that had been resonating in my heart since I was a hungry kid working at any job that I could get in order to earn some money to help put food on the table for my family: no time to stop, no time to rest, no time to feel, and no time to cry (Cooksey 2013:108).

The motivation that led so many Corvette owners down a pathway to owning their American dream car is the same motivation that pushed Cooksey to achieve his dream job of building Corvettes. The mantra of Corvette quality is marked by a wall sign inside the plant, "Precision Never Rests." This commitment to quality and accuracy has been

part of the recipe for success of Corvette and also the work culture at the plant. Here is an excerpt from my field notes that describes observations of the assembly line workers:

> The line moves efficiently with workers focused on a particular part of the assembly as I am told by the tour guide, "we don't just build cars, we build dreams." Suprising to me, there seems to be an equal number of men and women on the line. I am told that women have smaller hands and so they are often better at fitting certain parts of the car that require a tight fight. Workers appear so happy and many of them smile and wave to me. I counted the many desk size American flags that workers have placed at their work stations on the line, a total of thirty-one all together. I am told that jobs at the Corvette plant are the most coveted of all GM jobs and often only come after at least 15-20 years of seniority. As we move through each part of the assembly line, I learn that each employee cross trains for four different jobs so they are not assigned to the same task all day long. Toward the end of the tour, I see a sign posted on the wall of the plant that says "United We Stand." I assume this sign has double meaning, both for the United Auto Workers and also for the United States. I am told that as cars full assembled cars roll off the line and are safety tested, 99% of them come through with everything working as it should (field notes, August 12, 2015).

Through these observations, I was able to see in action what Will Cooksey had stated in his lecture at Corvettes at Carlisle, "As a manager I had high expectations of quality. Don't forget the people. Thank the customers for buying the car" (Cooksey 8/27/15). I had been told by more than one Corvette consumer who had been to the plant to watch their Corvette get built that plant workers came up and personally thanked them for "paying their electric bill" and "keeping them employed." Jerry, a 70 year- old consumer of a brand new 2017 Corvette Stingray remarked:

> People don't realize that when you buy a car like that, there's a lot of people that depend on that (workers) When I was going through that tire store and all the employees were coming up and thanking me, well, they know we provide their food. So it makes me feel good (Jerry, interview, November 3, 2016).

Here, the consumer's purchase reflects a feeling of ethical responsibility to the American workers and reaffirms the value of this domestic purchase. Tsai (2010:078),

describes this consumer consciousness as enacting the role of "altruistic helpers to fellow citizens whose employment is endangered by imported products." The relationship of consumer to worker is seen as reciprocal.

The acknowledgement of the lifeline between producers and consumers is an interesting approach to management and suggests that the plant workers are part of the Corvette family along with the consumers. Cooksey's philosophy in building a sustainable work culture included incentives of front row parking spaces for employees that bought a Corvette. Those who did not drive Chevys were banished to a parking lot about five minutes walking distance from the plant. This concept of pride in the product that one is making allows the laborers to have a sense of ownership and investment in the products they are making. This pride certainly contributed to the precision and quality of the car.

Figure 11 Outside the Corvette Assembly Plant in Bowling Green, KY

No discussion of the pride of Corvette workers would be complete without acknowledging another important figure in Corvette history, Russ McLean. Russ is credited for his role in saving America's sports car. An interviewee told me the story of Russ McLean who was in charge of overseeing design, engineering, purchasing, finance, and materials at the assembly plant in the 1990s. With the end of the C4 generation, Corvette sales were at a record low and he was told by his boss to "Kill the car. Let it die" (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016). According to McLean, he looked at all the dedicated Corvette staff members, many of whom had refused promotions in order to be a part of Corvette. He felt that it was more important to keep them working and keep the car alive than to follow orders. He worked secretly for many months trying to improve the car's performance and capabilities. With the help of Chevrolet engineering and

research specialists, the C5 generation was finally ready to be unveiled. The success of the C5 brought back the Corvette spirit of progress and profits soared higher than they had ever been in Corvette history (Schefter 1996). The story of Russ McLean's pride in the Corvette is a testament to the entire Corvette team who are committed to the success of the car. Their commitment to Corvette is a reflection of the success of America and the motivation to push the limits in order to achieve. In many ways, the effort to save the Corvette was symbolic of saving part of America's culture.

Now that we have taken a glimpse at the production side of building America's sports car, let's take a look at another fundamental component of the Corvette myth- patriotic advertising.

Selling the American Dream

Sometimes advertising and marketing create a so-called "legendary" brand whose values consumers identify with (Scott 2004). The brand narrative speaks to the needs of defining oneself to others through the social and cultural meanings we attach to objects (Motichka 2003). Scott (2004) points out while the Corvette has had an unmistakable impact on American culture, it took a series of key important events to make the Corvette a cultural icon. The Corvette has survived for reasons that involve people and society, their attitudes and perceptions and that they tell us something important about ourselves (Scott 2004). The mythological status of the Corvette as the "American Dream car" meets the needs of individuals that include achievement and the belief that living according to one's values and love of country will provide rewards for them. Marcus, a twenty-seven year- old Corvette owner who uses his C6 as a daily driver car proclaimed:

> I am not ashamed to be an American. I think it's awesome being a citizen of the most powerful nation in the world. I mean, I get all proud and everything when we do good stuff. Like when we make technological advancements, especially like the space programs and stuff like that. It always makes me proud of our country (Marcus, interview, May 31, 2015).

With this statement, Marcus illustrates that the Corvette provides emotional rewards of not only personal achievement, but national achievement. Culturally, the Corvette is a signifier of the technological capabilities of America and secures a place above the rest on a global scale.

The theme of patriotism that has been analyzed thus far is one that helps to frame the socio-cultural influence of the Corvette on American society. The legendary status of the Corvette brand has been largely created by the advertising campaigns that started with the car's inception in 1953. One of the earliest advertisements from 1954 promoted the car as "The First All American Sports Car" (Chevrolet Motor Division ad 1954). From the beginning, GM began a campaign that connected the Corvette emotionally to consumers through patriotic themes:

> Here is the exciting new high-performance Corvette- one of the world's truly authentic sports cars. Internationally acclaimed for its achievements, the Corvette is as American as the Fourth of July. Nothing on wheels handles more nobly. Nothing on a road or at a rally matches its style of leading *two* lives. For while the Corvette is a red-white-and blue-blooded sportsman, it also the leisure car supreme (Chevrolet Motor Division 1958).

The patriotic sentiment was planted with the introduction of Corvette as a halo car. This marketing theme was an extension of Chevrolet's previous American themed ads that were quite successful under the creative design of Campbell Ewald advertising. "See the USA in your Chevrolet" among the most famous that promoted buying American to travel

America. An advertisement from 1958 promoted the car with; "Corvette does America Proud!" as it continued to tout its status as America's first sports car.

A 2011 Chevrolet commercial celebrated 100 years of Chevrolet. With Ray Charles' version of "America the Beautiful" playing in the background, personal pictures of families, couples, and children are shown in Chevrolet models from the last 100 years. The pictures are held up against a background of America's majestic landscape including mountains, forests, national parks, and highways. The ad ends by thanking the audience "For the first 100 years and for generations to come, thanks for making us a part of your life" (youtube.com/Chevycelebratesits100thbirthday). "Chevy runs deep." This slogan reminds consumers of the longevity of Chevy that runs deep through modern American history. With America at the center of its advertising campaigns and slogans, Chevrolet became iconic in the marketplace.

A majority of the interviewees spoke about how Chevrolet ads resonated with them over the years and they often used ad slogans to describe their affinity for Chevrolet and Corvettes. Clyde explains how Chevy is synonymous with America:

> It's just American. There are other American cars (obviously), but there's a song that comes to mind by Don McLean, 'drove my Chevy to the levy but the levy was dry. American Pie.' Hot dogs, baseball, and apple pie. Chevrolet is all of these. Chevy is 'Like a Rock.' Just all those slogans. That's what it is (Clyde, interview, June 3, 2016).

The irony of Clyde's quote of the song, "American Pie" is that a General Motors billboard in Detroit features a 1963 split window Corvette with the slogan "They don't write songs about Volvos" (www.gearheadswc.com/GeneralMotorsBillboards.com).

Music,like advertising places the car within the reach of a mass consumer society and is influential in branding a cultural product long term.

When asked what has made Corvette so successful for over sixty years, Marsha reflects:

> I used to watch tv as a kid and it was always in that jingle for Chevy; red, white and blue. I'm terribly a patriot in terms of so overboard. I can't watch a Blue Angels fly over without crying. I'm a mess. The national anthem makes me cry. Honestly, I think it goes all the way back to good advertising. It's baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet. It doesn't get any more American than that (Marsha, interview, March 9, 2016).

While Marsha references several American symbols, she intertwines her feelings of patriotism with the rituals of the national anthem, the US Navy's legendary ritual, and Chevrolet. For Marsha, "Chevy and Corvette scream red, white, and blue. I think they did a great job branding that" (Marsha, interview, March 9, 2016). This statement has deep meaning that quite possibly many Corvette owners share- Chevy has figuratively branded America in the hearts and minds of consumers.

A particular television ad campaign mentioned by several Corvette consumers, was the "baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet" that ran in the early 1970s. Chevrolet embedded these signifiers into the C4 generation models from 1990 to 1996 with an 'easter egg' (hidden intentional message). In these models, hidden stamps imprinted in the metal can be found behind the passenger seat and under the carpet to reveal a baseball bat, apple pie, and a hot dog (Torchinsky 2013). The hidden imprint on these models is intentional, it is placed where only an avid Corvette enthusiast would find it. These loyalists are driving the car that is branded "America."

The simultaneous identification of Corvette with America has remained a consistent and clear message that helps to secure this group of brand loyalists. Karen, a Corvette collector recalls a 1989 Chevrolet promotion:

> You see the Corvette, you know it truly represents USA. It's the red, white, and blue. The "Heartbeat of America" was probably the best way to explain it. This ad was created by my friend Jerry Burton who was creative director at Campbell Ewald ad agency. The American concepts have all been incorporated promotionally by Chevrolet (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016).

The "Heartbeat of America" went on to win more than 400 awards by 1989 (Johnson 2011). These wins suggest that Chevy's messaging resonated not only with brand loyalists, but consumers from the general population.

Aside from advertising, the Chevrolet Corporation has fostered strong relationships with consumers. Karen continued her conversation on what has made Corvette successful by saying this:

> What has happened with this car is the provider and the consumer have really fed off each other, and they've paid attention to each other. The provider (Chevy) has done a great job of asking 'what do you like?' and 'what do you not like?' They have done that on multiple levels. They will do seminars at Corvette gatherings to listen to the consumer (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016).

A marketing specialist for a Southern California Corvette dealership reiterated the company's commitment to consumer's desires:

> Chevrolet is always out there doing market surveys and everything else. They survey current Corvette owners. What do you like? What don't you like? Plus they've got the biggest set of critics out there and all of the car magazines tell them what's good, what's bad. Then there are the Corvette blogs where consumers tell each other what Chevy is doing right or wrong (Troy, interview, July 30, 2016).

Chevrolet's democratic approach to production of the Corvette seems to elicit a deeper sense of ownership and involvement among consumers. This involvement has not only

contributed to brand loyalty, but also to the growth of the grassroots movement of Corvette clubs across the nation and the globe. The voluntary associations that have been formed around the passion for this car will be the focus of the next chapter.

Conclusion

The story of the Corvette community is a story about people who hold very strong attachments to American values. Through a quantitative study of symbolic patriotism, the Corvette owners proved to have significantly higher levels of patriotic sentiments than the non-Corvette owner population. In order to understand how these patriotic sentiments are constructed, the rituals surrounding the flag, pledge of allegiance, national anthem, and public celebrations that incorporate these symbols were analyzed. The findings suggest that patriotic sentiment and a commitment to American ideology is strongly linked to consumption of the Corvette.

The construction of the Corvette myth happened over time through advertising campaigns that appealed not only to consumers' emotional desires, but tapped into their love of country and the values that keep them rooted in their daily life. The iconic status of the car led to the formation of a community of people who want to share an appreciation for the freedoms that they feel fortunate to have. The social meaning of the Corvette has been appropriated by the people who consume the car and an appreciation for this social meaning is also reflected among non-Corvette consumers in the general population.

While the changing tide of society is marked by globalization, geo-political shifts, and proposed challenges to traditional values, the Corvette offers an anchor for members

of this community. The car affirms their commitment to an American way of life they believe in which includes supporting American workers, buying American made products, and free market principles that have offered them opportunities to achieve success.

Corvette history is one that has been branded by both Chevy and the consumer as a signifier of American culture. In addition to advertising, the key players in Corvette production and management have worked to preserve the American dream through protection of the product in order to ensure that the car continues and the nation thrives. Just as Corvette is considered by many to be "American Pie," if the car ceases to exist in the future, for loyalists it will be "the day the music died." Now we will take a closer look at the social ties that form around the Corvette through the voluntary participation in local clubs and also see what the future holds for this iconic sports car.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SOCIAL CAPITAL

> *It gets into your heart and it gets into your passion. It's almost like being a Green Bay Packers fan or something. You are just into it. There's so many opportunities that are associated with being part of this Corvette family. If you want to compete with your Corvette, there's many places you can go and do that. If you want to get out and drive and get ice cream, you can do that. Or if you want to take a road tour across Route 66, you can do that. There's just so many things. There's so many clubs and individuals involved in the philanthropic world, and it comes back to that connection that's been made through the Corvette* (Wendell, interview, August 12, 2015).

