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EXPLORING USER-PRODUCT INTERACTION IN CAR MODIFICATION PRACTICES

ARABA MODİFİYESİ PRATİKLERİNDE ÜRÜN-KULLANICI ETKİLEŞİMİNİN ARAŞTIRILMASI

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Abstract
This study aims to fill a gap in the field of material culture by addressing car modification as a creative activity, an often-overlooked aspect of automobile ownership and usage. It provides insight into the dynamic interaction between material qualities of cars and the experiences, relationships, and meanings generated through material appropriation of cars. The study investigates car modification communities in Istanbul, Turkey. The findings are structured into two main sections: *The Driver*, which focuses on car owners' experiences derived from in-depth qualitative interviews, and *The Car*, which explores the material aspects of cars through the analysis of modifications. The study revealed that car modification transcends mere material reproduction. Rather, it unveils a complex interplay where cars are shaped by their owners, while simultaneously shaping their owners in diverse ways. By altering the materiality of their cars, individuals not only forge material relationships but also cultivate new amalgamations of sensual and social relations and experiences. Through altering the materiality of their cars, car owners tailor the experience of driving and give a concrete form to their social and personal identities.

Keywords: Car Modification, Material Appropriation, Automobility, Car Culture.

Öz
Bu çalışma, otomobil sahipliği ve kullanımının genellikle göz ardı edilen bir yönü olan yaratıcı bir faaliyet olarak araba modifiyesini ele alarak maddi kültür alanında bir boşluğu doldurmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, arabaların maddi nitelikleri ve arabaların maddi olarak sahiplenilmesi ile üretilen deneyimler, ilişkiler ve anlamlar arasındaki dinamik etkileşime ışık tutmaktadır. Çalışma, İstanbul, Türkiye'deki otomobil modifiyesi topluluklarını odağına almaktadır. Bulgular, iki ana bölüme ele alınmıştır: Modifiye araba sahipleriyle yapılan derinlemesine nitel görüşmelerin analizine dayalı araç sahiplerinin deneyimlerinin ortaya konulduğu *Sürücü* bölümü ve arabalarda yapılan modifiyelerin analizi üzerinden arabaların maddi yönlerinin ortaya konulduğu *Araba* bölümü. Çalışma, araba modifiyesi pratiğinin arabanın maddi yeniden üretimin ötesine geçtiğini, arabaların sahipleri tarafından maddi olarak şekillendirilirken aynı zaman arabaların sahiplerini çeşitli yönlerde şekillendirdiği karmaşık bir etkileşimi ortaya koymuştur. Bireyler, arabalarının maddeselliğini değiştirerek aynı zamanda yeni duyusal, sosyal ilişkiler ve deneyimler geliştirmektedirler. Araba sahipleri, arabalarının maddeselliğini değiştirerek sürüş deneyiminlerini şekillendirirken, sosyal ve bireysel kimliklerine somut bir biçim vermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Araba Modifiyesi, Maddi Sahiplenme, Otomobilite, Araba Kültürü.

INTRODUCTION

Michel de Certeau (1984) characterizes consumers as migrants who engage in a *"silent production"* (xxi) within a vast system that exceeds their ownership yet ensnares them in its web. In this silent production, consumption is itself is a creative process where consumers utilize the resources of the system, appropriating objects from their mundane contexts, and reconfiguring them into alternative forms and engendering novel meanings that resonate with their purposes.

Arjun Appadurai (1986) argues that objects possess a social life intricately woven into human interactions and cultural dynamics. The flux in their value signifies their agency and liveliness within social contexts. Similarly, Douglas and Isherwood (1996) assert that objects participate in social processes. Individuals use the same object with diverse significances, engendering variegated interpretations and value attributions (Featherstone, 1987). Thus, within the realm of consumption, neither consumer nor objects remain passive entities.

This study explores the dynamic processes of consumption through one of the iconic objects of modern life: cars. Henri Lefebvre (1971) notes the car as *"the epitome of objects, the Leading-Object*" (100), which has a profound impact on modern societies and continues to shape civilization in various ways (Dant & Martin, 2001; Miller, 2001). Despite numerous studies exploring the experiences and practices associated with automobile usage from various perspectives, there remains a need for further research to deepen our understanding of this pioneering object.

This study investigates a less explored aspect of automobile usage: the practice of car modification. As a mass-produced commodity, cars are equipped with standard features. However, users who are not satisfied with such features take over control of the making process of their cars. Car owners tailor this designed artefact to make them their own (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2007). Car modification entails changing both the physical appearance and technical aspects of commercially produced cars to align with individual preferences and requirements (Doeden & Vranas, 2008; Lumsden, 2015; Warren & Gibson, 2011).

