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The Digital Driver: An Ethnographic Study of Social Media

Through Car Culture Perspectives

by

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Abstract

In recent decades, there has been strong proliferation in the use of social media through the use of computer technology and the Internet. Subcultures are using the digital spaces offered by social media as a form of expression, communication and engagement between its members. One such subculture is car culture. Through theoretical frameworks of materiality, publics and embodiment, this paper seeks to explore the manner in which car culture uses and adapts to these digital spaces. Based on ethnographic fieldwork within three different population groups within car culture, namely 1) car enthusiasts, 2) social media personalities and 3) car dealerships I aim to explore their narratives of social media usage. Ultimately, the data brought to light by studying these three groups, and car culture in its entirety, will provide insights into the ability which social media has in connecting people and addressing the technological progression of society.

Keywords: Social media, car culture, South Africa, materiality, publics, embodiment, communication, sociality
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Chapter One: Introduction

Sitting at the traffic lights on the main road of Grayston Drive, I noticed that the attention and gaze of the drivers and passengers of the vehicles around me are fixed upon a vehicle patiently sitting a few lanes away. As I tried to steal a glance through the hustle and bustle of pedestrians walking in between the vehicles I spotted a new, iridescently purple coloured sports car. Some pedestrians were admiring the stationary vehicle, whose aerodynamic body panels (such as front bumper splitters, boot spoilers and carbon fibre) glimmered in the sunlight. Many of the onlookers had their mobile phones out, taking pictures and selfies with the car during the moments before the traffic light changed. Without doubt, many of these images landed up on social media, giving the car a second life in the virtual realm, highlighting the emotional significance and how easily people can capture and post content though the use of technologies such as the phone, Internet and indeed social media. In the car’s second life in the virtual realm, many people will congregate around it in the forms of expressing their “likes” and comments, thereby transferring experiences from the actual into the virtual.

Social media has allowed for an exponential growth in connections to occur between individuals in society by linking people with shared interests. Although a relatively “young” development, social media had to go through various forms or iterations of itself in order to become what it is recognized as today. This development in communication has greatly influenced human society and sociality in its entirety. Social media has evolved from simple text based message replies on “primitive” social networking sites such as Myspace and Friendster to the contemporary, highly intuitive and sometimes intrusive forms of text, video and picture applications used today such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (boyd and
Social media in its various forms allows users from different locations, backgrounds and statuses to share in various societal trends. These trends are often preceded by the “hashtag” which has become Internet jargon to create emphasis on a word, thereby increasing its searchability on various social media platforms. However, most importantly social media has the ability to connect different people to the same, shared passions in life simply by searching for “hashtags” (#) related to their interests. These passions could range from food, movies, popular culture or more specifically, the focus of my study, automobiles. Undoubtedly, the images of this iridescent purple car will be adorned with various hashtags transferring its ephemeral actual presence into the virtual realm to exist indefinitely. Examples of trends from the automobile community include but are not limited to #Supercars, #Carsandcoffee and #Carculture. These social media tags allow for new levels of connectivity in creating nexus points for users to experience and assists in transferring experiences from the actual into the virtual. The examples of hashtags above form part of creating searchable terms to experience car culture in online spaces.

My study investigates how South African automotive subcultures use digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as a medium for cultural expression and communication by engaging with other car enthusiasts. This specifically means expression achieved through a sense of belonging that is cultivated through recreating or remaking the physical body and sensual experience in digital spaces. In this way, I have analyzed how the remaking of the sensory and material in digital space, reproduce or alter existing orientations and relationships associated with car culture such as seller-customer relations, car enthusiasts’ understandings of the car and the car world, and ultimately, how the car and its use as the center of this subculture is remade as an object. In doing this, my thesis seeks to contribute to studies of human-object relations and how these are transformed when transferred into the
digital world. In order to explore the above themes, I have visited and explored field sites in both the online and offline spaces. These include YouTube car videos, car forums and multiple car related websites in conjunction with visiting the actual location of car video production, car gatherings and dealerships respectively. Ultimately, I have used this car culture as a means to understand how sociality is affected through new forms of technologically assisted communication such as the Internet and social media.

The Internet and its respective constituents such as social media are one of the primary mechanisms that influence and continue to redefine the practice of democracy (Hart 2010; Miller et al 2016). In other words, social media is able to exemplify the characteristics of free speech afforded to society by democratic ideals. Contrastingly, certain spaces of social media can be used to breed negativity, conflict between people and anti-democratic perspectives as argued by Morozov (2011) and Gladwell (2010) in which they provide a techno-pessimist view on social media and question its ability to be a positive tool for enhancing human communication. I argue that social media has become a new “third” space characterized by these democratic ideals described by Kosselleck (2012), Habermas (1974) and Warner (2002). Hart (2010) has argued that subcultures use the Internet as a form of expression between their members that transcend physical boundaries, meaning that the virtual space of the Internet has allowed for people from around the world to unite around shared objects such as the car and connect with other like-minded individuals. This expression further refers to how subcultures use the Internet as a medium for exhibition which does not depend on geographical location. For example, people in South Africa are able to follow and keep up to date with the events happening in the European car culture scene without physically being present there.
The car is said to be a unique way of socializing and networking with the world (Olga and Sutton-Brady 2006: 212) which is exhibited on social media through the common interest car enthusiasts can have around the car itself. The characteristic of cars as a means for networking is important because the car itself has become a medium through which socialization and a sense of ‘communitas’ can occur. Whilst cars are fundamental to questions of transport, scholarly literature is increasingly understanding their centrality to social life (Olga and Sutton-Brady 2006: 212). Sheller (2003), Sheller and Urry (2004), Olga and Sutton-Brady (2006) to name a few have written about cars and the emotional attachment people can have towards cars, often describing how members within the car culture community obtain economic and social status through the buying and/or selling of the car. In this thesis, I build on that by looking at how social media can bring car enthusiasts together and transfer the actual experiences of this culture into the virtual world and vice-versa. Therefore, I am enquiring about the link between social media and cars in building belonging.

To track the transformation of human-object relations and the remaking of “car culture”, my study focuses on the translation of the physical or sensory nature of the automotive subculture into the digital landscape of social media. In doing this, the study investigates how automotive institutions and individuals are using social media and technology as a whole to increase their exposure and promote shared interests between its members. The relevance of this study is important due to 1) existing literature within Anthropology and Science and Technology Studies by Miller et al (2016); Boellstorff (2012) and Jordan (2009) to name a few, placing great importance on the understanding of social media and the creation of the digital persona replicating our physical self; 2) current features of importance such as the material and emotional value of cars as objects (Kopytoff 1987; Sheller 2003; Olga and
Sutton-Brady 2006) and advertising techniques employed by car culture in the local car culture scene and the global arena. These features are important because they emphasize the characteristics of sharing, networking and the increasing dominance of technology and online socialization.

One of the primary methods through which the automotive subculture is experienced is through the sensorial – in other words, via sight, smell, hearing and experiences of the body such as touch because it is a highly physical, sensory and visceral culture. These sensory experiences are now being transmitted through the digital landscape of Facebook and YouTube amongst others through the use of video, sound clips and other similar forms in an attempt to re-create the “sensory” nature of this subculture. Given that human life and society are being increasingly digitized, this transference of the sensory into the digital realm suggests the need to reconsider existing anthropological understandings of socialization and the body. For example, ideas that need to be reconsidered are embodiment, phenomenology and socialization within digital or cyber spaces.

I am also interested in analyzing how a subculture such as car culture is able to unite and bring people together based on the shared interest and passion of the ‘car.’ Sheller (2003: 3) argues that “cars are above all machines that move people, but they do so in many senses of the word”, suggesting that the car is able to move or “transport” people both physically and emotionally. This emotional “movement” of people is crucial to understand as it is a key for understanding how collectivity is produced via the object of the car. This statement by Sheller (2003) is one that I find particularly pertinent as the car itself has different symbolisms to different people. The car has been attributed multiple meanings and symbols of liberation, status and wealth (Jeske 2016; Olga and Sutton-Brady 2006). These meanings are particularly important within the South African landscape as cars are held in high regard.
often equivalent to a person’s social status and can even represent a method through which people can travel between social classes (Jeske 2016).

One of this study’s primary contributions is to focus on the workings of the automotive subculture in relation to the digital landscape, particularly within the South African context. However, apart from literature used to understand cars as transport and items within the infrastructure network, cars are important material objects in South African culture as demonstrated in the work by Jeske (2016) in which she explores the value of cars as the new form of social capital which equates to individual hierarchy on a societal level especially with the new generation of South Africans. When viewed in relation to larger ideas such as embodiment and the remaking of the body in the digital realm, the relevance of my study is strengthened by highlighting how actual, physical experiences of social interaction and communication are transferred into the virtual. This is because as digital spaces are being held with the same importance as physical reality (Boellstorff 2012), the representation of the body and how we as a society are able to embody such a space should be understood in relation to Anthropology of the Body and theories of transhumanism.

1.1) Methods and Fieldsites

The aim of this thesis was to understand how car culture was being altered through the rise of digital media by tracking how experience and the sensory was being reconfigured. This was done through exploring how the sensory experience was remade and represented in its transference from the physical realm into the virtual.
This thesis is the culmination of approximately six months of fieldwork. These six months were split roughly between three field sites at which I spent approximately two months each. These field sites were chosen to provide a holistic overview of car culture in the Johannesburg area and to allow me to understand the differences between “real world” car culture and its links and transformation in the digital realm. Firstly, I spent time with car enthusiasts in and around the Johannesburg area exploring their narratives and experiences of car culture by visiting them during car shows and time dedicated to their hobbies whenever their schedule would allow. Secondly, I explored various car related social media sites to understand general feelings, emotions and trends within the online car culture community. Car enthusiasts and personal experiences guided my choice of social media sites, with me generally choosing the ones with the most car related content. The final fieldsite was a car dealership in an affluent area of Johannesburg that trades with new and used car sales which also focuses on the accessorizing and manufacturer-approved modifications of that particular brand of motor vehicle. At the dealership, I spent time with an old friend, Shaun. Shaun epitomizes the “textbook” definition of a car enthusiast and he has combined his personal and work life as he works for a car dealership.

My interlocutors’ narratives express how social media is able to occupy an increasing presence in enthusiasts’ lives by allowing for more expressive and immersive nexus points between participants within the larger community of car culture. The use of narratives gathered from different members within society has often been a powerful form of inquiry to reflect larger societal conditions (Polletta 2006). Connections formed between these members are based on the shared materiality and symbolism of the car itself which is brought to the fore by social media. Whilst social media interactions primarily occur in “online” digital spaces, the physical space of “offline” spaces still hold tremendous value in nurturing the
sensory experience of the car and subsequent relationships formed as a direct result of a collective group image. Holistically, social media and computer technology has radically affected the way in which humans socialize and understanding this effect is another objective of this paper (Miller et al. 2016; boyd and Ellison 2007; McArthur 2009).

1.1.1) Ethnography

One of the primary methods I used was participant observations in order to develop a rich ethnography. The stories and lived experiences that various people possess provide a wealth of information for those researchers willing to tap into it. These experiences are often transferred through verbal forms making the nature of information itself very ephemeral if left undocumented (Benjamin 1969). The positionality of a researcher is also crucial to explore as only through full immersion in the lived experiences of both the researcher and research group can meaningful ideas be brought to light (Markham 2012). The idea of positionality is important because I am a car enthusiast and a highly active social media user as well. As social media is seen as a requirement in contemporary societal life (Miller et al. 2016), I found that my own experiences on social media exploring car culture would prove to be useful. Hence the use of autobiographical ethnography (Reed-Danahay 2011) or auto-ethnographic method has also helped my position as a researcher as the data which I’ve discovered, is mirrored by many other members who share in this subculture as well. Auto-ethnography occurs when researchers integrate their own perspectives and narratives into their research (Reed-Danahay 2011). As ethnography is successful upon a trustworthy contact to allow access into certain spaces (Markham 2012), I would interact with contacts with whom I’ve had previous experiences with in my personal time when frequenting car events and dealerships alike. It proved useful for interesting data to be gathered as my intermediaries were keen to discuss all things car and social media related.
At the car events I attended, I would observe the behaviour of the car enthusiasts who attended the event – noticing their reactions to cars and the manner in which they would document their experiences at the events. I would also take note of the locations at which these events occurred. However, for each chapter, I largely decided to focus on a single particular event or space as it made for greater descriptive detail to be understood. Whilst details from multiple events and locations I had attended were included to show that some themes being explored were felt across a wider variety of car enthusiasts, the focusing on singular events allowed for greater contextual understanding of the perspectives of my participants. For example, in Chapter Three, The Social Driver, although I provided a detailed description of a single car event, I would make reference to other events I had attended to show the similarities and contrasting details of different car enthusiast gatherings as well as highlight that certain ideas are shared by different people within car culture in its entirety.

In terms of conducting ethnography and participant observation online, I searched for countless weeks to located appropriate car channels, profiles and sites which I thought could be fruitful to my study which showed a multiple traits of car culture as will be seen in the upcoming ethnographic chapters. Whilst I did not receive much feedback from the ten social media profiles I reached out to, there were five profiles who initially which replied and was keen to participate in my study. These five profiles then reduced to three after the owners of the profiles simply stopped contacting me. After studying their video output and listening to the perspectives of these profiles, I would apply their data to my own opinions as well (Reed-Danahay 2011).
During my time in the field at a car dealership, anonymized as Flash Motors, I would often visit this dealership three times a week to observe the “daily life” of the objects (cars) and people who worked there. With particular reference to Shaun, my contact and friend at Flash Motors, a car dealership at which I conducted my fieldwork, he revealed the inner workings of that particular car dealership. Through his influence at this car dealership, he introduced me to further participants in the form of his colleagues, who helped me to discover and understand the deeper implications and practices of social media within the South African car culture scene. These implications and practices were something that I found deeply interesting due to my own positionality as a car enthusiast and avid social media user. I attributed this to “industry knowledge” that is only known by professionals such as car parts and social media managers to name a few who work within the industry. Without ethnographic methods, I would not have been able to learn and be aware of this industry knowledge as it is not made known to the general public. The ethnographic method proved to bear the proverbial fruit once more during second chapter of this paper as it helped me to realize that cars do hold incredibly profound material and intrinsic places in the lives of enthusiasts, which would have passed by relatively unnoticed if it weren’t for experiencing car events with my chosen participants, or rather, enthusiasts.

1.1.2) Interviews

When conducting qualitative research, like I have done in this thesis, understanding the lives and meaning of experiences is important to consider. Hence, the practice of interviews should be conducted (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007). In terms of the fifteen people I interviewed they were all car enthusiasts. In some cases, their enthusiasm and passion for cars would diffuse into their profession, as seen in Chapter Five, meaning my participants would work in the car industry and be passionate about cars too. All of my participants were relatively
young in age and could effectively understand and interpret the implication of social media. In order to fully discover what my participant’s perspectives were on their experiences of social media and subculture as a whole, I ensured that I would set a mutually beneficial time to conduct a 30-minute interview to fully conceptualize what their perspectives were. These interviews were conducted over a six-month period from January 2018 to June 2018. The interviews took place at the workplace of my participants or at car events, if it suited my participants to do so.

Whilst the interview process was not as clear cut as it theoretically seems, some of the difficulties I encountered were disturbances my participant and I would experience. These would range from urgent work calls being received during interviews especially among the car enthusiasts of Chapter Three. Particularly, when interviewing the enthusiast who worked at the car dealers in Chapter Five, one interview got interrupted several times due to continuous phone calls about aftermarket car parts and service information. At the car events I attended, it would be chaotic and noisy as there would be cars with loud exhausts and people screaming in joy and awe at the cars which it made difficult to maintain a clear train of thought at times. A well-balanced interview schedule was necessary for an effective interview as I was analyzing the transference of actual experiences into the virtual world.

The types of questions asked addressed both aspects of social media and the car. Firstly, the questions around social media dealt with its effectiveness in representing car culture, the experience of social media and how easy was it use to use social media. Secondly, in terms of questions of the car, I would ask about the meaning of cars, how well this culture adapted to social media and so on. The full set of interview questions are attached as an appendix to this paper. The interview questions generated data rich answers and perspectives. Data generated from interviews would be highly informative and personal but it was also data with which I
related to, as a car enthusiast and avid social media user myself. Once the interview process concluded, I would ensure to transcribe the data and thematically arrange the data into ideas of materiality, social media, publics and embodiment so as to better understand the perspectives and opinions of my participants. These interview questions were developed to explore the narratives and perspectives of both social media usage and the material significance of the car to my participants (Žikić 2007).

1.1.3) Viewing of Car Culture Related Material on Social Media

As described above, through auto-ethnographic methods I would explore my own experiences in this culture. Hence through the countless hours I’ve spent viewing and participating in car culture in virtual spaces, I was able to share and experience phenomena and larger themes presented in videos of car culture. I would often watch and re-watch videos several times to notice ideas or themes not overtly present at the initial viewing of the video. This would often be time consuming and monotonous but necessary to explore the subtle nuances in the videos. I would also frequent approximately five car related websites to understand and contextualize some of the data brought to light in the interview process. A key issue I encountered was when participation observation was used I had to maintain a balanced viewpoint in terms of researching my participants’ channels and profiles with them actively being aware that I would use certain elements of their profiles such as pictures or screenshots of videos. I had to be careful to not “lurk” (Leander and McKim 2003) and misconstrue information about their profiles which could be misinterpreted if understood out of context. Misinterpreting the meaning of posts, statuses and videos can be easy to do so in the virtual space as there is often no “verifying” authority to validate claims on the Internet. This forces me as a researcher to not fabricate further information by taking information about claims made in statuses or videos out of context (Markham 2012). There are challenges
posed when ensuring the validity of the identity of online participants, in terms of how certain are we, as researchers that our participants are who they say they are, as the Internet and social media allows for heightened levels of identity as there is a lack of face to face interaction (Morey et al 2012; McArthur 2009).

1.2) Ethics

Ethics should always be adhered to at any stage of research (Kvale 1996). In order to ensure the anonymity of my participants and their place of work, I have used pseudonyms unless they were willing to use their real names. I have also renamed the dealership at which I had conducted field work to “Flash Motors.” Further, as this dealership is a premier dealership of a well-known luxury and performance orientated car manufacturer, I have also renamed this brand as “Flash Cars” in order to offer increased anonymity and identity protection to my participants. Since all my meetings could only be conducted with the awareness of my intermediary, all my chosen participants were aware that I would be conducting research in their presence. Their full consent was given in terms of recording their responses to any questions that arose.