The Corvette story is not just about a fast car, it is a story about people. Consumption of this sports car links people to personal relationships, membership in groups who share the same interests, and the human need for community. While the level of involvement with the car varies among owners, the social life of the Corvette owner is rich with opportunities that are granted with the consumption of the car. Both nostalgia and patriotism have been analyzed as sentiments that help to construct the Corvette myth for consumers, and it is the human relationships that have built a community of brand enthusiasts. For most Corvette loyalists, their leisure practices involving the car are considered a lifestyle. The car is a part of who they are in daily life and how they identify themselves as unique among others in a mass consumer society. Membership in this car community is first and foremost providing individuals social capital or "the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties" (Putnam 2000:20). Presently, the decline in civic participation through membership in voluntary associations has led to an erosion of community life. As discussed in chapter one, the loss of social support networks developed through social ties to neighbors, civic groups and community based

organizations has left most Americans socially isolated. The benefits that once came from membership in traditional communities is being reconstructed through the shared interest and enthusiasm of sacred objects of consumption. This chapter will address the research question: *How does the sacred meaning assigned to the Corvette by Corvette club members facilitate a willingness to participate in community?*

In order to define the Corvette community, two definitions have been integrated between the disciplines of sociology and consumer marketing. In their research on community and American life, Bellah et al. (2008:335) define a lifestyle enclave as:

> Formed by people who share some feature of private life. Members of a lifestyle enclave express their identity through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities, which often serve to differentiate them sharply from those with other lifestyles. They are not interdependent, do not act together politically, and do not share a history. If these things begin to appear, the enclave is on its way to becoming a community. Many of what are called communities in America are mixtures of communities in our strong sense and lifestyle enclaves.

The lifestyle enclave describes the composition of the Corvette community as it is based on shared interests (the car), and leisure activities. I would add to this definition the strong generational influences found in my research that shaped similar tastes and values and help to expand the depth of personal relationships and shared interests within the community beyond the car. A president of a Corvette club describes his community: "Being in the club, you have anchors like the Corvette, but you also find you've got interests in other things too that don't involve the car" (Ron, interview, July 26, 2016). For many, the car is the "link that holds you together" (Mike, interview, July 26, 2016). As discussed in Chapter two, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) find that the members within specific subgroups of the Harley Davidson subculture are committed to the same

set of core values. Members have found that the ethos and cultural principles of the motorcycle group embodies their own needs and values. This finding suggests that the brand community is not formed solely because of the object. I suggest here that the Corvette owners' participation in the brand community may be based on pre-existing values and cultural identities (previously discussed) that guide them toward the product and the lifestyle. Membership in the group provides identity formation for the individual and also as for this grassroots group as a collective body.

Within consumer marketing literature, a brand community functions to provide a link between producer and consumer (Kilambi 2013). As discussed in Chapter two, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001:412) define brand community as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand." Three core elements of traditional communities throughout history are used as a framework by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) to construct contemporary brand communities: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility. Previous discussion of the Corvette community revealed a shared consciousness of American idealism and nostalgia for mid-twentieth century car culture. The rituals of road trips on historic highways, participation in car shows, and ceremonies including the flag and honoring veterans help to maintain the sacred status of the Corvette within the community. The third element, moral responsibility will be discussed further in this chapter. The concept of citizenship emerges from the shared practices of the

group, superseding individualism to be enacted on a local, regional, and sometimes national level of civic engagement through philanthropic work.

In order to understand how a consumer's feelings about the Corvette lead to membership in Corvette clubs, I will first take a look at how the sacred meaning of the Corvette is formed through personal identity and lifestyle. This lifestyle is the impetus for membership in Corvette clubs and ultimately, produces citizen participation in the larger context of local and regional communities (see Figure 12).

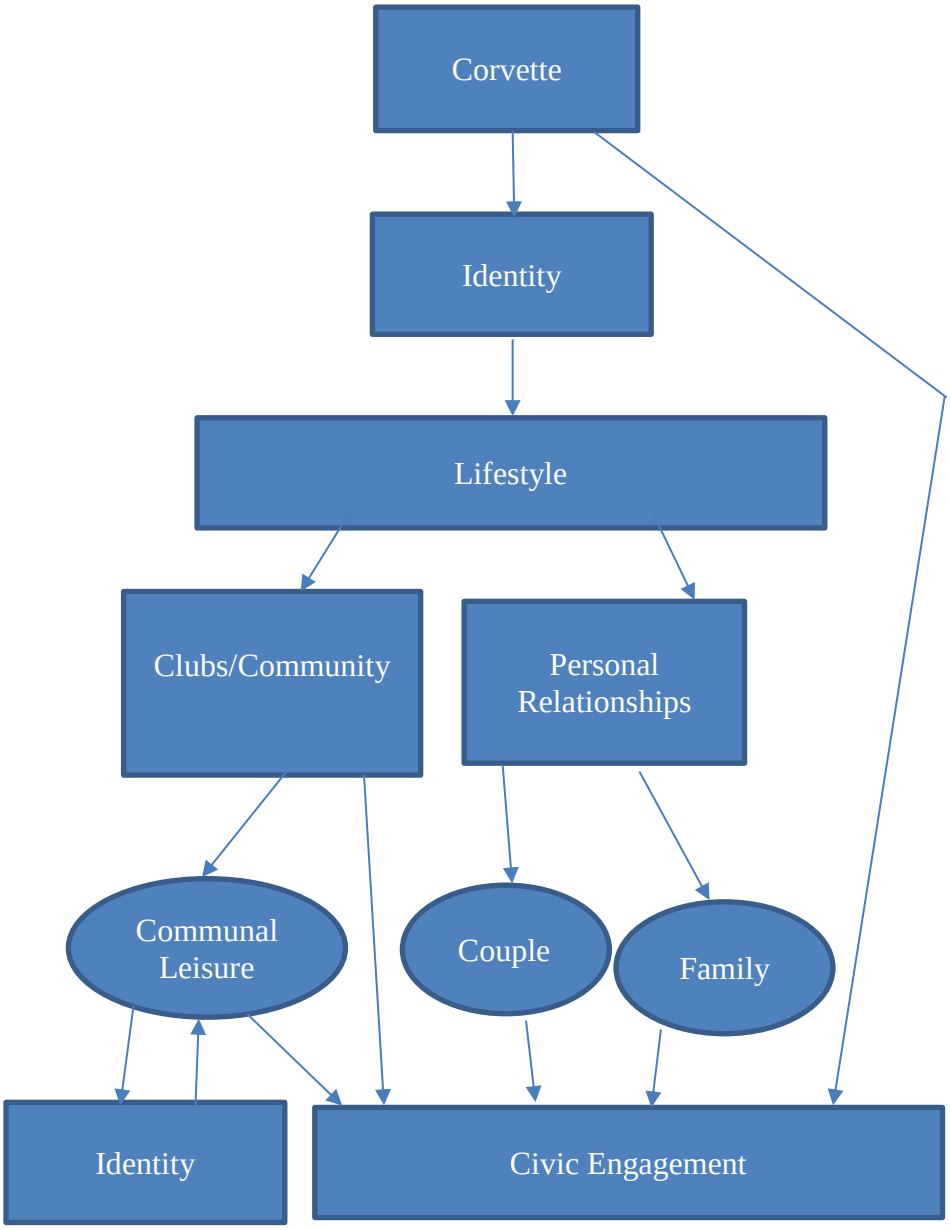

Figure 12: Concept Map

Identity Construction

Perhaps no other sociologist describes the construction of identity like contemporary theorist Erving Goffman. Goffman's (1959) concept of dramaturgical analysis symbolically compares the microsocial human interactions of daily life to theatrical performance. According to Goffman (1959), people engage in impression management in order to define themselves to others. Through the use of "fronts", "an individual's performance transpires in a fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (Goffman 1959:22). As the Corvette owner drives his car on the road, displays it at a car show, or simply has it valet parked, he is performing for an audience. Like in a play, the setting is of great importance to executing the performance. This setting involves furniture, décor, physical layout, or other background items which "supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it" (Goffman 1959:22). For Corvette consumers, the car is the setting and/or prop that facilitates role playing and transforms the identity of the person for themselves and to others. Here are two female accounts of how the Corvette created an identity for themselves:

> I bought my Corvette and that was my announcement to the world: I've made it. I'm a chick, I'm young, and this was the 70s remember. The mentality back then was different. This was my way of thumbing my nose at tradition (Marsha, interview, March 9, 2016).

> Driving that car, I got a feeling of power in a way, because I was shy and all of a sudden I felt powerful in this car. It made me feel like I was cool. I never felt like I was cool. I don't know if it's the same for other people, but that car made me somebody (MaryAnne, interview, July 7, 2015).

Both of these examples illustrate the impression management that Goffman describes. The Corvette facilitated the internal confidence of these women and suddenly, they were

performing an unexpected role that was gratifying, differentiating themselves from others around them. According to Troy, a marketing representative for Corvettes, “There’s an attachment there on a subconscious and conscious level. They’re driving something that nobody else has and when they’re not driving the Vette, they feel something is wrong” (Troy, interview, July 26, 2016).

This attachment to the car was described by more than one male Corvette owner as being a part of themselves physically. This gendered description refers back to the findings in Chapter four in which males described their relationship to the car in essentialist terms. Here are two examples of these male descriptions:

> The car tells who I am. It’s a machine. I fit well in it. It cradles me. It’s just like any other car, I fit that car. It’s like when I’m in it, we become one. I don’t slide in the seat, it’s just there (Clyde, interview, June 3, 2016).

> Well it looks like you’re going about 40 miles per hour when you’re sitting at the stop sign. Like I say, the performance and the steering and just everything about the car is just- unless you’ve driven it- it’s like an addiction. You feel a part of it. It’s like getting on a Harley Davidson, cranking the throttle. You kind of become part of it I guess (Doug, interview, August 21, 2015).

Both of these examples symbolically represent the car as a prosthetic machine capable of enhancing power and performance (Belk 2004). The physical encapsulation of riding in the car forms a bond between person and object that is enhanced by manipulation of the wheel and its navigation through roadway. Similar to sensory deprivation, the human limbs extend to operate as parts of the vehicle.

Although they used different language, both men and women describe the car as a mechanism for the transformation of identity. These self-fulfilling labels were coupled with multiple descriptions of an awareness of the audience they were performing for. A large

part of identification through the car is the acknowledgement and feedback one gets on the road from other drivers and knowing that "people notice you." Jeff, a sales manager for Corvette describes the motive of consumers:

> I think it's an ego thing too. People want to drive a car that maybe is a reflection of their personality. Corvette makes a statement just like anything in its class. It's obvious somebody wants to be noticed, I don't think you'd buy a Corvette because you want to keep a low profile, just like with any other sports car" (Jeff, interview, July 29, 2016).

Jeff's statement furthers Goffman's premise that through their performance, the individual gives meaning to themselves and to the situation while the audience is contributing meaning to the individual as well. The appearance of the Corvette driver is a statement about social status, gender, age, and even patriotism. Many of the interviewees stated that a large part of the thrill of driving the car down the road is the "looks they get at the stop light," and also, "other people that are admiring the looks of the car and give you that high-five or a thumbs up as you drive by" (Jerry, interview, November 3, 2016). Harry describes the response he gets from others on the road:

> I just think when I drive it I just feel good! You know you feel good, people look at you, look at the car and wave, sometimes beep the horn. Sometimes they come up to you at the grocery store parking lot and say 'Oh what a cool car!" So that makes you feel a little unique (Harry, interview, June 27, 2015).

These Corvette owners describe the car as a transformative object through which they identify themselves. However, this identity seems to be temporal and only present when operating the car. Like Goffman's metaphor of the world as a stage, when the Corvette owner enters the vehicle or stands beside it, they have entered the stage and assumed a different role. Marsha describes how her audience responds to her driving the car:

> A friend of mine from work rode with me for the first time the other day and said, "You're a different person. You get in the car and you morph into something that's just cool, like you're the female James Dean and got it going on." I will admit, it is true. It's the attitude. The sunglasses go on….getting a little cooler. Attitude. No other car gives me that feeling, and I've owned a lot of cars (Marsha, interview, March 9, 2016).

This narrative illustrates how the car is similar to a costume or prop the actor uses to transform their character. Not only does the driver herself acknowledge this transformation, but others around her (the audience) does as well. The myth of the Corvette that has previously been discussed in chapter six manifests itself in the driver's psyche and is powerful enough to transform behaviors. Dick, the owner of a C7 Stingray confesses a similar transformation when he gets behind the wheel: "It's almost like (I hate to say it), a Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde" (Dick, interview, June 16, 2015). A complete alternate personality emerges that without the car would not be possible. The emotional appeal of the Corvette seems to be the escapism that people often seek through leisure activities. Like the tag line "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," the car "lets them be something other than themselves" (Wendell, interview, August 12, 2015). The car as a sacred object seems to possess sacred properties that anoint the personality with qualities that one cannot express within the mundane world of everyday life. Not only does this identity transformation occur privately for the Corvette consumer, but it is acknowledged publicly, thus confirming the unique and mythical status of the car and by proxy, the driver. With the understanding that the Corvette mystique has the power to shape identity, let us look at how this identity linked to the car becomes a lifestyle for many Corvette owners.