This study serves as a gateway to understanding the dynamic interaction between the creative act of car modification, the material qualities of cars and the experiences, relationships, and meanings that generated in and through the material appropriation of cars. This study contributes to material culture studies by offering a nuanced understanding of the interplay between humans and objects in contemporary consumption practices, highlighting the active role of consumers in shaping the material world and the significance of objects in shaping social practices and experiences.

Adopting a grounded theory approach, the research focuses on car modification communities in Istanbul, Turkey. Istanbul is chosen as it hosts both amateur enthusiasts and professional modifiers, providing valuable insights into Turkish car modification culture. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with modification enthusiasts, the study explores their motivations, practices, and experiences. Additionally, it analyses the material aspects of cars through the analysis of modifications.

CAR USE AS AN EXPERIENCE

Linda Steg (2005) classifies motivations for private car usage into three primary categories: instrumental, symbolic, and affective. Instrumental motives stem from the practical benefits of cars, including attributes like active, autonomous, independent, and comfortable transportation. Affective motives relate to the emotions felt while driving. Symbolic motives centre on the social dimensions of car usage, providing individuals with opportunities for social expression.

Within the physical interaction facilitated by the material dimension of driving, car becomes a physical extension of the driver's body, and in that way, the driver's actions are reflected in the car's movements (Dant & Martin, 2001). Through the embodied actions, the driver and the car merge into a hybrid, intertwined entity, forming an assemblage shaped by their physical interaction (Dant, 2004; Katz, 1999;

Randell, 2017; Sheller, 2004; Sheller & Urry, 2000; Urry, 2006). Indeed, this physical interaction extends beyond the relationship between car and driver, encompassing spaces, objects, technologies, and bodies which shape varied sensory experiences and social relations which is called automobility (Sheller & Urry, 2000; Thrift, 2004; Urry, 2004).

Within this *"steel skin"* (Urry, 2004, p. 31) as an extension of the human body which *"we feel through and with,"* (Sheller, 2004, p. 228) motion and emotions are kinaesthetically intertwined. This heightened sensory engagement transforms driving into a remarkable, dynamic, and even sublime event. The emotions elicited while driving encompass intricate layers of interaction, constituting *"profoundly embodied and sensuous experiences"* (Thrift, 2004, p. 80). Being in a *"fast-moving object in a restricted space with other fast-moving objects"* (Dant, 2004, p. 72) forms a *"suspension of existence"* (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 66). This alteration in perception and cognition, along with the mastery over time and space, engenders a profound sense of satisfaction rooted in the perception of power (Sheller, 2004; Urry, 1999).

In this way, the relationship between driver and vehicle extends beyond the physical realm to encompass social dynamics (Husband et al., 2014). Driver and car are also socially intertwined. The car-driver assemblage, as described by Tim Dant (2004), is form of social being that generates various social actions tied to the car. This fusion of human and machine blurs conventional boundaries, resulting in what Jack Katz (1999) describes as a *"person-thing, a humanized car, or alternatively, an automobilized person"* (p. 33). Taking a Goffmanian perspective of the car-driver assemblage, Richard Randell (2017) posits the car-driver assemblage as a self that transcends reduction to either the driver's self or the material properties of the car. It is a hybrid of human and machine self: autoself constructed through routine, everyday social interactions.

The sociality of automobility is formed through the balance of two complementary but oppositional dynamic forces: differentiation and integration (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Differentiation emphasizes a person's individuality, which distinguishes him or her from the social context. On the other hand, integration expresses a way of merging with the given social context. In this dual role, the car flattens and homogenizes identity while also adding nuance and individuality to it (Husband et al., 2014). Here the car becomes a *"second skin"* (Belk, 1988, p. 151) through which others perceive us and we experience our surroundings through it.

Social relations are shaped as a collective open process in automobility (Collin-Lange, 2013). This collective socialisation finds expression in practices and rituals—cruising, racing, joy riding, car modification, parking area gatherings, and car exhibitions. These mobile and embodied practices of mobilities play a pivotal role in how drivers collectively experience the world. While the car conveys individuality, it simultaneously acts as an instrument of social bonding, fostering *"mobile sociability"* (Carrabine & Longhurst, 2002, p. 194) among enthusiasts. This collectivity extends beyond car users to individuals outside the car and other groups as well (Collin-Lange, 2013). The construction of individuality and social identity through the car transcends personal narratives, representing power rooted in social relations (Böhm et al., 2006; Creswell, 2010; Husband et al., 2014; Sack, 1986). The social relations within automobility can be viewed as *"a regime,"* (Böhm et al., 2006, p. 6) where social interactions are sometimes hierarchized among different actors (Collin-Lange, 2013). Within these socialization streets becomes a stage for drivers to present themselves and exhibit their power (Collin-Lange, 2013), with rituals revolving around the *"totemic material object"* (Lumsden, 2015, p. 38) of the car.

