

# Peeps, Beemers and Scooby-doo: Exploring Community Value amongst Scottish Car Cruisers

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## INTRODUCTION

“Crucially important to the ethnographic imagination of life as art is that we recognize and explore the scope of creativity in the use of commoditized and electronic materials, their profane possibilities as mobilized in concrete contexts.” (Willis, 2005:50).

This paper is inspired by the approach to consumer culture which Willis (2005) sets out to unravel with respect to the forms of creativity expressed through consumption practices. We examine in particular one such context that of the cruiser community who gather together once a month at a site in central Scotland locally referred to as the ‘The Falkirk Wheel’ (see <http://www.thefalkirkwheel.co.uk>). At this car park, of what is must be said is a very imposing canal lock, the ‘Falkirk Cruise’ is performed. Similar gatherings can be witnessed in cities and towns throughout the UK, where cars sporting thousands of pounds worth of modifications are temporarily brought together for the spectacle of what is termed ‘The Cruise’. Despite the significance of such events to those concerned, little is known about them beyond the charged tone of the media coverage which seeks to represent them as troublesome, secretive gatherings of ‘joy riders’ and ‘boy racers’ intent on inflicting their deviant practices on an unsuspecting public (Campbell, 1993; Mulford, 2000; Evening Times 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003). The effect of such media representations, as previously noted by Thornton (1997), is not merely to stigmatize cruising as anti-social, but to construct participants as committed members of a menacing collective expression, the unacceptable face of the ‘reality’ of youthful resistance and irresponsibility.

We argue that this topic is worthy of consumer researchers attention not least in that it gives us a glimpse into a specific instance of consumer culture in the making (c.f. Brownlie, Hewer and Horne, 2005). Moreover if we are to understand consumption as a way of doing and performing community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) then such a context speaks of the bonds of sociality that constitute the collective, enabling us to open up to question what Maffesoli terms ‘the relational component of social life’ (1996: 123). The social bond, or as Cova (1997) describes it, *the link*, is the important mediator here; as are what Peñaloza and Venkatesh (2006) refer to as the agentic practices which are an essential component for the ‘co-creation’ of *meaning and value in exchange and use*. In this sense it speaks of enabling us to rethink notions of tangible and intangible brand assets, especially when the brand is secondary, subverted and an object to be played with to inflect and produce their own meanings (or as they simply prefer ‘debadged’) by way of generating the intangibility of community value. Drawing on the recent work of Lury (2004) we consider brands as simply objects in motion, an interface of connectivity and interactivity, where “The ‘is’ of the brand is also its ‘may-be’; in its being—its objectivity—it has the potential to be otherwise, to become.” (2004:151). This paper then seeks to make an advance by turning our attention back to the significance of social relations for the understanding consumers and culture. But also to demonstrate the

inconsequential role which brands play in negotiations over social value (Dant, 1996); what Bauman in his discussion of culture as *praxis* refers to as the “hard core of actual interaction...the lasting, time-spanning, little-changing, skeleton of the societal practice...the kernels of stability in the husk of floating events.” (1973:106). This viewpoint alerts us to the merit of considering a specific cultural context where people choose to come together to forge what we see as their social and cultural identities through their relationships with their cars and others.

## EXPLORING THE SOCIALNESS OF CARS

Until recently research has highlighted the “dark underside of auto freedom” (Sheller 2004:224) where the motor car has been constructed as a ‘bad object’, as a sign of alienation and the source of environmental, urban and social problems of contemporary society (Miller, 2001; Noble and Baldwin, 2001). The car has been condemned as a machine which could only accelerate the decline of community and the decay of social solidarity, both facilitating and symbolising “the flight into privacy” (Hawkins 1986 cited in Dant and Martin 2001:7). As Urry and Sheller (2003:116) argue, in the car, “the public world beyond the windscreen is an alien other, to be kept at bay through the diverse privatising technologies incorporated within the contemporary car”. Similarly, Edensor (2004) argues that time spent in cars becomes normalised and the road becomes “socially sterile, purified and single purpose” (Sibley 1988 cited in Edensor 2004:110). Roads become in Auge’s (1995) words ‘non-places’; to be contrasted with ‘places’ wherein identities, relationships and a story can be played out. Non-places, on the other hand, effect a certain detachment between the individual and the spaces they negotiate “where solitudes coexist without creating any social bond or even a social emotion” (Auge 1995 cited in Merriman 2004:148). Bull further suggests that we think of the car as an extension to the home in which individuals, “physically cocooned” (Jacobsen, 2000 cited *ibid*), inhabit a “free dwelling” in motion on the road (2001:185). For us this individualised approach is insufficient since it fails to address what Riggins (1994) refers to as the ‘socialness’ of such material objects.