The Corvette Lifestyle

The term "lifestyle" turned up frequently in my interviews with Corvette owners. Through multiple participant observations I was able to experience the activities, commitments, and relationships that form around the car and the meaning this has in one's private life. Car enthusiasts distinguished their leisure interest as a way of life from a hobby. Karen explains the difference:

> I don't consider it a hobby. This is a lifestyle. A hobby is when you take paint and you build a little boat or you do a jigsaw puzzle, that's a hobby. Although to quilters that can be a lifestyle, they go to quilting events. This is a lifestyle- its social, community. It's a lifestyle (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016).

Karen's depiction of the lifestyle suggests that hobbies are something done for enjoyment to fill one's leisure time. While the Corvette certainly seems to satisfy the desire for leisure enjoyment, I was interested in how the car affected other facets of these owners lives- personal relationships and a sense of community. Another interviewee expressed how owning the car is both identity forming and a lifestyle:

> Piano is a hobby. Corvette is a lifestyle. It just is. Why is it? It's just part of you. You have to totally embrace it. It's as normal to me as a cup of coffee in the morning to some people. A piano, you play at. A Corvette is something I take very seriously. It has deeper meaning and if I were asked to sell one of them, it wouldn't be the Vette. It just wouldn't be. It gives me the most joy. Even just washing it, sitting in it, looking at it (Marsha, interview, March 9, 2016).

The deeper meaning of the car described here suggests that it serves a purpose in how the owner lives her life and may guide daily routines and activities. Another interviewee living the Corvette life explains: "You just do it. It becomes part of you, it becomes a lifestyle. If I look through my closet, most of my shirts have got Corvette on them. It's like going to church- it's just what you do" (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015). The

reference to church suggests that the consumer lifestyle fulfills the same needs and commitment of other societal institutions. The emphasis on the meaning of objects indicates that consumerism has shifted from a purchase for enjoyment in private life to something that provides self-identification and influences public life as well.

According to Bellah et al. (2008), the lifestyle enclave has become an important outgrowth of the sectoral organization of American life, resulting from the emergence of industrialization and the national market. In traditional societies, private life and it's leisure and consumption patterns were expressions of social status linked to social class. As social status became more defined by an occupational system, the social life of Americans that had been dependent on local communities began to contract. The newer contemporary lifestyle enclaves were found in post WWII society when "youth culture" emerged through patterns of recreation, dress, music, and tastes that were independent of ethnic or class background (Bellah, et. Al 2008). "The contemporary lifestyle enclave is based on a degree of individual choice that largely frees it from traditional ethnic and religious boundaries" (Bellah, et al. 2008:73). While traditional forms of collective support found in local (homogenous) communities began to dissolve, the lifestyle enclaves emerged as a necessary social form of private life. As mass consumer society expanded, so did the choices for how the individual would define himself. Family, religion, and work used to define a person's lifestyle and that has been replaced with the individual choice for creating one's own values. I suggest that the imprint of values that these institutions once provided are still present in the minds and hearts of Americans and are sought to be fulfilled through consumption and leisure practice. As we have seen in

previous chapters, the ethos of the Corvette owner was formed through childhood socialization and ideas of community. While the value systems may be similar among many in this brand community, the individual passion for the car is what draws them together. The lifestyle enclave is a form of community where the manifest functions of family and religion can be reclaimed through leisure and accountability to others. So what leads the average Corvette owner to gravitate toward the brand community? Experiences told from a sales manager of Corvette reveal that:

> People who own these cars are way into every aspect of owning it, they really live and breathe them. It's very important to them. People who have these cars want to be around other people that feel the same way about the car. I think it's just like with anything, if you're into something, it's more fun to have friends that share it (Jeff, interview, July 26, 2016).

While the Corvette lifestyle defines private life, the desire for social cohesion among those with similar interests not only validates an individual's consumer identity, but enhances his social life and membership in society.

In their work on organization and mutual aid in leisure, Bishop and Hoggett (1986) argue that communal leisure offers an opportunity for developing a sense of value and identity through performance. They state that members of leisure groups are looking for involvement, recreation, sociability, production, consumption, and competition (Bishop and Hogget 1986). A public relations specialist for the National Corvette Museum explains owners motivation for membership in Corvette clubs; "They're looking for friendship. They're looking for involvement, they are looking to be a part of it" (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015). As American life has shifted from small towns to urbanization, the separations of work, family, and community have become more

pronounced. This separation of self from society has caused a dramatic decline in voluntary associations and civic groups that have transpired over the last sixty years (recall Putnam's seminal research "Bowling Alone" referred to in Chapter one). Many individuals have retreated into themselves amid a decline in the institution of marriage and a loss of social attachments to neighbors and coworkers (Derber 2012; Eitzen 2004). In order to replace this loss, most Americans pursue self-interests and in so doing, choose to create their own morality that is based in self-gratification, not the collective or public good. A closer look at how members become involved in the Corvette brand community reveals how self-interests practiced collectively produce re-attachments to others and a sense of community. "The values and traditions implicit in any activity are linked quite directly to wider values" (Bishop and Hoggett 1986:43). I will now take a look at how these wider values are influential in constructing the Corvette community with particular attention to personal relationships, marriage and family, and social capital.

Branding the Social

Now that I have established how Corvette consumers assume identification through lifestyle, I will explore how this lifestyle provides a pathway to a richer social life and ultimately, to renewed citizen participation on a local and regional community level. Often before membership in a club is pursued, many Corvette owners report the building of intimate relationships surrounding the car. While some interviewees discussed their relation to kinship ties through the car (father to son, father to daughter, or sibling to sibling), others related to their spouse through activities related to the car.

Corvette Couples

Derber (2012) notes that marriage is on the decline and more people are living alone. According to the Pew Research Center (2017), divorce rates for Baby Boomers over age 50 have doubled since the 1990s (Stepler 2017). Despite these grim statistics, the sample of 437 Corvette owners reflects that 76.2% are married and 11.7% are single while just 11% are divorced. During my research, I was told by more than one participant that Corvette owners tend to get married and stay married. Bonnie has been married to her husband for 46 years with one of their first dates involving a Corvette. She states that, "Even when many people around us began to get divorced like in the 80s, all the Corvette people stayed married. I am not sure why this is" (Bonnie, personal communication, NCRS 2016). For Bonnie and her husband who recently bought a new Corvette (in a long line of many) they will not discuss anything negative while riding in the car. They decided it is their place to have peace and let all the troubles of life disappear while on the open road. Bonnie is describing the car as a space that may be therapeutic for the couple's marriage. Many interviewees report enjoying activities surrounding the Corvette as a form of leisure and bonding with their spouse. Mike explains the fun he and wife Marilyn experience: "So I always wanted a Corvette and the Corvette club was something we can do together. The Corvette allows us to have a social life together. She has always liked the Corvette as well" (Mike, interview, July 22, 2016). Another collector describes the friendship and fun he has in his marriage:

> She is my friend, my lover, she's just a wonderful woman. We have been married 45 years. She is just part of my life and she enjoys the Corvette, going out with me, and going out with the club to do things. We just hit a happy balance, I spend the money on Corvettes and she spends the money on cruises" (Harry, interview, June 27, 2015).

The companionship described by these interviewees is enhanced through involvement in the Corvette lifestyle. Referring back to Goffman (1959), the "setting" of the car built for two promotes intimacy in a physical space where two can be alone. The car owners describe relationships that are defined by enjoying activities together instead of alone. The social life that couples experience often is novel compared to the mundane activity of married life. Anna reflects, "We have done a lot of things as a couple that we would not have done unless we were part of the car club. So we have had a lot of great experiences with the car" (Anna, interview, July 25, 2016). According to experts who studied the habits of the nation's most happy couples, one of the most significant ways for couples to stay connected in a marriage is to take part in activities that are rewarding and out of the ordinary (Prevention.com March 2017). Another example of couples bonding over Corvettes is relayed by Todd:

> It's also something my wife and I enjoy together. I took her to the Kentucky Speedway and we paid the $40 to go around the track once. I hit the finish line at 110 miles per hour. My wife loved it! She had the engagement ring smile the whole time, her tongue was hanging out. That was the best $40 I ever spent (Todd, interview, August 23, 2015).

These narratives from Corvette owners illustrate how the connection of consumer to object also expands to connect consumer to consumer. Not only are married couples able to connect on a deeper level through the car, some report meeting their spouse through a mutual love for the car. "I've met two husbands through the car, the one that passed away and my current husband" (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016). Recalling the ethos of the Corvette owner that was analyzed in chapter five, similar value systems along with mutual interest in the car may be a recipe for couples' connections because of the vehicle. A

heartwarming example of this connection was a couple I met at a Virginia Corvette club meeting. They told me the story of their courtship that took place upon meeting one another through the club, and a marriage proposal that took place publicly at one of the monthly meetings. They call theirs a "Corvette marriage." Several other members concurred that it was indeed a very special proposal that they were happy to witness.

In addition to couples' involvement in the Corvette lifestyle, many personal friendships form around the car through communal leisure and membership in clubs. Let's take a look at the depth of the social utility within these relationships.

The Corvette Family

Corvette consumption fosters strong relationships between family members, couples, as well as friendships to other Corvette owners. In order to understand how the car facilitates such social connections, the sacred status of the car must be discussed. Recall classical sociologist Emile Durkheim's (1896) concept of the sacred from chapter one as it separates objects of the profane and the sacred. In our world, objects that are removed from the status of everyday, utilitarian use become sacred and revered above the rest. My explication of the Corvette as a mythical object thus far can be described as having sacred status by the owner. Similarly, the consumer marketing literature, describes several properties that ordinary objects assume to make them sacred including; sacrifice, commitment, rituals, myth, mystery, and ecstasy (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry1989). These properties create highly emotional experiences that often cannot be understood cognitively. Belk, et. al (1989:7) describe the ecstatic experience of the sacred as "one standing outside of oneself." All of these sacred properties have been used by participants

to describe the myth of the Corvette. I suggest here that the sacred status of the car held by owners facilitates a willingness to participate in the brand community. In order to illustrate the sacred status of the Corvette, I will provide two examples of the intimate connection that Corvette owners feel to others through the car.

Todd, a forty something Corvette enthusiast tells a personal story about how the Corvette connected him to his father who passed away:

> My father's dream car was a 1930 Model A two door sedan. He had wanted one for years and when he finally retired, I urged him to go for it. He found one out west and was able to purchase it. I have never seen my Dad prouder. Well, he got sick with cancer and only got to enjoy it for six years before he passed away. He kept telling me, 'you need to get your Corvette, time will pass you by.' Knowing he was sick I told him, 'we'll buy it together,' and I never got to, he passed away before that. Shortly after my Dad's death, I began to have very vivid dreams in which I swear he was talking to me. One night I woke up in the middle of the night hearing his voice as plain as daylight, 'Get your Corvette.' Well I woke up at 5:30am and told my wife, 'Today is the day I am getting my Corvette' and I went and bought one. For me, it was the thrill of my life that I had bought that car. I also was fulfilling the dream my father had had for me all of those years (Todd, interview, August 28, 2015).

This personal story is told in spiritual terms that acknowledge Belk, et al. (1989) ecstatic experience of standing outside of oneself. The car's sacred properties are transposed onto the relationship of father and son and assumes spiritual qualities. The bond between the two remains intact with consumption of the Corvette. Ironically, the dream is used as an impetus for purchase of the "dream car."

Christine's story is similar to Todd's and is told in spiritual terms:

> Well Steve is my stepdad who I lost in 2004. He was a Corvette fanatic and the last car he owned was a '97 Corvette, silver with black interior. In October of 2008, my Mom and I were at Rick Hendrick Chevrolet just to look around. As my mom was talking to the sales guy, I kept noticing this little silver drop top out of the corner of my eye and I got up and walked over and looked at it and I came

> back and said,' It looks just like Steve's.' I got thekeys to check it out and I was messing with the radio and other things on the dash, just sittin in the car. I swear to you he was in the seat next to me. Yeah, so I drove home that day with that car. That car held more sentimental value to me than anything. It didn't even hit me that it was his birthday until we were turning into the driveway and I thought, Oh my God! Its Steve's birthday today. Everytime he got a new Corvette I would say, I really would like to have one and he would always tell me, you'll get your chance, you'll have one someday and he was right (Christine, interview July 27, 2015).

This story reflects a strong bond between daughter and stepfather through mutual attachment to the Corvette. As discussed in Chapter one, the concept of flow constitutes "a state of transcendence, a suspension of temporal reality, a sense of separation from the mundane, and a sense of unity with some higher plane of experience" (Schouten et al. 2007:357). In the context of consumption, certain triggers are identified that lead to a peak experience including the sensory experiences of sights, sounds, smells, and interpersonal encounters with others that may include other consumers or marketing personnel (Schouten, et al. 2007).