PRACTICE OF CAR MODIFICATION

Car modification can be traced back to the late 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s in southern California (Ganahl, 1995). People who could not afford new cars during this time began to improve their old ones. While car modification initially stemmed from practical concerns, it quickly gained popularity and evolved into an entertainment-based cultural activity known as Hot Rod. Hot Rod began as modified car races on the dry lakebeds of southern California in the late 1930s.

The focus of these modifications was strictly on performance, aimed at making cars go faster during races. After a few years of pause during World War II, Hot Rod culture regained popularity and spread across the United States during the post-war prosperity (Franz, 2005). Eventually, Hot Rod races transformed into a worldwide cultural phenomenon. This popularity led to Hot Rod losing its racing background and evolving into a lifestyle representation.

Hot Rodders embraced appearance-based modifications (Warren & Gibson, 2011). Along with modifying their cars, enthusiasts also crafted their cultural identities, creating distinct clothing styles and slang. Car modification enabled enthusiasts to redesign the car and re-negotiate their cultural identities (Franz, 2005). Since then, the representation of lifestyles has become an integral part of car modification interest. Several American modification styles and subcultures emerged in the following years. These subcultures became a source of individuality within automobility (Gartman, 2004).

The decline of the American car industry during the 1970s, prompted by the oil crises, shifted the focus of car manufacturing and modification culture to new hubs, notably Germany and Japan. German and Japanese manufacturers introduced lighter, more affordable, and modification-friendly models, such as Volkswagen's Beetle, Minivan, and Golf, as well as the Honda Civic, supplanting bulky and fuel-inefficient American cars.

From the 1980s onward, globalization has profoundly influenced car culture and modification trends, facilitated by the exchange of information and products across borders. Mass culture elements, including movies like *The Fast and the Furious* series and car-themed video games, have played a significant role in popularizing car modification. The availability of cost-effective aftermarket products from the Japanese automotive industry has further fuelled the popularity of Japanese cars, solidifying Japan's position as a major centre of car modification culture.

Car modification encompasses changes to both the performance and appearance of a stock car -original factory configuration-. Alterations to the physical appearance involve exterior and interior modifications. Exterior changes often include body modifications targeting improvement of aerodynamic features, such as bumpers, spoilers, wings, fenders, and hoods. Other exterior modifications include adjustments to lighting, wheels, tires, and various accessories-based modification.

In-car modifications are geared towards enhancing driving comfort, often encompassing both accessory-based enhancements and upgrades to in-car entertainment systems. Accessory-based modifications may include dash kits and covers, seats and seat covers, steering wheels and covers, gauges, handbrake, gear shift knobs, pedals, supplemental lighting. Meanwhile, modifications to in-car entertainment systems typically involve upgrades to stereos, speakers, amplifiers, subwoofers, monitors, cameras for driver safety, multimedia players, navigation systems, and other related components.

Performance-oriented modifications focus on enhancing various components that contribute to power increase and management. These may include engine modifications, adjustments to handling such as suspension upgrades, coil overs, and wheel alignment, enhancements to braking systems with upgraded brake discs and pads, modifications to the transmission such as gearboxes and pedals, improvements to intake and exhaust systems, upgrades to cooling and fuel systems, installation of turbochargers or superchargers, enhancements to ignition systems, installation of performance chips, and more.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

In the initial phase of the study, an exploratory approach was adopted to delve into the culture of car modification, given the limited existing literature on the subject. To comprehensively explore this domain, 22 open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted (Figure 1). Additionally, two monthly car modification magazines based in Turkey were examined over a six-month period. Furthermore, 12 online social networking platforms dedicated to car modification, both international and Turkey-based was monitored, recognizing the increasing importance of online platforms in facilitating social interaction and information exchange within the car modification community.