Miller (2001) has contended that the car has become so central and ‘second nature’ that its significance has been overlooked to the detriment of an accurate understanding of the extensive role it plays in people’s lives. He argues that the car has been viewed as the “taken for granted mundane that hides the extraordinary found in this material expression of cultural life” (*ibid*, 2). We concur with Miller’s (2001) call for a rethinking of the car and a consideration of its evident humanity. Indeed, in the ‘Car Cultures’ collection he demonstrates “just how simplistic a concept such as ‘alienation’ appears to be when set against a relationship to cars which is not just contradictory but convoluted in extreme” (2001:2). The car’s humanity, he argues, “lies not just in what people are able to achieve through it, nor yet in its role of destruction, but in the degree to which we see ourselves as human” (*ibid*:2). For us, it is the cars sociality which matters most, for example Dant (1996) sets out to avoid the fetishism of the object through understanding the car as

an inherently social object, a point of connection or 'vector of communion' (Maffesoli, 1996) through which people are able to share their enthusiasms and passions to produce what Maffesoli might refer to as ephemeral, local emotional communities (Maffesoli, 1996). This paper seeks to explore and produce an 'emphatic account of car consumption (Miller, 2001:8) to thereby open up a set of questions around community value and the social construction of such value.

### TURNING TO CAR CULTURES

Within consumer research, studies of bikers (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) to those on goths (Miklas & Arnold, 1999; Goulding, Saren & Follett, 2004), rave cultures (Goulding, Shanker & Elliott, 2002), gay men (Kates, 2002), mountain men (Belk & Costa, 1998), trekkies (Kozinets, 2001) and X-Philers (Kozinets, 1997), have all sought to understand the situated nature of consumption practices, and in doing so have highlighted the value of what might be termed a cultural approach to consumer researchers. Such an approach draws upon the early work of the CCCS (cf Hodkinson, 2002, 2004; Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Gelder & Thornton, 1997; Malbon, 1998; Hall & Jefferson, 1993; Hebdige, 1991; Willis, 1978) offers a useful approach to cultural analysis framed through the notion of subculture. In the case of studying the subculture of skinheads, Clarke writes that "Skinhead style represent(ed) an attempt to recreate, through the 'mob', the traditional working class community as a substitution for the real decline of the latter" (1993:99). He argues that groups of similar minded youths were able to resist the "people on our backs" within their 'community', with solidarity expressed through the symbolic construction of taste and style (1993:99). In this way, the subculture is manifested through a collective response to changes taking place in wider social conditions, organized around style-based allegiances, especially to fashion and music. Early debate around the value of the CCCS notion of subculture centred on the idea of taste and style as articulations of symbolic capital and as the basis for strategies of resistance enacted through the conspicuous consumption of style-inscribed commodities (Clarke et al., 1993).

The work of Schouten and McAlexander (1995) imports a subcultural framework into their ethnographic research among a community of bikers, albeit with little reference to prior ethnographic studies of bikers (Willis, 1978) or the work of the CCCS (for example, Hall & Jefferson 1993; Bennett, Martin, Mercer & Woollacott 1986). They also introduced the term 'subculture of consumption' as a means of characterizing individual and group organizing structures, such as clearly defined hierarchical fields, systems of formal and informal membership, a unique ethos or shared set of beliefs, rituals, jargon and modes of symbolic expression. Although these characteristics, in particular shared rituals and modes of symbolic expression, seem extremely similar to those which mark neo-tribes (Cova, 2002), there are fundamental differences. For instance, a 'subculture of consumption' recognizes that subcultural groupings are defined by clear hierarchical social structures that may identify the status of individual members. Expanding on the work of Fox (1987), Schouten and McAlexander (1995) explain how subcultural groupings can be characterised by a concentric social structure and related consumption practices, signifying three levels of involvement based on commitment to the ideology of the group. 'Hard core' members exhibit a "commitment and ideology that is full time and enduring" (ibid:48). This grouping act as opinion leaders to the 'soft core' members, who demonstrate less commitment and in turn their role is subordinate to and dictated by the 'hard core'. Finally, 'Pretenders' show great interest in the subculture but only "delve superficially" into the ethos serving as

an audience and material support to the hard core and soft core members.

Another distinction between neo-tribes and subcultures as ways of framing cultural collectives relates to formal and informal membership practices. Maffesoli (1996) argues that neo-tribes are distinctive on the basis of their ephemerality, since they do not have any permanent membership other than through the duration of rituals (Maffesoli, 1996). Also it appears possible to belong to more than one neo-tribe through switching allegiances, where one mask is dropped and another is worn (Malbon, 1998). Within a subcultural framing then, identity is theorised as being unified and fixed. Membership is seen to be static, one mask being permanently worn, in that distinct dress codes and a specific stable way of life permeates everyday activities. On the other hand, membership framed through the concept of neo-tribes is represented as being temporary, unstable and shifting, making possible simultaneous membership of several sites, so that the individual can live out a temporary role or identity in one site, before relocating to another to assume a different role or identity. And those roles or identities are not simply class-based. As Maffesoli argues, "in contrast to the 1970s-with its strength such as the Californian counterculture and the European Student Communes-it is less a question of belonging to a gang, a family or a community than of switching from one group to another" (1996:76). Recent research into 'rave cultures' (Bennett, 1999; Goulding, Shanker & Elliott, 2002; Malbon, 1998) has been critical of the relevance of subcultural theory. Bennett maps out some of the objections, namely that it may be inappropriate to utilize "structuralist accounts to explain what are, in effect, examples of consumer autonomy and creativity" (1999:599). For example, it is suggested that subcultural activities may be better understood as expressions of self identity and creative solidarity rather than resistance against domineering forces in what is becoming a progressively classless society (Goulding, Shanker & Elliott, 2002). As a raver in Goulding's research stated "Going to a rave is like going to a massive party where everyone is in the same wavelength. Dancing kind of draws people together, not in any kind of sexual way, it's just like you're sharing something exhilarating, dancing till you nearly drop" (2002:273). Bennett (1999) prefers the notion of a neo-tribe as membership to such groupings is based not on conformity nor exclusivity, but an ambience, a state of mind that binds fellow individuals, even strangers, together into one tribe (Bennett, 1999; Goulding, Shanker & Elliott, 2002; Malbon, 1998). In contrast, Hodkinson (2004) argues for a reworking and clarification of the notion of subculture itself as he suggests that elective groupings such as goths are "less notable for their fluidity than their levels of what might be termed cultural substance" (ibid:141) as expressed through a consistent distinctiveness of values and tastes, a sense of shared identity, but also their practical commitment or immersion in the scene and the relative self-sufficiency of the grouping from mainstream commercial culture. Stahl (2004) in his research on music-making opts for the analytical concept of scene to account for the loose affiliations and 'webs of connectivity' that may define participants' everyday practices.