As I was in a professional environment working with a well-known, premier dealership I ensured maintaining a good level of professionalism as I not only represented myself but also my supervisor and my institution. A commitment to this level of conduct was made through an informed consent form which was signed by each participant. After each day in the field, I would return home to transfer my findings onto my secure, password controlled computer to store and analyze my findings. Consent forms were kept in a secure storage facility at my residence for a time frame of approximately eight to twelve months after my fieldwork concluded. When fieldwork was conducted with online groups, I anonymized all participants
details in terms of the use of pseudonyms in place of their birth names and screen names on social media. Also, any identifying feature in their profile pictures was edited out to ensure full anonymity and protection of the confidentiality and identity of my participants. Further, information and consent forms which described the purpose of my research, institutional affiliation and similar information was either given to my participants in paper form or emailed to them which was signed by them and returned to me to ensure informed consent. This information and consent sheet further described how participation in my study was voluntary with no remuneration in any form (economic or otherwise) and so on. The full information and consent form is attached as appendix at the end of this paper. Ethical conditions such as the ones mentioned above should always be adhered to particularly in offline spaces, but as human life and sociality in terms of communication and expression is becoming increasingly mediated (Miller et al 2016), there needs to be additional ethical requirements for virtual research.

As computer technology, the Internet and social media has evolved, it has become a repository for human knowledge and interaction (Rathje 1979; Grassby 2005; Morey et al 2012). With information constantly being created, uploaded and shared, it forces a re-thinking of ethical issues surrounding the collection and use of this information (Diebel-Fischer in Dobrick et al 2018). Whilst traditional ethical requirements such as assured anonymity, informed consent and confidentiality should always be adhered to under any research circumstances (Kvale 1996), these requirements are further built upon in social media research. The Internet is described both as a private and public space; as such, the researcher should be careful to maintain the correct observational distance and not probe too deeply or shallowly into the participants lives (Lange 2012). Additionally, the idea of identity protection is pertinent as there are many avenues of identification available such as profile
pictures, handles or user names, email and contact information and even linked profiles where a participant links all or one of their social media profiles together for easy references and viewing (Morey et al 2012). Ethics are important in both the actual and vital aspects, but there are some challenges which ethics cannot prepare a researcher for.

As time progressed throughout my fieldwork, I would often remind myself of my interaction and relationship with the above mentioned intermediary as it always proved to be source of inspiration I needed to continue with my research. Seeing the motivation and passion Shaun had for his job and his love for the car itself has always been a critical source of reflection in my own work as well. After the multiple phone calls I made to other participants who promised to “get back to me” and being made many unfulfilled promises, I realized that many people often work not for the passion they have for car culture but rather see it as a “job” or task to complete for the day, whether it be car detailers, aftermarket tuners and indeed enthusiasts. It is rare to find those who embody their job much like Shaun did. Lastly, as an avid social media user and car enthusiast myself, I had to ensure that my positionality still remained that of a researcher with unbiased viewpoints and perspectives (Holmes and Marcus 2008) because it was easy to immerse myself in virtual spaces and employ various car culture jargon, describing information to potential readers of this thesis.

1.3) Structure of Thesis

I must emphasize the way in which these chapters are structured based on an interconnected relationship between the three car culture groups I have chosen. This is due to the fact that many car enthusiasts often use social media to explore and indulge in their passion of the car by watching videos, reviews and engaging with other enthusiasts through social media. Car
enthusiasts also use social media to find car events that they would like to attend. Eventually, once the enthusiasts have viewed all available information on social media about particular cars or modifications, it will translate into many of them going into dealerships to experience the actual aspect of car culture in terms of buying the car or car accessories they viewed on the virtual space of the Internet.

Chapter One introduced my topic of research, rationale and niche of study as well as describing my research methods in terms of data collection and analysis and ethical conditions.

Chapter Two conceptualizes the themes which I have identified to be prevalent in this study namely, materiality, social media, publics and embodiment through cyborgism and transhumanism.

Chapter Three focuses on a car event called Supercar Sunday which I attended that was organized solely via social media. In this chapter, I observe the happenings of this car event as well as speaking to a group of car enthusiasts. In this chapter, the relationship between online and offline worlds are explored in the creation of a cyborg public.

Chapter Four is a study of online personalities on the popular special media site of YouTube in addition with the perspectives of a different group of car enthusiasts from the previous chapter. It is important to consider these enthusiasts perspectives as they form part of the primary demographic who use social media to indulge in car culture. This chapter argues that the transference of experiences from the actual into the virtual is aided by sensorial aspects further improving ideas of virtual embodiment.
Chapter Five focuses on my experience at a particular car dealership, called Flash Motors which, with the input of an old friend of mine, shows me the daily routine of the dealership as well as sharing some of his own and his colleagues perspectives on social media. This chapter argues that car dealerships are the actual sites where the materiality of the car is transferred into the virtual space.

Lastly, chapter six concludes my arguments presented in chapters three, four and five. I also concisely sum up my ideas of social media use by car culture.

In order to fully conceptualize the themes which I have identified to be prevalent in this study namely, materiality, social media, publics and embodiment through cyborgism and transhumanism, the following literature will build the bedrock of this study by understanding what other authors have written about the aforementioned themes. Additionally, I will further explore current discussions ‘trending’ in the field of social media studies and digital anthropology in the upcoming literature review chapter.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

My study of the remaking of materiality, the car and the role of social media and technology in online South African automotive subcultures draws on and contributes to the following literature 1) Material culture 2) Social Media 3) Publics and 4) Embodiment with an emphasis on cyborgism and transhumanism. These themes have formed the conceptual bedrock of my study and will be fundamental to explore within this thesis.

2.1) Materiality: A Focus on the Car and The Digital

In contemporary society, material culture encompasses acquisition of wealth, possession and can also refer to technology and forms of digital innovation such as social media and associated forms of virtual interaction (Billington 2001: 220). Material culture specifically refers to items of everyday consumption ranging from desks, books and computers etcetera to the focus of this study, cars. Through the use and interaction between these everyday objects, the idea of materiality is expressed through the linkages and usage of these material objects (Appadurai 2015; Ingold 2007; Grassby 2005). For example, objects such as the Internet, social media and the car can be said to have material value based on the physical properties they possess, that is, they can be touched and interacted with via tools such as computers, keyboards and the human body. Further, the interaction between people allowed by the materiality of objects such as cars generates “followings” or subcultures allowing for additional specialized expression of human interests centered around the material significance of cars (Miller et al 2016).
Subcultures craft uniquely encultured spaces in a sense that they create their own norms, values and beliefs based on a common link to material objects between its members. An example of this is how the car subculture instills norms and values of respect, admiration and a collective identity between its members (Sahakian and Wilhite 2014). The ownership of certain types of cars also creates a notion of elitism or hierarchy of status. Within the context of this research, material culture often must have an aspect of tangibility, though, with the use of technology this “tangibility” takes on new meaning (Miller 1995: 149). As the automotive subculture moves into an online space, it transforms the tactile or sensory nature of this subculture becoming somewhat non-material as it cannot be felt. However, senses such as sight, hearing and to an extent, imagination are often employed in order to regain some of the physical tangibility that is lost in the online space. For example, in videos or pictures displaying this subculture, certain types of music and phrases are used to elevate and counteract the lack of sensory feeling and in doing so, promote the norms of this subculture mentioned earlier. The use of these videos and media forms are closely linked in relation to technology which forces material culture to be re-assessed in contemporary society.

Whilst the central focus of this study is understanding the impact that social media and technology have on people’s lives, we should still place a great deal of importance on the medium through which we are studying this impact. The automobile or “car” as it is simply known has long been a form of transport to people, carrying people to places of work, leisure and social interaction (Warde 2005; Urry 2004). However, cars have always had deeper subliminal connotations attached to them (Sheller and Urry 2000). Connotations of wealth, status, and liberty amongst others are key factors which attract people to this subculture (Sheller 2003). For example, the ownership of a modern, efficient car creates a reflection that the owner of the car is modern and in a higher social class (Wolfe 2010). Car manufacturers
have always looked for innovative ways to exhibit and market their product which, in the contemporary moment, has led them to attempt to harness the power of social media as it has become a story-telling space for car brands, manufacturers and ultimately, the people for whom these products are built to engage and share in the symbolism of the car (Lutz 2015). Further, Jeske (2016) argues that cars have been attributed such a high social status which is transferred and shared with the owner or driver of the car, as a result cars have become commodified as cultural objects with tremendous social and monetary value. The occurrence of the commodification of material objects, in this case, the car, is explored by Kopytoff (1986) as the value an object acquires in its social or material “life” directly correlates to the value it has as both an object of materiality and an object of meaning. In other words, an object becomes a commodity in society firstly, based on its existential value as it (the object) has been produced within society and secondly, as a symbol of a shared meaning or significance. The example of the car can be applied to Kopytoff’s understanding of commoditization as the car has a monetary or economic value as it has been produced through processes of manufacture such as metal work, electronic components and paint work. These manufacturing characteristics assist in creating the social value of cars as it is the manner through which the way the metal, electronics and paint all combine to stir a reaction in society (Sheller and Urry 2000; Wolfe 2010; Jeske 2016), more specifically, the subculture of car enthusiasts. Through the expressive medium of social media, car culture uses this production value and characteristics of cars to exhibit themselves on social media and engage round the object of the car. Consequently many car enthusiasts choose to share pictures or videos of their cars on social media based on the idea that cars are valuable commodities both socially and materially, which I will use to build upon to understand how car culture is adapting to social media.
The accessibility to computer technology has allowed and resulted in continual participation in digital culture allowing for materiality to extend and diffuse into the virtual world. This means that people are always accessing or able to access information they require around them such as shopping malls, restaurants, hospitals and so on. Jordan (2009) describes this as a “hybrid world” which she defines as, “a world where a person’s identity, experiences and life possibilities begin to integrate physical and virtual faces of existence so that consciousness is to some extent shared between an offline physical and an online virtual self” (Jordan 2009: 181). Her statement is pertinent as it addresses the growing lacunae in understanding human-digital interaction. This is because the boundaries between the physical or actual and the digital or virtual is continuing to fade (Jordan 2009: 181). For example, in the early days of computer technology people were confined or restricted to a single location to access a sizeable computer and Internet. However, as Internet and computer technology has developed, people now can roam around freely whilst still having the same if not more computing power and accessibility to information through mobile device such as cellphones (Miller et al 2016; McArthur 2009; Shah 2008). Whilst saying that technology is changing society to a virtually connected one, there are still physical aspects such as the technology itself, ranging forms servers, networks to the electricity which ultimately powers such technology (Jordan 2009:181).

Miller and Horst (2012) argues the importance of materiality in digital anthropology. They describe how cultural dialogues are often based on objectification. In other words, cultures assign meaning to objects in their surroundings to help create a value based system of their cultural practices. In other words, the social value of the object, like a car, is both created and maintained by the importance of that object, similar to Kopytoff’s (1986) idea of commoditization in which material objects acquire value, based on the way they were created
and their meaning to people. Within the study of digital anthropology, understanding this value based system can be challenging at times. Miller and Horst (2012) and Knox and Walford (2016) argue that there are three different criteria which are present and become the foundation for understanding the materiality of digital anthropology. Firstly, the materiality of digital infrastructure and technology refers to the actual hardware components such as computers, tablets and electricity that are used to create digital content. Secondly, the “realness” of digital content implies that the content such as videos, texts and blogs have a sense of “materiality” as they are produced through real items such as video cameras, computers and other similar devices and input such as keys being typed on a keyboard through human effort. Lastly, the ideas surrounding context in digital spaces which refers to how space and place is brought to the fore in understanding how the network of computers around the world can be used to share information and experiences of each different user ad infinitum. In other words, computer networks help to transfer the materiality of actual spaces into the virtual through the endless replication and sharing of information via the Internet and social media. These three founding “rules” of understanding the materiality of digital culture within anthropology is crucial in terms of validating the tangibility of virtual spaces in relation to the rising importance of technology within modern society (Miller and Horst 2012). In terms of my own study, the purpose of this thesis, these three rules are mediums through which digital content can be captured, replicated and eventually shared across the Internet and social media. Latour’s (2005) Actor Network Theory is evident through the manner in which the interaction between digital and physical spaces occur, through the use of keyboards, computer monitors and networks of computers and the people who use these computer hardware and network devices.
Actor-Network Theory is a theory put forth by Latour (2005) which aims to describe the relationship between humans and non-human objects by redefining and reassembling previously thought notions of “society” through questioning the historical preference given to humans as agents and through this, rethinking the role of objects in the making of social life. In this theory, humans and non-humans are both referred to as mediators based on the situational relationship they exist within (Latour 2005: 9). Mediators, as Latour defines them, are objects (human or non-human) which can radically change or affect the outcomes of relational processes. This theory is useful to explore and understand the relation between humans and their surroundings, particularly with the ever-increasing presence of technology and its effect on human behaviour. Within the context of my study, humans both influence and are influenced by technology in the forms of social media, computers and other mobile devices and to a certain extent the automobile itself. There is a plethora of layered symbolisms and interactions which will be explored in depth in the ethnographic chapters of this paper. For example, car enthusiasts are drawn to the car which is a mediator for the interactions and relations with other car enthusiasts who then post this car into the online space, exponentially opening up the possibility of further relations to occur amongst this collective of car enthusiast gathered around social media pages, videos and profiles exhibiting car culture. These interactions and relations can take place simultaneously between the real world and virtual world.

With the multiple relations and interactions between computer devices, digital spaces and humans there needs to be a clearer understanding of what is meant by actual and virtual. Boellstorff (2012) eloquently puts forth a clear talking point within the digital anthropology field. He questions the dichotomy between what the real and the virtual is and the connotations of each respectively, ultimately showing that the materiality of the real world is
able to be transferred into the virtual world whilst still holding the same material value during this transference. Firstly, he argues that there exists a reciprocal relationship between the virtual and actual in which they both help to create and exist within each other. Boellstorff extends this into his second argument that the virtual and actual are amalgamating into a single “hybrid” field. In his first argument mentioned above, he states that academic studies should not use the term “physical” to describe offline experiences as this delegitimizes and reduces the importance of online worlds as it suggests that the online worlds are to a certain degree “fake” or immaterial. Rather, the term “actual” should be used to describe this offline world as it suggests a degree of realness and embodied experiences (Boellstorff 2012: 40). He then proposes that in order to understand digital communities, the approach of anthropology should not refer to the digital as the final object of enquiry but rather a methodological approach to understand how things or people themselves are becoming digitalized (Boellstorff 2012: 40). The boundaries between the virtual and actual worlds have become blurred to such an extent that these virtual worlds should be held in the same importance as work, family and leisure spheres of life (Lehdonvirta 2010: 41). The idea of blurring of actual and virtual space is further supported by Haraway (2010) as she argues that the notion of the digital and the notion of the human should not be used to explain and understand each other in isolation but rather, used together to explore the new affordances that computer technology creates for human society in terms of greater reach across geographical boundaries, access to information and the transference of materiality between actual and virtual spaces. A key device in blurring these boundaries mentioned above is social media, which will now be explored in detail.

2.2) Digital Worlds and Social Media
Social media is defined according to boyd and Ellison (2007: 211) as, “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-bounded system; articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. This statement refers to how social media is formed and centered around a series of connections between different individuals based on shared interests and common factors. A characteristic of social media is that the majority of connections take place on the Internet, in other words, a digital/online space or public. Herlea and Weber (2002: 31) argue that the Internet is now central to the proliferation and maintenance of social relations in contemporary society. These two ideas by boyd and Ellison (2007) and Herlea and Weber (2002) both share the same intrinsic idea. This idea is that social media and consequently the Internet, is a medium through which people can connect and engage with other people based in a shared interest on personal or societal affairs such as the development of new cars, subsequently becoming a space for subcultures to occupy.

McArthur (2009) highlights the role the Internet plays in catering to the needs of subcultures. He describes how the Internet aids in creating a space where individuals who are interested in certain subcultures can meet people with the same interests (McArthur 2009: 62). McArthur also provides some negative aspects to socialization on the Internet due to a lack of “media richness”. He describes this as a form of drama or action associated with physical, face-to-face interaction. On the Internet, such media richness is not commonly present when reading articles or texts. The Internet helps to create a new space for the socialization of subcultures, in which it transfers behaviours of face-to-face interaction into a non-actual space if understood using Boellstorff’s (2012) approach of understanding the virtual and actual.
Many scholars, building off Schumpeter’s (1975) theory of “creative destruction” in which he argues that capitalism entails the destruction of existing skills and professions to make way for ones that serve new industries and practices of profit-making, have argued that the rise of social media entails a similar logic of disruption for social relationships. DeNicola (2012: 83), for example, suggests that consumers of digital content can play important roles in creating the content which they can consume, rather than the predominant media institutions such a television and radio stations. Her argument is built on investigating how social media in the forms of YouTube, Vimeo and Facebook to name a few have disrupted the way people received their entertainment content. People who would traditionally resort to cable and satellite television for entertainment, now use the Internet and social media platforms instead, as they have the ability to tailor-make their viewing preferences which are continually populated and maintained by the active algorithms in the social media platforms. These platforms negotiate around the intense political and social control that traditional television is subject to whilst various YouTube personalities are able to have “creative liberty” in their content where they upload and exhibit any content as they see suitable. However, the users are still subject to general community guidelines stipulated by their chosen social media platform to maintain a “safe” representation of their ideas and content, nevertheless, social media has allowed for greater avenues to upload and exhibit individual content (Coleman 2010: 492). This shift to a new form of content creation must be emphasized particularly in recent times because of the re-assessment of traditional societal centers of knowledge production (for example television companies) to more inclusive participatory knowledge production in the form of general citizens creating social media pages filled with their own content (Stockl 2003: 75). In simple terms, there is a shift in the way content is produced to be “by the people, for the people” which results in a more accessible media source for creators to exhibit their work (DeNicola 2012: 83).
The idea of decentralization is paralleled in the work of Kohler et al (2011) in their idea of “co-creation”. They describe it to be when the consumers play an active role and create value together with a company (Kohler et al 2011: 773). They attribute this co-creation to the Internet because of the capability to connect with various users and consumers, it has allowed these companies to draw upon the innovation and potential that consumers have for creating better content for other users and the company in its entirety as well (Kohler et al 2011: 773). These content co-creators have the task of bridging actual and virtual worlds, often blurring boundaries between the two. Using the literature in this paragraph, I will think through how my chosen car enthusiasts and content creators participate in the virtual aspect of car culture, as there are many new relationships formed around the car in the virtual space of websites and social media.

As social media is becoming more common place, the contextual situations in which it used is placed under scrutiny. Miller et al (2016) analyze how social media has been changed by the world and vice versa. Miller et al discuss and analyze various theories that have contributed to the understanding of social media. They describe how social media companies are “capitalist corporations and therefore likely to promote such values” (Miller et al 2016: 13), thereby implying that social media is likely to promote values such as the acquisition of wealth and material objects to name a few. The authors are concerned that the geographical reach of social media means that such values would spread beyond the places which have generated them to other locations (Miller et al 2016: 13). DiMaggio (2014) parallels these ideas as he describes that technology, namely the Internet is a dynamic evolving medium which is a direct result of the environment around it. In other words, although social media is a result of technological advances, it is also subject to changes in economic and political
environment present in society (DiMaggio 2014: 10). For example, in China due to stricter governmental rules on Internet freedom, there has been a locally developed social media platform called “QQ” which is an instant messaging service. It has a huge following and user-count specifically in the region of China, whereas it is unknown on a global level (Miller et al 2016: 14). Understanding specialized groups formed through social media is particularly useful as social media serves as a platform for the creation and exhibition of specialized groups. Consequently, a key by-product of context specific spaces is the formation of “memes” which are in continual creation throughout the digital space of social media.