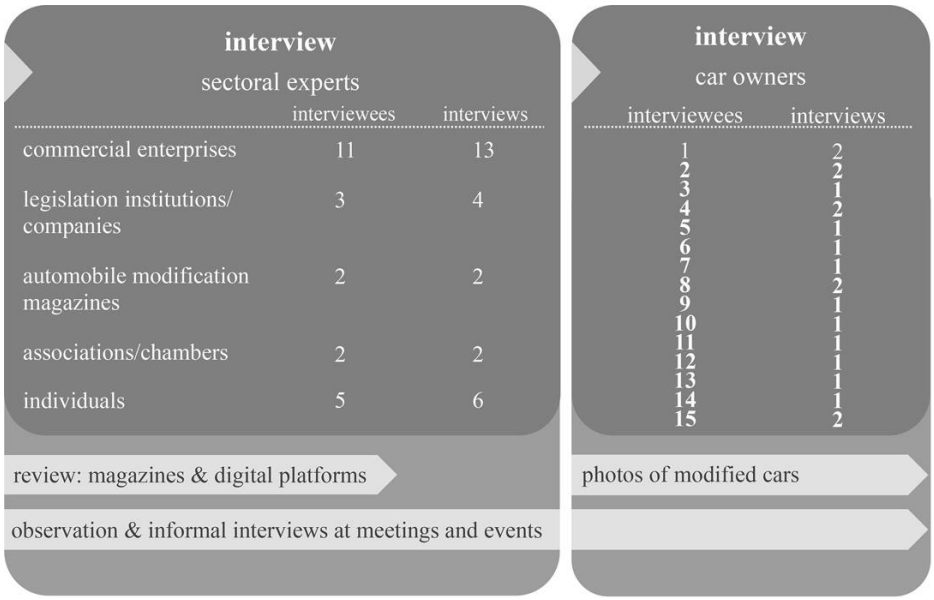

Figure 1: Data collection methods

Following an initial understanding of car modification culture, an ethnographic study was conducted within car modification communities in Istanbul, Turkey. This study covered various contexts, with a particular focus on gatherings as central rituals within the car modification practice. The research extended beyond gatherings to include events, cruises and shows. During these activities, observations were made of modified car owners, and informal interviews were conducted with them. These interactions provided valuable insights into how participants integrate modification practices into their daily lives and offered glimpses into their life histories. Importantly, they facilitated open communication between the predominantly young male members of these communities and the female author of this research, establishing trust and rapport.

After establishing trust, face-to-face semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with owners of modified cars over the course of the fieldwork. The interviews were conducted beside the modified cars to enhance participant engagement and comfort. The interviews are structured in a flexible and open manner, allowing concepts to emerge freely without imposing preconceived perceptions or opinions on the participants (Charmaz, 2001; Goulding, 2002). Face to face interviews lasted between 32-63 minutes and audio recorded.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory was employed for the analysis of qualitative interviews as it allows for an exploration of how individuals perceive events and phenomena, and how they attribute meanings to these experiences (Denscombe, 2007; Goulding, 2002). This approach is well-suited for this study since it offers an understanding of practical situations in the real world, particularly useful for investigating new areas or phenomena that have not been fully explored (Denscombe, 2007).

In grounded theory, both data collection and analysis are conducted flexibly, allowing for simultaneous analysis during collection, providing researchers with control to focus, structure, and organize data effectively (Charmaz, 2001). This approach employs a non-linear analysis process, with each coded data continually compared with existing ones throughout the analysis, fostering a dynamic analytical process until no new codes emerge, reaching a state known as theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Likewise, interview data was analysed simultaneously and constantly compared with each other from the early stages of this research.

Additionally, modifications were analysed to understand the structure of material reproduction of cars through the photos of cars. The visual data underwent qualitative content analysis, a method that

quantifies qualitative material by identifying patterns according to certain codes (Schreier, 2012). To facilitate this process, the 'sticky notes' feature of the *Miro* digital collaboration platform was utilized for coding. This tool allows for data categorization through colour and tags, with colour coding used to distinguish car parts targeted for modification. Modifications were grouped into categories such as body, interior, wheels, lighting, entertainment systems, and accessories, drawing from classifications used by aftermarket product sellers. Specific modification types within these categories were further coded using *Miro*'s tag feature. After coding, clusters of colour and tag-based codes were formed using Miro's clustering tool. These clusters were then exported to MS Excel for frequency analysis and visualization. In total, 14 cars were analysed, with one participant's car being excluded due to servicing before the interviews.

This study is derived from the doctoral dissertation titled 'User-Product Interaction within The Context of Usage Practices: Automobile Modification in Turkey', which was conducted under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Nigan Bayazıt and defended on 25.06.2012. On the relevant date, the Istanbul Technical University Institute of Science and Technology did not request an Ethics Committee Report in the context of the study subject and research sample.

Participants

In the grounded theory approach, the sampling strategy is determined by theoretical sampling, wherein the researcher repeatedly decides on the next source of data after each data collection and analysis process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher seeks sources of data that will provide information-rich data (Charmaz, 2001). To gain access to modified automobile owners, two different channels were utilized: face-to-face meetings with modified automobile owners at gatherings and events, and through automobile workshops and equipment dealers who invited their clients. This initial pool of participants later invited their peers, facilitating access to a broader range of participants. This sampling method proved beneficial for reaching a hidden population that is often difficult to access. In accordance with the theoretical saturation approach of grounded theory, the sample size was determined based on the point at which the analysis of constantly compared data reached saturation, indicating that no new data sets were emerging.

Table 1 displays the demographic information of participants. The majority of the participants are under 30 years old, come from a low-income working-class background, and are single males with no children. Only one of the participants is over 30 years old and is married with one child.