Turning to studies of car consumption we find that most have tended to adopt the subcultural approach rather than that of the tribal framework. Two cross cultural studies, in particular, have documented the practices of 'Raggare' culture in Sweden (O'Dell, 2001) and the Kortteliralli in Finland (Vaaranen and Wieloch, 2002; Vaaranen, 2004). The latter study revisits the CCCS approach to explain the practices of Finnish street racers as emotion fuelled opposition to their 'bitterly remembered' working class childhood. Resembling other CCCS inspired studies, the existence of the Kortteliralli as a car centred collective was underplayed in favour

of a theorisation of their practices as working class resistance against the bourgeois ways of consumption (Vaaranen, 2004). As Vaaranen and Wieloch (2002:92) argue “the affection felt for the cars unites these boys. Still, even stronger bonds are based on mutual history due to bitterly remembered school years and shared living conditions in the housing projects surrounding Helsinki”. O’Dell’s (2001) study of the Raggare (‘Working class Greasers’) is presented in a similar manner. He argues that working class youth purposely adopted “all but beautiful” American cars of the 1950s as symbols of their resistance to the ‘good taste’ of middle class Swedish culture.

We argue that the value of such studies lies in the attention they draw to the creativity embedded in the everyday (Willis, 2005), most notably through cultural practices and their social potential. For example, while the Raggare became “something of a vulgarity” in the public domain, O’Dell highlights the positive social role of the car for these young people. He argues it is possible to liken the car to a mobile family room, a semi public sphere in which friends congregate and socialise. Furthermore, through acts of bricolage the cars of the Raggare were customised and decorated outlandishly with two-tone paint serving as a forum for self expression for these young people. As he clarifies, “more than just an object, the car is a room in and around which working class youth can develop their own modern identities” (O’Dell 2001:124). Or as Willis suggests: “[consumers]...adopt and make use of capitalist consumption commodities—clothes, drink, cigarettes—not only to resist domination but to make, project and believe in versions of their own worldliness and superiority. They penetrate the shells of fetishized commodities to find new social use values.” (2005:36).

### ON METHOD

In terms a method capable of bringing such creative practices to light, our work is largely inspired by the work of Cova and Cova (2001), who suggest that in order to understand neo-tribes the consumer researcher is “well advised to cast aside the more traditional mono-disciplinary, systematic approaches and to favour practices based on detecting signs, foraging for faint hints and sighting glimmers of shadow” (2001:71). In following this advice data generation employed a multi-method approach combining desk based research, face to face participant observation and online computer mediated communication (Kozinets, 2002).

First, to build an understanding of the jargon, rituals and aesthetic ambience shared by the group, a review of popular discourse was undertaken, involving websites and newspaper coverage. The dedicated fanzines *Max Power* magazine and *Fast and Modified* provided accounts of “key [cruise] events memorialized in words” (Fetterman 1998:92). This material was then coupled with a phase of participant observation, which involved an episodic “deep hanging out” (Wolcott 1999, cited in Elliot & Jankel-Elliot 2003:215) with tribal members over a six month period at a number of specific cruise events across the breadth of Central Scotland. Observations (including the taking of photographs) focused on uncovering the symbols and rituals (Fetterman 1998; Swidler 1986) to attempt to grasp the role of uses and meaningfulness of objects, and their role in the performativity of the ‘social drama’ of social life (Turner, 1982). As Swidler (1986) testifies, to understand culture, researchers must attempt to understand the symbolic vehicles of meaning that comprise it. In particular, she argues that beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, ceremonies, and informal cultural practices (Language and gossip) are the means through which “social processes of sharing modes of behaviour and outlook within a community” takes place (Hannerz, 1969 cited in Swidler, 1986). These methods were then supplemented by recourse to ‘consumer

voices’ (Stern, 1998, cited in Cova & Salle 2003, 10) as a means of accounting for of the lived experiences and everyday practices of cruisers. First, as Elliot and Jankel-Elliot (2003) advise, interviews took the form of impromptu discussions between researcher and informants. Thereafter, web forums provided an invaluable environment in which to probe the lived experiences of Cruisers (Kozinets, 2002). In utilising the web forums, initial questions formed during observations were, in the first instance, posted on the open message board where people could choose whether they wanted to respond or not. In line with the suggestion of Illingworth (2001) this provided an interesting and dynamic environment in which group members could dispute or co-construct meaning. Anyone who responded was subsequently contacted personally and asked whether they would become a research contact. Combined, these strategies formed part of a concerted ethnographic effort to give the group a voice, to in other words explore and understand their everyday practices of meaning-making. It could be argued that a strategy of non-participant observation may indeed serve only to impose an outside interpretation on the activities of a group already objectified in public discourse. It was important, as Kusenbach (2004) reminds us, that we checked whether our ‘savvy’ academic observations were shared by, or meant anything to, any of the respondents. Accordingly, forums and attendance at the cruises provided a less intrusive opportunity to take Cruisers on their own terms and allow them to articulate their own activities.