An interesting occurrence that has been proliferating across various Internet sites and the subcultures that are present in these spaces, is the presence of “memes”. Various subcultures have used these “memes” as a unique form of specialized expression. Whilst difficult to define, Shifman (2013) proposes a ubiquitous definition. He defines memes to be the sharing of jokes, rumors, videos or even websites between people on the Internet (Shifman 2013: 362). His definition proves to be appropriate as many people often share viral pictures, jokes and videos of current societal trends between people mainly found on the Internet. Shifman goes on to explain that memes have three basic qualities that contribute to understanding digital spaces and indeed, digital anthropology as a whole. Firstly, memes are a cultural phenomenon that begins with a single person eventually spreading to a larger social sensation. Consequently, memes help to shape and reflect the broader mindset of society, based on the conditions in which these memes are proliferated, for example elections, sporting tournaments to various subcultures alike. Secondly, memes are created through forms of imitation and reproduction, meaning that the content of memes are often taken or “plagiarized” from other sources simply due to the fact of the exponential number of Internet users generating the same type of content. Lastly, the “survival” of memes are based on how relevant they are and the ability they have to adapt to the social, political and digital
environment around them (Shifman 2013: 365). Subcultures have applied the above three qualities to create specialized memes based on their own characteristics, for example various groups within car culture creates their own “meme-identity” such as mechanical memes, racecar memes and more general car memes to express their group interest and identity. As the subject matter of memes can deal with a vast variety of broad topics and subtopics within many different subcultures present in the virtual space of social media, it is important to note that the meanings of these memes are highly dependent and based on the context, spaces or “publics” it is used in as seen in the various memes about cars and car culture seen around the Internet.

Within the South African context, a large number of social media and Internet technology users favour their wireless devices such as cellphones to access the virtual spaces discussed above. In a recent survey conducted by Fin24 (2017), their data revealed that 87.5% of people accessed social media through mobile devices, which was further broken down into sixteen million people accessing Facebook and eight million people accessing Twitter. It is not only ordinary citizens using social media but also large brands which have taken to using digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In a survey of one hundred and eighteen companies, 97% of these companies use Facebook as their main form of advertising due to the reach and penetration it has in connecting with potential customers. Therefore, the use of computer technology helps to explore and connect with new material objects of cultural and social significance such as cars.

The transformation of sociality is evident among many users of social media who spend a considerable amount of time in online car forums and viewing car culture related videos thereby creating online communities. DiMaggio (2014) strengthens this argument by suggesting that the Internet is a form of advanced industrial democracy through which
intellectual and creative rights are emphasized and made more easily available to those who seek to create and share information. It is this ‘neo-democracy’ which continually demands new methods of understanding society through technology and the people who use it. DiMaggio suggests a crucial point of reflection about the impact of technology, especially since technology is being adapted and molded more and more in daily life by governmental regimes and bureaucratic organizations. “Technological change, inflected by economic incentives and regulatory constraint, guarantees that today’s Internet will be as remote by 2025 as the Internet of 2000 seems today” (DiMaggio 2014: 10). Consequently, there is tremendous amount of social and technological power embedded within the Internet, evident in the number of people who use the Internet and social media with close to 2.13 billion number of active users on Facebook alone (Fin24 2017). Resultantly, the effect the Internet can have on these various cultures lie on the border between catastrophic and euphoric in a sense that technology and social media can become forms of stricter governmental control through the monitoring of each person’s history and location movements to the unparalleled way that people can communicate and share in the “human-ness” of the lived experience of a variety of cultures. DiMaggio (2010: 14) then raises an imperative point that the “Internet’s future cultural impact is both uncertain and ours to make”.

2.3) Publics

As the human footprint is ever expanding into different spaces, the occupation of virtual territories comes to the fore. Through social media, computer technology has been at the forefront of redefining what society’s understanding of space is, particularly within the digital landscape and consequently, the effects computer technology has on the actual world. Gupta and Ferguson (2012) argue that people’s understanding of space is a socially constructed
experience. With this definition in mind, communities of people can form in varying arenas, spaces or “publics”. Publics are important to understand as a tool through which digital communication technology such as social media allows for access to virtual spaces and helps to transfer experiences from the actual into the virtual (Boellstorff 2012; McArthur 2009). According to Habermas (1974) the public sphere does not occur in a specific place and has the ability to host virtual or imaginary communities. His definition describes how groups can create “public” spaces which do not have a specific location or position. These publics come into existence solely based on the need of such a space. These public spaces can be used for a variety of purposes. These purposes include sharing mutual interests, discussing these interests and eventually, reaching socially or morally acceptable conclusions about such interests. Habermas (1974) states that in order for a public to exist, it must meet three characteristics. Firstly, this is that it must be formed based on a communal opinion or need. Secondly, each and every citizen must have access to it in one form or another. Thirdly, it must be a space of freedom and safety meaning that each person can express their thoughts without fear of retaliation (Habermas 1974). Postill (2012) builds on Habermas’ idea of the public sphere through developing the concept of ‘digital democracy’. In using this term, he describes how social media platforms facilitate new forms of free speech, and opportunities for people to engage with others in discussion. Through a variety of digital social media platforms, people are able to exercise their right to free speech, engage with others in discussion and reach a consensus about differing ideals. Castells (2010) further explains how communication whether it be in the physical (face-to face) or virtual, forms the building block for any cultural movement. The creation of networks in both physical and virtual forms surrounding various cultural movements who continually engage and participate in this shared cultural interest has become the apex characteristic of contemporary society (Castells in Postill 2012: 168). With particular relevance to my study, social media has become a
discursive space or public in which the interaction of car enthusiasts is transferred from the actual into the virtual with the goal of discussing and sharing in car culture with other enthusiasts. With this in mind, the principles of spaces come to the fore.

Koselleck (2012) mirrors the ideas of Habermas however, he is more concerned with ideas concerning political ideologies. The most important characteristic of his work is the idea of a public and private sphere owned by different social classes. He describes how certain elite members of state create their own public space. In contrast, he also describes a public space, which is “owned” by each member of society where they can express their individuality. This idea is crucial for my study as it describes how members of society can create their own spaces such as social media sites and YouTube channels to express their individuality and share their personal views on car culture (Koselleck in Isenberg 2012:4). As will be seen in my ethnographic chapters, social media personalities have taken the general space of YouTube and creatively embodied this space by creating unique expressions through their videos in terms of aesthetic (visual and auditory) appeal.

Through this aesthetic appeal, the idea of publics have a subjective meaning. Warner (2002) suggests a fluid and dynamic meaning of publics as its meaning can change depending on the context it is in by arguing that “publics have become an essential fact of the social landscape, yet it would tax our understanding to say exactly what they are” (Warner 2002: 413). In his work, he describes the occurrence of three different forms of public presence. Firstly, publics as a form of totality and entirety refers to the general population of people which make up society. Secondly, a public which is shared by different spaces and presences which is consequently aware of the group identity present (Warner 2002: 413). The third different form of public, one which I find particularly pertinent is a public that is brought into
existence based on highly specific and context dependent items such as book clubs, texts, university meetings and so on. Warner then goes on to state the boundaries between these three forms of publics which are not clearly defined and can often overlap with each other by saying, “the distinctions among these three senses are not always sharp, and are not simply the difference between oral and written texts” (Warner 2002: 413).

Warner goes further into the specific characteristics which contribute to our understanding of publics. He states that a public is self-organized. This means that a public is able to arrange and establish itself based on the nature of knowledge and stories being shared (Warner 2002: 414). Also, a public is a relation amongst strangers which refers to the ability of certain types of discourse and story-telling to create a sense of group identity amongst participants even if their individual identities are not known (Warner 2002: 414). A public is constituted through mere attention, meaning that a public only exists and is created due to the fact that it will reach members of the society either intentionally or unintentionally. (Warner 2002: 419). The idea that publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation is important to understand as this refers to how certain public groups and discourse are subject to time dependent outcomes (Warner 2002: 421). Lastly, a public is a poetic world making, referring to how publics aim to re-tell the world to its participants in different ways which will connect with the participant in order for the public group to continue its existence and gain more participants (Warner 2002: 422).

The ideas discussed by Warner are particularly important when considering the nature of my study. Warner’s ideas provide a tool for understanding how automotive communities – or rather publics – are created through digital media. The focus on the anonymous and unknown consumer of the digital content nevertheless being drawn into a sphere of mutual belonging,
iterates Warner’s argument that publics are produced through the circulation of specific ideas and discourses rather than pre-existing them. Online videos tell a story and showcase car culture to a global community of strangers which creates a collective group identity. Also, these videos only exist due to the fact that people want to participate and watch such a culture. As these videos exist on the Internet, they will exist and be present in the online space for some time and continually be able for viewing/interaction and perpetuate the automotive culture ‘public’ in the online space.

The idea of publics is particularly important in the digital realm as there are great concerns about how humans express and embody themselves in the virtual arena. Many users often choose to limit their personal information to certain friends, networks or in some cases, no one at all and applications or social media platforms can differ greatly with regards to their intended audience, users and “reach”. This “reach” or influence is sometimes referred to as ‘scalable sociality’ (Miller et al 2016). Scalable sociality refers to how different social media platforms are used based on their intended “target audience” and how wide of an influence the users of particular social networks are able to share their stories with (Miller et al 2016: 9). Furthermore, this idea lends itself to the dichotomy between online and offline spaces discussed above by Boellstorff (2012) and Haraway (2010). In other words, there are ongoing debates about whether we should regard the online space with the same importance with that of the offline space (reality) because many people often lead different lives or personas based on these differing spaces. The virtual public of social media has tremendously increased inter-human communication. Lange (2008) focuses on understanding sociality within the social media platform of YouTube. She shows how online video sharing communities create an affinity between users or rather a sense of connection between people with the same interests regardless of geographical position (Lange 2008: 363). This affinity has a strong
relationship to the idea of “publics” with specific reference to how it is created and maintained between people. The ways that content such as videos or messages are accessed reveal a lot about the individual and their interests. Further, the ways which this content is then shared amongst their network also provides interesting insights into the dichotomy between public and private (Lange 2008: 363), highlighting the level of embodiment which humans can experience.

Consequently, the Internet and social media is of great interest to many researchers, myself included because in contemporary society, a significant amount of our socialization takes place online, and our online activity is generally steadily increasing. “When the study of the Internet began people commonly talked about two worlds: the virtual and the real. By now it is very evident that there is no such distinction-the online is just as real as the offline” (Boellstorff 2012: 40). In other words, online activities should be granted equal weight to that of offline or ‘real’ interactions. Further strengthening Boellstorff’s reasoning to hold virtual worlds in high regard is the argument Miller et al. (2016: 6) make in the sense that “social media has already become such an integral part of everyday life that it makes no sense to see it as separate. In the same way no one today would regard a telephone conversation as taking place in a separate world from ‘real life’” (Miller et al. 2016: 6). Their statements show how there is no clear distinction separating the offline and online worlds afforded to society by computer technology. Many people interested in car culture spend many hours viewing videos, visiting websites to partake in this culture and often replicate certain ideas that appeal to them such as sound systems or aftermarket wheels. In this process, they often create relationships with the people who are supplying and presenting such ideas originally which is mirrored in the following statement, “social media should be regarded rather as a place where many of us spend part of our lives. As a result, the study of social media is as much one of
sociality as of communication” (Miller et al 2016: 7). As this “sociality through virtual communication” increases, actual geographic boundaries begin to fade away, resulting in communication on a global scale through virtual means allowing for participation in the global virtual car culture public.

2.4) Embodiment and Cyborgs

As publics are continually created and expressed through tools such as the Internet, people essentially form and constitute this space to negotiate bodily experiences of communication. As Gupta and Ferguson (2012) describe how peoples understanding of space is a socially constructed experience, it is crucial to explore how the body is able to negotiate through the different experiences within society. The idea of embodiment deals with how we, as humans experience our lives through many levels of understanding, actions and practices. According to Desjarlais and Throop (2011: 89) embodiment is defined as the bodily aspects of human beings’ subjectivity. They argue that our bodies are vessels through which we experience our surroundings and the larger world. These experiences show significant cultural differences across space and time (Classen 1997). Online platforms transform the possibilities of embodiment as we cannot take our physical body with us into cyberspace but rather, we can project ourselves through our uploads, comments and “likes” on various social media.

Therefore, our profiles themselves become an embodied self in digital spaces. The ability that technology creates for an embodied digital experience is eloquently put forth by Murray and Sixsmith (2003: 75) argue that, “the body, the story goes, remains docked, immobile at the interface, while the mind wanders the pixelled delights of the computer programmers'. This statement has pertinent ramifications particularly as regards to the ability that social media
has to allow its users to virtually experience and traverse a global community of shared interests whilst being geographically fixed in a single actual place. DiMaggio (2014: 9) further contrasts this by stating that the Internet does not become a space where we create new versions of ourselves but rather it exposes who we really are, as he states, “technologies don’t change us. They provide affordances to allow us to be ourselves, to the things we like or need to do more easily”.

It is also important to understand that there are multiple “bodies” one can possess in society because the ownership of these “bodies” are often influenced through a mutually exclusive relationship between each other. According to Scheper Hughes and Lock (1987) these are the individual body or private body we possess that we use to go about our lives, the social body which refers to the community around us, consisting of our peers, colleagues and so on. Lastly, the larger body politick which refers to governmental institutions and global organizations. Each of these three bodies has an interconnected relationship with one another and therefore affect how each can be embodied. For example, large global car companies build enthralling cars which garner important cult-like statuses in society, which ultimately creates a need to own such as cars on an individual level. Their theoretical framework lends itself to ideas of scalable sociality discussed by Miller et al (2016) as it questions how much an impact we want our online selves to have within our social circles or beyond. Stockl (2003) argues that a sense of community achieved through shared interests located within the digital space of social media can positively contribute to a person’s sense of belonging which ultimately helps to inform that persons identity (Stockl 2003: 72). As their newfound “digital identities” are formed, people need to continually monitor and “tinker” with their perceived incarnation or “avatar” through mobile technologies.
Through this digital identity a new, virtually embodied persona, reminiscent of a cyborg is created. Donna Haraway has brought to light issues surrounding cyborgism and a cyborg reality. In “The Cyborg Manifesto” she defines the cyborg as, “A cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 1991: 291). In other words, a cyborg is perceived to be an amalgam of human and technology – both virtual and analogue, often existing in the liminal space between reality and imagination. She argues that this amalgam is often created through real and imagined realities of human consciousness. For her, combining the human and technology suggests a beneficial relationship which can elevate peoples lived sensation and experience. As part of her work Haraway investigates the implications of a breakdown between the boundaries separating organisms and machines, as well as the breakdown of the physical versus the non-physical. It is this latter issue which my thesis particularly seeks to extend and built upon. The transfer of car experiences from the actual to the virtual entails, arguably, the construction of a cyborg car enthusiast and space as being part of the community now constitutes bridging the virtual and the actual, the physical and the non-physical, as well as the organic and the machine. The concept of the cyborg therefore assists in understanding the transformations of sociality and subjectivity when people are able to hear and see car culture on social media via computer screens or mobile devices but they cannot actually touch or feel the aspects of the car like the body panels, interior or engine components.

Through the cyborg identity, a person can create an alternate version in the embodied space of the Internet. In the work by Shah (2008) he further adds to our understanding of a cyborg reality. He analyzes how the ‘cyborg’ exists in a variety of spheres. He argues that with the increasing ownership of electronic devices such as cellphones, tablets and laptops, humans have continual access to informational resources to make their physical and online presence
available to fellow humans. This then allows humans to continually interact with a variety of both offline and online spaces. Through the use of these digital technologies, the human body can be liberated from its own physical limitations and embody new spaces regardless of the physical body’s position in health, mind or society (Shah 2008:213). The idea of digital embodiment is further reflected by Bull’s (2012) work where it is suggested that continual access to digital spaces through mobile technology provides a new medium of liberation for the body. Liberation afforded by computer technology can, however, also negatively affect the user as it desensitizes them to their immediate surroundings in favour of a remote, digital location (Bull in DeNicola 2012: 82). The ability the body has to occupy distant places enhances the footprint of the human experiences, creating a new stage in understanding what being human entails.

Transhumanism in simple terms, is a stage of societal transformation marked by a human body in transition – that is, moving between an analogue existence to that of highly connected, computer and Internet technology dependent existence (Whitehead and Wesch 2012). My thesis makes use of transhumanist approaches as a means to understand how the idea of human-ness is changing through socialization in digital spaces as a result of the proliferation of computer technology such as the Internet and social media. Whitehead and Wesch (2012: 132) refer to transhumanism as, “a growing body of literature and theory that deals with computer-mediated human interaction, where imagination and sensation extend beyond the reach of the human body.” Their definition refers to how the human body is extended across physical and geographical boundaries due to the increasing role of technology in the mediation of human interactions (Whitehead and Wesch 2012). Transhumanism serves to explain contemporary changes in relation to how technology is affecting our understanding of embodying spheres of family, sociality and well-being by
analyzing the increasingly digitalized nature of these spheres. For example, families are now in continual contact with each other through mobile devices such as cell phones, rendering geographical distances easy to mitigate and communication easy to occur. These changes, Whitehead and Wesch (2012: 132) argue, are a product of a society that spends a growing amount of time in virtual spaces which become a primary means of communication and social interaction.