Table 1. Participants and their cars

Participant	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Occupation	Car
1	23	Male	Single	Student	Dodge Neon
2	18	Male	Single	Student	Peugeot 206
3	27	Male	Single	Sales Representative	Ford Mondeo
4	27	Male	Single	Auto Repair Worker	BMW E46
5	22	Male	Single	Student	Ford Fiesta
6	39	Male	Married/1 Child	Domestic Appliance Technician	Fiat Palio
7	29	Male	Single	Bodyguard	Nissan 200 SX
8	21	Male	Single	Student	Peugeot 106
9	29	Male	Single	Automobile Products Retailer	Nissan 200 SX
10	23	Male	Single	Auto Cleaning Worker	Ford Focus
11	21	Male	Single	Medical Personnel	Ford Focus
12	27	Male	Single	Window Company Worker	Mitsubishi Carisma
13	22	Male	Single	Sales Representative	Chevrolet Aveo
14	22	Male	Single	Sales Representative	Honda Civic
15	22	Male	Single	Printing House Technician	Renault Megan

FINDINGS

The findings are structured into two main sections: *The Driver* which explores themes derived from qualitative interviews, highlighting the experiences and behaviours of car owners, and *The Car* which examines the material aspects of modification through analysis of the modifications made.

The Driver

"We Are Not Ordinary People, So Why Drive an Ordinary Car?"

The desire to be unique serves as a significant motivation for participants in modifying their cars. They aim not just to be different but rather unique in every aspect, viewing stock cars as commonplace and lacking distinction. By transforming their vehicles into something nobody has, participants seek exclusivity and individuality, distancing themselves from the ordinary.

Emotional experiences while driving also drive their desire for uniqueness. Modified cars evoke feelings of individuality, whereas stock cars leave them feeling like normal, ordinary individuals, leading to a sense of disappointment and unfulfillment. This emotional contrast motivates participants to modify their cars continually, viewing modification as an ongoing, never-ending pursuit. In this sense, modification is an insane activity with no definitive endpoint. All participants have modified at least two cars before. When they believe that they can no longer differentiate their cars, they sell them and start over again with a new stock car.

Furthermore, participants endeavour to set themselves apart from other modified car owners. To differentiate themselves further, participants avoid commonly used modification products or styles, preferring to improve and renovate their cars continuously. Additionally, some opt for less common vehicles for modification, choosing models that are rare in Turkey or not typically selected for modification, further setting themselves apart from other modified car owners.

"All That Matters Is to Catch That Look"

The desire for visibility serves as another key motivation for car modification among participants. They seek to attract attention and stand out with their uniquely modified vehicles. This visibility not only satisfies their desire to be noticed but also contributes to their sense of uniqueness and specialness. For some participants, driving stock cars is unpleasant because they feel unnoticed and overlooked by others.

The significance of grabbing people's attention with modified cars that everybody looks at is invaluable to participants. They highlight the reactions of others to their cars, describing feelings akin to being celebrities when people gaze at them. Positive responses, such as receiving thumbs up and applause from children, further fuel their desire for acknowledgment and admiration. Conversely, negative reactions, like complaints about loud exhaust noise, also fuel their desire for attention.

While participants appreciate both positive and negative reactions to their modified cars, they emphasize that these responses do not influence their decisions regarding further modifications. However, the viewpoints of other modified car owners carry substantial weight in their modification choices. Participants perceive car modification not only as a hobby but as a passion and lifestyle, considering themselves part of a community. Thus, while they appreciate validation from others, they prioritize feedback and comments from fellow modified car owners, whom they regard as part of their extended family.

Socializing and exchanging information with fellow modification enthusiasts at gatherings and events play a vital role in modification culture. Enthusiasts often gather in public spaces like shopping mall parking lots, where they showcase their cars side by side. Additionally, online platforms and social networks dedicated to car modifications serve as crucial mediums for enthusiasts to connect and interact. Displaying their cars at both real-life gatherings and virtual spaces is highly valued by participants, as it can lead to recognition and admiration within the community. Furthermore, some participants' tendency to disregard regulations and the risks associated with their modifications sets them apart and fuels their desire for visibility.

Form Follows Intentions

The participants' main drivers for car modification, namely the desire to be visible and the desire for uniqueness, significantly influence their modification preferences. They tend to prioritize appearance-based modifications, as they are the part that other people see, often considering them as the ostentatious or showy aspects of their vehicles.

The participants' inclination towards appearance-based modifications is evident in their preference for certain elements, notably modifications targeting body and wheels. These components are considered pivotal as they contribute significantly to the overall aesthetic appeal of the car. For instance, wheels are often regarded as the first noticeable parts of a car, while body modifications such as front bumpers, rear bumpers, fender skirts, hoods, and spoilers are likened to the face of the car. Participants typically avoid preferring performance and in-car modifications, as they are merely seen and, therefore, less impactful in fulfilling their desire for uniqueness and visibility. For them, what matters is how the car is seen from the outside.