### “Anti-Social”: A contradiction in terms

Unsurprisingly, in defining their practices respondents sought to distance themselves from the images presented in public discourse. In particular, they rejected three major characterisations. First, the respondents defined themselves in contrast to the ‘boy racer’ or ‘ned’ label that they are frequently subjected to. Accordingly this differentiation formed a discursive boundary through which Cruisers could define themselves as legitimate and mark out their own meaning-making. As these respondents testify, despite a small element of ‘boy racers’ existed within the culture, they do not share the same values as Cruisers,

“Cruising goes by what it says in the dictionary to go somewhere in no great hurry or speed. There’s a difference between boy racers and Cruisers”.

“I wouldn’t ever deny that there are young lads who like to race about and yes it is dangerous, however a Cruiser and a boy racer/ned are completely different things”.

It is unsurprising that respondents defined themselves in this manner. Indeed a person’s identity is said to be conditioned, not only through an inward looking self consciousness, but, more significantly by defining who one is not and differentiating members of the group from ‘others’. Identity is largely constructed in relation to an ‘other’ (Bauman, 1990; Triandafyllidou, 1998). As Kedoune articulates, “there is duty laid upon us to cultivate our own peculiar qualities and not to mix or merge them with ‘others’” (1992 cited in Triandafyllidou 1998:596), an argument which was validated during fieldwork at Edinburgh Cruise (Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> June 2006).

*A sports car came into the car park (A slick black looking FTO?) and over in a clearance started performing burnouts and what they described as ‘attempting to drift’. Surprisingly, only a few people went to watch. As an outsider on the search for exciting data, I went to go over, only to be stopped and told,*

*“don’t go over mate, you’d only be encouraging him. He’s being an arse. You watch the police will be here any minute”. The guys started laughing at the ‘point’ of wasting ‘a good motor’ and a good set of tires.*

This sentiment is supported by this respondent,

“A boy racer will 9 times out of 10 have a pretty standard car which they think is amazing and they race about or do burnouts/hand-break turns. Why would someone spend thousands on a car and possibly the same on insurance to kill it like that?”

In essence, respondents were knowledgeable of their position as labeled by the media,

“It’s just the fact we’re young and have modified cars we all get tarred with the same brush as being ‘boy racers’ but we don’t race. It’s just a gathering of car enthusiasts that get painted in the media as menaces.”

Secondly, respondents hinted at the ‘normality’ of Cruising and rather interestingly, likened the act of Cruising to everyday mundane activities. Furthermore, respondents contrasted the morality of Cruising against other popular forms of social interaction such as drinking and taking drugs. In essence, the act of being parked up in a car park to them was no different to non-Cruisers doing the same. If anything, respondents felt it was safer to be doing this than being out on the streets ‘drinking’.

“Cruising is a chance for people to meet likeminded folks from all walks of life without fear of being abused or attacked physically. People who love their cars and don’t spend their hard earned cash getting drunk or doing drugs. How is that a THREAT to local communities?”

Thirdly, in relation to Cruising being perceived as an Anti-social behaviour, respondents indicated that while small minorities of individuals at Cruises are ‘anti-social’, they felt it was unfair to label all Cruisers in this way. Indeed, despite Anti-social behaviour taking place during other leisure activities, respondents felt the whole culture was victimized,

“How is lots of young people meeting up to have a chat and enjoy each other’s company ‘anti social’. That would be a contradiction in terms. Yes, there are people who do burnouts, handbrake turns etc but then again when you go out to ‘socialise’ at the pub there are people who like to randomly glass strangers, or look for fights with bouncers. Does that make all drinkers and pubs dangerous and they should be labeled as anti social?”

In sum, the definitions of Cruising from inside the group were markedly different from the definitions of the practices of the group provided by the media. Indeed, the definition of their actions as everyday is heavily linked to the persistence of respondents to define themselves as ‘normal’. Respondents maintain, their interest in Cruising does not mean they have a repertoire of values that are discontinuous with the centre (Jenks 2005). As this respondent is keen to explain, Cruisers are implicated in the values of everyday society as much as anyone else,

“Most people think of cruisers as trouble makers etc. Most would be surprised if they found out I actually work full time

and study part time for my accountants degree....Not exactly the image people have in mind of a Cruiser....anything which is done to my car is insured and paid for through hard work.”

