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Research Article

## Branding the Social: Leisure, Consumption, and the Corvette Community

Virginia D'ANTONIO<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Assoc. Prof. Dr., Northern Virginia Community College, Department of Sociology, Woodbridge, VA USA

**Corresponding author:**

Virginia D'ANTONIO  
Northern Virginia Community College,  
Department of Sociology, Woodbridge,  
6561 Malbrook Ct., Manassas, VA 20112, USA  
**E-mail:** vkdantonio@nvcc.edu

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the social world of Corvette car clubs and their membership based on social ties formed through common interests centered on consumption and leisure practice. This study contributes to the limited literature on brand communities that provide social capital in a postindustrial economy of intensified individualism that has experienced a decline in participation in voluntary associations. I address these factors through the framework of Robert Putnam's classification of 'bridging' social capital or weak social ties that can be good for getting ahead. The cultural significance of the Corvette as America's sports car is used as a unit of analysis in this ethnographic study of the brand community and its role in creating social capital for its members. The broad implication of this research reveals how the meaning assigned to consumer objects facilitates strong social networks that are productive in constructing identity and cementing relationships among fellow consumers and their communities. Ethnographic research methods were employed to design this sociological research. The data for this study was taken from 30 structured interviews with Corvette enthusiasts and 18 months of participant observation research. This study will fill a gap in the research on brand communities as organized leisure structures that facilitate social capital and renewed civic engagement in the public sphere.

**Keywords:** Social capital, lifestyle, leisure, consumption, brand community

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Since the late twentieth century, social scientists have grown increasingly concerned about the lost sense of community and decline in civic participation in American society. Several indicators suggest a retraction in our core support networks including fewer contacts between neighbors, clubs, and organizations outside of the home. The current trend towards this decreased participation in civic life suggests that we are in the midst of a monumental social restructuring of how we form relationships, care for others, and locate meaning in our personal lives. This research proposes that a new form of social involvement surrounding consumption may be able to provide a sense of personal meaning through leisure groups as well as renewed civic engagement in public life.

In spite of this age of social disconnection, the desire to find meaning and purpose through collective life remains. At the same time, the ascendance of leisure and the expansion of consumer markets as core social institutions in postindustrial society offer opportunity structures for social connections and involvement for informal groups of people with similar interests. As the postindustrial economy changes social life, leisure has become a primary institution, replacing the significant impact that work once had in providing meaning and purpose in personal life. In this research, the leisure community of the Corvette brand is analyzed, not just as a material object, but one that carries symbolic and iconic value to its members.

The motivation in pursuing research of this car community is rooted in the long-standing history of the Corvette as America's sports car and its iconic status in both the marketplace and hearts and minds of many Americans. The Corvette is unique in that the brand community is one of the few created by its consumers, not the corporation itself. This grassroots community provides a strong sense of consumer agency that helps to solidify this lifestyle enclave.

My selection of the Corvette community as a unit of analysis was rooted in preliminary participant observations that suggest that involvement in this consumer leisure group is a form of 'serious leisure.' This term, coined by Stebbins (1982) distinguishes itself from casual leisure as the steady pursuit of an activity that is profound, long-lasting, and based on substantial skill, knowledge, or experience. Serious leisure can provide a central life interest that shapes a person's identity, commensurate with a lifestyle that provides significant social rewards that include membership in a vast social world of networks and relationships.

Through theoretical frameworks of consumer culture and social capital, this research explores the sacred meaning of the Corvette as a shared, collective experience in Corvette clubs. Social capital provides the central framework for membership in this leisure community. Putnam's classification of social capital is used to understand "the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties" (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). Specifically, this research explores how leisure in this brand community uses weak social ties, or "bridging," to link with distant acquaintances, providing opportunities for civic engagement and for getting ahead.

I used the qualitative method of participant observation by immersing myself for 18 months in the leisure spaces of Corvette shows, club meetings, car rallies, fundraisers, and activities at a local, regional, and national level. I analyzed the structure and organization of these leisure spaces to determine how they shaped collective behavior, in-group attachments, and civic participation. I evaluated the rituals and practices of this brand community in the context of individual and small group activities while identifying links to broader structures of influence that shape this community - such as consumer markets. To do so, I conducted 30 in-depth interviews with Corvette enthusiasts in various regions of the U.S. Their narratives gave voice to the consumer lifestyle and revealed how productive social ties are formed and maintained through this leisure community.