Contemporary literature therefore emphasizes the significance of the virtual world in remaking our notions of materiality, publics, the body and the human. As this thesis will show, these insights are particularly important for understanding motoring culture as a whole. The materiality of actual and virtual spaces accessible through technology and the significance of the car has been looked at. Additionally, characteristics of social media – the new public space which the human body can engage in through virtual embodiment has been brought to the fore. This thesis builds upon these scholars work by using their insights to understand how the car in its actual and virtual lives enables the formation of gathering points around it, new communication channels between people, and through that sheds light onto the implications of technology assisted sociality on human communication via social media.
Chapter Three: The Social Driver: Publics and Car Enthusiasts

A chance encounter with a friend, Hope, at the gym sparked the purpose of this chapter. Hope, known as the “car guy” in my social circle has always posted car related content on social media. During the years I have known him, he often invited me to accompany him to car events and finally, I decided to tag along. He had found out about an event, a “Supercar Sunday” to be held at an upmarket shopping centre in the north of Johannesburg on a Facebook group which he was a member of. Hope’s offer reinforced what my research had increasingly suggested – that social media was playing a major role in mobilizing car enthusiasts to engage in their passions by forming a part of the car culture public. Due to a tough economic climate, many people cannot afford to buy such high-end supercars. Social media therefore enabled the creation of a digital public whose members could experience these cars on both the local and international arenas. Seeing these high-end supercars in reality by getting to touch, hear and smell them, provides a sensorial satisfaction to the enthusiasts which become a notable memory in their lives. The posting of car events, was just one example of the crossover of the virtual and actual publics, the increasingly cyborg nature of car enthusiasts social circles and the very object of their attention – the car. This chapter argues that car events form specialized public spaces of car enthusiasts and the car itself by exploring how an object such as a car can have ascribed meanings to car enthusiasts through the transformation of experiences to create a cyborg extension afforded by the car and social media by exploring the personal narratives of car enthusiasts focusing on one event called Supercar Sunday.
3.1) Supercar Sunday – A Public of Car Enthusiasts

The car as an object has deep rooted symbolic meanings of wealth, status and freedom within enthusiasts lives, and in South Africa has come to powerfully index a person’s status in the country’s social hierarchy (Jeske 2016). Car events and gatherings such as Supercar Sunday events, “ShowNShine” (an event focused on exhibition where cars were parked in car parks or exhibition centers to show levels of customizations through reupholstering interiors, upgrading sound systems and detail to which paint and car cleanliness was maintained) and events of showcasing cars between different countries such as “GerVJap” (an event held annually focusing on showcasing cars made in Germany and Japan) served as spaces to exhibit car culture and its different aspects ranging from supercars, race cars to modified and standard cars.

In order to gain higher exposure to the general public of car enthusiasts, the above-mentioned events are often advertised on social media and can even be arranged and organized solely via social media. Enthusiasts interested in showcasing their cars and being part of the event can email or ‘direct message’ the organizers of the event asking for participation. If there are strict rules for participation, such as the ownership of a supercar such a Ferrari, Bentley or Lamborghini, then the organizers of the event might sometimes ask for pictures of the car and maybe an ownership title to allow participation in the event. When applying for one such event called Cars&Coffee, Perry, the owner of a highly personalized and modified BMW M3 had sent a participation request through to the organizers via social media but was unfortunately rejected due to high levels of applications to participate in the event. He mentioned to me that the particular reason for his rejection was that there were already too
many BMW M3’s booked for that event and the organizers wished to maintain a balance of a variety of other cars. Building upon the theoretical framework of publics using the works of Kosselleck (2012), Warner (2002) and Habermas (2004) to name a few, this chapter discusses how these car events such as Supercar Sunday exhibit strong theoretical examples of the creation of hyper-localized spaces. Further, the fluid meaning of space and understanding the people who use these spaces based on a communal requirement will be scrutinized using the works of the above authors.

The Supercar Sunday event was being held at an upmarket indoor/outdoor shopping center situated a stone’s throw away from the economic hub of Johannesburg in the Sandton area. On a normal day, the space where the car event was being staged was usually an open courtyard area that people could walk across to the different restaurants and shops. The area was also, however, used to host other social events, such as when the shopping centre demarcated areas for children to play on jumping castles and jungle gyms. On the day of Supercar Sunday, the roads leading up to the courtyard were cordoned off, restricting access to the cars entering the event. Dedicated security guards ensured that this access control was closely adhered to. Once the cars had “passed” this security checkpoint, the organizers helped to direct, guide and park the cars in the courtyard, maintaining professionalism and a neat layout of parking the cars. I arrived at the event early so I could watch the kaleidoscopic colours of cars. Red and yellow Ferraris, purple and blue McLarens, black and white BMWs and green Aston Martins arrived with drivers enthralling the public with audible delights in the form of a few well timed and thunder-escque ‘revs’ of their engines. There were a few people strolling around the courtyard,
with their cellphones whipped out already taking pictures of the cars rolling in and also joining in on the compulsory “SundaySelfie” craze. Some dedicated professionals walked through the show with high-end camera equipment, drones and camera attachments in order to document the event. People from a variety of backgrounds attended; avid car enthusiasts as well as the casual shopping centre visitor walked through the foyer to observe what was happening. This wide spectrum of event attendees is characteristic of Kosselleck’s (2012) idea of a public dedicated to the different social classes and backgrounds where members from the working class can see and partake in the culture of the elite by having a sensorial experience of the cars the elite drive thereby blurring the dichotomy between various social classes, ultimately improving relations between all members of society based on the symbolism and meaning that the car invokes. I overheard a very friendly and warm conversation between a professional photographer and the owner of a Porsche in which they were organizing a private photoshoot at a racetrack in the south of Johannesburg – validating the unification brought about the car between different backgrounds of people. Whilst I waited for the many high-end luxury and performance cars to arrive and park, I spoke to my participants, whom I’ve arranged to meet at this event.
I met some old friends by the name of Ush, a young graduate professional, dressed sharply in a VW Golf GTi polo shirt and fashion conscious jeans which had many purpose made rips and tears in them. He was accompanied by Bams, a middle-aged single dad of one child, dressed in cargo shorts and an oversized shirt and Des who is Ush’s brother casually dressed.
in a tracksuit and t-shirt. Lastly, Hope, dressed in his finest Converse All Stars with jeans and formal shirt who eludes an aura of street knowledge as he was always in the ‘know’ of where the biggest and most important car ‘meets’ were happening. All of the above are male participants who have massive hearts for anything with an engine. This group of friends who work together at a software consulting company often spend most of their time at work, looking at different car pages on social media when their schedule allowed. These friends described how they discovered this Supercar Sunday event through a post of a premier dealership which ‘popped’ up on Hope’s social media feed. After the obligatory greetings and ‘catch up’ I told them what my current research objective was hence my Supercar Sunday attendance and they agreed to share some of their perspectives, depicting some themes of publics to follow.

3.2) Social Media: The Call Sign of the New Age Car Public

Whilst we were standing at a fruit juice bar located in the middle of the foyer, conversing about general car culture topics and future car events, we noticed how many people were already taking pictures with their phones and cameras, which eventually would be posted on social media. I found this behaviour of mobile phone usage and cameras common place at almost all of the car events I attended ranging from the humble Friday evening mall rooftop gathering to the intricately planned Sunday event such as this Supercar Sunday. However, I found it interesting to see the sheer number of people taking pictures of the cars on display at this event. I attributed this to the fact that this event specifically dealt with Supercars such as Ferraris, McLarens and so on – cars that are out of reach to the ordinary citizen or enthusiast due to exorbitant prices. Certain Ferraris start off with a price of five million Rand, hence there was an increased need to document the experiences of this event via the use of phones
and cameras, as enthusiasts were keen to be photographed with an expensive car that they usually would not be able to have contact with.

Our conversation lent itself to the increasing role that social media was playing in our lives and socialization through mobilizing gatherings of people to share, participate and attend events around communal items such as the car. Asking this group of car enthusiasts about perceived trends and the ease at which car culture adapts to social media, they focused on questions of access to information through the Internet. Ush was one of the first to offer up a response, suggesting that, “When I was in school we just got Internet in 1998-2000. It wasn’t as big as it was now. In that sense we couldn’t see as much as we can now. Now you can see almost everything you want to. From a market point of view you can play on people’s emotions.” In Ush’s response, the reach that social media has was brought to the fore. He suggested that prior to social media access to information and the world was more difficult. People had to rely on other forms of communication such as radio and television. According to Ush, social media has created a new way to connect with the rest of society and indulge in their passions, something which car manufacturers used to their advantage. This new form of connection appeared very similar to what social theory has historically understood to be a “public” – a non-identifiable, non-location based space that has been created by the needs of people for a such a space to exist (Habermas 2004). In other words, spaces such as these do not have any static, fixed characteristics definitions of existence, but rather a dynamic meaning based on the characteristic of people who need them. Ush’s answer was further enhanced by Bams who described car culture’s ability to use social media,

I don’t think it’s car culture specifically, everything in general become much easier to share. The days are gone when you had to drive to a persons house to find out an answer. Technology has advanced so much that you can be across the world and I can remap your car, because the Internet is connecting everyone. Days are gone where you had to wait three months for the guys to look at your car and fix it. You dial up and cars are changing and evolving in such a manner where you can remote into the
car without being there. We also can share our experiences. People are hesitant to buy a product without knowing what the repercussions are. From a consumer perspective, you don’t buy a car if you don’t your homework or do a review on it. So, social media enables us as the consumer to make better decisions, so these guys reviewed the car saying “X” and “Z” is clunky or maybe friends post that the car is not standard as “X” is clunky, it makes your decisions easy and more structured where you can walk into a dealership and the salesperson is going to talk ‘bullshit’ and tell you what phenomenal stuff the car has and two months later the car has a problem.

Bams reply above revealed that in his opinion, society as a whole was adapting to the growing presence of social media not only in car culture. Also, the fact that if a car was based in South Africa, the manufacturer or tuner based in Germany could remotely access your car through wireless technology to conduct Over-The-Air (OTA) updates for performance or engine error codes, showing that actual geographic locations are not as important as it once was. Overall, Bams interpretation of social media was positive as he suggested that social media helped to inform the consumer about their favourite cars and shared stories about ownership and driving experiences of other cars by making it easier for enthusiasts to engage with other enthusiasts when it came to buying advice or maintenance issues, strengthening social media’s ability to create specialized publics.

Both Bams and Ush’s statement in highlighting the importance of online reviews in making purchasing decisions, or the role of online marketers in driving emotions, begin to indicate the importance of the virtual in the creation of a car enthusiast public. Castell’s (2010) has argued that information technologies have produced a world where time and space are no longer forms of separation, instead through technologies such as social media platforms, people across the globe can interact with those in a different geographic region who share similar interests. While neither Ush or Bams dwelled on these transnational dimensions in their discussions, their allusions to quick access to information and the importance of the online in shaping decisions, suggests that the car enthusiast public is being pushed beyond
geographical limits. This then not only reinforces Dirksen’s (2005) argument that social media allows for global access to expert knowledge, but enables the beginning of a rethinking of the publics. Both Warner (2002) and Kosselleck (2012) argue that publics or “forums” emerge when people are united by a specialized interest. This is the same for car enthusiasts who require information about issues such as clunky gearboxes or new tuning techniques. They now increasingly turn to online forums to find the information they require. Social media with a specific locus on car-related pages on groups, have become liberal spaces of free speech and knowledge dissemination and engaging discussions to occur, thereby allowing for the emergence, this chapter argues, of cyborg publics that stretch across space and time. Cyborg publics involve a mixture or hybrid between the actual and virtual worlds as seen in the actual Supercar Sunday event that was solely organized via social media.

While some scholars might argue that the use of social media is not substantively different from previous means of communication (Miller et al. 2016; boyd and Ellison 2008), the actual enthusiasts felt that this was not the case particularly when forming part of a new cyborg public. Reflecting on this, Hope argued,

What other way would we to speak about things in a forum or have debate or conversation without using social media? It is difficult to use old fashion ways such as newspaper or word of mouth. Firstly, not everyone has the same thing and for you to get the right info can be difficult. Using old ways won’t hit home as easy as social media. Everyone I know loves cars, everyone I grew up with loves cars and if there’s something we like I’ll post it and we just grab onto that. For example, the Ford Kuga burns so easily we found out on social media. With the Ford Kuga, it was bad, sales plunged, cars were recalled, and people took lawyers to go fight. Once it’s out there on social media you can’t control it. If this were to happen through the newspaper we would find out eventually but not as quick. What happened was people took those cars back, traded it in, it went viral. Social media makes things go viral.

Hope’s answer revealed the ease at which communication was made possible by social media in ways which he felt older media could not achieve, bringing people together in new ways. His social circle all value cars as important material objects in their lives which they were
able to engage with through social media as they grew up by connecting and experience elements of car culture such as memes and jokes with other car enthusiasts within South Africa and around the world. Hope mentioned social media helped to facilitate public discussion (or even ridicule) about trending topics directly correlating to purpose of publics in reaching conclusions about social topics as described by Habermas (2004). This new capacity of social media to bind people through the virtual world was seen in the rise of memes and jokes in the wake of the discovery that the Ford Kuga had a high risk of suddenly catching alight due to a manufacturing defect. These virtual links had effects in the actual world, where after people on social media posted humorous and hurtful comments about the brand, many owners of such vehicles felt compelled to exchange the Kuga for another car. This was also taken note of by the manufacturer, Ford, which announced on social media that it would recall the Kuga for repairs. It also became a trending topic on various social media platforms at the time. Hope’s answer was profound because it described the impact social media can have on a brand’s image, particularly when that particular brand was associated with negative connotations such as poor workmanship or build quality.

As we talked about the Ford Kuga easily burning down, Hope showed us a “meme” of the Kuga which made our friend group erupt in some snickering. As the car enthusiast public deals with highly context specific discussions about cars, the emergence of ‘memes’ depicting trending topics within car culture have developed. The idea of topics that become a “viral sensation” or “meme” is explained by Shifman (2013) in which he likens societal phenomena to infectious cell disease which in order to survive need to replicate and attach themselves to new hosts. In this way, when things go viral, often in the form of a meme it spreads rapidly through society, eventually reaching saturation once this trend is over, as seen in the memes of the Ford Kuga.
Hope described how societal phenomena, in this case, the burning of the Ford Kuga had spread to such an extent that even non-car enthusiasts were aware of the Kuga’s design flaw. The idea of specialized communication and language or jargon, such as car parts like turbos, intercoolers and car model names like the “Kuga” used in car culture memes further increase the embodied feeling. The special jargon of the car enthusiasts meant that only they could fully access the complete embodied experience of the car, feeling as Csordas (2004) has argued that language pulled one into the body.” In addition, theoretical aspects of publics come to the fore in the sense that social media and car sites have allowed for a greater sense of communication to occur between enthusiasts (Warner 2002), as viewed in the sharing and discussions of memes between enthusiasts in both the online forum (Facebook, Twitter etc.) where these memes are displayed and the offline space such as these car gatherings like Supercar Sunday, ShowNShine and GerVJap to name a few.

Figure 2: A meme “mocking” the Ford Kuga’s ease of burning, which was shown to us by Hope.

Picture Credit: Unknown
The above responses highlighted certain ramifications of mockery and social ridicule which could ultimately impact on a car manufacturer's sales and profitability. Further ramifications were explored by Ush and Des which could either be good or bad as highlighted in the following comments: “Negative aspects of sharing stuff on social media could be that crime syndicates could see what people have, their locations etc. Positives could be more sales for companies, things go viral. If you see something – you want it more. People are influenced easily.” Des described, “Negative opinions from an individual could possibly be transferred to other individuals. Also, flaws in engineering of a specific vehicle may be mocked upon.”

Their replies provided a more ‘ominous’ insight into social media. This was because as people who continually posted their accomplishments in life such as new cars, televisions and homes, people with malevolent ideas would seek to cause harm to the people posting their accomplishments. It was by pure coincidence that as Ush and Des were sharing their opinion about the posting of valuable information on social media with me, we noticed a plainly marked BMW approaching with VIP (Very Important Person) Protection Services written on the doors approach the event, followed by an ultra-rare (and ultra-valuable) Ferrari entering the courtyard. We remarked that the driver of the Ferrari must be a high net worth individual in order to require personalized protection as evident at his arrival at the event, whilst we all looked wide eyed in amazement at this rare Ferrari passing before our eyes.

On the contrary however, Ush said if people saw posts about their passions in life it would serve as motivation to help them achieve such material objects such as cars, televisions and houses etcetera. Hence, cars could hold a deep material significance to their owners or admirers as many people often aspired to own various cars. In this case, many people attended this Supercar Sunday event as many of the cars on display are out of reach for the
ordinary person, hence events like these Supercar Sundays and others like “ShowNShine” to name a few, gave people an opportunity to experience the sight, sounds and smell of their “aspirations.” In the works of Sheller (2003) and Olga and Sutton-Brady (2006), the above material significance of cars is emphasized as cars are not only a form of transport, but rather a material object which causes deep and meaningful emotions and passion within people.

The above information mentioned by Ush and Des both have a strong correlation to the ability information in its various forms (such as positive and negatives) to diffuse and spread across people who are members in the car culture public, as put forth by McDonough (2014) through is understanding of the flow and diffusion of information. Further, as Gupta and Ferguson (2012) describe how our ideas of space is socially constructed, the way in which information is created, shared and understood is based on the people who occupy or create localized spaces. An example of this is how people interpret posts as a measure to see and be envious over the possessions of people in terms of cars, houses and so on as mentioned by Ush and Des’ in their replies above.

Bams, contrasted the perspectives put forth by Ush and Des above by describing social media and the levels of connectivity and communication it affords car culture by creating a cyborg public in a more positive manner:

It joins so many people together that has the same passion and hobby. Even if you can’t afford that lifestyle or car, you can still watch your favourites by logging on YouTube. Days are gone where you have pictures on the wall you can now interact with the car. You have a 360 degree camera angle to interact with it. You don’t necessarily have that particular car or a car in general to be an enthusiast or to give advice. It’s a very open area. It’s not a racial thing – same principle as music where everyone can listen to it whether you are ten or fifty whatever as long you passionate about something. Social media brings it together. Not everyone has the answers but if you take two hundred million people on social media that loves cars and out their answers together you'll have a super car with no problems. It wasn’t possible ten, fifteen or even a hundred years ago – what I’m seeing is the same as a guy in Japan, America or small town that just has Internet.
Bams words illustrates Dirksen’s (2006) idea that the Internet and ultimately, social media has created an open platform for people around the world to share their knowledge and even gain input from industry experts. Further, the theoretical perspectives of publics is present as the Internet has allowed for specialized spaces for the dissemination of information to occur between members within that space, as seen in the manner in which Bams acquired the knowledge on how to fix his own car (Habermas 2004). Further, the car itself becomes a mediator in creating relationships between enthusiasts, ultimately creating a public of enthusiasts focused around the value and attraction of the car.

As Bams was sharing his response with me, he would point at some enthusiasts attending the events and illustrate his answers of the unity which cars provide by showing how the owners of Ferraris and McLarens would be talking to and engaging with other enthusiasts about their cars and showing them around their cars. I decided to test Bams idea of unity and ventured out to chat to the owner of a vivid blue McLaren, with whom I spent close to ten minutes informally chatting as if we’ve known each other for years. We spoke about how his McLaren was built bespoke to his specifications for him. My interaction was proof that cars unite people as we share a common interest in the car itself, attracted to the freedom it offers and power of the design and engineering elements. If it was not for social media sharing the invite to such an event – Supercar Sunday, then I would not have been able to participate in this new cyborg public of interactions suggested in the virtual, enacted out in the actual.