In broader context, the flow and peak experiences of consumers via attachment to objects is reflective of a consumer society where objects provide meaning and purpose. Through these narratives, we see the institution of family maintains primary status in the lives of the people, but a noted shift from non-material that once bonded family members (words of wisdom, moral guidelines) to the material. Intimate connections are now made through objects and consumers have accepted their status as sacred in their lives.

Aside from families of kinship that bond Corvette consumers, there are families of choice made through social encounters in the Corvette community. For consumers, owning the car and driving it can promote immediate acknowledgement as a family

member by fellow owners. When asked how he feels when he sees other Corvette drivers on the road or at gatherings, Clayton responds:

> They are in my community. They are my brothers and sisters. The Corvette community is unique in America because no other car in America do the occupants feel this kinship. Not in Mustangs, not in Cobras, they don't have the kinship that the Corvettes and their owners share (Clayton, interview, September 16, 2015).

The assumption that fellow Corvette consumers are like kinship ties is reflective of one of the main characteristics of a brand community. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), brand community members share a "consciousness of kind" or a need for unity within the group. The conscious choice to purchase a Corvette is associated with the person having other personal qualities (values) that are similar to consumers of the car. This individual identification with the car is acknowledged as something that all owners of the car embody. There is no better example of the unity the community shares than the "Corvette wave" that owners give to one another when they pass on the open road. This gesture signifies that members of the brand community 'sort of know each other' (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001**)** even though they haven't met. This consciousness of kind symbolically has deep meaning to the Corvette owners and includes a "Save the Wave" campaign among fellow consumers to ensure that the lifestyle continues. Corvette wave rules were created for this effort by the Lost Caravan Corvette Club, an internet based club that organizes caravans of Corvettes from all over North America. The rationale for the wave is summarized here:

> The Corvette wave is an integral part of the mystique and culture of the Corvette owner experience….wave at your fellow Corvette owners whoever they are, whenever you see them. This will show you are a person who understands the full

> measure and etiquette that comes with your proud ownership of a Corvette (Woomer 2003).

Rituals such as the wave help to keep the consciousness of kind among brand community members and preserve a sense of unity within the group. Underneath this mutual acknowledgement among strangers is a desire to hold onto the values and sentiments of American idealism previously discussed in chapter six.

The consciousness of kind within the brand community was often expressed as a form of trust between fellow members that one had forged social ties with. Diane gives an example of how strong the social bond can be between members:

> I have some lifelong friends from being in the club for so many years. Last month we got several friends together that had gotten out of touch. We pulled them back together at a reunion party and we just lapsed back into things we used to do. A guy named Dave was asked to lead us in prayer like he used to do and everything just fell into our old routine like a large family. There was about 100 of us, just good close relationships that you spend a lifetime cultivating. I think they understand what the car means to me, and I understand what the car means to them (Diane, interview, August 6, 2015).

While mutual understanding is expressed as a sentiment that helps to bind members of this community, trust is a virtue that binds it as well. As noted in chapter one, trust and relationships that people use for social support have dissipated greatly over the last sixty years (Arai and Pedlar 2003; Putnam 2000). America's circle of confidants has shrunk considerably in the last three decades. Different from thick forms of trust that develop from insular groups who share either kinship ties or similar morality, thin trust is found through indirect interactions, and ties that allow overlapping and interlocking networks of voluntary associations. Thin trust expands social integration as it accommodates for a modern, pluralistic society where not everyone is bound by the same

morality (Putnam 2000). The thin trust that develops among Corvette owners through a mutual understanding of what the car means, allows an openness for trust of each other in other aspects of their lives. A car collector who I met at a national convention explained to me "it's not just a car, you join a family, you don't eat alone" (field notes from Carlisle, August 23, 2015). Many participants voiced the growth in their social life and networks just from purchasing the car. The car facilitates a social connection to others that people are seeking in today's society where former support systems in traditional communities (neighborhood confidants, fellow members of voluntary associations) have faded.

Through trust and mutual passion for the car and all the moral sentiments that come with it, members of this community take on the qualities of family. Gary explains how this concept works:

> I'm with my Corvette family way more than I'm with my family "family." We just have the same interest. We all have the Corvette, whether we drive it or leave it in the garage covered up, we still have it. The car brought us together, it's the people that keep you together, the friendships (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015).

Similar to Gary's statement, the National Council of Corvette Clubs' slogan is "we joined for the car, we stay for the people." While members of Corvette clubs relish the social bonds that membership brings, it is not entirely clear whether the car is the impetus for such strong relationships forming, or if the members were seeking a sense of community and personal relationships to begin with. Wendell, the executive director of the National Corvette Museum (NCM) reflects on over twenty years of experience observing the brand community:

> When I was in Cypress Gardens, Florida in January of 1990, I was just overwhelmed with how this car facilitates such a feeling of family and camaraderie. And whether you owned one Corvette, and it was all you could do to make the payments, or you owned forty-four Corvettes, you were still friends- you had a common bond. I like to tell folks that I am one of thirteen children and when we all get together, (it's like 150 of us), that being at the Corvette convention was just like going to my family reunion (Wendell, interview, August 12, 2015).

The family of Corvette owners is described here as one that does not discriminate among different classes of members. The car provides acceptance, openness, and a willingness to let others join.

Interviewees described Corvette people as "friendly" and "genuine." Several felt that members of clubs were looking for "involvement" and "friendship." When asked why they are so genuine and friendly, one collector responds:

> They understand how hard it is to own a Corvette, how much trouble it was to even get their first one, or how much they wanted one, so most everybody is very gracious about owning a Corvette. It's not, "look at me, I've got a Corvette." Most people would be like, "Yeah, I got a Corvette, you want to go for a ride?" that kind of people (Todd, interview, August 23, 2015).

The thin trust that develops through mutual interest in the car maintains an in -group camaraderie without a mistrust of outsiders. Competition seems to be replaced with a desire for cooperation. With the desire for friendship and involvement in Corvette clubs, the structure for communal leisure is formed and creates various forms of social capital for members. Let us now take a deeper look at how forms of social capital are accessed through activities and rituals inside of Corvette clubs.

The Social Capital of Corvette Clubs

Toqueville (1840) described the civic life of Americans as a 'nation of joiners.'

“Getting involved is a peculiarly American notion of the relationship between self and society” (Bellah et al. 2008:167). Civic life has long been an arena where Americans can pursue self-interests by choosing to participate in social institutions. From membership in these social institutions, social relationships with others are gained while often a sense of responsibility toward one’s community is fulfilled. Up until the mid-twentieth century, many people were deeply rooted in their communities and membership in the town was defined by an appreciation of a community of memory linking the destiny of its citizens with their ancestors and descendants (Bellah et al. 2008). This classic vision of community life gave meaning to their lives. Bellah et al. describes them as “town fathers” who are members of the Rotary, Lions, and Kiwanis clubs and have small businesses that have met the needs of the citizens for decades, sometimes over a hundred years. These “natural citizens” have often spent generations in the community, and the community is perceived as an extension of the self. Hence, to harm the community would be to harm oneself (Bellah et al. 2008). Contemporary social scientists point to a perforation in this classic community structure due to globalization, industrialization, and urbanization (Bellah et al. 2008; Derber 2012; Eitzen 2004; Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003; Smith-Lovin 2004; Uslaner 1998). The tensions between social and economic life have caused the separations of work, family, and community to be more pronounced in which these worlds may touch, but do not interrelate.

Recall from chapter two Louis Wirth’s (1938) sociological work on urbanization in which he describes urban individualism as it moves people away from bonds with people of similar morality. Recall also Granovetter’s (1973) theory of ‘weak ties’ that are

formed through loose, secondary associations with others. The significance of Granovetter's (1973) premise is the strength of associational ties diffuses into opportunities for information, mobility, and community organization that may extend well beyond a person's locale. I find the brand community of Corvette owners to be bound by weak ties that foster social capital as a replacement for the classic community.

The findings of the Corvette lifestyle enclave suggest that in today's society where a majority of American citizens do not operate as "town fathers," people are seeking social ties in other ways. The social institutions that guide lifestyle enclaves are driven by consumer and leisure markets. As work and residential life becomes more isolated from others, the desire to connect is still there, and the car is a means with which to make this connection. Christine explains how she got involved in the Corvette club;

> I have only been in South Carolina for seven years and that's really why I joined the club was to meet people. Working from home and having grown children, you don't have that social life anymore. I didn't know a soul here except for my son, so the Corvette was a way for me to meet people. I really don't know what I would be doing if I wasn't in the club (Christine, interview July 27, 2015).

Christine is a perfect example of how in today's mobile society, working from home, moving for work, and being single can lead to a feeling of social isolation. The friendships that develop through joining a club offer opportunities that some feel could not be found elsewhere. Another example from a club member in California:

> My brother moved two years ago to Houston and he belongs to the Houston Corvette club and also another club called Vette Rods. He told me, "I have more friends now that I belong to this club, we go out to dinner, we enjoy wine tasting, we do cruises. I've got more friends now than I've ever had in my life, and it's all because of the Corvette club!" (Don, interview, August 7, 2016).

The Corvette offers consumers an entrée into a social group that provides leisure experiences where lives intersect to reveal common interests and values outside of the car. “Being in the club promotes friendships and gets people out of their little corner, so you might find somebody who does what you do- a hunter or a fisherman. It’s not politics, it’s not religion- there is a lot of camaraderie within the community” (Clayton, interview, September 16, 2015). Seeing members on a regular basis and the frequency of club events helps to develop deeper bonds among people beyond the car.

In his research of consumer culture, McCracken (1986:4113) argues that “rituals perpetuate a community’s culture and shared history through celebrations of the brand’s history, sharing of stories, and symbolic behaviors.” Personal stories about the car and relationships built around it help to ‘reinforce consciousness of kind between members and contribute to imagined communities. It assists in maintaining communal values” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001:423). Communal values are expressed and enacted in the rituals practiced together by Corvette club members.

Rituals within the club begin first with the ritual of monthly club meetings. The meeting provides organization and legitimation to the club as a formal non-profit voluntary association. Meetings are run by a board of officers that are democratically elected by club members and include a president, vice president of membership, secretary, treasurer, and a club historian. Most meetings I attended began with introductions of each person standing up and stating their name and what model of Corvette they own. Here, complete identification with the car occurs as both the person and car are considered members of the club. The agenda of the meeting includes the ritual

(at some clubs) of the pledge of allegiance and then on to business with the planning of club events including group outings, car shows, and caravans to name a few. Many clubs include a fun Corvette trivia session at meetings led by the club historian and members who answer correctly can win a prize or small amount of cash through 50/50 ticket purchases. Acknowledging the history of the car in this way keeps tradition and legitimizes the classis status of the car and purpose for the community.

Communication is another necessary ritual that serves to keep social cohesion within the group. Forms of communication include a monthly newsletter for the club, website, and the circulation of a magazine, "Blue Bars" published by the National Council of Corvette Clubs. The magazine includes personal Corvette stories from enthusiasts and collectors across the country as well as winners of regional auto-cross events and rallies. The national and regional focus of this magazine and membership extends the social networks of club members and provides more "weak ties" for people to access in other parts of the country for friendship and leisure pursuits.

Participation in club activities is widely enjoyed by most members and volunteer workers are needed to make sure they run smoothly. Dick, a long standing member of a Virginia Corvette club explains:

> A lot of the club activities you need worker bees and I am a great worker bee. It's a kind of 'we need this, go do that' sort of thing. Participation is really hard in the club, 20% of the people do 100% of the work. So you can see who the core people are, even just going to the meetings. So it's very important. Everything the club offered, I have done (Dick, interview, June 6, 2015).

Dick's description touches on some of the organizational elements of communal leisure. Bishop and Hoggett (1986) claim that one of the reasons enthusiasts join collective

groups is involvement and opportunity for the person to take on a role that they are unaccustomed to doing in their personal or professional life. They also describe communal leisure groups as mutual aid where "the organization is done by some of us for all of us, not by them for us" (Bishop and Hoggett 1986:41). In other words, people who are in it for what they can get out of it don't usually last long.

What people bring to the group helps to keep the community thriving. Communal leisure offers the opportunity to develop a sense of value and identity through what each member can offer the group. Personal values, leadership, work ethic, abilities, experience, knowledge, money, and access to other social/substantive networks are some of the resources that individuals bring to the Corvette club. Often, the talents and skills that members use in their occupation and professional life are utilized as an asset to this volunteer based group. Stephanie provides an example of how volunteer efforts keep the National Corvette Museum thriving:

> Great ideas and skills. It's very heartwarming to see someone take what they do in their career and help the museum. The first one that comes to mind is an energy specialist out of Indiana who told us, "I can do a survey and find out how to save you money on the electric bill and how to cut the usage." It's so cool to have them come down here and have that impact on the museum that we didn't have the expertise to do. There's clubs that will volunteer and they will bring their skill sets of their members here to help with major projects whether it be woodworking or electrical, or even as simple as some guys that have a window cleaning company and when they come they bring all of their equipment and we have spotless windows. So, they can take what they specialize in and help enhance their Bowling Green home (Stephanie, interview, August 13, 2015).