My findings show that members of the Corvette community form strong social ties to one another through a shared passion for the Corvette. Owners channel their self-interest in friendship and leisure

by joining Corvette clubs and ritually practicing leisure within this community. The commitment to the Corvette lifestyle in turn helps to produce attachments to others and access to resources that extend beyond the confines of the car club, providing opportunities for civic engagement.

This research contributes to the understanding of community life in the twenty-first century as it is shaped by consumption and leisure. The relationship between consumer and object, consumer and consumer, and consumer to community are all considered a part of how individuals create social ties through the consumption of meaningful objects. The practice of creating social ties through participation in brand communities is an important part of community engagement at this moment in time and it reflects the shifting relevance of consumerism and leisure as key institutions that can provide interdependence and social support in a postindustrial economy.

## 1. Introduction

To set the stage for research into America's sports car, the Corvette, it is necessary to understand the cultural significance of cars in America. Historically, cars have symbolized the ideals of mobility, freedom, and progress, and resulted in America's deep fascination with cars. The car, like other objects that are important to us -- homes, photographs, family heirlooms -- connect us to the world, to each other, and often serve as memory markers signposting a certain time in our life. Cars have also long reflected personal identity and social class.

The paradox of consumption in late capitalism is that consumer products are purchased not just for fulfilling material needs, but also social-psychological needs (Conley, 2009). Items purchased for pleasure and not necessity are considered "positional goods" where the value of the product depends on the fact that others don't consume it (Conley, 2009, p. 85). Sheller (2004) describes the relationship between cars and people as "automotive emotions embodied in car-users' visceral feelings about driving, and their personal relationship to their car" (p. 222). Passion best describes the emotional investment that people have made in their cars, often applying human traits to them, caring for them as children, lovers, and friends (Belk, 2004). Such personification of the car suggests the object may have replaced relations that were previously formed within family and religious institutions.

The Corvette's unique history, combined with its annual limited production in the market place help to create its mythical status and its rarity. The two-seater car emerged in the American auto market in 1953 as "America's sports car." The concept of the Corvette has always been as a leisure vehicle. It was designed for speed, low to the ground, with sleek lines that offered aesthetic appeal on the road. Hewer and Brownlie (2007) state that individual brands and traditions of car models often demand an act of agency to not only "stand out from the crowd, but more importantly to affiliate with others" (p.107). The consumption of cars enables some to collectively experience the relational aspect of person to object and through use of this object, connect from person to person. Because the Corvette is a sacred object among its owners, and has emotional value, it is through the emotional register that fellow Corvette owners forge ties.

The connections forged through the Corvette community leisure club have implications for civic engagement more generally. Many social scientists believe that over the last century, solitary pursuits such as television, internet, and social media have caused us to replace our loyalty to the community with self-interest, and this has transformed everyday life into a series of isolated, private pursuits of leisure in which we engage in few social activities with others.

There are empirical indicators of the decline in community, and the shrinkage of America's circle of confidants over the last three decades. For example, McPherson, Brashears, and Smith-Lovin (2006) found that people's core discussion networks (a set of close, routinely connected people whom we confide in with personal matters for social support) have dissipated as we have moved inward to smaller support networks centered on spouses and partners. This means fewer contacts created through clubs, neighbors, and organizations outside of the home. Our social lives have become progressively more insular as we have retreated into ourselves. Putnam (2000) calls this trend "bowling alone" (p. 99).

Data from Simply Analytics 2013 survey on household membership in civic organizations reveals that an average of just 1.5% of Americans are members of a civic organization (Simply Analytics, 2018). This data further supports Putnam's argument that Americans are experiencing large scale social changes that may be altering patterns of interpersonal relationships, and ultimately the fabric of how we define community.

How we form interpersonal relationships is closely related to upward mobility and life changes. Granovetter's (1973) "weak ties" illustrates the significance of interpersonal relationships because the strength of associational ties diffuses into opportunities for information acquisition, upward mobility, and greater community organization extending well beyond a person's locale. Hence, in an impersonal world, an individual can get ahead by fostering ties with others trying to do the same.