As enthusiasts are able to connect with other car enthusiasts and industry experts from varying backgrounds and social classes, via the use of computer technology, it could be said that the network of relationships explode as a result. In other words, each car enthusiast becomes a node in the interconnected web made possible through computer technology such
as social media which is depicted by Latour’s (2005) Actor Network Theory. Latour highlights how there are many relationships each individual shares with the environment around them ranging from the computer they use, to the object they are viewing on said computer to the human at the end of this relational linkage. Further, the interconnected relation between people and the objects around them are important to understand in terms of publics as relationships emerge along the chain of interaction of car culture between people, cars and social media. In other words, car enthusiasts are now able to use objects such as computers (and the Internet) to experience their passion, in this case, cars and ultimately form relationships based on this shared connection to the car with other car enthusiasts around the world. However, this theory also poses the question of whether the car and relationships formed around it existed even though it wasn’t being shared on social media. However, as humans always shared a link to other human in one form or another, these relationships were formed based on driving to people’s houses, putting out advertisements on radio and newspapers in order to build relationships on the commonality of the car. Social media has created a new cyborg public in terms of reaching a variety of people, through affordable means, ultimately resulting in mass participation of car events as seen in the multitude of people who attend such events.

3.3) Creating A Digital Car Public

After we walked around the Supercar Sunday event, discussing the various cars parked on display and reminiscing about various videos we saw on social media, we debated whether there were any challenges in creating content for social media.

Bams noticed the number of people walking around the event with numerous camera gear and mounts which informs his holistic reply: “Internet ‘tech’ enables us to do so much more
these days, trending videos of GoPro’s including side cameras and drones, cars etc. You can
do whatever you want to- even create content that has no constraints.” Bams highlighted how
there is creative liberty in terms of creating content especially as the immersive angles a
person can use to capture first-person point of view perspectives which is possible through
the use of body mounted cameras etc. The enhancement of human ability to document their
surroundings is reminiscent of a transhumanist agenda whereby humans are now using
technology to enhance our “basic” ability such as sight and memory through the use of
cameras suggesting a form of transhuman enhancement where he is located in a digital space
which further extends his reach as a car enthusiast. Whitehead and Wesch (2012) argue that
technological advancements such as these cameras drastically improves what humans can see
and remember due to the specialized camera lenses and memory cards improving on our
biological functions of sight and memory. Further, Haraway’s (1991) emphatic definition of a
cyborg, “a hybrid of flesh and machine” is also evident in Bams’ description in the sense that
through the use of wearable camera devices we enhance our basic senses allowing us to
embody a larger and more detailed habitat to engage in our passions, that is, car culture in
this scenario. The use of such camera equipment is highly symbolic of the extent to which
technology was being employed to enhance documentation of our surroundings and
propagating the idea of cyborgs and transhumanism, as our bodies have formed part of the
camera technology itself, further blurring notions of the actual and virtual as content such as
pictures and videos of these supercars are uploaded into the virtual public whilst the car event
was still taking place in actuality.

As we walked around the event, we were indulged in a variety of high end cars for our eyes
to feast upon. The shear variety of car manufactures from McLaren, Ferrari, Aston Marin to
the classic Alfa Romeo’s of the 1980’s all garnered attention, from young to old, everyone
was engaged in discussion about the cars around them, taking pictures and chatting with a few friendly owners willing to engage in discussion. As we further strolled past the classic Alfa Romeo, suddenly a few attendees rushed over to the Ferrari parked a few rows over in the courtyard. As we wondered what the reason for this could possibly be, our ears were delighted with a high pitched, sonorous wail signaling the Ferrari had indeed been fired into life. This audible delight was short lived as the owner of the Ferrari was about the leave event as it was nearing lunch time, showing the ability the body has in experiencing the world around us through our senses. The Ferrari itself dramatically allowed its owner to show off his presence through its exhaust note and aesthetic appeal – directly showing how the human body can extend its presence through material items creating a cyborg identity within this public of car enthusiasts. After a moment of appreciation, my participants and I went to have a quick lunch so we could get back to indulging our passion for cars. Whilst we waited for lunch to arrive, I had a few moments to reflect on my fieldwork up to that moment.

During my research, I had attended many car events like the Supercar Sunday, and they all tended to be broadly similar. As with the other events, a restricted area had been created where a number of luxury cars - Ferraris, Bentley, and Lamborghinis - were on display to a group of adulating onlookers. At a few events, people were allowed to get inside, and many behaved as if they could imagine driving the vehicle. However, at this Supercar Sunday event, majority of the supercars remained locked with people allowed to peer through the windows to gain a view into the interior. Perry, who was there with his BMW, allowed some enthusiasts to sit in the car and to take pictures of the interior. Perry mentioned that the point of events like these was to create a space or public which allowed enthusiasts to physically engage and get a tangible feel of their “dream” supercars and not detract from the experience of these cars. Conceptually, cyborg publics enable certain kinds of access and embodied
interactions with cars, which are sometimes incredibly hard to access in the actual world with high value cars like Ferrari, Lamborghini and so on. Enthusiasts can interact with certain cars in the virtual space of social media and car dealership pages, but it is the tangibility of actually seeing and experiencing the car with the body is a key reason why enthusiasts attended such car events.

After lunch, Hope described how the general public do not really see advertisements on television and newspapers for these high-end cars, conceptually highlighting the material value of higher-end cars and embodied aspects of ownership. Hope gave an insightful response arguing both sides of the automobile scale of everyday affordability versus upper echelon exclusivity,

How do you advertise a car that has no ‘wow’ factor? You gonna use an advert and say the car has safety features but in today’s day and age every car should have safety features. Competition is tough; it’s all about sales. In a country, people are in different levels, starter pack guys who can afford to buy cheaper cars will be interested in such. But on the other hand, people whose lives we can’t even explain, we don’t even see adverts for Lamborghini, Ferrari or McLaren, they aren’t gonna waste time to impress time to buy their brand. People who have money are just gonna buy their brand. It’s tricky but they face challenges. Mazda is not doing well with sales but they do lots of adverts compared to the Vivo\(^1\) which had no adverts but sold lots. This is cause of what people see on the road, price tag, affordability and the car also went viral. Personally, Volkswagen is smart with changing the Polo TSi\(^2\) to a Vivo, they are now forcing people who have TSI’s to change it because you can’t be associated with a Vivo, you are playing with people feelings to leave it and trade it.

Hope’s answer revealed his perspective towards advertising in the South African economic climate. He emotively verbalized the rhetorical question of how cars are advertised with no defining characteristics or “appeal”. Hope then made a reference to the hierarchy of the car

\(^1\) The Vivo is an entry level hatchback built by Volkswagen. It is priced competitively hence it is hugely popular with young South Africans.

\(^2\) The Polo TSi is also a hatchback built by Volkswagen but is a category above the Vivo.
culture ecosystem where cars which sell on a similar price value are grouped into the same bracket. These similar cars all have the same features thus need some defining characteristic such as improved sound system or added free products such as sunroofs etcetera to entice customers to that brand. He further elaborated on the idea of hierarchical or “levelled” society where a car can denote your status in life from the, as Hope calls it, “starter pack” car guys who buy entry level cars to the more accomplished people who buy the ostentatiously priced Italian and German sports and luxury cars. Cyborg publics such as these car events allow enthusiasts for a brief moment to experience the embodied feeling of interacting and immersing themselves into the sensorial experience of luxury, sports and super cars. In addition, car brands “trick” customers by playing with their emotions, into purchasing new cars by ‘demoting’ current cars into the lower tier of car culture resulting in people who subjectively aren’t in that bracket to spend money they don’t necessarily have, on a car which is in a higher tier with a perceived high status in society (Jeske 2016: 490).

3.4) The Social Value of Cars

Although Hope and Bams were not professionally involved with cars, cars occupied an important space in their lives and they spent significant amounts of leisure time involved in activities related to their passion for cars. This significant role the car plays in enthusiasts’ lives forms an important part of their lived experiences. Enthusiasts ultimately attend these car events and form part of the car public that physically exists during the event because these people all have a shared interest in the car. Bams built upon the meaning of cars as he elaborated,

Cars in general have been classed as a sense of accomplishment in life. If you do have a nice car it creates that perception that you’re elegant and classy etc and mostly you have money as well which is not always true Where you are in life etc it’s not bound by any rules and brand loyalty where a person who drives and likes BMW’s won’t necessarily buy a Mercedes vehicle and vice versa. It’s all personal preference and it must be related to your personality.
Bams’ understood cars to index a person’s status in life. He described this “status” as a stereotype which he perceived to be perpetuated by the West which is evident in South African culture as the person who owns multiple, high end cars are the preserve of the upper class in society. Bams answer reminded me of an informal discussion I had with another enthusiast, Mr D, at the ‘GerVJap’ event I attended. Mr D said that, “in the 80’s when I was a young boy, I would see different racial groups driving these smart, fast cars and would always be enthralled by them. I would always be envious of the freedom that those cars brought. That’s why now, I buy these cars like the fancy “Bee Ems” (BMW’s) even though I can just barely afford them because of that freedom and power I always wanted.”

Bams further described how everyone who shared in car culture has their own particular preference of cars ranging from the speed to the more “laid-back” hip-hop trends such as including large wheels, sound systems and so on. An important idea re-iterated by Bams is the loyalty a person can have to a particularly brand and will not cross over and buy another vehicle or any product from another brand. With the emergence of technology, namely through the Internet, information and ideas have the ability to easily move across many different boundaries, spaces and places ranging from geography, class and background. McDonough (2014) refers to this movement of information as “flows”. His work speaks to anthropological ideas surrounding the movement of people, information as well non-human objects such as goods and finance. A crucial idea he suggests is the ability that people have to move across spaces in different forms. For example, this could be embodied in physical form or through the forms of letters, emails and other Internet avatars in a type of new “proxy” (McDonough 2014: 31). Through this form of embodiment, it gives people the ability to occupy many different spaces at the same time (McDonough 2014: 31). This is further
supported by Castells (2010) who suggests that through flows and the use of technology, information can be separated in distance yet still remain in contact with each other. McDonough (2014) and Castell’s (2010) ideas of the way in which information can disseminate across geographical borders through mediums like the Internet is evident as seen in Bams’ answer as Bams is able to keep updated with trends in the international car culture scene.

Hope’s attention was particularly drawn to a sole, classic car parked somewhat discretely near the entrance of the event. I could see that he had a sparkle in his eyes as he was running through the memories he had with this car. He narrated a backstory of his life whilst these group of friends I congregated around a classic BMW parked at the entrance to entrance of this event:

I grew up in a township called Emdeni North, the most famous car is the gusheshe\(^3\) - the 325i box shape it was the most expensive car you can get when you’re a thug who’s not working so if your drive that car you’re rich in the hood. We grew up seeing that car – we wanted a car that’s gonna have an impact. It’s a cultural thing, we come from that place so we understand how people feel and appreciate and live with loving that thing. When I bought my BMW, I thought of that. I had options of getting a 320i coupe which was a ‘no-go’ because I’ll get no respect with that car. The 325m, which was good but better, 330i convertible coupe and 335i, which is boss of the road. Looking at all of them the one which made most sense and to get enough respect is the 325iS. I love the 335i, the power is amazing you can push other cars like Volkswagen GTI’s giving them a tough time. But it came to 325iS cause of the cultural thing, cause of the love and appreciation people gave to it. It was amazing. To this day, it’s called a Gusheshe- it is very important. It’s meaningful.

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\(^3\) The term “Gusheshe” is a South African slang term to describe the BMW E30 325iS which became synonymous as an escape vehicle for criminals of the early 90’s due to the speed and handling capabilities of the car. In recent times, the 325iS has achieved cult status in South African pop culture as the purist form of local car culture and its ability to excel in motorsports particularly in drifting, with numerable mentions in South African rap music culture as well.
Hope’s story was profound as it described the personal significance of certain cars to him, afforded to him by participating in this cyborg public. He described the process of how he was looking for a BMW for sale online. Although there were many modern options such as the 3 series 320i, 330i convertible and the 335i the latter of which commands respect on the roads due to this model being known for the ease at which it can be modified and large horsepower gains can be achieved. Hope still looked specifically at the E30 325i, a thirty-year-old car as it had a legendary status in the South African car culture scene. Growing up in a small township south west of Soweto he would see other people driving this Gusheshe and fantasize about the days when he would drive one. Now through social media, he was able to explore the many different specifications and decided on which “Gusheshe” he wanted to buy. A key reflection in the above statement was how ideas of memory play an important role in informing Hope’s car buying decision in his adulthood, as he would always remember the
Gusheshe and strive to purchase it when he could. The idea of memory aiding in the embodiment process is propagated by Desjarlais and Throop (2011) and Jeske (2016) in which they describe that people always carry memories of their past selves informing decisions they make through their lives as seen in how Hope always remembers what it was like to see the “Gusheshes” whilst he was a young child and aspired to own such a car when he was older, as supported by Labov (1997) in the sense that a person’s memory, emotion and experiences play a key role in their phenomenological perspective of life. Cyborg publics, created by social media, such as this Supercar Sunday allowed for heightened embodied experiences of car culture through sensorial elements of sound, sight and touch.

The embodied experience present within car culture is highlighted by Jeske (2016) who relates the importance of certain cars which are rooted in popular culture such as movies in which certain cars are glamourized to be the cars to own if you want status, respect or even women (Jeske 2016: 490). Furthermore, as supported by Wilson and Peterson (2002) the “realness” of content of online worlds holds an equal value to offline worlds especially when items are of special material significance such as “cult” heroes like the BMW E30 325iS. When viewed with Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s (1987) approach of understanding of the ‘body’ it can be said that the owning of this Gusheshe on an individual level allows for respect and a sense of validation given by society to Hope, highlighting the interdependence of the first and second bodies as perceived by Scheper-Hughes and Lock. According to Scheper Hughes and Lock (1987) these are the individual body, which refers to the private body or individual that wishes to participate in the social body of car culture, the social body which is the community of car culture its entirety and the larger body politick, or the state and government entities (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987: 6). Each of these three bodies has an interconnected relationship with one another and therefore affect how each can be
embodied. This theoretical framework of embodiment in particular refers to ideas of cyborgism, with specific locus on social media allowing for the creation of a cyborg public where cars, namely the “Gusheshe” holds powerful symbolism in both actual and virtual worlds. It was seeing this classic car parked on display at the Supercar Sunday which brought about these emotions and symbols to Hope which he shared with the group showing how the car or “Gusheshe” became a material extension of Hope. Through attending the cyborg public of Supercar Sunday created by social media, the symbol of the car, that is, the symbol of power and freedom cars represent, was experienced by car enthusiasts who in turn, place important value on these cars in both the actual and virtual car publics.

3.5) Conclusion

In conclusion, the above ethnographic perspectives described the emotions and feelings evoked by car culture from the viewpoint of South African car enthusiasts. When related back to the central argument of this particular chapter, social media has allowed for the creation of new public spaces or cyborg publics of car events such as Supercar Sunday. The car also became inscribed in enthusiast’s memories depicting a life of freedom and respect which entices enthusiasts to participate in this culture. Social media aids the enthusiast to indulge and satisfy their passion by granting them access into worlds of cars which they normally won’t have, ultimately exposing them to new relationships with fellow enthusiasts who attend events by seeing the advertisements online. Additionally, the supporting argument described how social media aided in strengthening and sharing the meaning of cars with fellow enthusiasts through “social media only” invites to Supercar Sunday events further
substantiating the occurrence of cyborg publics enabled through the crossover between the actual and virtual worlds of car culture.

After the day spent at this event, I was interested to learn about the different specification of cars that were on display. I therefore “logged” on to the digital dealerships, forums and digital gatherings available throughout the Internet and “window-shopped” to my heart’s content while also looking at the various car culture videos waiting to be consumed on various social media platforms. These searches allowed me to participate in the different areas of car culture – from the videos of car racing to car shopping on the virtual dealership floor. Whilst actual access to certain cars were limited, the transference of car culture into virtual spaces mitigated the limitations my body had in accessing the different elements of car racing and luxury vehicle experiences of car culture. After seeing the vast array of car-centric social media profiles, I realized that it is important to understand the perspective of the online profiles that display and exhibit such car culture related phenomena, which will be explored in the upcoming chapter.
Chapter Four: The Online Driver: A Virtual Perspective

Social media sites have become discursive spaces for car enthusiasts aimed at communicating and engaging with the wider car culture community and sharing the passion of the car. This is done through many forms such as videos, blogs, forums etc. Accessible through a myriad of mediums such as mobile tablets, phones and computers, social media makes modern life highly mediated (Murthy 2008). Through the use of these devices, the digital spaces of social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram are continually accessible allowing for constant participation in virtual communities (McArthur 2009; Shah 2008). This continual participation in virtual spaces has powerful ramifications for understanding the increasing presence of the human body in social media and the transference of experiences from the actual into the virtual and communication between individuals (Haraway 1991).

4.1) The Power of Social Media – A Focus on YouTube

The fieldwork for this particular chapter has taken place in the virtual environment of popular social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This chapter argues that the transference of experiences and interactions from the actual into the virtual is aided by sensorial aspects such as auditory and visual features of videos and pictures. Therefore, I have focused more on the platform of YouTube, because videos are a key medium used in intensifying the immersive nature of virtual spaces and media.

This chapter has focused on the digital car culture space created and curated by three well-known automotive content creators named FastMan, CS and Walker. They were active across all major social media platforms but used YouTube as their main source of exhibition. Whilst their online identities are well-known, for the purposes of anonymity I have used
pseudonyms and removed any key searchable features of their channels. I have described how the social media personalities I have chosen for this research created their own unique “identity” though customizing their home pages and video style, ultimately creating a personalized area of virtual space, as suggested by Lange (2007) and boyd and Ellison (2008) who describe how people can make embodied spaces by employing techniques which claim or demarcate the space through customization techniques mentioned above.

In addition to understanding the way in which these social media “personalities” used social media, I have supplemented their ideas with opinions from car enthusiasts as well. The main reason for this was that enthusiasts are the predominant demographic who use car culture associated social media by engaging with virtual materiality of car posts, videos and interactive facilities on car manufacturer websites, it was valuable for my research that we considered their perspectives as well. Conceptually, using the works of McArthur (2009), Coleman (2010) and Desjarlais and Throop (2011) to name a few, the enthusiasts perspective on social media has related to the way in which human sociality in terms of communication and phenomenological experiences are lived by the enthusiast in the virtual space of social media. Additionally, understanding the enthusiasts consumption of content by virtual creators of content, was important to consider because it highlighted a reciprocal element to the virtual, in which content creators make content for consumers (enthusiasts) who then support and make the creators create more videos and content to consume.
4.1.1) *FastMan – An Audible Experience*

FastMan, a petrolhead\(^4\) in every sense of the word has an immense passion for anything with an engine, operates an online profile which mainly deals with showcasing aftermarket or modified cars. FastMan’s videos were characterized by in-depth discussions about the modifications done to the cars with their owners, mixed with a few scenes of the cars revving their engine, and drive-bys. These were overlaid with music which added to the theatricality of the videos and the nature of the cars themselves. For example, if a car had a dramatic or “sinister” presence through being fully blacked out\(^5\) then FastMan would use more dramatic music to suit the car in conjunction with suitable matching video editing. After “setting the scene”, FastMan then proceeded to go for a drive with the owner of the car to gain a first-person experience of the car, immersing himself in the experience. If the owner allowed, FastMan would then drive the car himself creating a POV (point of view) perspective through describing the feeling that the car invoked on the road. He attempted to create immersive experiences for the viewers by including many GoPro camera angles attached to the car and on fixed mounts to capture both dynamic and static perspectives of the car respectively. When I asked FastMan how he managed to gain such positive notoriety on YouTube, he replied

> With social media and YouTube in particular there is a steep learning curve where consistency (uploads, content, style) is the key to success. I always tell anyone who is interested in starting a YouTube channel to be the face of your channel. While some channels/profiles are successful with anonymity, some are not. Always be transparent because people like to see the face behind the channel.