Lowering the vehicle, achieved through adjustments to shock absorbers and springs to bring the car closer to the ground, is a widespread modification among all participants. They appreciate the aesthetic appeal of a lowered car, resembling high-performance vehicles. However, instead of opting for aftermarket products, many participants prefer the more affordable option of cutting stock springs, despite its technical drawbacks. They express discomfort with the potential damage to their vehicles caused by this practice, particularly due to the poor road infrastructure in Turkey. Consequently, they prefer to use their vehicles solely for modification activities rather than daily driving.

Likewise, although they are not visible from the outside, exhaust system and in-car entertainment modifications are common because they enable a different type of noticeability based on sound. Participants exemplify this kind of visuality in the sense that everyone in the neighbourhood knows that they are coming, other drivers give way to them, and it annoys people. Such loud exhaust systems make the drivers more noticeable and hence make them visible. Moreover, such modifications produce a feeling of pleasure as they create a sound of power and a sound that makes you feel alive.

Inexpressible Experience of Modified Car

The pleasure of driving a modified car is a unique, inexpressible experience for the participants, stems from a sense of satisfaction through the control of speed and power. These cars enable them to feel like going to a race every day. For many, driving modified cars becomes an addiction, a daily necessity for their mental well-being. They feel depressed when they can't spend time with their cars.

For some participants, driving their cars brings a sense of pride as they are content with their self-designed and built vehicles. Modified cars hold significant emotional value, often seen as extensions of themselves and reflections of their personalities. They justify their modification choices based on their own traits and sometimes even adopt the same nickname as their cars, blurring the line between themselves and their vehicles.

Because of that feeling of belonging, participants expressed a sense of devotion to their cars. They form deep emotional bonds with their vehicles, referring to them as lovers, girlfriends, or children, and prioritizing their care and protection above all else. When their cars get damaged, they feel as if they or a loved one had gotten hurt. Even minor damage to their cars evokes strong emotional responses, with some participants expressing a desire to confront those responsible. Both financial and emotional investments in their cars are substantial, with many dedicating a significant portion of their income and time to modifications, sometimes leading to family problems.

For most of the participants, parting ways with their cars is especially challenging due to these financial and emotional dedications. Participants are unwilling to sell their cars because they value them more than the other things in their lives. The thought of parting with their cars elicits feelings of misery and bitterness, leading some to track their former vehicles and advise new owners on their care.

The Car

Participants frequently incorporate various modification elements into their cars, mostly opting for body, wheel and tire, performance modifications. These are followed by in-car entertainment, lighting and accessory-based modifications. Engine and management systems modifications are the least preferred type modifications. Figure 2 displays the individual modification type preferences of the participants.

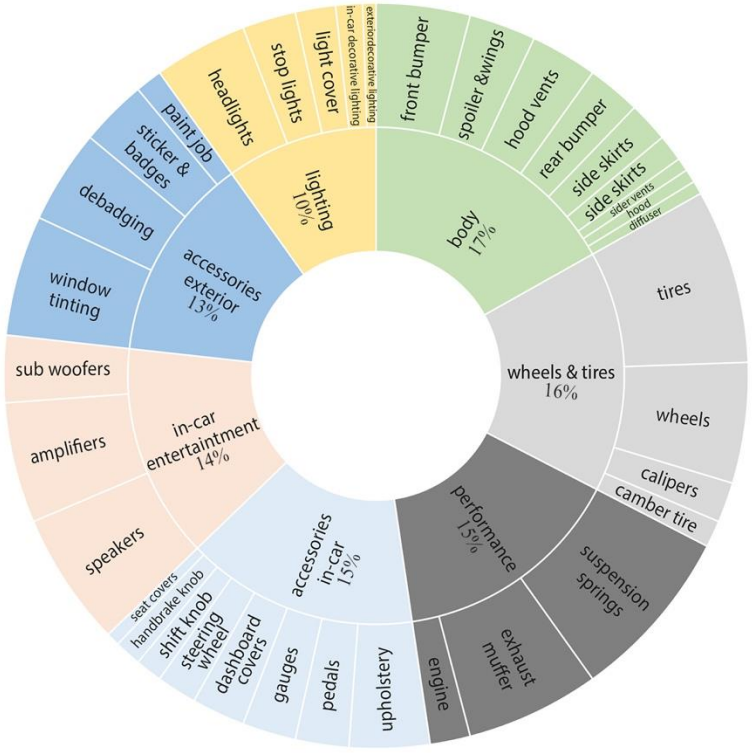

Figure 2. Modification preferences of the participants

Most preferred body modifications include front bumpers, spoilers, and wing applications (Figure 3), commonly found in high-performance vehicles. These features serve aerodynamic purposes, regulating airflow and creating downforce to improve stability at high speeds. Additionally, hood and side vents, along with carbon fibre body applications, are popular among participants. Hood and side vents aid in directing airflow to cool the engine during high-speed driving, while carbon fibre body applications offer lightweight properties typical of high-performance vehicles. However, due to cost considerations, participants often opt for carbon fibre imitations. However, it's worth noting that most participants' cars lack the high power associated with such features, except for a few.