Similar to Granovetter's "weak ties", Putnam's (2000) "bridging" form of social capital represents associations that are outward looking and link us to external assets that provide opportunities for information diffusion. Bridging is thus another form of social capital encompassing the weak ties that can be good for "getting ahead" (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). The dense social networks of leisure communities can thus provide support for members of the larger community as well as constitute stronger civic engagement and social well-being.

I address the contemporary issue of social disengagement by exploring how membership in the Corvette brand community creates social capital for the members and connects them to civic projects in larger communities. My methodology includes 30 in-depth interviews with Corvette enthusiasts who consider themselves part of the brand community. I conducted the interviews over an 18-month period while simultaneously conducting participant observation in the leisure spaces of Corvette community events.

The findings of this ethnographic study reflect strong social ties formed through membership that serve as forms of emotional support and social resources in personal life. The findings reflect the prominence of leisure as a primary institution in the members' lives as an organizational structure that includes frequent rituals similar to those involved in the institutions of work, family, and religion. In addition, the meaning that enthusiasts assign to the Corvette contributes to a set of collective values that are important in cementing the social ties of this community.

The broader significance is the suggestion that leisure communities may offer opportunity structures for social capital and facilitate involvement in the public sphere that many Americans have lost in a world of online social networks, iPads, and chat rooms.

In this article, I explain the theoretical framework of the study and summarize the relevant literature in Section 2. Section 3 describes the methodology of the study. Section 4 provides the findings of the research and section 5 discusses the findings and suggests ideas for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

My research was informed by three theoretical frameworks: consumer culture, leisure as a primary institution, and social capital. This literature review will briefly summarize some of the relevant literature that pertains to these frameworks.

In my analysis of the cultural meaning of cars, the broader institution of consumer markets must be acknowledged as a framework within which brand communities are constructed. In the absence of traditional communities where values and physical living spaces are shared, individuals in postmodernity turn toward objects to forge an identity while the system of consumption becomes central to the existence of the individual (Cova, 1997). The search for meaning in life is no longer constituted through the shared morality of traditional communities, it is found symbolically through the consumption of objects and brands where consumers must take action to both distinguish their own existence and the difference among others (Cova, 1997).

Similarly, to work within a framework of consumer behavior, the concept of consumer culture must first be defined. Arnould and Thompson (2005) describe consumer culture as:

a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through market (p. 868).

Consumer culture is also constituted and shaped by broader historical forces, such as cultural narratives, myths, and ideologies, and grounded in socioeconomic circumstances and marketplace systems (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Cars are one such object in consumer markets that carry cultural meaning and create identity for the owner.

The symbolic importance of consumer goods often reflects the motivation of the consumer. "People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean" (Levy, 1959, p. 118). From this viewpoint, modern goods are laden with the symbolism of personal attributes and goals, social standings and strivings (Levy, 1959). Objects are used as symbols of differentiation, symbols of status, and symbols of social integration with the world around us. The concept of the self and one's roles is cultivated through our relationship with objects and these relations of consumer to object only receive and maintain significance through the context of a culture (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

The process by which consumers construct meaning through their experience with the object is significant. For example, the sacred meaning of the car as a material object reflects the institutional change in contemporary society where religion has given way to secularization and is often replaced with material objects of worship (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989). Hirschle (2014) has found that religious institutions have increasingly been replaced with leisure consumption activities.

This transition from religion to leisure can also be analyzed through the work of Durkheim (1977), who distinguishes between the sacred and the profane. Durkheim states that individuals treat the sacred via a collective experience in which members of society remove objects from everyday, mundane use and hold them to be more valuable. Similarly, cars are considered objects of worship by true enthusiasts, and are often removed from daily life only to be enjoyed during sacred times of leisure including car shows and vacations. That said, in a convergence of the sacred and profane, the car is also often enjoyed in everyday life.

Just as transcendent experiences are aided by social contexts that involve fellow believers, the concept of the brand community emerging from 1990s literature on consumer culture is considered relatively new. Brand community influence on social behavior has been studied even less from a sociological perspective. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) define brand community as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (p. 412).

The brand communities that are successful are usually formed around brands with a strong image, lengthy history, and threatening competition (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Three core elements of traditional communities existing across different history periods are identified as a framework by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) to construct contemporary brand communities: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility.