FastMans answer highlighted how being a YouTube personality required learning a lot of new methods of editing, video capture as well as social media etiquette in order to gain good results in terms of followers and videos watched. He emphasized that uploading videos on a

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\(^4\) This term is used as car culture jargon to describe anyone who has a passion for cars.

\(^5\) A “blacked out” car refers to a car that has the colour black as a predominant theme in terms of body paint, wheel paint to window and light tints etc.
regular schedule, as he did every Monday and Wednesday, edited in a similar style, was one of the main factors that garnered him such a tremendous following on social media. In addition, he added that he knew from the beginning of his initiative that he would be the “face” of his channel, meaning that he would present himself on camera and use himself as the main ‘marketing’ tool of his YouTube/social media image. He related this to the actual interaction which happened on a daily basis in reality where people responded better if they could see and interact with another human. As the perception of our environment is culturally defined (Classen 1997), a highly visual approach to understanding and experience car culture, was key in helping to transfer the experience of the car from the actual into the virtual world.

The issue of how the self is presented on social media that discussions of ‘public privates’ and ‘private publics’ points to, rather the question of how embodiment can be approached through the visual senses. FastMans method of creating an immersive video through the practice of being the face of his channel is illustrated in the idea of transparency evident in Lange’s (2008) work. She describes how social media profiles can either be “publicly private” or “privately public” through controlling the amount of information a user can release to the public on the Internet. In other words, profiles can be publicly private in terms of using creating a social media “personality” that uses a fake name, a hidden face and other alternative identity traits in order to still be in the view of the digital public yet still remain private in terms of keeping real character traits hidden. An embodied aspect is present as suggested by McArthur (2009) who describes how social media and Internet communication can lack a certain degree of media richness due to interacting with media on a flat-screen. Consequently, there can be a misunderstanding of mannerisms as there is a disconnect between the virtual and actual through the use of a computer screen. FastMan understood the dangers of this potential disconnect describing how channels can fail due to there being an
assumption of no “genuine” person being behind the camera. FastMan who favoured using his own face with his videos. In order to best achieve the transference of actual experiences into the virtual, FastMan emphasized,

The key to transferring offline/online experiences is the sound. Thumbnails attract viewers through photo editing. I like to compare a thumbnail to a shop front. What I mean is that, for example if a shop has good food but a poor entrance it means no one will enter but if a shop has an attractive entrance and good food it is a winning combo. Your new followers are attracted by thumbnails. Another important piece of advice I can give that tagging is crucial- always fill your tags to gain more spread and exposure across YouTube or wherever- for example if you’ve uploaded a video on a BMW M3 then you need to include tags of the chassis code, model, make etc.

The sense of sound is crucial in helping to create an immersive experience of car culture through video as the auditory sense is one of the primary senses used to experience our environment (Classen 1997). FastMan often used many sound clips by attaching cameras and microphones directly above the cars’ exhausts, and using drive-by shots where the owner of the car drove past FastMan whilst he recorded the sound emanating from the car.

FastMan described how thumbnails, or the still picture used to “present” videos on YouTube are the first point of contact for viewers to consumer content. He likened this to a restaurant shop front where if the entrance was aesthetically pleasing it would entice many customers to enter and consume the products offered whereas if a shop served great food and had great service but could not attract customers through a poor aesthetic appeal then it would render the food secondary. In the same way, if content consumers were impressed by the thumbnail of videos then they would be eager to “enter” the channel and immerse themselves in your videos.

The manner in which car sounds or videos are captured in the actual world can greatly affect the way these experiences are felt in the virtual world particularly when it comes to the
sensorial involvement offered by the videos created in car culture. FastMan addressed that there is a misconception that in order to have a successful YouTube channel, one should have the best camera and recording equipment but in actual fact, it’s not about the camera but rather the way in which you were able to creatively immerse viewers in whatever type of content you create.

When attempting to gain viewers of content, the type of exposure that videos have comes under analysis. Through the act of tagging, videos can proliferate across the virtual world. The idea of tagging bears some resemblance to Miller et al’s (2016) idea of scalable sociality whereby through the use of different levels of social media exposure, one can increase their reach or exposure to different audiences in the same way that tagging places videos in multiple search results in order to guarantee a high number views per video and channel traffic. FastMan further mentioned that in order for your videos or content to reach a larger scale of audience, you should fill in as many “tags” or identifiers of your videos as possible. For example, if a video was dealing with the BMW M3 then you should use as many tags or keywords as possible such as “BMW, “M3”, “BMW M”, “Fast cars”, “German cars” and so on. The use of these multiple tags allowed your videos to appear on the search result of any consumer who had searched for the associated key word.

Through the tagging methods employed by FastMan, his videos were able to be viewed by many different people and shared across the virtual sphere of car culture. A side story Fastman told me was due to the spread or reach of his videos, he received a call from his insurance company, who had requested to raise his insurance premiums due to him showcasing how he had modified his car but also driving over the speed limit and other traffic infringements. Fastman said that he was very careful to edit his videos in a manner that
he did not show any perception of speed by blurring out the speedometer. This was to ensure that viewers won’t “sell him out” to law enforcement as the Internet and social media consists of many users with different backgrounds, professions and motives for watching videos. The example described by FastMan in this paragraph shows the indirect consequence of transferring experiences from the actual into the virtual. In other words, as his car was highly modified and displayed on the virtual arena of social media, viewers of his video would share his videos as it was exciting and displayed a different element of car culture such as the modified car culture scene. Consequently the video would be circulated and eventually reach employees of his insurance company and law enforcement agencies translating back into action in the actual world where he used video editing techniques to keep him on the legal side of the law.

Figure 4: A screenshot describing the tagging process. Although not related to car culture, the essence of tagging remains the same for many subcultures.

Picture Credit: http://faqtube.tv/youtube-tags-2016/
4.1.2) CS – A Visual Feast

CS, a young, outgoing "Youtuber" in his late twenties with a general aura of high social class evident through his use of language, clothes and knowledge of cars, originally with a background and degree in marketing shared some of his experiences. CS had a penchant for classic cars, which he mainly focused on for his channel and is currently in the market to buy a classic sports car. He had made YouTube his full-time profession. As CS had been in the “YouTube Game” for a relatively short time, since 2014, he described how he continuously found it exciting as ideas were only limited by his own creativity.

His videos’ “signature” included highly cinematic and visually detailed drone shots of the car he was using or reviewing overlaid with “raw” music such as guitar riffs and old school rock. The use of drone equipment in videos was an idea which I found particularly powerful as drone footage allows for us, as humans, to experience an entirely new aerial perspective of our environment, which would not be available to us without the use of a drone. The use of drone equipment extends the idea of visual enhancement through cyborgism by improving what the human eye can perceive about its environment. Haraway (1991) argues that as cyborgs, through the increasing amalgamation of human and technology, we will have better influence and understanding of our environment, as evident in how drone footage allows us to view our environment more clearly and to a greater extent. Furthermore, Whitehead and Wesch (2012) describe how the divide between human and cyborg is further blurred as through technology, such as drones, improving our field of sight, we are able to embody vast areas of living and therefore, move towards a transhuman state of being – a state of existence improved by both human and technological aspects such as drones (Whitehead and Wesch
Through the use of technology such as drones, the visual ability of humans is further enhanced, increasing the nature of a cyborg reality. The different perspectives offered by drone footage attracts people to view social media channels which offer new viewpoints on phenomena like car culture, thereby increasing the view count of videos offered by such channels.

Figure 5: A screenshot of a recent video CS posted on his YouTube channel. From the picture we can clearly see how the use of a drone allows for the viewer of videos to have a much wider view of the landscape and gain a new perspective which would not have been previously known if it was not for drone technology.

*Picture Credit: CS*
The different viewpoints offered by drone footage attracts car enthusiasts to social media channels offering these viewpoints. An idea which shows the attraction of viewers to social media, with YouTube in particular, was the view count of videos. In CS’s video screenshot above, this particular video had a view count of 184,302 total views (at the time of writing this chapter). When I asked CS about his perspective on YouTube’s ability to reach out and connect with viewers interested in watching his channel he said that technically, he sold out stadiums of viewers with every video. When I asked him what he meant by this statement, he said, “So think about it, a stadium normally has around sixty thousand seats for people to enjoy a concert or event for one night. But with YouTube, close to three times that amount (sixty thousand) or more people can watch and access my videos for as long as it is online. It’s crazy because sometimes I have no idea about the video I’m going to make on the day, I just keep my cameras fully charged and shoot stuff I like. It’s in the editing of the footage and making a fun video that makes people want to attend my stadium event.”

Whilst content specific data about followers are important to consider because it helped to understand CS’ YouTube world, I probed further to get an understanding of general follower-trends he noticed,

The “trolls” are mainly on YouTube. There are also core supporters who watch every video contrasted by “now and then viewers”- you know, those viewers who watch few videos intermittently. My opinion is that you can watch my videos if you want to and if not, you can change to another source or another channel. Sadly, few trolls affect the whole online experience. Also keyboard warriors negatively affect the experience online. I like to call this the “dark side” of social media.

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6 The term troll has been used on the Internet to describe a person who purposely uses negative and harmful comments to incite arguments and disagreements on various posts, forums and comment sections.

7 A keyboard warrior is used to describe someone who starts fights and instigates hateful comments without fear of retaliation as they are behind the “safety” of their keyboard and computer screen.
CS dramatically elaborated that he had encountered a lot of “trolls” or negative comments on his YouTube channel which made no sense to him because if a person or “troll” doesn’t like the content he would upload, then the “troll” has the choice to change to another YouTube channel and not continue to watch his content. A trend he noticed was that some followers would watch every video he would upload whereas others would watch alternate uploads and so on. CS accounted this reason to personal preference or liking of particular content that he uploads. For example, in Figure 5 above, this particular video had over one hundred and eighty thousand views which was proof of the number of car enthusiasts who were able to engage and share in car culture content perpetuated by CS via YouTube. Ultimately, this view count shows how many people CS can engage with through social media. Rather than physically going to show one hundred and eighty thousand people a video, social media acts as a hub which brings people together around a central video of interest, helping to transfer interactions between people into the virtual.

There is often a mutuality between actual and virtual space. Boellstorff (2012) describes how through the use of computer technology, the two different spheres of the actual and virtual are fusing into one thereby transferring experiences between the two almost seamlessly. This fusion of spheres is evident as CS volunteered the following information, “I find that my online presence is transferred into my offline reputation. I had no straightforward path into YouTube.” He further mentioned that as his YouTube channel was growing in popularity, if his followers would see him in reality then they would always ask him about his new car which he revealed on YouTube and discussions along those lines. CS reiterated what FastMan described, in that there was no direct degree or qualification that would take a person into YouTube success as he lightheartedly mentioned how he has a business degree. He would record and edit car videos as a hobby in his spare time and eventually would
upload these videos onto YouTube as a way of showcasing his passion. Eventually once big corporate companies started looking at YouTube and social media as a new avenue to reach out to their customers, CS realized that it was possible to make a career from YouTube and eventually quit his job and became a YouTube personality full time. McArthur (2009), Miller et al (2016) and boyd and Ellison (2007) all reflect this idea by describing how social media creates embodied meeting spaces for people with shared interests and allows for easier formation of communicative spaces facilitated through computer assisted technologies. YouTube’s meeting space was pre-empted by CS who realized that many car enthusiasts are looking for quality car content, hence his decision to become a professional “YouTuber.” CS went to a great extent to change his profession from a physically orientated business and marketing job to that of a virtual YouTube personality. Based on Desjarlais and Throop’s (2011) notion of embodiment through which the actual body is a vessel through which we can experience the world around us, social media created opportunities for this actual body to digitize and recreate itself virtually for new experiences of communication.

Relating CS’s story back to a conversation I had with my friend, Jess, who also shared with me a story about YouTube and its ability to generate an income. He provided an example of his neighbor who created a YouTube channel to share the experiences of driving cars on South African roads. When I further probed into the reason as to why this channel wasn’t successful, Jess attributed to it the fact that his neighbor was not able to secure drives in certain cars as he was an unknown name in the South African YouTube scene - no person or dealership would trust him with a valuable car nearing the million Rand or over price range. Although there are some South African YouTubers who succeeded in making YouTube their sole source of income and profession, the chances of it happening were quite rare. Social medias ability to generate or supplement ones income was further illustrated by Jess in the
sense that he used forums and similar sites to sell his used car modifications. Further, an example of how social media was able to bridge geographical distances, increase the embodiment of a person and generate an income was how Jess was able to sell his “water methanol” kit to someone in Durban whilst Jess was based in Johannesburg. He further mentioned how before the proliferation of social media, people would post their adverts on newspapers, car magazines etcetera but it would cost a significant amount based on the type of advertisements and how many days it would be posted for. However, in modern times, the costing of such advertisements is free and can reach a far wider audience than that of traditional print media. The idea of being present and embodying multiple virtual spaces at once is described by Haraway (1991) and boyd and Ellison (2008) who describe how people can increase their actual range of influence by using the network of car enthusiasts within social media to traverse geographical boundaries. Through this multi-place embodiment, human interactions are exponentially increased as communications are transferred from the actual into the virtual by social media. In other words, instead of people or car enthusiasts visiting other enthusiasts in actuality, social media allows for car enthusiasts to interact with many other enthusiasts at once across different locations around the world.

Social media affords people new ways to embody themselves in terms of professional title, hobby indulgence and income generation. As tools such as camera equipment and video editing software are becoming more accessible to people, these tools offer new opportunities for people to share their own perspective on larger societal discourses. Furthermore, an example of the transparency of media content creation is evident due to the ordinary person having the ability to embody virtual space by creating videos and sharing their opinion of the

A water-meth or “water-methanol injection” kit is equipment used to keep engine combustion chamber temperatures low by spraying a mixture of water and methanol into the combustion chamber enabling the driver to run higher turbo boost pressures resulting in higher power output avoiding pre-ignition of fuel and engine damage.
world via social media. This type of transparency is similar to ideas described by Stockl (2003) and Kohler et al (2011) where they both describe how there is a growing trend in society where by citizens value a sense of decentralization when it comes to the type of digital content they consume. In other words, with the proliferation of YouTube and social media in general, an increasing amount of people are using these social media platforms as a source of entertainment and to create their own content in terms of using digital marketplaces to sell and/or buy goods as described by Jess.

4.1.3) Walker – A Move Towards Full Digital Immersion

Walker, a stylish and dapper socialite in his early thirties, with a tremendous passion for cars is a relative newcomer to the YouTube game who had amassed a tremendous following in a few years since 2016, with his YouTube follower account which sat at close to four hundred and twenty thousand followers. Walker’s video signature was highly artistic through the use of more lifestyle orientated elements associated around the car itself. Examples of these elements was the inclusion of luxury air travel, hotel room stays and gourmet food experiences. These experiences were often catered and offered or by particular car brands which invited Walker to new car launches, test drives and events and in return he would showcase the event via YouTube, ultimately creating an extra level of exposure for that particular car brand and their product. Walker mentioned how,

Channels can go through many iterations. A key tip I can give is to always make YouTube content on your passion no matter what – find your niche, your passion shows in the content. You are the audience; therefore, you’ll know what to include. Copying each other won’t necessarily result in success. Although there is a general perception about requirements to have a successful channel such as supercars, you can do it with anything. As long your channel focuses around content and is story driven – you can make it.

In his answer, Walker revealed how YouTube, or even other social media profiles can be known for different identities or “signatures” but ultimately if you showcased content that
you are passionate about then that same passion would show in how you are able to immerse your audience in your videos. The idea of a virtual “signature” demonstrated by Walker could be likened to an extension of the human body into the virtual (Haraway 1991). In other words, as people are known for certain traits or characteristics in actuality such as a talkative personality, certain signatures or traits can be carried through to the virtual. These traits which exemplified virtual human embodiment range from the avatars we create, comments we make on posts and in the case of Walker and social media personalities, the way in which they structure and create videos. He further described how many people often see "YouTubers" making videos about cars and the associated perks of making such videos like luxury travel and so on but they did not have the passion for cars hence their profile eventually fails to survive. Further, he emphasized that you yourself are the audience as well so if you felt that there was a niche that needed to be explored which did not have sufficient social media exposure then you should explore that path because it could be lucrative.

Offline experiences felt by people can be shared virtually via social media resulting in stronger affinities created between members of car culture. Whilst Walker was describing some of his perspectives he further shared with me how he recently had to abruptly sell one of his most prized cars, a high-end Ferrari which he originally thought he would never sell and sometimes when he misses that car, he would go back to his channel and re-watch videos he made with that car to reminisce about that car and the feelings, sensations and emotion that car stirred within him. I found this temporal aspect of YouTube relevant because although the car is not physically with Walker, he can still have “access” to it in the virtual form in the form of his videos. His videos have become a deep symbolic medium in which his memories are stored. Furthermore, it was this car that garnered him the increase of followers to his channel which made him dub the car as “our” car, further showing the
manner in which social media bring car enthusiasts together and unites them based on the shared passion of the car. Walker told me, “You should see the comments on the video when I told everyone I’m selling our car, for the first time in my YouTube career, I received close to all positive comments saying stuff like ‘Don’t be sad dude, it was a great car and now on to better things” with another comment saying something like “I will buy it and we can share it whenever you want”.

Conceptually, Walkers experience is shown in the work by Desjarlais and Throop (2011) as they describe how memories continually inform and create a person’s lived experience where Walkers memory of his beloved car sill hold a significant place in his memory and make him create more car culture videos. On a material level, YouTube has become a repository of memories for both the content creator and consumer which when viewed with Haraway’s (1991) cyborgism lense, shows how computer and Internet technology have become a place to store human experiences and knowledge further enhancing the ability of the human brain to memorize life events.

When experiences are transferred from the actual into the virtual, only a small aspect of this transference is seen from the consumers perspective. Walker gave me a small insight into behind the scenes information of YouTube,

To make a ten to twelve minute video, it sometimes takes twelve hours of travel in addition to editing. It’s easy to underestimate how much work is needed for YouTube. People want better and better content therefore it requires more work to transfer experiences online. A YouTube channel is a brand- it takes time and energy to make progress. Money/profit is in branding. It is used to be filming at the right place at right time, but now there is content saturation. We need new automotive collaborations, new content etc.