#### **Decommodification—or simply standing out in a home away from home**

In broad terms modifications attempt to appropriate ‘standardised’ cars and create a personalised creation that ‘stands out from the crowd’. Interestingly, respondents did not feel that these actions were different to other everyday consumption rituals. These sentiments are articulately expressed by these respondents,

“A couple of things I usually say when people ask, ‘Why bother doing it’ .... Well to the first one my answer would be, why bother decorating your house. Why not leave it plain white with floorboards and no curtains? Because you want to make it your own that’s why. Why bother buying a 4x4 offroad vehicle when all you do is drive your kids to school or to the shops? Because you want people to think better of you because you can afford that 4x4.”

“Cruising is a chance to make something your own and is an extension of your personality and individual style.”

In this manner some of the respondents explained their passion for modifying cars in terms of the desire to be “unique”, to possess what they termed a “one-off”, but also “To be as different as possible from anyone else”. However, this assertion is also framed in terms of what the CCCS (Hall and Jefferson 1993) might define as the values of the parent culture. As some of the participants suggested:

“In a world where everyone had a grey coloured car, wore grey suits, had grey wallpaper and carpets would there be much to live for?”

By this reckoning the name of the game is not simply a spectacle of escape and freedom (Goulding, Shanker & Elliott, 2002), but also appears geared to expressing resistance through symbolic means to broader cultural imperatives:

“The reason is to be different from standard. Standard is boring and you can see standard cars at any time of the week. It’s all about individuality and standing out from the crowd.”

It is as if in a drab humdrum world such groups are searching for the glamour of the spectacle, the glamour of conspicuous consumption and production to forge their social identities through solidarity and communion with others. Their being-as-a-group, or as they prefer “standing out from the crowd”, can be reaffirmed in their resistance or antipathy the logic of the market, what Willis refers to as the “shit of capitalist production” (1978, 178), and their desire to deflect their own meanings from such commodities. Debadging being one such act of reappropriation which appears to represent a symbolic attempt to escape the market and it’s characteristic brand-dominated culture (Holt, 2002).

Interestingly, a standardised car is underwhelming for the group, it is as they suggest “nobody’s dream machine”. Despite their obvious love for cars, with the exception of a few chosen models such as Subaru (Evos) and Sierra Cosworths (Cossies), most standard models of cars fail to fascinate or interest the group. While most in society purchase specific models as status symbols, to Cruisers, cars are merely blank canvases onto which they can paint their own styles:

"It's personal choice and I don't own a house I rent so my car is my canvass, my way of expressing myself and making me stand out a wee bit."

The majority of cruisers, although not all, were likely to be aged from 17-25. In this way, they were unlikely to own their own house have other responsibilities of 'adulthood'. As a result, their cars are the most expensive and important object that defines them. Previously, Northcote (2006), after Turner (1982), has conceptualized clubbing as part of the symbolic work by youth in a phase of liminality. As she argues, youth leisure pursuits are fundamental to "defining a lifestyle set apart from everyday worlds- a setting apart that is in fact integral to dealing with the pressures and demands of the everyday world." Indeed, Turner's (1982) liminality may be an interesting means of understanding the practices of Cruisers. As well as defining these practices, as Northcote (2006) does, as a rite of passage between childhood and adult responsibilities, liminality may account for the ways in which, through the creative leisure pursuit of Cruising, Cruisers reappropriate the taken for granted cultural symbols of cars that, or as Turner argues, "In liminality people 'play' with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarise them" (1982:27).

Indeed, defamiliarising and personalizing the commonly held aesthetics of cars is the main function of car modifications. The addition of 'body kits', spoilers, alloys, bore exhausts, to name but a few (see Table 1), reappropriate the exterior of the car in line with the personal taste of the owner. At the same time, the removal of familiar brand symbols of the car through 'debadging' attempts to give the car as smooth look as possible. This active decommodification of the car seeks to subjugate the centrality of brand symbols as signs of distinction. Through debadging, Cruisers actively seek to personalise the car by removing the car of its previous cultural meanings imposed by manufacturers and advertisers. Consequently, Cruisers manufacture their own creations. In this situation, car badges serve no other purpose than to advertise the company:

"I think it's advertising from the company, everyone knows it's a Clio for the shape. Why have the badges to prove it?"

In sum, debadging, and other exterior modifications, can be understood as an explicit attempt by Cruisers to position themselves as different; and as Noble and Baldwin (2001:87) highlight, often we construct ourselves as different to "contain the terrifying ordinariness of our lives...in appropriating objects, we are not simply personalising them, transforming them from a generic, commodity status to something unique and our own; we are personalising and subjecting ourselves, pursuing our own 'distinction'".

While the attention paid to the 'look' of their cars allowed respondents to receive self validation by enhancing their sense of visibility through standing out from the crowd of 'standard' cars, it was interesting that no such codes existed around the 'look' of members, as no particular cruiser 'uniforms' appeared to exist. Significantly, the projection of the car and its exterior provides, to use a Goffman term, a 'front' for Cruisers that is markedly different to that which is achieved by other props in everyday social interaction. Conventionally, self presentations are based on makeup, hairstyles and clothing. However, these did not appear important to Cruisers. Indeed, resembling Vaarenen and Wieloch's (2001) Finnish street racing culture, the self presentation of cruisers seemed to favour the car over the driver.