These three elements will be applied to the Corvette clubs in order to describe how the members socially construct this modern community. Through these practices, the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community (Muniz & O'Guinn,

2001). Brand community activity is often accompanied by leisure activity. The Corvette brand community is one that exists worldwide with thousands of members who recognize the history and strong iconic image of what this car represents: being American.

As American society advances further into post-industrialism, the prominence of leisure as a primary institution is defined by the characteristics of its organized nature and its growing significance as an alternative for those in search of community or bonding with a social group (Frey & Dickens, 1990). According to Goldman and Wilson (1977), leisure was established as an organizational force in contemporary society that replaced family as a major provider of recreation experiences, and was subsequently rationalized.

Varying definitions of social capital abound in social science literature. Robert Putnam's theory of social capital has been the most influential in the literature (Glover & Hemingway, 2005) and also to my study on Corvette communities. Putnam (2000) defines social capital as "the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties" (p. 20). Putnam (1995) maintains that the most important form of social network is the voluntary association. In particular, voluntary associations, including leisure-based ones, serve as primary sites for generating social capital and social cohesion. Putnam (2000) traced the decline in civic participation over the last fifty years, revealing a loss of social capital in people's lives. Putnam (2000) also distinguishes between the "bonding" and "bridging" forms of social capital (p. 19). The bonding form of social capital is more exclusive, inward looking, and is good for encouraging reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity. While the bonding form of capital can provide social support, the individual's opportunities may be limited to just one close-knit group with a narrow set of values and information.

In contrast, "bridging" social capital represents associations that are outward looking and link us to external assets and provide information diffusion. This form of social capital is often described as the weak ties that link people to distant acquaintances and provide opportunities for social mobility (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). These dense networks can provide support for members of the larger community as well as constitute stronger civic engagement and social well-being.

The social networks created for the benefit of the members provide channels to recruit people for good deeds and foster norms of reciprocity. In other words, doing "with others" can encourage doing "for others" (Putnam, 2000). Analysis of the Corvette community confirms Putnam's assertion that securing personal social ties within the group leads to an outward focus on community philanthropy. Leisure practices involving the car may be considered a 'lifestyle.' To which, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton (2008) have interpreted as:

members of an enclave who express their identity through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities, which often serve to differentiate them sharply from those with other lifestyles (p. 335).

Members of Corvette clubs may be combining sacralization of a leisure object and civic association to form social capital. The question becomes: how does sacred meaning assigned to the Corvette brand of car by Corvette club members facilitate a willingness to participate in community?

### **3. Methodology**

The qualitative methods for the study include both participant observation and in-depth ethnographic interviews. The value of ethnographic fieldwork is the placing of the researcher in the center of the activities and rituals of the group in order to understand how members construct and maintain

meaning through relationships and actions. The goal of the research is to place the points of view of the Corvette community participants at the center. Open-ended questioning yields in-depth findings of the people and how they construct meaning. I found that the best method to capture these subjective, emotional sentiments is through the narratives of the car community members themselves and through participant observations in the settings where the members gather.

Through in-depth interviews with car owners, the socio-cultural history and biography of the individual is spoken in his own words tracing a pathway to involvement in this leisure practice. In order to address the research question, I use a constructivist perspective which focuses on the emergent and generative dimensions of reality making to understand the complex process of meaning-making in the leisure world of Corvette car communities. It also seeks to demonstrate how engagement with the community fosters social capital.

Participant observation involved immersion in the leisure spaces of car shows, club meetings, car rallies, caravans, parades, dinners, fundraisers, and car clinics, and was experienced at a local, regional, and national level. Over an eighteen-month period I joined a Corvette club in Northern Virginia and attended monthly meetings. Owning a Corvette (a requirement for membership in any of the local clubs across the U.S) granted me immediate “in-group” access to the club and other Corvette community gatherings. Therefore, without the financial capital to buy my own Corvette, full participation in this research project might not have been possible.

I attended monthly club gatherings - a ritual where members discuss club business, fundraisers, and plan social activities. The structure and organization of this leisure space revealed the more formal side of the community in its ability to organize themselves around their enthusiasm for the car. The structure and organization of these leisure spaces were analyzed to determine how they shaped collective behavior, civic participation, and in group attachments. Attention to symbols, exchange of knowledge, and social interaction were noted for patterns that were recorded for data analysis.