The collaborative effort that is described here reflects the work ethic that was discussed in Chapter five. The willingness to offer individual expertise is not motivated by profit, but a desire to be an integral part of the larger whole of the organization. The investment

of personal skills shows there is production in this leisure practice as well as a sense of interdependence that supersedes the self-interest that originally brought one to join the club. An investment of one's talents is an investment in the lifestyle's continuance.

Thick and Thin Trust

The social aspect that comes with membership in the Corvette community "trumps a lot of stuff" according to one owner (Clayton, interview, September 15, 2015). During this research, there were two types of relationships identified within the Corvette community, very personal relationships that exceeded the confines of formal membership, and associational ties that yielded great systems of support. The former is what Putnam (2000:136) calls thick trust; or "trust embedded in personal relationships that are strong, frequent, and nested in wider networks." On the other hand is thin trust, "similar to 'generalized other' like your acquaintance from the coffee shop who rests implicitly on some background of shared social networks and expectations of reciprocity" (Putnam 2000:136). Each of these forms of trust seem to meet a different set of needs among Corvette members. More than half of the interviewees stated that they have made some of the deepest friendships they have ever had. Kim relays the emotional ties she has formed:

> I have many deep friendships from the Corvette club. I have been really involved. I was president for several years and my husband was VP of membership. When he became ill, the members of the club were so supportive and helpful for me. They were very good friends before and they have remained wonderful friends to me. They have been like family. It is a miracle how a vehicle can pull people together (Kim, interview, August 3, 2015).

Notice how she states the car "pulls people together." This statement directly addresses my research question, *how does the sacred meaning of the Corvette facilitate the*

development of social capital among brand consumers? Individuals' emotional ties to the car help to facilitate similar emotional ties to others. Passion for the Corvette is a starting point for the friendship.

Another Corvette owner from Illinois who describes the social bond that developed for him and his wife:

> I have been in the club now since '92 and have made some real good relationships. We get along with everybody good, and there was a period there where there was four of us couples who went on vacation together for about ten years. Some retired and moved to Florida. We are still friends with a couple who moved to South Carolina. We go down there in the wintertime for a while to visit them and in the summertime when its hotter in them places, they come up here and mooch off of me. It works good (Doug, interview, August 21, 2015).

Doug's description shows the reciprocity of close, personal friendships that extend even beyond the life of one's membership in the local Corvette community. There is an assumption that paying club dues does not a member make, it's the imagined sense of community that is immaterial to building strong relationships.

While thick trust social ties were evident as requiring emotional commitments through one's primary group, thin trust is described by Putnam (2000:136) as even more useful "because it extends beyond the radius of trust beyond the roster of people whom we can know personally." The social benefits of this larger web of group affiliations include access to resources and support that may not be found within the exclusivity of the "thick trust" relationships. Simmel (1955:125) describes the individual who belongs to many groups as "standing at the intersection of social circles." He characterizes secondary groups as bearing rationale, determined by a purpose, with affairs revolving around intellectually articulated interests (Simmel 1955). Meeting another's needs in a

time where thick trust relationships seem to be absent, can help fill the gaps that occur in everyday life situations. Jerry illustrates how associational ties in the Corvette club can be very helpful:

> There are a lot of good people in the hobby and its just enjoyable. We had our house painted and one of the members said, 'You can stay with us. You don't have to go to a hotel. You can stay here while your house is being painted for a couple days.'So I think they are very outgoing and want to help people (Jerry, interview, November 3, 2016).

As stated previously, the passion for the car creates mutual understanding where members offer support to one another. Other examples from the field include a story of a 9/11 rescue attempt. A Corvette museum employee was in New York on 9/11 and during that time received a call from a club member who was over 700 miles away. She recalls: "To this day, I don't know how he got my phone number but he asked if I was okay and said, 'I will come and get you or you can come here and stay and we will get you home" (Stephanie, interview, August 12, 2015). A concern for fellow members whom one knows only by association of the community is similar to the brotherhood of fraternal and sorority organizations where taking care of each other is a priority in order to preserve the group as a whole. This is what Muniz and O'Guinn (2003) classified as the "moral responsibility" component that is integral to the brand community. Caring for others is seen as extension of caring for one's self.

An example of how beneficial these "weak ties" within the community can be for even increasing life chances was given by a Corvette club member in Tennessee. Dan recalls:

> My wife was hospitalized two years ago. She had a perforated colon, kind of a dangerous thing. We were in the emergency room and here comes a gal that

> looked familiar. She had been in the Corvette club here. She's a head nurse, and she recognized me. She was getting off work around 8pm and we were still in the Emergency room, hadn't been admitted. Well, she went around and 'greased the skids' and got us admitted early, made sure people paid attention to us, and said she would be checking on them in the morning since she was a supervisor. And that really paid off. I wasn't close with her in the club, I knew her but could barely remember her first name. She came by the next day and checked on us and it really made a difference during this rough time (Dan, interview, July 25, 2016).

When speaking to club members who gave examples of "thin trust," there seemed to be an expectation of reciprocity between members. One member quoted the Bible commandment, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" to describe how many members look out for one another with a sense of moral responsibility. Bellah et al. (2008:179) describe the imperative of "love thy neighbor" as metropolitan American thinking that "considers this responsibility fulfilled when they love those compatible neighbors they have surrounded themselves with- fellow members of their own lifestyle enclave." While the energy of members is directed toward communion with other members, social trust increases. Putnam (2000:126) found that "social trust in this sense is strongly associated with many other forms of civic engagement and social capital. People who trust their fellow citizens volunteer more often, contribute more to charity, and participate more in community organizations." This pivot from the social capital of personal relationships to broader, civic relationships is the focus of the next section.

Civic Engagement

In their research on American community life, Bellah, et al. (2008:168) ask the question, "How are self-interest motives transformed into public commitments?" I found this question to be relevant to the Corvette brand community as a majority of clubs

participate in some form of philanthropic work geared toward benefitting local groups in their community. This section will address my hypothesis, H4: *Membership in Corvette communities leads to high levels of civic engagement.* While the Corvette owners expressed multiple ways that social capital is earned through personal relationships that benefit them individually, they also illustrated how social capital has externalities that affect the wider community. In other words, there is not only a benefit from private, well connected individuals, but also a public benefit that comes from these individuals being involved in their community.

The building of social trust was found to be an asset to members of the Corvette community and may account for their involvement in philanthropic work. Uslaner (1998) finds that the more people congregate with others, the more likely they are to develop a sense of community and are willing to engage in collective action beyond the confines of their groups and neighborhood. Brehm and Rahn (1997) find that people who trust others are more likely to belong to social groups, volunteer, vote, and give larger shares to charity. I found the philanthropic focus of Corvette clubs to be a foundational principle embedded into the structural organization of the club.

The terms charity and philanthropy have different connotations throughout academic research as well as among different social classes of society. Wright (2001:400) argues that "In the United States, philanthropy is an act and an increasingly commanding one, while charity is dismissed as a patronizing and somewhat out of date attitude." For the purpose of my research, I invoke the term charity as a term that was used by all Corvette club members interviewed to explain different activities including fundraising

and organizing events for particular populations of people in their community who were perceived to have financial or social needs. A third form of charity I call, "making a difference," was employed through direct personal connections between club members and local community members in order to tackle problems of poverty or inequality. Most interviewees explained that the choice for fundraising projects is decided democratically by club members. The choice of specific organizational contributions reflects the values and social priorities of the members in the club. Having direct autonomy over what organizations to donate to may also be symbolic of the American constitutional framework that includes a belief in limited government. Doug explains how his club in Illinois determines charity projects:

> We have a committee every year that does the research on who in the community needs help the most. The club then votes on the top three or four local organizations we want to donate to- either battered women society or local troops who are overseas (Doug, interview, August 21, 2015).

Clyde explains his Virginia club's process:

> It's voted on by membership. So as long as there's no reason not to donate to a charity and the majority wants to continue a donation that they did last year, they will. This past year we donated to Safe Harbor, which is a child advocacy program locally for at risk children who have been removed from their home for safety and security reasons and the program has tripled in size in the past few years (Clyde, interview, June 3, 2016).

Contemporary research on voluntary organizations finds that "Americans believe in giving to the needs they can directly see, feel, and understand" (Wright 2001:404). It is important for the Corvette clubs to know exactly where their money is going for charitable donations. All of the club members interviewed stated that their club prefers to give on a local level as an investment in their community as opposed to the anonymity of

a national or global organization. According to Kristof and Wu Dunn (2014:24) “charities across the United States employ 13 million people and take in $1.5 trillion in revenues each year.” These charities are not just from donations but from government grants that run programs for the homeless or low-income school children. The charity industry accounts for 10 percent of the national economy (Kristof and Wu Dunn 2014:25). With such a considerable portion of charitable efforts, there is little scrutiny and accountability for how the money benefits the targeted population. Often, a considerable portion goes to benefit the founders.

In today’s society, charity has become an “industry” with overwhelming solicitations for donating at the grocery store check -out line and numerous retail stores and coffee shops. “A wave of social entrepreneurs have built organizations that act as bridges between donors and beneficiaries” (Kristof and Wu Dunn 2014:12). With so much charity abound, it is not without shortcomings. Opportunists have exploited situations where people are vulnerable to giving. According to Forbes magazine (October 5, 2015) “In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the American Red Cross asked the FBI to investigate at least 15 fake websites that were designed to look like legitimate Red Cross appeals for donations.” Such fake charity scams may raise upwards of a million dollars to support professional cyber thieves’ own wallets. With the upsurge in charlatan philanthropy, there’s a good deal of skepticism about charity and where donations end up. However, many still seek to have a substantial impact on the lives of others.

As Corvette clubs autonomously choose the charities they wish to support on a local level, they feel they are able to have a connection to those they are helping. Anna explains:

> We do have a large Ronald McDonald house here but they get national attention. So when we give them a check for $5,000 that's a significant amount of money for us, but it's a drop in the bucket for them. Whereas, when we gave that same check to the Hospice of Chattanooga, that was a big deal for them. And so we are going to be more mindful to pick charities that- I don't want to say appreciate the money more, but the money could make a big difference for them (Anna, interview, July 25, 2016).

The desire to know that their club fundraising has made a difference to people in their own community is aligned with the latest evidence based approach to research that tracks the results of charitable work. This research is part of an emerging social science that measures "how best to make a difference" (Kristoff and Wu Dunn 2014:11). For these individual Corvette clubs, fundraising activity is "an opportunity to give back to the community and do something meaningful" (Anna, interview, July 25, 2016). The term "give back" is often used to the point of being cliché. The term implies that one has gotten something that they may feel guilty about and thus need to return it to someone who doesn't have the same. However, I suggest here that for club members, giving back is an activity that injects meaning into the collective group, similar to the moral responsibility component of brand community structures (Muniz and O'Guinn 2003). Kim describes the mission of her South Carolina Corvette club:

> I think that most all of us in the club feel very blessed with what we have and want to give back to the community. It's a part of when you look at the purpose of our club, the mission statement is 'supporting the heritage of the American sports car and providing support to our communities (Kim, interview, August 3, 2015).

Kim's club uses the word 'support' to preserve the heritage of the Corvette, and also to describe their efforts to reach out to the local community. The mission implies reciprocity between club and community where providing support reaffirms the club's purpose and existence. Bellah et al. (2008:175) describes this involvement of small groups as having a primary language of self-interest along with a "second language of social commitment." Hence, our desire to participate in civic activity in broader terms begins with building satisfying and stable relationships in our own personal lives first. If one does not have self-fulfillment, then the motive for membership in social groups is at risk of becoming completely self-serving, egocentric, and a "what I can get out of it" approach to involvement. One interviewee describes the altruism of the clubs:

> It's back to the whole character of the individuals that are Corvette enthusiasts. And it's not always just taking, it's giving back. And whether it's planning a cruise to a local children's hospital to give sick children rides in Corvettes or stuff like that. It's a car that let's them be something other than themselves (Wendell, interview, August 12, 2015).

This narrative expresses the link between the Corvette and the American dream idealism that was discussed in Chapter six. The car not only symbolically represents the American dream to owners, this myth is shared with non-Corvette owners through offering a ride in the sports car.

During my field observations, I encountered a rather large Corvette charity project that was committed to stamping out cancer. The project was a joint effort of several Corvette clubs, private donors, and the Corvette plant workers. The car was imprinted with the logo in memorial of a lady who passed away from cancer at age 54 (see figure below). Participants at the Corvettes at Carlisle convention were offered the opportunity

to donate to cancer in exchange for writing a personal signature on the engine of this Corvette decorated for the cause.

Figure 13 Corvette Club Charity Project for Cancer

Figure 14 Donor Signatures on Corvette Engine

This example illustrates the personification of the Corvette as a charity worker. While human signatures mark the engine of the car, the Corvette is seen as the instrument that makes the fundraising efforts possible. The car (after all) is what brought all of these people together uniting for this cause.