Similar to wearing makeup and clothing as the central aspect of a person's performance, however, Cruisers' presentation of self

is the result of a large amount of time spent backstage. Considering the amount of time taken to design, save for, and complete modifications, we concur with Northcote (2006) when she explains, in relation to Clubbing cultures, that presentation is usually the outcome of sustained backstage work. Indeed this was obvious given the condition of the cars at Cruises that were evidence of the hours of care, attention and modifying lavished upon their cars. However, it could be theorised that cars and clothing differ regarding the level of embodiment of the owner. As well as providing an exterior to enhance visibility, as the contradictory mix of interior-exterior modifications indicates, the employment of modified cars as the central aspects of one's public identity can provide a retreat for the endless task of self management. In this respect, modified cars exemplify Featherstone's (2004) argument that the projection of the car as identity impairs traditional communication. In this regard, their cars provide a sense of solitude, where Cruisers can, in a sense, go 'backstage' and delegate the front stage work to the car. The car, therefore, serves as a "go-between" (Goffman 1967:15) in public life, thereby protecting the self evaluation projected by clothes and the manner of the driver. The car as an extension of the person, facilitates social interaction as the person. The driver becomes decentred and dislocated and, in this regard, the car acquires 'front stage' status. As Goffman (1967:15) explains, "The surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face is to avoid contacts in which these threats are likely to occur". The car then can provide a convenient vehicle to place a barrier between such threats:

"I feel great when I'm in my car. I feel free from most other things in my life, it's a place to escape to".

This is actively sought from the modification of tinting. As this respondent indicates, having tinted windows is a deliberate attempt to obscure the visibility of the driver:

"...to stop people having a nosey in my car. I feel like I am in a fish bowl with no tinted windows"

Indeed other interior based modifications reinforce this observation. Similar to Miller's (2001) study in Trinidad, a contradiction is inherent in the modification of I.C.E (In-Car-Entertainment). While the installation of large subs, speakers and other parts of sound systems, like exterior modifications, made individuals stand out from the crowd and enhanced visibility, other I.C.E are reflective of an attempt to recreate the style and but more importantly comforts of household room, to give it an air of *homeyness* (McCracken, 1989).

The central aspect of enhanced invisibility is centered on the installation of very loud music systems. In many cases, music is played so loud it can easily be heard outside the car. However, this effect allows further visibility for owners that is not possible with standard music systems,

"It's a form of identification and a cruise thing. I wouldn't be able to drive my car everyday without having some subs for bass and amps for my speakers. It's like listening to a portable radio and then being in a club."

"I love music so usually have a loud system to sing along to. I like to be heard"

Paradoxically, the centrality of I.C.E in the social worlds of cruisers, is also related to the large amounts of time spent backstage in their cars, and the comfort afforded by I.C.E during this time. Thus,

**TABLE 1**  
A List of Common Tribal Modifications

<b>MODIFICATION</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>Debadging</b>	Involves removing all the badges of the car manufacturer so as to reveal a blank shell.
<b>Smoothing</b>	Removing or inverting locks from car doors and boot as it is perceived that the smoother the car is, the better it looks
<b>Spoiler</b>	Usually used for preventing lift on the car and increasing the downward force on the car. However spoilers have largely been adopted as a style feature on their cars. These can vary in size and proportion. Prices range from £50 to £300
<b>Body kit</b>	Body kits are molded panels applied to the original shell of the car which makes the car, at times, unrecognizable according to shape and manufacturer. Prices range from £200 to £1000
<b>Neon lights</b>	Neon lights are fitted under the car to light up the underside of the car. Usually neon blue in colour these lights are perceived to add style.
<b>Exhausts</b>	Wider bore exhausts are purchased to replace standard exhausts. As well as for style and performance purposes, exhausts result in the car sounding louder and as a result is noticed more. Prices range from £100 to £700
<b>Paint effects &amp; Transfers</b>	Paint effects can vary from smaller stencilled graphics to full bodywork coverings. The most popular style is multi lustre 'flip' paint but more recently glitter paint effects have become widespread.
<b>Tints</b>	Tinting involves darkening the windows of the car so that it is difficult to see inside the car. Recent legislation has made some tinting illegal, depending on how dark the windows have been made. As a result many Cruisers who previously modified windows have now discovered their windows are breaking the law.
<b>Alloys</b>	One of the first purchased modifications a Cruiser is likely to make. Purely for style purposes. Ranging from £120 to £1000's for a set of 4, they can form a considerable expense. Sizes range from 10" to 22" and are available in a number of colours (White, Black, Powder Coated, Gun Metal Grey, and most common, Chrome). It is generally perceived that the larger the alloys, the more fashionable they are.
<b>I.C.E (in car Entertainment)</b>	Given the time Cruisers spend in their cars many have extensive in car entertainment. I.C.E varies in extent and variety. The most common I.C.E is a stereo system to listen to music. Frequently Cruisers dedicate the whole boot to install their sound systems and 'sub woofer' speakers that increase bass power and volume. Other examples observed in the field included flat screen DVD players in the passenger seat of cars and even Playstation consoles.
<b>Custom Lights and Clear Indicators</b>	All lights on the car can be modified to suit individual tastes and styles. An example of custom lights are 'angel eyes' which are LED powered light rings, forming a halo effect, that replace standard lights. Clear direction indicators involve replacing the conventional yellow indicator and making it clear.
<b>Lowered Suspension</b>	Usually prioritizing style over practicality, lowering involves sinking the suspension. It is generally perceived that the lower the car is the better it looks. However extremely low cars prevent anyone from sitting in the rear seats. Moreover driving over speed bumps is likely to damage the underside of the car, especially the exhaust usually lowered by 30mm to as much as 150mm.
<b>Body Vents</b>	Used to increase the flow of air and provide greater stability in rallying. Cruisers use them for styling.
<b>Engine Modifications</b>	Used primarily for performance enhancement engine modifications take many forms. Examples include the following: conventional engine 'swaps' where one engine, is replaced by another; Turbo charges and dump valves are installed to give more power. Such modifications do not only increase performance of the car, but also serve to increase the subcultural capital ascribed to its owner. The intense sound of a highly tuned engine gives great pleasure to Cruisers. More style based engine modifications include colour coding the engine with different coloured leads and hoses, and installation of push button starters whereby the engine can be started at the push of a button.
<b>Misc. Engine Modifications</b>	Given the amount of time Cruisers spend in their cars it is unsurprising that that the interior of the car tends to be stylized to the same extent as the exterior. A small selection of interior modifications include: Stylized seats including bucket, leather, recliners, racing etc.; Replacing standard dials with custom images or coloured varieties; Additional dials added to show extra elements of the car not provided by original manufacturer; Replacement of floor mats, steering wheels, handbrakes, pedals (Available with neon lights) and gear shift sticks, with versions to suit personalized comfort and style ambitions.