Figure 3. Body modifications

Wheel and tire modifications are the top choice for most participants (Figure 4). Wheel modification is popular due to its cost-effectiveness compared to other options. Nearly all participants, except one, opt for offset wheels to increase the thickness of the wheel, favouring deeper offsets for better road grip. Some also choose wheel camber adjustments and calipers. Wheel camber alterations improve cornering

grip at high speeds by adjusting the angle between the wheel and vehicle axes. Calipers, part of the braking system, contain brake pads that engage the rotor to facilitate braking.

Figure 4. Wheel and tire modifications

Only three own cars classified as high-performance vehicles, with two of them actively engaging in car racing. These individuals have implemented engine and management system modifications to boost vehicle performance. However, most performance enhancements among participants involve exhaust and suspension modifications (Figure 5). Specifically, suspension spring adjustments, such as using firmer springs to lower the car's stance, were popular among almost all participants except one. Lowering the vehicle's centre of gravity through suspension modifications optimizes traction and grip, particularly during high-speed cornering and acceleration, leading to better performance on the racetrack. However, instead of choosing aftermarket suspension springs, most participants preferred modifying their suspension systems by cutting the springs, which can pose safety risks.

Figure 5. Suspension springs (car lowering) modifications

In-car entertainment systems, particularly audio setups, rank among the top modifications favoured by participants (Figure 6). These systems combine entertainment and informational features, enhancing the overall in-car experience. Many participants chose to upgrade their stock speaker systems with high-quality audio setups. Amplifiers were also commonly installed to increase the power output of the sound systems, while subwoofers were added to enhance bass frequencies, resulting in a more immersive audio experience with rich sound quality. However, these entertainment systems often take up considerable space in the boot and rear passenger compartment, which goes against the lightweight characteristics of high-performance cars.

Figure 6. In-car entertainment modifications

Despite participants expressing in interviews that they didn't prioritize in-car modifications since they were only visible to themselves, analysis of their cars revealed that in-car modifications are among preferred type of modification (Figure 7). The most favoured in-car modifications, such as leather upholstery, carbon fibre dashboard covers, and steering wheel modifications, mirror features commonly found in luxury segment sports cars. Exterior accessories and lighting group modifications are among the least favoured, but within exterior accessory modifications, window tinting and debadging stand out as particularly popular choices among participants. Window tinting involves applying a thin film, typically made from a polyester base to the interior surface of car windows. It not only enhances privacy by making it difficult to see inside the vehicle but also enhances the car's aesthetic appeal. On the other hand, debadging refers to the act of removing the manufacturer's emblems or badges from a vehicle.

Figure 7. Accessory-based modifications

DISCUSSIONS

Car modification aims to customize the original features of a stock car to suit the preferences of its owner. Initially rooted in car racing, modifications focused on enhancing engine systems and aerodynamic performance. However, the focus has shifted towards lifestyle representation, leading to a predominance of appearance-based modifications over performance enhancements. Similarly, the study found that enthusiasts primarily focus on appearance-based modifications to achieve uniqueness and visibility. Despite mimicking features of high-performance cars, these modifications often don't enhance actual performance, leading to safety concerns. As a result, owners reserve their modified cars for special occasions, like gatherings, where they can engage with fellow enthusiasts.

The motivations driving car modification, notably the desire for uniqueness and visibility, are intricately woven into the social dynamics of automobility, characterized by both differentiation and integration. Enthusiasts aim to distinguish themselves both within society and among their community of fellow car modifiers, while also seeking integration within the collective group affiliation of like-minded enthusiasts (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Husband et al., 2014).

These motivations lead participants to prioritize appearance-based modifications, enabling them to customize their cars beyond standard factory options. Common preferences include body modifications

and upgrades to wheels and tires, which give their cars a unique aesthetic. However, performance-enhancing modifications, particularly those that are not visible, receive less attention. Suspension modifications are an exception, as they provide tangible indicators of high-performance cars and are favoured by most participants. In-car modifications are limited but often mimic the appearance of high-performance or luxury segment cars, such as artificial leather seat upholstery and imitation carbon fibre dashboard covers. Additionally, the practice of debagging, or removing the manufacturer's emblem, aims to eliminate any information about the car's origin that might contradict its high-performance appearance, emphasizing the uniqueness of the car over mass-market design.

Enthusiasts' desire to be visible and attract attention through their modified cars extends beyond positive reactions, encompassing even negative responses. In this way, any form of attention, whether positive or negative, serves to reinforce their sense of uniqueness and distinction. Additionally, enthusiasts value intangible forms of visibility, such as the distinctive sound of their exhaust systems and in-car entertainment systems, which serve as another means of visibility.