A number of similar fundraising projects are organized among hundreds of Corvette clubs across the nation that donate to veterans. Gary describes this annual project at the National Corvette Museum:

> Vettes for Vets, that's become a big show here. A lot of veterans come. We do the Veterans day parade in the Corvettes. It touches your heart. And we do a lot of Wounded Warriors stuff here at the museum, so we bring a lot of Wounded Warriors in. We give them rides in Corvettes. Some of them have never been in a Corvette in their life. So that's a great weekend (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015).

The form of charity Gary describes here is distinctively different from monetary donations to an organization where no contact with the recipients is ever made. Charitable activities like "Vettes for Vets" are social activities where the donors deliver more than financial benevolence to others, they offer transcendent experiences that fulfill the recipients on an emotional level. Simultaneously, the involvement is providing meaning and purpose for the Corvette club members who wish to connect to a cause larger than themselves. Their own success and achievements have left them self-satisfied and with enough emotional energy (and resources) to seek a purpose that utilizes these assets for bettering the lives of others. This giving spirit and mission should not be misconstrued with altruism. Altruism has been generally defined as self-sacrificing or "a behavior that benefits others at a personal cost to the behaving individual" (Kerr,

Godfrey-Smith, and Feldman 2003). According to some psychologists, altruism is often considered egocentric, paternalistic, and sentimental foolishness (Khalil 2004). The Corvette owners' contributions to the extended community do not constitute self-sacrifice but instead provide an opportunity for the club members as citizens to develop the skills of self-government and learning to serve others- not just themselves (Etzioni 1995).

Now that I have discussed charity work in the form of fundraising and organizing, let us look at a few examples of the third form found within the Corvette brand community, employing direct personal involvement in tackling poverty or inequalities in communities. I call this form of charity "making a difference." The interviewees that spoke about their direct, personal involvement with touching the lives of others in the community described these efforts in spiritually and emotionally rewarding terms. For club members, their passion for the Corvette seemed to be enhanced through these acts of charity and also served as a tool for bringing positive change in the lives of others. In other words, the car as object took on human qualities as a powerful donor to these philanthropic pursuits. Marsha describes her direct involvement with community safety through her Corvette club in Northern Virginia:

> The stuff that I am proudest of that the club does are the teen driving schools. I think they have a substantial impact on these kids. Both of my kids went through it and their friends go through it. I don't know the current statistics, but I know for the first few years the track record was—none of the kids had accidents after our course. None. We had a 100% success rate. Clean driving record. Good! (Marsha, interview, March 9, 2016).

Knowing the results of a volunteer project that educates teens in the community provides members like Marsha with the reassurance that they are "making a difference." This example shows that experienced drivers of the Corvette care about safety for themselves

as drivers, and for young people on the road and that charity does not always come in monetary form.

A Corvette club member in Houston expressed his club's charity work as "really gratifying." The ritual practice of caravanning on long trips (recall discussion on this activity from chapter four) was used to directly connect with inner-city youth. Clayton describes the organized venture:

> We put together 100 cars for the Martin Luther King parade down here in Houston one time. I was leading the line and this kid about 8 years old or so said, "ooh look at all those Corvettes, did y'all rent those?" And I said "No son, I went to college, I got a degree. You go to college, you get a degree, and buy yourself a Corvette and a house for your Mama." And his Mama just fell out laughing. Not everybody sees the bigger picture, this kid was 8 years old and he didn't believe people of color could afford Corvettes (Clayton, interview, September 16, 2015).

With this example, the car once again symbolizes the American Dream of working hard to achieve material success. The Corvette as a status symbol speaks to this young African American boy through the driver behind the wheel and becomes a powerful image of what is possible. The benefit to young people in this community cannot be quantified through such a brief encounter, but it suggests that in a broader sense the activities that this club pursues have a purpose to reach those who are socially marginalized. Ironically, the car as a mobile vehicle symbolizes social mobility. In this same club, a long-term charity project was described that donates to a local organization known as "No More Victims." This program is for children of incarcerated parents who reside in a shelter. Clayton explains the Corvette club's work in contributing to this program:

> The majority of these kids are black and Hispanic and they don't have anything. They are being raped by family members, they are being put out, and we go over there to provide food, clothing, and shelter. If they can't pay the light bill, we

> keep the lights on. When they graduate from high school we have a special event where we pick the child up in a Corvette and take them to the graduation exercises. And when those kids get up and talk, there is not a dry eye in the house. They are so appreciative of what we are doing for them and what the lady at the shelter is doing for them. That kind of warmth in your heart, you can't hardly find anywhere, I mean it's better than church (Clayton, interview, September 16, 2015).

This narrative illustrates the reciprocity in charity work. The joy and fulfillment felt by the Corvette owner parallels with the gratitude expressed by the vulnerable population his club is supporting. The long term investment in this charity project exemplifies the form of "making a difference." In a broader sense, the civic engagement of the Corvette club extends the benefits of helping these young people so that the entire local community will be more prosperous. Citizen acts of kindness are directly addressing inequalities in order to construct future citizens to participate in the community. The club president ended his story by stating that as of today, the club is awaiting the first of these youngsters to graduate college, at which time the club intends to donate money to assist him or her in the purchase of their first Corvette. With this mission, the club not only contributes to the realization of the American Dream, but also secures the future of the brand community by creating new enthusiasts. Reciprocity once again.

Another compelling example of Corvette owners touching lives came from Karen, the founder of Vettes to Vets charity that donates to a veterans hospital in Bedford, Massachusetts. Hundreds of Corvette owners from around the country participate in this event and Karen told me directly, "I know personally that we are making a difference." This charity project won the fundraising category of the national HAVE award (sponsored by the American Hospital Association). Over the past twelve years, the project has raised

over $400,000 in monetary and non-monetary items for this VA hospital, which includes both a homeless veterans and psychiatric ward. With humility, Karen explains "I don't want to say I run this organization, I am involved in it" (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016). In collaboration with the volunteer services at the hospital, this annual event includes dozens of Corvette owners who volunteer their time and talents to orchestrate this event that now spans an entire weekend to raise money for the veterans. Karen explains:

> One hundred percent of the proceeds go to the general patient fund. So it doesn't turn the lights on, it doesn't pay a salary, because we oversee where the money goes. Someone wanted to pay to have the delivery van painted and I said no. Painting the van doesn't benefit the patients. So we are pretty good about keeping the focus (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016).

Relationships formed with nurses and staff at the hospital ensure that the items for patients (socks, toiletries, gas cards, grocery cards) are given directly to the patients when there is an immediate need. The donations also help to maintain the hospice wing and the computer training center for veterans.

Learning about the Vettes to Vets program is relevant to the ongoing medical care crisis among US veterans' population. Misappropriated government funds, incompetent hospital supervisors, long waits for doctors, and growing suicide rates are but a few reasons that explain the growing mistrust of government's ability to manage veterans' affairs (Shear and Phillips 2015). The philanthropic efforts of programs like this one organized by local Corvette clubs illustrate the strength of the statement, "charity begins at home." This example shows that a grassroots project where local members address the needs of those in their own community can fill gaps that large government bureaucracy often cannot. The difference in these two entities (government versus voluntary group) effectiveness in

addressing problems is the emotional investment in the populations they serve. Karen describes the personal commitment of volunteers involved:

> It's really pretty wonderful. But every single person involved in this, their whole heart and soul is in it. The way that we have promoted the event is that this is YOUR event, not mine so whatever you want to do to be a part of it, bring other people and that's how it's gotten so big (Karen, interview, July 20, 2016).

Another key ingredient to the success of this grassroots organization is the opportunity for identity construction through service. What is expressed in this narrative is the feeling of ownership that volunteers have through their involvement in the project that they are in fact "making a difference." Identity is constructed through this service, just as it is constructed through ownership of the car. The three examples of this type of charity took a look at some very different needs based on the different communities and regions of the country (Virginia, Texas, and Massachusetts) they serve. These charity projects not only reflect the varying populations within these regions, it also reflects local Corvette club members' distinct social priorities and values that are in tune with what their community needs.

Conclusion

This chapter has revealed how the Corvette as a consumer object not only shapes the identity of the individual, but also forms a lifestyle enclave. This lifestyle expands beyond the private self into the public self through personal relationships with others who share the same passion. Within the context of the brand community, this consciousness of kind bonds the members together in the form of friendship, social support networks, and leisure activities.

The nature of these personal relationships often surpass the limited nature of friendships and develop into a sense of family that deepens the bond to each other, and to the car. Throughout the formation of these various forms of social capital, the car exists as a central character within the lifestyle.

The satisfaction achieved through group membership primarily motivated by self-interest evolves into a community atmosphere that reaches outward selflessly, expanding itself to public causes through optimism and trust. These members give because they are optimistic that the future can be better than it is today. They are also looking for meaning and purpose beyond the material gains they have achieved and celebrated. They are looking to create a legacy that is realized through the impact they leave on other fellow citizens around them.

The reciprocity that occurs as a result of the brand community's civic engagement has broad implications for enhancing well-being of individuals and local communities. Over the past few decades, a growing amount of evidence has shown that social behavior (including helping others) improves our mental and physical health and extends life expectancy (Kristoff and Wu Dunn 2014). While the US charity industry proliferates, the jury is still out on the evidence to quantify just how effective these ventures are in changing lives and addressing inequalities. For the Corvette community, members continue to give freely and voluntarily of their time and resources with a substantial amount of satisfaction that they are improving their communities, keeping them safer, and changing lives with many small acts of generosity that add up to a lot in the end. This

mission helps to sustain the brand community's purpose and ultimately, exalts the Corvette as the reason why it is all possible.

CONCLUSION: "SAVE THE WAVE"

It has been a tremendous social experience-it doesn't involve drinking, it doesn't involve being prejudiced. We are very charitable, we can help people and put on events that raise money and people are willing to come and show off their cars and let others enjoy them. We are doing good work and buying something that is made in America, so it's the patriotism and the social aspect all rolled into one and who would have expected all this when you went out and bought your first Corvette? (Diane, interview, August 6, 2015)

This narrative summarizes the personal and social enrichment the Corvette lifestyle has to offer (often unexpectedly) upon consumption. For many of the Corvette owners interviewed in this dissertation, owning a Corvette and belonging to a Corvette club have been the peak experience in a life lived by "coloring inside the lines." By this I mean a provincial life lived with the utmost conventionality, delayed gratification, self-restraint, fiscal practicality, and moral responsibility to family and community. The reward for this lifestyle is the self –purchase of the classic American sports car that is symbolically representative of the American Dream. Yet it is not only conventionality that defines these car owners, it is their social location and generation that has shaped their involvement in this lifestyle enclave. While the bulk of cases of Corvette owners in this study are Baby Boomers, further study of newcomers to the Corvette lifestyle may reveal a difference in value and meaning they bring to the community.

Talkin 'Bout My Generation

Sociologist Karl Mannheim argued that socialization was in large part based on the generation into which one is born. The Baby Boomers came of age during a booming consumer society where the incentive to buy happiness was ubiquitous via media advertising and youth culture. During this time, leisure was becoming a primary

institution that met the social needs of people, made possible by an expanding middle class and the opportunities afforded to those in the middle class. This heightened importance of leisure signaled changes in labor and consumer markets. Previously, identity was determined largely through work and family ties, now status could be determined through pursuit of hobbies, recreation, and consumer objects.

Mid-twentieth century consumer society thrived in a prosperous economy defined by manufacturing in large part due to GM, Ford, and Chrysler. The economy and its wealth of labor opportunities created what Chernin (2009:161) labels; "blue-collar aristocrats." According to Chernin (2009:161); these are people who during the 1950s and early 1960s "had not gone to college but with hard work were able to earn decent wages-not enough to make them rich but enough to buy a home, perhaps with help from a Veterans Administration loan, and to marry, have children, and buy a car and the latest home appliances." Chernin is describing the parents of many of these Corvette owners who socialized their children in a time of optimism about America's future and its possibilities gained through personal achievement. These appropriated memories (a term coined by Mannheim) formed the early value schema of Corvette owners that shaped their pathway to consumption of the Corvette.

While the Boomers are more educated than their parents, their education usually came after being drafted into military service or serving voluntarily. The stability of their work life is quite possibly a factor in the stable marriages of these Corvette owners (recall the marriage rate of 76.2% among Corvette owners surveyed and just an 11% divorce rate). These two primary institutions, work and family prove integral to the security of the

lives of these Corvette consumers. In her book, *Tumbleweed Society*, Allison Pugh explores the decline of work security over the last fifty years. Pugh (2015:198) argues that those who are stably employed are strikingly different from those who have contingent and unstable employment. “They may have heard about rising insecurity for other people, but it seems of little relevance to their own lives.” This job security affects the way people anchor themselves in commitments.

While the security of family and work may have insulated many of those I interviewed from the winds of change due to globalization, information technology, and a decline in union membership, they were not untouched by the pluralism of ideas that came with these changes. The idea of community, either imagined or through lived experience slowly dissolved around them as monumental shifts in economic and government institutions occurred. Recall our discussion of government mandated safety regulations on automobiles in the late 1960s and the oil crisis of the 1970s that prompted many muscle car enthusiasts to relent to the purchase of Japanese fuel-efficient vehicles. These events were described as trajectory points by many Corvette owners and in broader context reshaped the landscape for cars from leisure vehicles to utilitarian means of transportation. These moments were a backdrop to the life of the Corvette and were significant in both the consumer and producer desire to maintain the car’s existence.