the installation of, for example, Playstations and DVDs, provides home comforts for drivers during the large amount of time spent not driving. As these respondents highlight,

“ICE is just to make the car more comfortable. If a Cruiser spends more time in the car, parked up, it’ll be like his home away from home, hence the DVD players and stuff like that as well. Anywhere you spend a majority of your time in, you’ll want it to have personal qualities about it”.

### THE CRUISE AS AN EMANCIPATORY SCENE

In addition, our research reveals that central to their enthusiasm is the spectacle of the cruise itself, whereby cars meet periodically at a pre-arranged meeting place, usually a sizeable public car park, details having previously been circulated by internet, phone and email. The convoy which follows enables participants to express solidarity and defiance by travelling in tandem along public roads.

Comparisons here can be made to Hebdige’s accounts of the Mods and their symbolic scooter charge on Buckingham Palace (1991; 1993), or even Harley Davidson chapters riding in tandem (Schouten and McAlexander, 1996). That is to say, the convoy and cruise represent the imaginative marking out of territory, or better space, a symbolic attempt to ‘win contested space’ (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts, 1993, orig. 1975), but also to convert non-places into spaces (Auge, 1995) where the social itself is reinvigorated and brought to life. In this sense they exist as performances delivered on the public and commercial stage of the car park, whereupon the tribe marks its own ‘unique’ existence through rituals of display and performance. In terms of interpreting such cultural events we argue that such spectacles are not defined simply by their public visibility, but also as Kahn Harris (2004) and Butler (1997) prefer it is essential to view the scene as a space for performance, a stage on which the cruisers mark out their visibility and the creative forms that their cultural practices take to each other. Taking this line of argument further, we might suggest that the cruise functions to energize and vitalize this space, providing it not only with legitimacy, but also producing an ephemeral community where emergent socialities are produced, what Maffesoli might refer to as a form of ‘undirected being together’ (1996: 86) where the ‘social glue’ acquires a less intangible form.

While we found it difficult to estimate the numbers involved, we concur with Cova and Cova’s (2001) evaluation of the in-line skater tribe that hundreds of individuals may share in the vogue surrounding modified cars and cruising. Outward manifestations of this include the movie *Fast and Furious* and its sequel, as well as a variety of internet sites and chat forums, what we might term neo-tribal spaces, where regular exchanges of information on modifications are facilitated but also where the identity of each regional cruise is marked out and a counter-discourse to the dominant media representations is produced. As the following response posted on one of the cruise forum conveys:

“Well the BBC certainly got one over us, what a fucking embarrassment to those that are genuine cruisers... This “Inverness posse” bunch of twats climbing out car roofs and in through windows while on the move, smart! Good show for the camera’s and exactly what the folk in Crail need to see when they get Crail shut down...It was basically a bunch of neds selected to show us up, well done.” (Edinburgh Cruise Forum Tuesday March 23: 2004).

The internet is in this way not simply giving rise to new forms of community, but operates as a cultural resource enhancing group

solidarity through the affirmation of a ‘them’ and ‘us’ mentality mediated specifically in terms of local affiliations and differences.