As they seek to distinguish themselves not only from mainstream car owners, but also from fellow modifiers. They actively avoid common modification products or styles, opting instead to continuously customize their cars for a unique aesthetic. This pursuit of individuality not only sets them apart but also integrates them into a broader community of like-minded enthusiasts. By sharing a passion for distinctiveness and uniqueness, they forge bonds with fellow modifiers, forming a collective group affiliation (Husband et al., 2014). Therefore, they place greater importance on the feedback and comments from fellow modified car owners, whom they see as part of their extended family.

Social relations within car modification culture are not confined to the material production of cars but extend into everyday practices and rituals. Activities like cruising, racing, gatherings, exhibitions, and competitions serve as platforms for enthusiasts to cultivate individual and collective social relations (Brownlie et al., 2007; Carrabine & Longhurst, 2002; Collin-Lange, 2013; Randell, 2017). Moreover, online platforms play a vital role in connecting enthusiasts, facilitating the exchange of information, mentorship between experienced and novice modifiers, and discussions on broader aspects of car modification culture. These interactions strengthen social bonds within the community while also allowing individuals to showcase their uniqueness and individuality within the collective.

In gatherings and events, enthusiasts engage in a form of competition to gain recognition and assert dominance within the community. These interactions reflect power dynamics rooted in social relations, often structured hierarchically among participants (Böhm et al., 2006; Creswell, 2010; Collin-Lange, 2013; Husband et al., 2014; Sack, 1986). These practices serve as platforms for drivers to assert themselves and demonstrate their power. In this regard, as noted by Redshaw (2007), the car embodies and facilitates aspects of Western culture characterized by individualism and assertive advancement. These practices and rituals exemplify how presence and co-presence shape the social dynamics of car modification culture (Collin-Lange, 2013).

The materiality of their cars serves as a symbolic extension of enthusiasts, shaping how they are perceived by others and influencing their experiences within their surroundings (Belk, 1988; Sheller, 2004; Urry, 2004). By viewing their cars as extensions of themselves, they mould their cars to align with their personalities. This intimate connection often leads to the car and owner being referred to interchangeably, emphasizing the inseparable bond between them. This fusion of driver and car forms the basis of social interaction (Dant, 2004; Husband et al., 2014; Katz, 1999; Randell, 2017).

The pursuit of uniqueness and superiority within the social dynamics of car modification intersects with power relations at the individual level, often reflecting *"patriarchal constructions of masculinity"* (Paterson, 2007, p. 47). Enthusiasts often anthropomorphize their cars, viewing them as female companions, lovers, or even children under their control. This emotional attachment to their 'ownership' fosters a deep sense of belonging and dedication, leading enthusiasts to care for their cars meticulously, like the attention lavished on a loved one. As an extension of their masculinity, enthusiasts often see themselves as providers, investing a significant portion of their income and time into their cars. Parting

ways with their cars proves to be an especially challenging task. This emotional attachment highlights the profound significance that these cars hold in their lives, surpassing the value of other possessions.

The physical interaction facilitated by the material dimension of modified cars not only shapes the social relations, but also elicits diverse sensory experiences and emotions (Sheller, 2004; Urry, 2004). The experience of driving a modified car brings excessive pleasure, primarily stemming from the sense of power and control. For some, driving a modified car is akin to addiction, resulting in an urge to drive it every day and feelings of depression when unable to do so. These emotions vary across several embodied practices related to modification, leading enthusiasts to continuously modify and renovate their cars until they can no longer differentiate them. Some even sell their modified cars and start over again with a new stock car, perpetuating the cycle of modification.

CONCLUSION

As modified cars represent more than just material possessions, the practice of car modification extends beyond material production. Through car modification, these craft-consumers engage in experimenting with their cars' materiality, resulting in the creation of new experiences, relationships, and meanings from the interaction of a wider system encompassing materialities, entities, and spatial, infrastructural, cultural, political, economic, and social contexts.

Modified cars are at the centre of these young men's lives who are mostly from working-class backgrounds. They aim to express their existence by differentiating themselves from others through their possessions. As Mike Featherstone (2005) notes, cars have held *"high visibility in the social landscape and cultural imaginary over the last century"* (p. 1). Similarly, car modification enthusiasts seek to materialize their desire to attract attention and stand out by making their cars unique, different, and visible within the context of both individuality and collectivity. Although modified automobiles possess signs of real, they primarily serve as representations of the real. Their desire to be noticed by others is fulfilled by engaging in predominantly superficial appearance-based modifications that mimic the indicators of high-performance cars from upper segments. These modifications serve as symbols of the social and economic status that these individuals aspire to achieve.

However, as they re-shape how others see them, their creations, in turn, shape how they experience the world. Even though material production of modified cars is grounded in simulacra, the automobility of these vehicles constructs a sense of reality. Sociality and emotions are forged with the notions of uniqueness, passion, power, pleasure, superiority, excitement, belonging and pride within the realm of car modification culture.

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