Recall the story of Karen, the founder of the Corvette charity project that has benefitted thousands of veterans. A Corvette community member for over forty years, she states the success of the car is due to “the consumer and the producer listening to each other and feeding off of each other for over sixty years” (Karen, interview, July 20,

2016). The strength of this market relationship has also been shaped by successful advertising that continues to touch a consumer population through emotional evocativeness. Advertising helped to construct the Corvette myth over time as "The All - American Sports Car," "The Heartbeat of America," and "Chevrolet, Baseball, and Apple Pie." Embedded into American car culture, the ads stand the test of time and have resonated in the minds and hearts of brand loyalists. The Corvette myth was also found to resonate among non-Corvette owners with a significant percentage describing the Corvette with terminology like "American" and "Americana." This finding suggests the cultural significance of the car is recognized by larger consumer society outside of the brand community.

Throughout this dissertation, I have evaluated a community of people who form strong social ties to each other through a shared passion for the Corvette. The self-interests of friendship and leisure activity that motivate owners to join Corvette clubs are practiced collectively through membership. This membership helps to produce attachments to others and creates a sense of community that expands beyond the confines of the car club. The social life and philanthropic work of Corvette clubs in various regions of the U.S. reveals well organized activities that promote trust and systems of support that can touch both the personal lives of car enthusiasts and local communities through monetary donations and volunteering of time and resources to others. In broader context, club membership facilitates members' involvement in the public sphere and that participation is central to civil society, which is foundational to democracy.

Recall the story told by Dan about his sick wife who received special care in the hospital through the "weak ties" of a fellow Corvette club member. Recall also Clayton's story of his Corvette club's philanthropic work with the "No More Victims" project that helps to keep at risk youth housed and secure on the path to graduate high school. These examples and many others demonstrate the fulfillment of a human need for community. The close proximity between club members and the recipients of their philanthropic work is facilitated by the social class of members, another variable found to be significant in defining this brand community. The class range of "blue collar artistocrats" to upper middle class suggests they are not insulated from the everyday goings on in the local community. Their philanthropic efforts are grassroots and a stark contrast to the elite social class whose fundraising and philanthropy galas are often far removed from the people they serve. The brand community (itself a grassroots group) fosters social connections among club members, Corvette employees, and local communities- all of which are considered part of the "Corvette family." All of these relationships are made possible through shared meaning of the car as a sacred object.

Immortalizing the Corvette

In conducting my research, I set out to answer the question, *How does the sacred meaning assigned to the Corvette by Corvette club members facilitate a willingness to participate in community?* Exploration of this car community found the Corvette is a sacred object in the lives of those who consume it. Holt (1995) describes this social involvement of consuming as both integration and play. Integrating practices include two elements; practices that integrate consumption objects into one's identity as an extension

of self (Belk 1988), and in a reverse manner, consumers reorient their self-concept so that it aligns with an institutionally defined identity (Zerubavel 1991; Solomon 1983). Through my research, I found the Corvette to be both an object of individual identity and also an object that orients people toward the larger social structure of the brand community. Consuming as play (Holt 1995:9) involves "directly engaging consumption objects as resources to interact with fellow consumers." The types of playing include communing, or sharing how they are experiencing the consumer object with each other and socializing with others that takes on a more performative role as consumers exchange stories or experiences with the object and often try to outdo one another (Holt 1995). The play aspect of the Corvette was illustrated through leisure activities of the car rally, parades, auto-cross events, and even drag racing stories that were relayed in this research project. All activities reconstitute the sacredness of the car for its members, transforming it from a mundane consumer object to one that the consumer forms a relationship with.

Chapter five described the sacred value of the Corvette and its associations with nostalgic sentiments felt by many owners through experiences of driving the car on historic Route 66 and through America's National Parks and landmarks. The drive was expressed in terms that were temporarily transcendent of reality while also illustrating the primary significance of leisure travel as a form of escape from today's hyper-frenetic society. Through the personal meaning found through consumption of the Corvette, a new form of social involvement is revealed in relationships and leisure that are transferred and activated into connections of civic engagement. A major facilitator of

civic engagement for the Corvette community has been through the development of the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

National Corvette Museum

According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), the United States is moving away from a service based economy to an experience based economy. In their case study of the World of Coca Cola brand museum, Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan (2008) find that brand museums have three key features that distinguish them from other themed retail environments: historical linkages, museum-like qualities (exhibits, paid admission), and an education-based mission. "By positioning the brand within American history, the brand museum experience is perceived as meaningful, rather than commercialized" (Hollenbeck et al. 2008:342). Like the World of Coca Cola museum, nostalgia and cultural history of the Corvette build authenticity, enhance the brand's meaning and builds brand centered bonds among consumers.

To understand the depth of meaning for the Corvette family, one must know the purpose of The National Corvette Museum (NCM). NCM was conceived, designed, and implemented by Corvette enthusiasts nationwide through donations and volunteer efforts and is the only non-profit museum dedicated to a single automotive model in the United States. The museum is an archive for historical and technical resources to "promote the traditions of the Corvette for generations to enjoy." The concept for the museum was born ten years before its doors opened in 1994 with a vision from members of the National Corvette Restoration Society who wanted to preserve all things Corvette. Through grass roots efforts, car club members nationwide began to criss-cross ideas for

how to make this dream of a museum happen. While Chevrolet helped with promotion of the museum concept, the corporation did not provide financial investment for the Corvette museum. Through grassroots efforts, private donations of time and money from various clubs were given and a fund drive from union workers at the Corvette assembly plant volunteered for automatic pay check deductions to contribute to museum funds. The voluntary donations of union workers to the museum are quite meaningful as they serve to bring purpose behind a facility job that could otherwise feel deadening. The contributions are a way to craft significance and assign meaning to the end product.

In September of 1994, the Corvette Museum opened its doors for the first time. The "Godfather of Corvette," Zora Arkos-Duntov was there to commemorate the event. Two years later upon his death, his ashes were entombed at the museum. Within his obituary was written, "If you do not mourn his passing, you are not a good American." ("Zora_Arkus-Duntov"). Not only Duntov's memory, but the Corvette legends who are inducted into the National Corvette Museum Hall of Fame every year are permanent historical figures in the life of the car. Recall the creator of the C5, Russ McLean, a rebel like Duntov who put his job on the line, working under the radar while being told by General Motors to "kill the car." From engineers, designers, plant workers, to loyal fans, this car has a community that are committed to maintaining the Corvette's legacy. The existence of the museum helps to secure the legacy of the car and allows an opportunity for the loyal consumers to be involved in preserving the car's iconic status. The museum provides a narrative about the car, that others can stand behind.

Wendell, director of the NCM states the tag line that is used by the staff to their members, “We are your museum” (Wendell, interview, August 12, 2015). The museum survives by way of membership and when asked how the museum administration approaches this task, Wendell explains:

> Serve. You’ve got to be willing to serve other people. If you can’t see yourself doing that, then you are working in the wrong place. It all comes back to the culture we think we have here- it’s about our guests. It’s about our visitors. Treat them like family, treat them like you want to be treated. Common sense and the Golden Rule still go a long way in this life (Wendell, interview, August 12, 2015).

Wendell’s approach to management of the museum echoes the value schema that was explored through the personal histories and narratives of many Corvette owners in my research. As discussed in Chapter five, the ethos that anchors Corvette owners to themselves and to the community was in part formed through membership in Boy Scouts whose mission is to “serve others.” Similarly, the Girl Scouts mission of “building character to make the world a better place” also promotes service to others as its sounding bell. This moral responsibility to others was expressed by many interviewees who incorporated biblical principles into their daily way of living. Mike, a Corvette club member in Tennessee spoke about the companionship he feels toward other Corvette club members by quoting one of the Ten Commandments, “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Referring back to Putnam’s (2000) *Bowling Alone*, he described the steady decline of religious participation in the U.S. over the last sixty years, marking another dissolution of community ties. I suggest here that the values practiced within organized religious affiliations may be enacted in voluntary memberships like the National Corvette Museum. The commitments to others, the volunteer nature of the museum, and the ultimate

protection of the Corvette as a sacred object all mimic the composition of religious congregations. Durkheim's classic work, *Elementary Forms* described the church as an integral component of religion in which the individuals who compose it feel themselves united to each other by the simple fact that they have a common faith (Jones 1986). In modern society, I suggest this common faith is sometimes found in the "congregation" of the brand community.

Today, the National Corvette Museum's mission statement includes; to "Preserve the legendary past, present, and future of America's first sports car through exhibitions and events." Contributions from individuals, clubs, and foundations keep the museum and its events alive. Production history of the car and pitfalls along the way are recorded through exhibits that capture the journey of this unique sports car from 1953 to the present. Like a time capsule, over eighty Corvettes are staged in period settings to mark different generations of the car. The cars are donated by private owners, or loaned to the museum for an extended period so they themselves can be a part of this car's history. A few enthusiasts have willed as many as eight to ten different Corvettes they owned to the museum thus immortalizing themselves as a piece of Corvette history within the walls of this time capsule. Members can purchase a brick in dedication of a special person, anniversary, or group that becomes part of the museum structure. This purchase seals a Corvette enthusiast into the very foundation of this heritage museum and reflects a desire to preserve themselves as part of this legacy.

The director of membership for the museum describes members as: "People who see the value of having the history of the car and the lifestyle protected. They feel the

passion for the museum, the car, and the people and want to see it continue through the generations" (Stephanie, interview, August 15, 2015). I will add to this statement by saying that the altruistic intentions of preserving the car for future generations is part of the commitment, but there is also a large element of identity construction and self-interest this commitment serves as well. Finding meaning in personal life comes in many forms including contributions made to the work place, family, and church. These contributions are often ephemeral and anonymous. While there is anonymity with contributions made to the Corvette Museum, the potential impact of one's involvement may reach thousands of people worldwide. The magnitude of this opportunity to "make one's mark" on such an iconic, American treasure may be self -gratifying in ways that their contributions in other institutions is not.

Like the social clubs of the Corvette community, the members of the museum want to engage in experiences with the museum and each other through annual charity events and reunions with club members all over the world. Recently, a new motorsports park was built on the property that expands activities to experience with the car. This reinvestment of donations into the museum is described by the director of membership services:

> They see the goal, the expansion of the museum. They donated for that, the land for the motorsports park so they see the value, they see the true non-profit side of us (museum) that we are taking the revenue and improving, enhancing, and growing. It's very obvious through what we have done in the past twenty years (Stephanie, interview, August 15, 2015).

As members are able to see the results of their donations and volunteer efforts, a strong sense of ownership of the museum arises. The National Corvette Museum is not a place you go to sightsee, it is a place that you are a part of.

Many new members arrive by way of purchasing their first new Corvette that can be delivered to the museum. When this shiny new car arrives from either the assembly plant or a dealership, the owner is greeted by all museum staff and volunteers who gather around to "welcome them to the family." Symbolically, the American dream is delivered at the holiest of places for lovers of the car and is an experience that conjoins the new owner as a part of museum history.

In 2014, a tragic sinkhole incident inside the museum swallowed eight Corvettes in the showroom. Following the incident, membership increased and the museum drew a record number of visitors and continues to have record attendees since the damaged cars have been made part of the permanent display. Small jars of sinkhole dirt are sold at the museum gift shop for $10 each. To outsiders, the sale of this dirt is "cultish" but for enthusiasts, the sinkhole is now a piece of Corvette history that connects people to the events associated with the car's history. Three out of the eight cars have been restored and five are displayed in their damaged condition. The history of each of these eight Corvettes has provided more intrigue to fans, including the recent restoration that is underway of the 1962 black Corvette worth $60,000. This '62 was owned by a man who saved up enough money to buy it in high school and owned it for fifty years (Schreiner 2017). The personal story behind each Corvette is significant as it marks the lives of people as individual pieces of this automobile's history.

Save the Wave

The most recent Corvette advertisement I observed on a billboard alongside Interstate 95 promotes the new 2017 Stingray, "The Shapliest Sixty Year- Old You Will

Ever See." This ad targets the aging Corvette owner who comprises the largest demographic in this brand community. The greying of the Corvette community was a grave concern for most of the car enthusiasts I met. During the 2016 NCRS convention, I spoke with Roy, a 62 year- old owner of a 1960 Corvette. He summed up the current population of Corvette owners:

> Look around the room, some of the youngest guys here are in their sixties. I look around and it makes me sad. Within 10 years, half of them will be gone. When these members die this organization will die too. The NCRS has tried to recruit younger members, but have not been successful. The NCRS opened up the judging to include younger generations of Vettes including C4s, but it only attracted more old guys with money, not younger owners. The number one obstacle is affordability. The younger ones don't have the money, and most of them aren't even interested in the car anymore. A lot of these guys' kids don't even care about inheriting a valuable Corvette, they'd rather sell it and get the money. It makes me sad (Roy, interview, July 19, 2015).