### Feesties, Beemers and Scooby-dos: Unruly Bricolage or simply exploring peeps and their mods

As suggested the spectacle of the cruise is central to the collective display of the sensibilities of taste and style that mark out the imaginative territory of the cruise; alongside this exist the forms of customization made to the ‘look’ of the car itself and the associated modifications made to this cultural object. In this way, it is not just the spectacle that cements and animates the group, but through the prior acts of modification (or as they prefer *mods*) and the social codes which regulate such changes to instigate the attribution of community value upon specific forms and styles of modification. A synopsis of the main modifications of car cruisers gleaned from observation (see Table 1), revealed that designs of alloy wheels are the apparent ‘calling card’ for cruisers, where they, like the Mods before them (Hebdige 1991; 1993) are not merely passive consumers of culture, but creative reappropriators of such commercial sources of value. Their modifications then provide the cruisers with a means of acquiring *distinction*, displaying their tribal *cultural capital*, and, perhaps more significantly belonging. In short, we argue that the cultural practice of modifying one’s car represents an attempt to solidify the role of the car as a central aspect of respondent’s sense of self. Further, these appropriations of a taken for granted cultural object allowed such individuals to, despite its misinterpretations, gain control of the front that they project in part of daily life. As McCracken (1990) highlights, these modification rituals are an opportunity to revise the conventional meanings which surround the car, but also this act of reappropriation appears to serve as a means for the individual and collective consciousness of the group to be expressed.

By means of reworking their vehicles, removing original features and building-in or appropriating others, the vehicle is imaginatively removed from its original context. Bricolage involves then a ‘hyper-stylisation’ of the car, achieved for instance through the deliberate lowering of the suspension, or the addition of elements to attract the gaze of spectators such as bonnet vents or unique paint effects, debadging, neon lights, body kits and spoilers, smoothing, or I.C.E, illustrating that some commodities are constantly in flux and occupy shifting positions for consumers. Through transcending the style boundaries imposed by the commodity aesthetics of marketing and branding the cruisers are continually striving to express their individual creativity and autonomy whilst at the same time invoking their affiliation with fellow cruisers (or as they refer *peeps*). So, we understand customization, even where it involves removing the accoutrements of brand recognition (‘debadging’) that many other consumers seem so keen to cherish and display, as significant in the formation of tribal capital. More importantly we suggest that it is through language and their creative cultural practices that the commodity-dominated world is reimagined as a land of *Beemers*, *Feesties* and *Scooby-dos* (see Table 2). That is, a world where through cultural commodities social and community value are exchanged and foregrounded over forms of commercial value. Here then we witness how the development of a unique argot provides the cruisers with a palette of expressions to not only endorse their own individual status and being-within-the-group but also to exclude non-members or outsiders. The language of metaphor and affiliation, be it through talk of *peeps* engaging in *mods* to their *Beemers* and *Scooby-dos* and displaying their aesthetic endeavours at *cruises*, enables the community to reinvent and reimagine the mundane world, but more importantly perhaps serves to reinvigorate and reawaken the social as something other, that is with a tangible presence and form. Suggesting perhaps that the

**TABLE 2**  
The language and argot of Scottish Car Cruisers

TRIBAL TERM	DEFINITIONS
Mods	Modifications
Peeps	Endearing term for friends/other members
Fourteens/Sixteens/Eighteens etc	14/16/18 inch Alloys
Scooby-doo	Subaru
Evo	Mitsubishi Evolution
Cossie	Ford sierra Cosworth
Feestie	Ford Fiesta
Chinq	Fiat cinquecento
Slammed	Lowered Cars
Dubs	20 inch Alloys
Beemer	BMW
Zorts	Exhaust
Rims	Alloys
Dusties	Fancy Dustcaps
Tunes (Choons)	In Car Entertainment (ie. Sounds systems and Playstations)
Rims	Wheels
Smoked	To have been Overtaken
Honnie	Handbrake Turn
Donut	Rear-wheel drive car in a continuous circle

death of the social (Baudrillard, 1983) in a media-saturated world may have been premature conclusion to make, or at least brought forth particular forms of cultural practices and community value.

### In departing

By way of conclusion, in this paper we employed the lens of cultural practice (Willis, 2005; Warde, 2005) as a device to help frame social relations circulating around the cultural form of the 'car', as particular manifestations then of consumer culture in the making. We sought to interrogate questions of identity making and the affiliative work of objects to unravel the complex processes by means of which consumer culture is instantiated in the particular milieu of the car as an object of bricolage; a site where cruisers improvise collective responses to the wider social structures which constrain their lives. Consumption practices then become the flip-side of logics of appropriation and reappropriation which cruisers (or similar tribes) employ to capitalize on their difference and pursue strategies of authenticity, largely through the creative reworking of available resources to forge not only their own identity but also to rework and reconstitute the social world as something other to its mundane and everyday form. In our minds, cars like many other cultural objects appear perfectly suited to this task, the job that is of expressing the relational nature of social life (Maffesoli, 1996) where what matters most is the social bond (Cova, 1997). An

approach to consumers where as Cova asserts "the link is more important than the thing" (Cova, 1997:311); and where consumers are considered as important co-producers of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). As we have sought to demonstrate through reference to the cruiser community the extent to which value is as much a community and social affair as a matter of commercial exchange is significant, and by this token brands appear to play only bit parts in the drama and spectacle staged within these ephemeral gatherings. The cruise then can be viewed as a performance of such community value, an enactment where negotiations over meaning in *use and exchange* are paramount and take a visible and tangible form. More so, our contribution is to demonstrate that in some instances of consumer culture in the making the brand is merely a cultural resource to be contested, subverted and erased; an object to be played with through the 'dialogic ritual' (cf. Gilroy, 1987) of debadging which serves to inflect and produce their own participatory and celebratory meanings in the name of making explicit the all-too-implicit, taken-for-granted and intangible qualities of community value.

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