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

I also attended regional and national car club events with my Corvette, including both the 2015 and 2016 annual “Corvettes at Carlisle” conventions at the Carlisle, Pennsylvania fairgrounds. There, thousands of Corvette owners gather annually to socialize, buy and sell parts for cars, attend lectures about the cars, and take part in a parade with hundreds of Corvettes through downtown Carlisle. During the August 2015 event, I participated in the field size American flag formation of 156 red, white, and blue Corvettes from different states across the country.

I also attended the 2016 National Corvette Restoration Society annual convention in Warwick, Rhode Island. I observed car shows, dinners, and receptions, to understand how the rituals surrounding the Corvette reaffirm meaning and maintains the life of the community. I viewed relationships with the car and fellow Corvette enthusiasts as forms of social capital, and developed an understanding of how club membership was an integral part of regulating and maintaining collective behavior and group identity. Many clubs from across the country traveled in caravans for hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles to gather at this annual convention. The car brought people from clubs across the country, and led to other social, leisure activities providing social cohesion in between the judging of cars and awards ceremonies.

Another site for observing group membership of this community was a four-day observation at both the National Corvette Museum and Corvette Assembly Plant in Bowling Green, Kentucky



in August of 2015. The non-profit museum is the only museum dedicated to a single brand of car and was founded by Corvette consumers.

My thirty in-depth interviews were constructed to provide supplemental, in-depth information that could identify the larger social forces that shape both involvement and the organization of the Corvette community. These included the recurring themes of social capital, leisure lifestyle, and civic engagement. As such, the sample may not be generalizable to all Corvette owners, however it is conducted to provide deeper knowledge about the leisure community (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

In Northern Virginia, where I became a member of a local Corvette club and also was introduced to another regional club, I used convenience sampling. I also used this method at national car shows in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, where I talked to fellow owners and solicited interviews from those present.

In my contacts at a car show in South Carolina, I used snowball sampling, which led to multiple interviews in three other states. Consequently, the sample was limited to Corvette owners who may not be representative of the entire Corvette consumer population. Because the survey was taken from a volunteer sample of Corvette club members from organized clubs throughout the U.S., the traits and values revealed may be reflective of those who prefer to join organized clubs.

#### **4. Findings**

The Corvette story is not just about a sports car, it is a story about people. Consumption of this sports car links people to personal relationships, membership in groups who share the same interests, and the human need for community. While the level of involvement with the car varies among owners, the social life of the Corvette owner is rich with opportunities that are granted with the consumption of the car.

In this section, I will present the findings of my ethnographic research that apply to the research question. Three theoretical frameworks of consumer culture, leisure, and social capital will be applied to the findings as a context for how the Corvette community is organized and maintained. I divide my findings into three sections: Identity Construction, Building Social Capital, and Civic Engagement.

##### **4.1. Identity Construction**

I investigated the personal biography and socio-cultural background of the respondents to better understand how they became involved in the consumer lifestyle. I identified emergent patterns of cultural values, as they not only play a part in why the members consume the Corvette, but also how they bring these value systems to the group. The values that were identified to be most common among the Corvette owners included; technical skill, work ethic, financial prudence, and early life participation in Boy/Girl Scouts of America.

The technical skills of tinkering with cars in their youth proved to be an omnipresent part of the interest in the Corvette brand community. The exchange of knowledge about the vehicle and how to fix parts were valued resources that one got from being a member. Loose associations among the group served to help those who had a problem with the car, and also saved them a considerable amount of money. These club resources most likely could not be found outside of the leisure group without paying a high price to a specialty auto shop.

A strong sense of self-reliance through work was a pattern found among all Corvette owners. The phrase, "I went to work fairly early" emerged as the men and women of the study reported going to work between the ages of 10 and 15. They embraced adult responsibility by means of

newspaper delivery, grocery store clerking, lawn mowing, and retail work. For these youngsters enamored with cars, work as a means to car ownership provided an anchor that would always be associated with achievement. This intrinsic value of self-reliance constructed through labor was coupled with an earned knowledge of financial management that translated in adulthood to the purchase of the Corvette as a practical choice of leisure vehicle. Most owners relayed that they had delayed gratification in other consumer spending, had a proclivity for saving, and enjoyed getting “the most bang for your buck.” This description fit well with the sample of Corvette consumers who were very satisfied with the performance and price ratio the car produces.