Roy hints at a generational shift in the emotional experience of cars. The lack of affordability is a big roadblock to younger people consuming new Corvettes, but the aspirations for owning a car have been replaced also. According to Mark Lizewskie, executive director of the Antique Automobile Club of America Museum, "much of the emotional meaning of the car, especially to young adults, has transferred to the smartphone" (Fisher 2015). The millennial generation that often has willing parents to taxi them to school or work has little incentive to own a car or even get a license. According to the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, "the percentage of 19-year-olds with driver's licenses has dropped from 87 percent two decades ago to 70 percent two years ago" (Fisher 2015). In a growing urban society, walking to the Metro is preferred over getting a driver's license. These preferences are also shaped by larger institutional

efforts to clean the environment and encourage public (shared) transportation. Dick, a Corvette owner in California states:

> We need to do something about it, to get younger folks involved in not only the Corvette, the automotive sport. A lot of kids are taught in school that "Oh cars are bad." Bad? That is a terrible delusion. Let's face it, kids can't afford a new Corvette, but what about an affordable older model? The clubs need to do more to attract and include younger people- let them organize the rallies and see how much fun it can be. They meet new people and can keep the community going (Dick, interview, August 7, 2016).

In spite of the focus on the Baby Boomer generation of Corvette owners, the consumer market will be in need of younger Corvette enthusiasts to ensure that the life of the car continues. The National Council of Corvette Clubs initiated a grassroots foundation during the 1990s to foster a younger generation of Corvette owners. The organization is called Future Corvette Owners Association and is for young Corvette enthusiasts under age 16 FCOA. "Members are the foundation of NCCC's future and hopefully FCOA members will go on to be active NCCC members when they turn 16" (National Council of Corvette Clubs 2017). The foundation provides annual scholarships for college to young members who are selected. Socializing young people into the Corvette lifestyle seems to have been institutionalized in lieu of the passing down of values and interests that were once transmitted from parent to child.

The young Corvette owners interviewed were aware of their minority status (age wise) while interestingly holding similar value systems to the Boomers. The sentiments of patriotism, nostalgia and values of community, work ethic, and technological performance were expressed by these young people. This finding left me with questions; does membership in the Corvette community create sentiments such as nostalgia and

patriotism among members? Or are consumers who have this ethos drawn to the Corvette? Either way, the car seems to anchor the community members in a way that other aspects of public life do not.

Membership in the Corvette community was found to be not just about the preservation of the car, but an effort to preserve American society, including workers from dissolution and obsolescence. Chapter six explored the rituals of patriotism that are embedded in this community and their efforts to preserve the cultural heritage of America through the pledge of allegiance, flag flying, and honoring service members through ceremonies and fundraising projects. These rituals constitute a contemporary civil religion that helps to unify members of the community. The Corvette family includes consumers, club members, engineers, manufacturers, plant workers, and National Corvette Museum staff who have a vision for American society as a sovereign nation that rejects the outsourcing of labor due to globalization. The Corvette centers the activities, rituals, and mission of these efforts. Gary, public relations director at the museum describes the underlying meaning of Corvette's survival in broader terms:

> Relations with other places aren't the greatest. American people need to work. American people have gone through the recessions and understand we better get jobs back over here and I think we've learned by association. We need jobs. We've got to work, we've got to make a good product. In Kentucky, there are several foreign car companies here but I always say, where does the money finally end up going? Back over there. Yeah, you've got a job, you're working here in America, but the ultimate money goes back over there to wherever (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015).

The concern with workers and American made products is a pragmatic vision the Corvette community has for the nation's future. These ideals are rooted in nostalgia for the original success and prosperity that the car company created for many Americans

over the last century. The vision is also rooted in the early socio-cultural experiences of the owners that molded their attachment to the Corvette.

Given the social nature of Corvette club members, it is difficult to say whether they would find other pathways to form social ties and civic grassroots projects if the brand community was not available. Were they seeking strong relationships to begin with and was the car community a medium with which to satisfy these emotional desires? Based on my observations, interviews, and quantitative data, I propose the Corvette club members have emotional and social needs that they bring to the community. The fulfillment of these relational needs through consumer activity is a collective experience that helps to maintain community and value systems that ground members amid the bewilderment of a rapidly changing, pluralistic society where the future is uncertain for a car that is symbolic of American culture. Members of the brand community want to see the legacy of the car continue even if it is only in spirit. When asked what the future of the Corvette holds, a club member answers: "We've got to keep it going. Even if we stop building the Corvette, this is always going to be history. We've got to keep it going" (Gary, interview, August 12, 2015). The symbolic ritual of the Corvette wave discussed in Chapter Seven is significant in ensuring that the community and lifestyle continue. It is a gesture that acknowledges the community exists and sometimes signals that a fellow Corvette brother or sister will be there to assist if the car or driver is in trouble. The findings of this research suggest that "weak ties" formed through consumption of the car fill gaps where neighborly associations have declined in residential community life. For brand loyalists, the deep meaning of the car fosters relationship building and support

systems that extend beyond regular leisure activities and form connections that are often long lasting and life changing for members of the community. It is important to note that while Corvette owners' social lives are enhanced through consumption of the car, non-owners who are part of mass consumer society contribute to creating the iconic status of the car.

The Corvette image has been deeply embedded into American culture through film, music, art, and literature and is recognized as a cultural icon. In April 2016 when the pop music artist Prince passed away suddenly at age 57, Chevrolet ad agency, Commonwealth/McCann paid tribute to the artist with a full- page newspaper ad of a 1963 split window Corvette. The ad read; "Baby, that was much too fast" 1958-2016 (Nudd 2016). The line is a quote from Prince's 1982 first top ten hit, "Little Red Corvette" and is a play on words, signifying the artist's talented life was too short. The ad was so successful that it ran in nationally syndicated newspapers across the country. Why? It touched people emotionally. The most powerful effect of advertising is to create a good feeling about the product (Dempsey and Mitchell 2010). The emotional evocativeness of the car extends beyond the community of Corvette owners.

In recent years as GM has fought its way back to the top following the 2009 bankruptcy, Corvette as a halo car has helped the giant corporation to remain a competitor in the U.S. marketplace. This "halo" effect is described as redirecting customer attention to the waning U.S. brands of Cadillac, Chevrolet, GMC, and Buick. The reintroduction of the Corvette Stingray in 2014 had a huge impact on GM sales in general. According to inside sources for GM:

> Sales are not the direct goal with any Corvette. Sales came in last year (2012) at just over 14,000. But the car draws major attention and headlines. This in turn draws consumers- the serious and tire kickers alike-into the showroom. They may not leave with the keys to a red hot new V8 Stingray, but the visit could translate into an entry sell with say the Camaro. Perhaps that same buyer will upgrade when their financial circumstances afford them the opportunity. At the very least, it gets people talking about GM, about Chevrolet (Turner 2013).

It is easy to see how the Corvette was shielded from the hits that GM took from the 2009 bankruptcy. The iconic status of the car maintains a strong presence in the marketplace and its halo over the rest of GM products helps to secure consumers across the spectrum of lower, middle, and high- priced vehicles.

At the time of this writing, I frequently drive my Corvette in nice weather to my daughter's elementary school. Often when I pull up, a group of young boys aged eight to eleven are captivated, "oohing" and "awing." "Wow that's a cool car!" they say. This reaction was frequent among many young boys who watched me pull up in parking lots in different models of Corvettes throughout the course of my research. Similarly, grown men (mostly aged fifty and above) seemed to get a mesmerized look in their eye when I mentioned the Corvette, as if they transcended time for a moment. They were taken back to days of their youth when they first saw a Corvette. Inevitably, this gaze turned into a story, a nostalgic memory of how enamored they had been with the Corvette years ago. I relay this experience to emphasize the very gendered nature of Corvette car consumption. While I acknowledge that many women are involved in the Corvette lifestyle today, I never received the same reaction from them about the Corvette as I did with males. The close bond formed with men and cars is quite pronounced, perhaps contributing to the mystique.

The mystique of the Corvette centers on notions of timelessness, and its imaging has the power to make us feel good. The mystique that has been constructed has generated nostalgia for early childhood experiences, classic rock music, and youthful experiences. Through the socio-historical narratives of Corvette owners and classic advertising that stirs patriotic sentiments, a part of modern American culture is revealed. Ultimately, the narratives and meaning assigned to the Corvette are representative of personal mobility and freedom that despite a rapidly changing world, never goes out of style.

APPENDIX A

Holbrook's Nostalgia Proneness Scale

The following statements are about life today and in the past. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the statements by marking the answer that best represents the way that you feel.

1. They don't make 'em like they used to

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Undecided	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)

2. Things used to be better in the good old days

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Undecided	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)

3. Products are getting shoddier and shoddier

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Undecided	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)

4. Technological change will insure a brighter future

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Undecided	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)

5. History involves a steady improvement in human welfare

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Undecided	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)

6. We are experiencing a decline in the quality of life

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Undecided	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)

7. Steady growth in GNP has brought increased human happiness

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Undecided	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)

8. Modem business constantly builds a better tomorrow

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Undecided	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)

APPENDIX B

Qualitative Research Methods: Semi-structured interview questions for Corvette owners

Q1: Nostalgia and Early Experience for Consumer Preference

1.What year of Corvette(s) do you own? Does this year of Corvette have any particular significance for you?
2.Can you tell me where you grew up, what the community was like?
and how you remember spending your free time and weekends as a teenager?
3.What is your earliest memory of a car? What was the one car that was your favorite and why?
4.While growing up, did your father, grandfather, uncle, or other family member have a Corvette?
5. Did you learn how to fix and work on cars when you were growing up? If so, who taught you?
6.Describe the difference between the cars you grew up with and the cars that are around today.
7. Have you been brand loyal to Chevy during your driving lifetime? Explain.
8.Were you involved in any voluntary organizations or associations while growing up?
9.Do you collect any old things like antiques, stamps, coins, records, etc.?
10.Do you like any old music? What kind of music do you prefer?

Q2: Constructing Meaning/Consumption

1.When did you purchase your first Corvette? Describe the experience of buying it for the first time.
2.Why is the Corvette your choice of leisure car? What makes it special as far as automobiles go?
3.How does it make you feel when you drive your Corvette?
4.What message does the Corvette express to people on the road?
5.What do you assume about other Corvette drivers when you see them? What sort of 'profile' constitutes a Corvette driver?
6.What else in your life gives you the same fulfillment as your Corvette?
7. I find that there is a lot of patriotism within the Corvette communities. Why do you think that may be?

8. How important is it for you to buy an American made car? Do you prefer to buy other American made products? If so, why?
9. Have you made other purchases with a comparable (or higher) price tag to the Corvette? What are they?

Q3: Social Capital/Leisure Activity

1. How do you spend your leisure time/ weekends as an adult?
2. If you have children, are they involved with Corvettes in any way?
3. I've noticed that many car enthusiasts share their love of cars with their kids. Can you comment on this?
4. Are you a member of a Corvette club? (if yes, follow up question: what kind of relationships have you built within the club?)
5. How active are you socially with activities surrounding your Corvette? How do you spend most of your weekends as an adult?
6. Do you participate in any other civic clubs or voluntary associations?
7. Do you consider owning your Corvette to be a hobby? What does this hobby include? (finding parts, modifications, fixing parts of the car, etc.)
8. Do you fix or build things other than cars?
9. Are your friends Corvette owners also? Do you hang out with other Corvette owners?
10. If you were not involved with the Corvette as a hobby, what else would you be interested in?
11. Do you see yourself involved with this hobby in the next five years?
12. What is your biggest take away from this hobby?

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire for Sales/Marketing Associates of Corvette Dealerships

Market Segmentation

1. Who are Corvette consumers? How would you describe them? (demographics)
2. How would you describe the lifestyle of the Corvette consumer? (this includes their activities, interests, opinions and leisure)
3. Are there certain values that you think Corvette consumers share? If so, what are they?
4. Is age a factor in the marketing approach to Corvette consumers?
5. What do Corvette consumers need/want in a Corvette? What do they want in terms of the driving experience?
6. Why do people purchase a Corvette for the first time?
7. Why motivates people to buy multiple Corvettes? What about collectors?

Social Capital within the Brand Community

1. After you sell a Corvette do you remain engaged with your customers? If so, in what ways? (after sales service, products, satisfaction surveys, other ways) For how long?
2. Do you know what types of relationships Corvette owners wish to have with their car? With your dealership? With GM?
3. Do you and your employees participate in events with Corvette owners? (local car club events, shows, cruises) as a sponsor or participant? Online chats?
4. Does your dealership do anything to foster personal interaction among Corvette owners? For example, does your dealership offer any social functions for Corvette owners-place to cultivate interests, expand networks and build community?
5. How does the brand community of Corvette owners strengthen the Corvette business? How does this brand community differ from others?

Constructing Meaning of the Corvette

1. What is the meaning of the Corvette brand to you?
2. Do you need a Corvette in order to perform your role? Why or why not?
3. How has Corvette survived in the marketplace for the last sixty-three years?
4. How has the marketing and advertising approach of Chevrolet changed over the years?
5. How is the Corvette consumer changing and how might their needs be different in the future?

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