Walkers answer revealed how much effort in the actual world is needed to produce quality content, highlighting the challenges in transferring actual experiences replicating it in the
virtual. Often the logistical arrangements of travel alone took a significant amount of time out of the day, which excluded editing and piecing together footage recorded through the event or daily events. This challenge was then compounded as YouTube is evolving. People crave more detailed and creative content which required more editing and immersive techniques of using multiple camera angles to help transfer experiences between the actual and virtual. Walker reiterated that when it came to social media, with YouTube in particular, you are your brand. This paralleled what FastMan said in a sense that people value transparency by being able to associate a name to a face counteracting against the lack of media richness suggested by McArthur (2009). Walker further mentioned how in the current YouTube landscape, there was a seemingly infinite amount of automotive content currently available which could be monotonous and overwhelming. Therefore, people actively searched for channels that are different and more immersive to indulge their interest for the car, which ultimately spoke to the embodied experience which social media offers in creating exposure to new creators of content through which the enthusiast can interact with instead of physically meeting fellow enthusiasts at car events and so on. Building on this, Walker gave an insight into the trends he is noticed in the YouTube sphere,

There is a lot of automotive saturation—we need new gaps such as classic cars, modified cars etc. There is too much focus on supercars. YouTube makes people live their dreams rather than being a cog in machine working 9-5 jobs. I notice that YouTube personalities can’t socialize with non-YouTube citizens especially in terms of discussing of content thumbnails etc. YouTube makes intangible products on a daily basis.

In order to display a broad spectrum of actual experiences in the virtual space, Walker suggested looking at alternative junctures within the car culture sphere such as modified cars (as FastMan does) or classic cars, simply to add more exposure and variety to the type of car culture content available for consumption. In doing so, the transference of experiences and passions from the actual into the virtual allow for more opportunities for virtual embodiment
to occur. This embodiment allows for more car enthusiasts with different interests within car culture to be able to participate and interact with other car enthusiasts with those similar different interests such as classic cars. He added that YouTube is an avenue which allowed people immense personal freedom and creativity instead of being stuck in a job which they do not necessarily like. As explored in detail in Chapter Three, Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1978) explain that there are three “bodies” a person can embody within society. Theses bodies are namely 1), the individual body, 2) the social body and 3) the body politic. This three-body approach can support the idea mentioned above of YouTube or social media being a medium through which the individual body can escape the monotony of the social and body politic through the perceived freedom and creative liberty social media can bring. Specifically, people or YouTube personalities such as Walker, FastMan and CS to name a few (using the first body) are able to redefine their own freedom through their videos and briefly release themselves from the perceived constraints of creativity and media production present in society and body politic (the second body and third body respectively) by using their videos to embody virtual space of social media to mitigate the effects of the second and third bodies with its many rules of order and control.

Although the actual and virtual are fusing into one hybrid world as mentioned by Boellstorff (2012), there are still some tensions which exist between the actual and virtual world. The dichotomy illustrated by Walker depicted these tensions in the sense that he mentioned how it could be difficult at times for "YouTubers" to talk to "non-YouTubers" as it could be challenging to discuss ideas for new content, thumbnail descriptions to name a few with people who cannot understand the complexities of such ideas. According to Boellstorff (2012) there should be no separation from what we, as a society deem to be virtual and actual as both these aspects of society arise from and contribute to each other, as seen in the
tensions arising from the interactions between “YouTubers” and “non-YouTubers”. In other words, the virtual and actual should intertwine as they are mutually exclusive as the actual is where content is created for the virtual. Crucially, Walker elaborated that many “normal” professions can create tangible products or services daily, in other words, these professions would have an idea at the beginning of the day as to what the daily schedule of tasks will be. With YouTube however, this is not the case as often great content appeared sporadically and YouTube personalities often have to be ready to capture it thereby creating an intangible product but still remain tangible enough that is consumed by the viewers, showing how capturing and transferring elements from the actual into the virtual world can be challenging. The intangibility of virtual content discussed by Walker directly contrasts Boellstorff (2012) because of the actual and virtual world are fusing into a single domain then there should be no tension in creating content which appears sporadically as there is always a means to document the world.

As the various ways of capturing the actual world and the challenges of transferring the analogue experiences of the offline into the virtual world has been explored from the curators of the virtual car culture experience, it is important to understand the perspectives of the people who the virtual experience was created for – the consumer.

4.2) Digital Consumption – Social Media by the Enthusiast – For the Enthusiast

Understanding the way viewers consume and participate in the social media experience was one of the fundamental aims of this chapter hence I have incorporated the phenomenological experiences of the following enthusiasts namely AJ, Jess, Ted and Vin. I had been referred to Jess a notorious street racer in Johannesburg by another friend of mine, Shaun. Shaun and
Jess are well-known figures in the car culture scene, particularly in Johannesburg, and were keen to share their views. Jess brought along some friends of his by the names of AJ – a young adult in his late twenties, wearing a ‘Ford” motor company sunhat, Ted – a student who recently acquired his driving license and Vin – who was carrying multiple mobile devices with him to always be connected to his social networks. Their social media experiences were each different, and yet fundamentally the same in terms of sharing in both global and local car culture, thereby forming part of the community interested in cars around the world. Through various social media posts, they were able to engage in discussions about car culture. When asked what type of content they as enthusiasts’ posted, AJ replied,

I don’t necessarily post stuff but I do follow a lot of things. I follow a motoring publication called “Off the Board”, I have an Android app which creates a booklet of all motoring articles on there. I’m also a big fan of Top Gear and Amazon’s The Grand Tour. In particular, I just follow friends and trends in general. When I do see a nice car, I’ll post it. I do follow some local car groups, like Wheels24. I have a vast friend variety where certain ones are into off-road vehicles whilst other friends are into speed machines so I see a lot of car stuff in their posts.

Jess, after a moment of thought, illustrated that,

I’m not a social media person I just view stuff, I don’t necessarily post stuff. The furthest I’ve gone is to register on VW GTi club. I don’t like social media too much but if someone needs help in terms of exposure of charities or wants Information on something then I’ll log on and check. I think social media is too much work, it takes time out of my day. The only time I would really go into it is when I’m doing research like right now as I’m in the market to buy a car or on aftermarket modifications then I’d read up on it online etc. What I notice is that people often post things on Instagram and so on looking for a particular type of response saying ‘nice car’. I’m the type of person that doesn’t need that-I don’t thrive on it.

A stand out idea described above by Jess was when he needed more information on certain products or new car information then he would become an active social media user. An important occurrence he highlighted was how social media provided a sense of achievement or accomplishment in life when comments are of a positive nature. As Murthy (2008) has described how daily life is being increasingly digitized by social media and computer
technology as a whole, many aspects of daily life are able to be easily shared on the various social media platforms. The idea of digitized daily life is extended by Puri (2007) who adds the argument that computers are not mere work tools but rather, a way of life, which itself directly corresponds to the way that social media users such as Jess, AJ and even Ush, Bams and Hope, in the previous chapter experience and navigate the complexities of life by using social media to post and engage in the world around them.

These authors provide interesting insights when related to the statement by Jess as they substantiate that social media is now a space to share the embodied events of people’s daily lives and enhance or even detract from the human experience. Jess goes on to somewhat contrast this as he does not necessarily require this “online validation” to provide him with sense of accomplishment. In terms of the embodied aspect of social media, social media serves as a stage to display the positives (or sometimes negatives) of a persons life. When these events are “liked” by other social media users, it provides a sense of validation which reaffirms the lived experience of the personal who posted the event initially.

4.2.1) So, You Only Like Cars?

There are different ways in which the body and interests are extended beyond the physical object of the car. Whilst I was discussing the above perspectives with my friends, AJ, Jess, Ted and Vin, I noticed that AJ’s mobile phone case was the symbol for Ford cars- the ubiquitous blue oval with white/silver “Ford” lettering. When I drew attention to his mobile phone case, he showed it off proudly, even going to extent to show me his wallpaper on his phone screen, a picture of his very own Ford Fiesta with aftermarket rims which he was even more proud of. I found his behaviour powerful in the sense that although he cannot physically take his beloved car with him everywhere, the placing of his Ford Fiesta as his mobile phone
wallpaper allowed him to continually see and “interact” with his car on a virtual level. He reached a heightened level of embodied “car display” by showing off his car on his phone via his pictures and wallpaper. With the car as an important symbol in these enthusiasts lives, I realized that it is important to understand and probe into just how much importance they place on the car. I gathered this “value” by asking if they posted any other non-car related content. AJ described to me how,

I do post stuff from car shows, like SEMA⁹, the biggest aftermarket show. I hardly do magazines anymore. I was a big fan of Speed and Sound. You read it today and there’s a new one out tomorrow and you waste R30.00. I had a collection of the first four to five years and I just chucked it out because it was taking too much space. Once its read there’s no point in going back to read it, so magazine-wise I don’t invest. I think we changed now where we don’t want to sit and read through the magazine now but people rather talk about it or read about it online. The dynamics have changed, info is much more freely available. 99.9% if you have issues with a car, if you go to right places someone else has experienced it already and you can get it fixed quickly. My personal example, my Ford Fiesta had a problem with the radio. I “Googled” it and saw there was a faulty bracket and fixed my own radio instead of going to dealer and charging R3000.00 just for labour which I fixed it myself.

Social media is a powerful tool to help humans embody multiple virtual spaces regardless of actual geographic location. AJ highlighted how through social media he was able to follow events such as drag racing and exhibitions ranging from local to international car shows. With particular relevance to international car shows even though he was not able to physically attend, he could still virtually present himself as an attendee by sharing and posting content on social media about those very car events. The ability to virtually transport ones self and embody new multiple locations around the world-wide web as suggested by AJ is reflected in the work by Murray and Sixsmith (2003), Miller et al (2016) and Haraway (1991) where they describe how technology and the Internet allows for people to occupy and embody many different locations at once although remaining “docked” at a single geographic

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⁹ Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) is one of the largest car events held annually in North America for a global exhibition of aftermarket modifications and tuner companies.
point through the use of their online profiles. In other words, through social media, AJ was able to view events happening on a global scale such as the Paris Motor Show whilst he was still in South Africa, thereby embodying multiple locations at once afforded to him by social media. An emphatic personal point he raised was through digital technology, the use and importance of “analogue” print magazines had become outdated whereas now through the use of mobile applications or ‘apps’, people are able to create their own virtual bookshelf of magazines which require almost no physical space and are able to be kept for a long time. This new virtual means of collecting memorabilia shows the ability that social media or computer technology has in transforming how actual experiences of collecting magazines are now being digitized and accessed through virtual means.

AJ shared a backstory of how he collected close to four or five years of car culture magazines but eventually had to dispose of them as they were taking too much space. This idea was important because through the use of digital media such as social media and virtual magazines, issues of physical space is mitigated. As some content on social media is “free” it reduced costs of engaging in car culture, except for costs of mobile data and devices respectively. Schumpeter (2003) directly discusses this point in his theory of creative destruction and how technology and subsequently social media disrupts previous forms of technology such as print magazines are serving as new channels through which participation in culture in occur. Lastly, AJ raised the creation of a community identity whereby if a fellow enthusiast posed a question, then fellow enthusiasts would engage and discuss the question to find a suitable solution, as narrated in his anecdote of himself personally being able to fix his car radio through the advice of online enthusiasts.
Holistically, social media is changing the way we as humans embody and experience our hobbies and life in particularly in either the online or offline spheres. Instead of collecting vast physical “libraries” of car culture magazines, these same images are now available virtually which occupy no physical space in rooms or halls, but rather megabytes of storage data on a computer devices such as a mobile phone. Further, in place of physically going to various car workshops looking for advice on repairs, social media now virtually brings mechanics and solution givers to “hubs” on the Internet such as forums, Facebook postings and video comments allowing for easier access to advice whilst physically remaining in and embodying one geographical location. Social media has also allowed for global access to expert knowledge and information (Dirksen 2005) with regards to varying topics.

4.2.2) Recommended for you

The transference of experience from the actual into the virtual results in large amounts of content being uploaded that appeals to different people. Different social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube continually suggest new profiles to follow or video to watch based on algorithms that group content together in an attempt to expose the viewer or consumer to content which they will find interesting. Due to the reach of various pages and information across social media, many car enthusiasts often tend to congregate around pages and sites that have good, reliable and a safe discussion space to engage in their passion for the car. Hence, in order to gain an insight into the way in which car related information is transferred from the actual into the virtual world I enquired about the pages and communities these enthusiasts participate in through the embodied space of car pages, profiles and sites.

AJ said that he followed sites such as, “Top Gear, Speed Society, not really much local stuff”. When I asked AJ the reason why he does not follow too many local pages, he further
reiterated that even local car culture has elements of global car culture hence he rather followed those international pages which resonates with McDonough’s (2014) description of how ideas and cultural practices are able to move between geographic borders through the Internet. Ted contrasted AJ’s answer as he follows mainly local sites. Ted shared the names of local car owners’ forums such as ‘VWClubSA’, ‘VWGTCclub’, ‘BMWFanatics’. Ted mainly followed car culture forums as mentioned above through which he was able to interact with many like-minded enthusiasts instead of physically going to car events. Jess further elaborated,

As I’m in the market for a car, I’ve already looked at getting ‘mods’ so I’m looking on Pinterest to see who has done the ‘mods’ I want to do and also how it will look. Every now and then I’ll reactivate my other accounts and look at what I need to look at and then leave. I found a guy who does modifications to VW Polo lights etc. So I went to see his Facebook pages to see his work content. With forums, I would go there because there’s tried and tested approaches. You see newbies interacting with more mature guys and you can understand how things work from a more factual point of view.

Social media can greatly affect how the actual is experienced due to many aspects of human life being moved into the virtual world. As described, Jess had bought his new car without physically seeing or driving it. He based his decisions solely on the reviews on social media. He further extended this power of social media by describing how he was able to use different configurators and applications to preview how different modifications would look on the car. When he saw the modifications he liked, he would then search on social media about companies and individuals who could provide these modifications he is looking for. He frequented forums where more detailed discussions about car functions and problem solving could be engaged with and new information learnt about regardless of one’s experience with cars. Forums are an example of how the actual actions of going to mechanics and car dealerships to look for car parts or advice are being transferred into the virtual as forums brings different branches of car culture together to discuss problems and find solutions.
Forums have become the embodied digital space in which enthusiasts can partake in digital car culture (Classen 1997) and express their “physicality” in a sense that they can represent themselves through pictures and names similar to how they would in real life when interacting with other people. Vin quickly took out his phone and showed me a new forum application which he installed on his mobile phone further added, “BMW forums. I’m a member; before I bought my car, I signed up to see what the problems and solutions were to these cars.” A recurring occurrence from the above discussions was the importance that forums have within the virtual experience of car culture. All my chosen participants were often members of many different forums which they could participate in through meaningful discussions about cars and associated ideas of maintenance, modifications and even which was the best model to buy. Forums in particular, accessed by social media and the Internet have created new affordances for embodiment to occur through the creation of online profiles required to access the digital spaces. Reflected in Desjarlais and Throop’s (2011) and DiMaggio’s (2014) conceptualization of embodiment, forums have become hubs for meetings and conversations to occur between car culture enthusiasts. Forums also served as a highly-specialized virtual embodied arena for contextualized discussion such as advice on service, repairs and modifications were communicated between members about the car to occur. Also as every forum member interacted with each other there was no perceived status or hierarchy as described by Jess who mentions that the forum “newbies” and mature members interacted with each other with no contestation.

4.2.3) Social Media – The Best?

Social media has made contemporary living highly mediated in terms of actively bring connected to information within our various social circles (Murthy 2008). Whilst Jess was
sharing some of the pictures he saved on his mobile phone of his new car, we were continually interrupted by the rest of the group’s notification alerts sounding off on their mobile devices. We all jokingly remarked that social media never lets us have a few moments of peace due to this disturbance. With continual hype surrounding social media, and with social media being seen as a requirement in society, I asked these group of enthusiasts if they thought social media was the best way to exhibit car culture, AJ said,

It depends on how you look at it. It depends on your point of interest. If you like performance and modified cars you look at SEMA. You always have a way to get out the point of interest you have. Social media has allowed us to organize bigger and better events where before you had to drive to people to tell them you are having an event, now you post it and see it on Cars24 people can see it online. It’s a good way, it’s not the best it’s just become part of the norm. In SA, not everyone is on Facebook, etc. Word of mouth is best and it has ripple effect. As technology becomes better social media will become the norm.

The above reply by AJ indicated how social media has changed the way in which societal interaction and gatherings occur. He described how social media had the ability to mobilize people based on car events such as the SEMA event that has global coverage due to social media. AJ was able to follow the detailed event schedule, participate in discussions and view all the action even though he could not physically be present there. Also, through social media, car events have become bigger and better due to reasons of logistics as there is a large, exponential exposure to event information as it gets shared and reposted throughout the virtual car community. However, in South Africa this can be difficult at times due to infrastructural inequalities as not all citizens have access to the Internet and subsequently, social media. AJ does believe that as technology becomes better and access to virtual infrastructure such as devices and cheaper data becomes more widespread, car culture will be able to fully embrace it and use social media to its full advantage.
Jess’s answer paralleled that of AJ in a sense that social media helped to bridge the hindrance of physical distance through various pictures, videos and augmented reality devices as supported by Haraway’s (1991) argument of the increased footprint the human can have due to enhancements such as technology and social media. Ted added, “Irrespective of time or place it is always possible to connect with others and make your opinion available. I can check responses to my queries or posts at any time.”

Ted added to the ease of socialization that social media brought about by mentioning how easy connections and discussion can be made based on personal preference whilst showing me that majority of his social media “friends” on Facebook are mostly car enthusiasts he met at car events. Haraway’s (1991) argument comes to the fore as computer technology and social media helps to spread the human footprint across many different locations around the world as well as making inter-human connections easier as suggested by Ted’s “friend” list above. Vin further extended this argument as he showed me some pictures of cars he seen on YouTube,

It’s difficult cause it depends on what ‘hood’ you’re from as culture is different in different places. Some people in certain areas regard certain brands as more important than others. You can’t just generalize that certain brands are the best, with regards to this you need to communicate with different areas to get a feel for what’s hot or not. But in terms of communication, getting the personal experiences on a level where enthusiasts are aware of car culture. It’s good and bad but you just got to be careful how you present your ideas.

Vin gave a profound reply as he acknowledged that culture is different based on geographical places, social media helped to expose these varying cultures around the world. Also, he described how it could be so easy to get into arguments on social media to defend your own world view so any user should be careful to navigate social media effectively. Hence for Vin, social media was both a positive and negative element of society.
4.3) Conclusion

In summation, the above discusses my findings with relevance to the online space of car culture and how social media is a medium through which such spaces can be accessed. To reiterate the main argument I posed with regards to this digital space, online content creators such as FastMan, CS And Walker use the digital space of the Internet and social media to create and share content with their own unique signature and style. The content they create is based on the car and how its experiences are transferred from the physical into the virtual by emphasizing the use and capture of visual and auditory cues. In addition, the nexus point of car websites, social media pages and YouTube videos serve as new forms of embodied spaces where car enthusiasts can meet and engage with fellow enthusiasts which eventually translate into physical friendships and connections.