Another set of value commitments that emerged from the research was early life membership in voluntary associations. Of the 30 Corvette interviewees, 28 reported being a member of the Boy or Girl Scouts of America in childhood. This experience helped to form a set of embodied dispositions towards associational memberships as a basis of group ties. The Corvette brand community had a strong philanthropic focus that mirrored the mission of both Boy and Girl Scouts in its outreach to local communities through fundraising and service work.

The personal biography and socio-cultural values of the Corvette owner were foundational in constructing the relationship of the consumer to the car. In adulthood, the Corvette was described as a consumer object that enthusiasts were very attached to and one that shaped their identity. A majority of Corvette owners in this study describe the car as a transformative object that creates identity for themselves and manages impressions made to others (Goffman, 1959). One female Corvette owner explains:

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

Not only does this identity transformation occur privately for the Corvette consumer, but it is acknowledged publicly as well. Most of the interviewees stated that a large part of the thrill of driving the car down the road is “the looks that they get at the stop light,” and also “other people admire the looks of the car and give you that high five or thumbs up as you drive by” (D. Bottis, personal communication, November 3, 2016). Car enthusiasts distinguished their leisure interest as a way of life, or “lifestyle,” and not a hobby. K.Torini explains this difference:

I don't consider the Corvette a hobby. This is a lifestyle. A hobby is when you take paint and you build a little boat or you do a jigsaw puzzle, that's a hobby. This is a lifestyle- it's social, it's community. A lifestyle (personal communication, July 20, 2016).

The lifestyle enclave provides a foundation for the consumers in this leisure community. The word “lifestyle” was used by all 30 interviewees and in multiple field observations to describe the deep meaning of the Corvette to owners, and its significance in their daily lives. I experienced the relationships that form around the car and the meaning it imbues in members' personal life. The deep meaning that guide the daily routines and activities of the owner is described by Gary, below:

You just do it. It becomes part of you, it becomes a lifestyle. If I look through my closet, most of my shirts have Corvette on them. I have Corvette lamps and furniture in my house. It's like going to church every week- it's what you do (G.Cross, personal communication, August 12, 2015).

The emphasis on the “meaning” of objects indicates that the function of consumerism has shifted from a purchase for enjoyment in private life to something that provides self-identification and influences social interaction and public life as well.

#### ***4.2. Building Social Capital***

While the Corvette lifestyle defines private life, the desire for social cohesion among those with similar interests not only validates an individual’s consumer identity, it enhances his social life and membership in society. In their work on organization and mutual aid in leisure, Bishop and Hoggett (1986) argue that members of leisure groups are looking for involvement, recreation, sociability, production, consumption, and competition. The Corvette club members I studied showed all of these motivations through the structure of their organized leisure activities via membership in Corvette clubs.

The National Council of Corvette Clubs (2018) boasts up to 17,000 members in 270 different clubs across the United States. Each local Corvette club has democratic organization with officers that are elected by the club. Aside from the loosely organized events like weekend cruise-ins at a Dairy Queen or caravans of dozens of Corvettes to a national park or recreation spot, Corvette club activities exhibited a high level of organizational skill by the club officers and members. Structured leisure activities such as safe driving clinics and car rallies (a car scavenger hunt of sorts) reflect the technical and associational skills of the members that were previously discussed as part of Corvette owners’ socio-cultural value systems.

Many Corvette club activities like the rally are organized by designated club officers who structure these contests. The National Council of Corvette Clubs encourages different regions of Corvette Clubs to organize rallies, auto cross, and drag races in order to encourage interactivity between individual Corvette Clubs within the National Council of Corvette Clubs. While these activities are created both for fun and knowledge exchange, they can be defined as what I would call “competitive leisure practice.” Social ties are encouraged and formed through inter-club participation with others and the competition that many of these Corvette owners experience in their professional lives transfers into their recreational practices. Here, leisure becomes commodified and linked to market behavior of competition, performance, and rewards earned through merits.

Membership of a Corvette club offers organized leisure experiences that allow owners to meet others with similar interests and passion for the car. In a broader context, the consumer/leisure markets are mediating these relationships and guiding the Corvette lifestyle. Moving from the organizational aspect of the leisure activities to the associational, I now describe how “bridging” social capital is formed within the community.

The term most frequently used by Corvette owners to define the community was “family.” When asked how he feels when he sees other Corvette drivers on the road or at gatherings, Clinton responds:

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

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

The National Council of Corvette Club's slogan is "we joined for the car, we stay for the people." Members expressed forming friendships that they felt could not be found elsewhere. Many of these relationships were identified according to Putnam's "bridging social capital." The associations made through the club prove to be beneficial to personal life and needs and are described as reciprocal in nature. Meeting another's needs in a time where the more insular forms of "bonding social capital" seem to be absent can help to fill gaps that occur in everyday life situations. Jerry illustrates how associational ties in the club can be helpful:

There a lot of good people in the club. We had our house painted and one of the members said, 'You can stay with us. You don't have to go to a hotel. You can stay here while your house is being painted for a couple days.' So I think the people are very outgoing and want to help people (J.DeFazio, personal communication, November 3, 2016).

The passion for the car creates mutual understanding where members offer support to one another. One owner related this ethos of good will to the Bible verse, "Love thy Neighbor as thyself." Other examples from the field include help with terminally ill family members, attending funerals, and helping Corvette drivers with a stalled car at the side of the road. Putnam (2000) describes these associational ties as particularly useful "because it extends beyond the radius of trust, beyond the roster of people whom we can know personally" (p. 136). The social benefits of this larger web of group affiliations include access to resources and support that may not be found within the exclusivity of more insular relationships.

As the energy of members is directed toward communion with other members, social trust increases, leading to social capital and civic engagement. Putnam (2000) found that "social trust is strongly associated with many other forms of civic engagement and social capital" (p.126). He found people who trust their fellow citizens volunteer more often, contribute more to charity, and participate more in community organizations. This pivot from the social capital of personal relationships to broader, civic relationships is the focus of the last section.

#### ***4.3. Civic Engagement***

I found that the philanthropic focus of Corvette clubs was a foundational principle embedded into the structural organization of the club. Most interviewees explained that the choice for fundraising projects is decided democratically by club members. The selection of specific organizations to contribute to reflects the values and social priorities of the members in the club.

Contemporary research on voluntary organizations finds that "Americans believe in giving to the needs they can directly see, feel, and understand" (Wright, 2001, p. 404). It is important for the Corvette clubs to know exactly where their money is going for charitable donations. All of the club members interviewed stated that their club prefers to give on a local level as an investment in their community as opposed to the anonymity of a national or global organization.

For these individual Corvette clubs, fundraising activities are "an opportunity to give back to the community and do something meaningful" (K.Sheldon, personal communication, July 25, 2016). I suggest here that for club members, giving back is an activity that injects meaning into the collective group, similar to the moral responsibility component of brand community structures (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2003). Kim describes the mission of her South Carolina Corvette club:

I think that most all of us in the club feel very blessed with what we have and want to give back to the community. It's a part of when you look at the purpose of our club, the mission statement is 'supporting the heritage of the American sports car and providing support to our communities.' (K. Sheldon, personal communication, August 3, 2015).

Kim's club uses the word "support" to preserve the heritage of the Corvette, and also to describe their efforts to reach out to the local community. The mission implies reciprocity between club and community where providing support reaffirms the club's purpose and existence.

The desire to participate in civic activity in broader terms begins with the Corvette members building satisfying and stable relationships in their own personal lives first. If one does not have self-fulfillment, then the motive for membership in social groups is at risk of becoming completely self-serving, egocentric, and a "what can I get out of it" approach to involvement. Several Corvette owners made it clear that these types of people do not last long within the Corvette community.

All Corvette club members in this study discussed their club's philanthropic mission of helping local communities. The focus of the mission varies per club and includes giving to; domestic violent shelters, cancer research, Ronald McDonald House, wounded veterans, homeless veterans, inner-city youth, orphanages, kids with cancer, fire safety and rescue education, and local SPCA. These missions were found to be an embodiment of Putnam's (2000) premise within bridging social capital that "doing with others leads to doing for others" (p. 23).

Corvette club members expressed the joy and fulfillment they receive through community projects that "make a difference." One example is a Corvette club project in Texas that donates to a local organization for children of incarcerated parents. The club president relays:

The majority of these kids don't have anything. They are being abandoned by family members. We go over there to provide food and pay the light bills. When they graduate from high school, we have a special event where we pick the child up in a Corvette and take them to the graduation exercises. And those kids are so appreciative of what we are doing. The kind of warmth in your heart you experience, you can't hardly find anywhere, I mean it's better than church (C. Cummings, personal communication, September 16, 2015).

This narrative illustrates the reciprocity in group membership. In a broader sense, the civic engagement of the Corvette club extends the benefits of helping these young people so that the entire local community will be more prosperous.

For the Corvette community, members continue to give freely and voluntarily of their time and resources with a substantial amount of satisfaction that they are improving their communities, keeping them safer, and changing lives with many small acts of generosity that add up to a lot in the end. This mission helps to sustain the brand community's purpose and ultimately, exalts the Corvette as the reason why it is all possible.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

In conducting my research, I set out to answer the question, *how does the sacred meaning assigned to the Corvette by Corvette club members facilitate a willingness to participate in community?* Exploration of this car community found the Corvette is a sacred object in the lives of those who consume it. Holt (1995) describes this social involvement of consuming as both inte-

gration and play. Integrating practices include two elements; practices that integrate consumption objects into one's identity as an extension of self (Belk, 1988), and in a reverse manner, consumers reorienting their self-concept so that it aligns with an institutionally defined identity (Solomon, 1983; Zerubavel, 1991). Through my research, I found the Corvette to be both an object of individual identity and also an object that orients people toward the larger social structure of the brand community. The commitment to a Corvette lifestyle forms a pathway to shared commitments and deeper meaning through experiencing this lifestyle with others who have made the same commitment. The play aspect of the Corvette was illustrated through such leisure activities as the car rally, parades, auto-cross events, and car caravans that were relayed by the participants. All activities reconstitute the sacredness of the car for its members, transforming it from a mundane consumer object to one that the consumer forms a relationship with and builds community around.

The three components of brand community are found to be integral to the building of social capital; consciousness of kind, rituals, and shared moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2003). The consciousness of kind is reflected in the construction of the group as family, often with the car's status having somewhat religious qualities. In a broader sense, the values previously found within the traditional institutions of family and religion receive agency through the institutions of leisure and consumer markets. The rituals performed within the Corvette club (meetings, organized leisure, car shows, fundraising) are required to maintain the both the resources and assets the social capital provides. The moral responsibility is found in the social life and philanthropic work of the Corvette clubs. In broader terms, club membership facilitates members' involvement in the public sphere and that participation is central to civil society, which is foundational to democracy.

The findings of this study reveal that new concepts of community are forming through the intersection of leisure and consumer markets. The findings also suggest that "weak ties" formed through consumption of the car fill gaps where neighborly associations have declined in residential community life. For brand loyalists, the deep meaning of the car fosters relationship building and support systems that extend beyond regular leisure activities and form connections that are often long lasting and life changing for members of their local and regional communities.

Given the social nature of Corvette club members, it is difficult to say whether they would find other pathways to form social ties and civic grassroots projects if the brand community was not available. Were they seeking strong relationships to begin with and was the car community a medium through which they could satisfy these emotional desires? Based on my observations and interviews, I propose the Corvette club members have emotional and social needs that they bring to the community. The fulfillment of these relational needs through consumer activity is a collective experience that helps to maintain community and value systems that ground members amidst the bewilderment of a rapidly changing, pluralistic society where the future is uncertain for a car that is symbolic of American culture.

The uncertainty of the Corvette community's longevity brings me to two suggestions for further research. The first suggestion is to study how the current Corvette community with an aging population will be able to pass this passion for the car onto the next generation. Progress on this is reportedly slow as younger people don't share the same history of the car and lack interest in the consumer object as a hobby, much less a lifestyle. The second suggestion for research is one that is essentially untapped, and that is the world of online car clubs. While the focus of this study

shows the social capital that is built through activity and rituals that require physical presence, there are a plethora of online car clubs that offer social utility and knowledge exchange. The growth of social media has helped to bring car enthusiasts together in online forums where they help each other with mechanical questions, searches for cars, and occasionally organize in person leisure activities. How these car enthusiasts interpret social capital may look very different than this study, but nonetheless has the potential to connect larger numbers of people worldwide. In fact, it may be the key to keeping people in the lifestyle without a deep commitment to time and place.

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