Additionally, through many forms such as videos, blogs and forums social media aids the enthusiast to indulge and satisfy their passion in a myriad of forms in terms of videos, discussions or simple write-ups about cars. An example displaying this ability of enthusiasts to engage in their passion for cars was AJ’s ability to follow the events of international car shows whilst he was based in South Africa. Through these social media pages, there are new forms of media and content being created by individuals who are passionate about the car and the culture around it, hence actual experiences are captured and transferred into the virtual in order to express and exhibit car culture to its best potential. The new virtual car experience attracts enthusiasts to be active members of car culture by viewing content made by content creators as new insights are offered in terms of car maintenance problem solving and even envisaging the look of new cars and so on.
After taking all the above points into consideration, I realise that in order to fully understand how social media is used by car culture, a holistic perspective from the main figures in South African car culture needs to explored. These main figures are namely the brands and car dealerships who are the key players of social media engagement with the wider car culture community within South Africa. The following chapter seeks to explore the car dealership narrative.
Chapter Five: The Temple of Speed: A Showroom Experience

A warm breeze filled the cabin of my car, fragranced with the smell of freshly mowed lawn from the private golf course across the intersection. As the traffic light changed to green, it was finally my turn to proceed into the road adjacent to the Johannesburg premier flagship car dealership - “Flash Motors”. The reflection of sunshine in the parked cars’ windshields caught my vision as I entered the property, rendering the boom gate controlling access into the dealer forecourt nearly invisible. After a quick chat with the security guard describing the nature of my visit – to meet with an old-friend to conduct field research, the guard noted down my vehicle details and allowed me to park amongst those sunbathed vehicles. Finally, I was here– the “temple of the petrolhead\textsuperscript{10}” where enthusiasts visit to experience car culture in its purist form. This chapter argued that car dealerships became ground zero for enthusiasts to experience the materiality of the car. It was this location where the materiality of the car was transferred from the actual into the virtual by using social media to harness the emotional symbolism of the car – freedom, power and status, to advertise and promote not only this car dealership but also the cars it sold and the services it offered.

This particular dealership was located in a prominent, “northern” artery of Johannesburg. In South Africa’s traumatic past, the northern areas of Johannesburg were key stronghold of the white middle to upper-class attached to ideas of perceived wealth, freedom and a sense of power. Whilst modern day, post-apartheid South Africa no longer conforms to this “norm,” the remnants of this way of life are present, even though a variety of people from different

\textsuperscript{10} A colloquial term to describe a person who is passionate about cars and the culture around it.
racial groups now live here it remains associated with representations of whiteness and wealth. This assumption of “wealth” manifests through many gated communities, prominent business corporations and luxury vehicle dealerships. As a result, this area is always filled with various supercars from Ferrari, Lamborghini and Bentleys to tastefully modified BMWs, Mercedes and Volkswagens. The modifications on these vehicles ranged from louder aftermarket exhausts, more aggressive bootlid spoilers and front bumper extensions to vibrant paint schemes. Consequently, many car enthusiasts who don’t reside in this area often frequent and roam around this area exploring various dealerships looking for their next “ride”. Dealerships and shopping malls also served as meeting points for various car club gatherings and events organized through social media.

5.1) Enter the Temple: A Moment of Catharsis

This chapter focuses on the experience of a premier vehicle dealer, anonymized as “Flash Motors” which sold “Flash Cars”, focusing on their use of a variety of social media platforms to promote their brand but also to depict how car dealerships were adapting to social media. At the time of writing, Flash Motors had over six thousand three hundred followers on a popular image sharing platform of social media. There were new posts uploaded by this dealership almost every day showcasing the latest stock of cars they had in terms of new and used cars, specials on vehicle services and maintenance offers as well as deliveries of vehicles to clients. Through detailed ethnographic fieldwork, in this chapter, I describe the process behind capturing, using and managing car culture related information from the dealerships perspective. This is supported by understanding the extent to which social media was also used as a marketing tool to reach many people in different communities in order to promote the brands, products and services offered by that particular dealership. The ability
that social media has in transferring real world experiences into the virtual and vice versa will also be highlighted as social media is radically transforming the way in which businesses and individuals go about conducting business. To understand how social media has become the new virtual public for car dealerships to extend their physical presence into, I spent field time with various people who worked at this dealership starting with my old friend, Shaun who then lead me to Chatty, a new car salesperson and Tilly, the social media manager for this dealership.

As I continued to locate a suitable parking spot, I crept past ornately large, clear windows through which I was able to see the full dealer floor of the second hand or used car lot. After parking, a quick window shop revealed that there were a few eye-catching performance cars parked in the more visible areas in the front whilst the more mundane vehicles were scattered towards the back of the floor possibly to attract customers through the more exciting car models which were parked in eye-catching spots. In order to meet with my contact, I spoke to the main receptionists in the building opposite the used car lot. Immediately as I walked in to this building, I noticed that the receptionists all wore headsets and are young females I estimated to be in their late twenties. They all had a good command of the English language and had a ‘set’ welcome message to any incoming phone call. This welcome message went along the lines of “Good morning and welcome to Flash Motors. My Name is [Receptionist’s name]. How may I direct your call?”.

Whilst I was waiting for an available receptionist, I saw to my right that the service department was located in that corner area of the building. There were four desks at which the different service advisors sat and assisted customers with booking in the cars for services, service-related advice and so on. Finally I was told to speak to another reception desk which
specifically dealt with the parts and accessories department as this was where my old friend, Shaun was located. I was guided to the parts reception which was occupied by two men, both middle aged. They seemed to be perennially busy as their phones were ringing and customers were waiting for their turn to be served. Whilst I was waiting, a female customer walked in and asked for a pint of engine oil. The male receptionists gladly assisted her without asserting any generalized gender stereotypes towards her. Finally, they asked how would I like assistance and I explained to them my purpose there. They jokingly said that they kept my contact, Shaun, in the “dungeon”. I was lead into a tiny parts elevator into a small, windowless awkwardly shaped oblong basement room around 30x5 meters which made this room emulate the characteristics of a dungeon. This room was where all the accessories and parts were kept for servicing and a strong aroma of metal, rubber and engine oil permeated my nostrils. Shauns office was located at the end of this room upon entering which I saw many wall posters of modified cars and small scale-replica car models placed on his cupboards. I immediately got a sense of how he had claimed this space and made it his own. Our discussions were centered around themes such as materiality, social media, and publics all pertaining to the car, culture around it and extending into the role the Flash Motors dealership played in these themes.

5.1.1) Car Stuff – A Matter of Material Meaning

With all the car culture paraphernalia such as the posters and replica models placed in Shaun’s office it was evident that the car held a certain level of significance in his life. Materiality with pertinence in this chapter referred specifically to the actual car itself – in other words, the tangibility of the car itself as an item of social and material significance.

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11 A modified car is a car that has been improved in terms of aesthetic appeal through the addition of boot spoilers, body kits to larger wheel rims to name a few. Modified cars can also be improved in terms of performance aspects such as the addition of larger turbo chargers, intercoolers and so on.
(Kopytoff 1968; Miller et al 2016) and the network of relations that are created by the car, the enthusiasts and the dealerships which are they key proponents in the car culture network (Latour 2005, Ingold 2007, Appadurai 2015). Flash Motors harnessed this materiality to increase their sales and garnered more attention from the community around them as well as car enthusiasts who were interested in purchasing vehicles and services from them.

After a brief discussion of formalities, Shaun took me on a walk around this dealership and showed me how daily life in the dealership acted out and had informal talks about the work life at Flash Motors. Immediately, I noticed how other staff members no longer kept gazing at me as if I was out of place and didn’t belong there. Shaun held a unique position as he epitomized his passion for cars to such an extent that he worked for a dealership occupying the role of a “parts and accessories manager”. As he showed me a highly customized high performance Flash Car model with aerodynamically enhanced spoilers, I saw and felt his passion for cars in the way he spoke and described cars on the dealer forecourt. Due to the loud exhaust noises which constantly bombarded my audible senses, I had to keep straining my ears as there were always cars being moved and shuffled around in order to make more space for newer models. Some cars were taken outside to a more picturesque section of the dealership that had its name, branding and logo in large signage in order for their pictures to be taken and shared on the Internet. I asked him what the purpose for such an act were, he elaborated, “Different angles of pictures are used to intrigue customers. In social media, certain cars look like’ mean machines’ but in real life it looks normal. Social media is meant to amplify features of cars”. His statement suggested that in order to attract people to their particular social media page, the car dealership incorporated the use of multiple angles and unique features of the cars, which invited the customer to phone or email them about that particular car and eventually lead to a sale. Furthermore, in real life, cars looked ordinary but
on social media with various filters and photo effects it made the cars look ethereal which contributed to stirring the emotions within enthusiasts.

Shaun’s statement allowed me to think about how the car as an object is moved online by focusing on the social value of a car and the materials it is made out of. For example, the best visual qualities of the car such aggressive design lines or unique wheels are used to create interest in the car and the features that the car has, creating unique selling points by suggesting that car has millions of research and development money invested into it, making it a prestigious car to own which can elevate a person’s social status (Kopytoff 1986; Jeske 2016). Furthermore, the way in which connections are made in the virtual space as a result of the materiality of the car extend Appadurai’s (2015) and Latour’s (2007) argument of how objects such as cars can be the cause and effect of linkages made possible through social media.

After a saunter back to his “dungeon” he showed me some car related videos that he found on social media. Surprisingly, I had watched most of the videos he showed me already in my own social media travels which showed how a shared interest can unite people and bring them together. He then made a quick phone call to two of his colleagues, Chatty and Tilly and within moments they were in his office willing to participate in my interview session. Chatty, an Indian male in his early thirties, dressed in work attire including a jersey embroidered with the “Flash Motors” name occupies the role of a new car salesperson at this dealership. He was joined by Tilly, a Caucasian female similar in age to Chatty, who the social media manager of this dealership who is dressed in similar attire bearing the Flash Motors name.
After some brief introductions, as Shaun and I mentioned what my purpose was at the dealership and Shaun described how he was showing me some online videos, Tilly volunteered some information in terms of the type of content she posts, “I do what I want to do. If I see something I like, I’ll share it. I love sharing videos on performance cars because it gets people rowdy. If I think it’ll cause emotion in someone I’ll share it.”

Her statement was noteworthy it highlights the transparency and creativity in creating posts allowed by social media. She implied that there was a lot of free reign with regards to what she shared on social media as long as it was aligned with the brand marketing strategy. She particularly liked sharing pictures and videos about the performance orientated cars as it excited people and got them “rowdy” as Tilly eloquently stated. This highlighted the meaning of performance orientated cars as it stirred a reaction of excitement and “rawness” which was something that “Flash Motors” advertising played upon. In this way, the car for Tilly was framed in a similar way to Sheller’s (2003:3) description of how cars have become items of immense social meaning and symbolism. She describes that cars are able to “move” people in many different ways both physically in terms of transport and more importantly, emotionally, which draws enthusiasts and people to have a look at things like Flash Motors social media pages. This emotional symbolism of excitement, rawness and rowdiness is attached to the materiality of the car in terms of design and production, creates an affinity between enthusiasts ultimately promoting how cars can unite people, suggesting that cars are more than merely transport or social mobility as described by Urry (2004) in which it is described how cars have subliminal meanings of rawness and rowdiness described above attached to them which act as “pull factors” to elevate the meaning of cars to car enthusiasts. Tilly’s answer highlighted how car makers exploit the materiality of the car by using the emotional significance the car has to result in more sales and interest in the car brand itself (Lutz 2015).
The social value of cars on a material level are highlighted once more as cars are valued not only as a medium for physical movement or transport but also as a “sum of its parts” upon which value is created on an emotional level from ideas of speed, liberation and status (Kopytoff 1986; Olga and Sutton-Brady 2006).

Tilly’s ability to entice customers to Flash Motors was paralleled and illustrated by Brad, with whom I had an informal discussion whilst waiting to speak to Shaun earlier. Brad described how,

> For me it’s the look of the car, something that looks good, sporty to drive, comfort and speed. I look at the appearance and how fast the car is. I haven’t seen much advertising on speed but more about the look and they always use range topping cars. To get normal cars looking like that you gotta spend more money to get it that way. It’s meant to excite the customer, bring them to the dealer only to realize they gotta spend more money. This also cause customers to apply for credit and then some can’t manage this credit. Further down the line they can’t manage house payments etc.

Brad provided a holistic perspective in the sense that car companies offered many different ways to customize the interior of your car through “individualization” programs. I found that it was pertinent that Brad had mentioned this whilst we were looking at the cars on display. Almost each car had some modification in terms of a larger boot spoiler, aggressive body styling or aftermarket exhaust. It was the cars that had these modifications which attracted the most attention and adulation from enthusiasts. Often, when modifying supercars to this level, it involved a sizable expense with a pure carbon fibre\textsuperscript{12} spoiler which had a price of R60 000.00 as I was informed by Ty, a fellow car enthusiast with whom I interacted with whilst

\textsuperscript{12} Carbon fibre is the preserve of the more premium sports cars and has been associated with strong structural and engineering characteristics, as the production of carbon fibre involves a special production process of weaving carbon fibres in specific ways, vacuum sealing and setting the carbon fibre design in large molds. Therefore, the use or modification of cars to include this material implies that the car has a focus on good build quality and a high level of manufacturing process.
walking around the dealer forecourt with whom I had an informal discussion with whilst
admiring that very car.

Brad further described how car manufacturers somewhat enticed customers into spending
more money on a car just to have the best looking or fast performing car by advertising car
models with many optional extras. However, customers eventually discovered that in order
for their own car to have the similar look or performance of the “dealer” car, the customers
would have to outlay an additional sum of money which could sometimes be detrimental as
other aspects of life such as mortgage payments and education loans were not taken care of as
the money was used to drive and customize their car. Lutz (2015) describes how car makers
are aware that their products entice emotional reactions from enthusiasts hence they employ
clever marketing techniques to increase sales in their products and elevate the value of their
car brand which directly aligns to Brad’s perspective as car makers often play upon the
emotional draw and pull to cars by enthusiasts.

Alterations and their representation, despite making promises of customization, were
however, tightly controlled according to brand, suggesting a careful crafting of the online
experience of the car. This was evident in the strict controls that Flash Motors exercised over
the content and style of its online presence. Based on Shaun’s experience working at “Flash
Motors”, I was curious to understand how this dealership increased the impact of their social
media uploads and posts, hence I asked if there were any challenges in creating content for
social media. This led to informative conversations which described the inner working of the
motor industry. As a petrolhead myself, I was unaware of the intricacies that various
dealerships had to negotiate around, especially when they were part of a larger brand image. I
was particularly intrigued when Shaun opened a web page of Flash Motors. He quickly
signed on to the Flash Motors intranet\textsuperscript{13} and began to download a sizeable Microsoft Word document entailing the “do’s and don’ts” of correct workplace social media policy. I asked to read through this document however I was not allowed to, as it strictly for employees of Flash Motors.

“There is a lot of red tape from head office so we are not allowed to do direct marketing. We as a dealer aren’t allowed to post/publish in a magazine saying that we are the best dealer etc. We work around it by implying we are the best and not making direct claims. We aren’t allowed to do direct marketing by suggesting prices as it creates price wars on products-The post then becomes an auction etc. Head Office does different things compared to Flash Motors etc. People don’t care about Head Office they want a personalized experience from their dealership. Social media is free speech, if you gave me bad service why would I buy from you? Social media in that sense can work for you or against you. People value transparency.

His reply to my question regarding challenges faced when creating content for social media listed above proved to be insightful when understanding how the materiality of the car is transferred, replicated and controlled in the virtual arena. Firstly, as this dealership was part of a larger brand image, it had to follow a mandate by the marketing department of headquarters which stipulates what they are allowed to post and what not to post. For example, they are only allowed to post pictures or video clips about services and products they offer so as to not provide a false sense of advertising which would ultimately be harmful for the company’s brand image. Secondly, they managed to negotiate around the murkiness of making blatant claims which could seem boastful by suggesting that they are a “premier” dealership advocating that they provided top level service. A crucial idea Shaun argued was the trend that customers wanted a personalized service from their preferred dealership. Hence, as these dealerships received the social media mandate from headquarters, they adapted it to their local community to bring in customers. He gave a small backstory to say that this dealership initially advertised on a large billboard a couple meters away from the

\textsuperscript{13} Intranet is a secure and specialized Internet access point available to members of communities or workplaces based on their credentials and affiliations.
dealer to entice customers but they were forced by headquarters to remove it as it was not in line with what the brand was trying to represent. Analytically, the above points are significant because through this form of control on social media, Flash Motors exhibits the materiality car culture in its purist form, free from any misrepresentation. The wholesome exhibition of car culture results in more trust towards Flash Motors as a brand from the community around them as well as being rated highly within the larger South African Flash Cars network, as this car dealership is one of the many locations at which the materiality of the car is displayed in its purest form.

As seen above, social media can impose limits to materiality of the car when it is transferred into the virtual space. Crucially, Shaun suggested that social media could be good or bad, especially at a time in modern society where people valued a sense of honesty and transparency. This type of transparency is similar to ideas described by Stockl (2003) where it is described how any citizen can create digital content as long as they have access to a computer and the Internet. Transparency is important for Flash Motors because in addition to the ideas of control mentioned above, through the employment of people like Tilly who specifically manages all social media posts and helps to create specialized advertisements for Flash Motors, through her the use of her own experiences and the trends she has noticed in her own social media usage.

Kohler et al (2011) put forth the idea of ‘co-creation’ where both the consumer and company, in this case, Flash Motors create posts together for maximum effect. The idea of “co-creation” of content is evident in the above statement by Shaun as Flash Motors adapt advertising regimes to suit their local community. In this example, Flash Motors is the
“consumer” and the larger “Flash Cars” network is the company which requires social media content.

On a localized scale, if Tilly’s answer of using her own social media knowledge to create posts for Flash Motors was applied to the above example, then Tilly, Shaun and Chatty themselves became the company and the community they served in the north of Johannesburg became the consumer. Importantly, the underlying idea described here was a growing trend in society where by citizens valued a sense of decentralization when it came to the type of digital content they consumed, similar to the way in which Flash Motors created their social media posts independently of the larger Flash Cars network. The independent adaptation of social media content by Flash Motors promoted the idea of content decentralization suggested by Stockl (2003) and Kohler et al (2011). Content decentralization refers to the occurrence of social media posts, videos or statues being made by other entities in society such as Flash Motors instead of dominant media institutions like television or radio companies. Relating the idea of decentralization to the thematic of materiality, we can see that Flash Motors adapt the materiality of the cars sold by Flash Motors to their area of service creating context dependent material meaning of the car, instead of a generalized formula for selling or distributing information about Flash Cars by the South African headquarters, highlighting how materiality of the car is something which is both decentralized and tightly controlled at the same time by the brand image of Flash Motors.

Flash Motors clearly valued the brand image associated with them and the level to which this value would affect the material significance of their cars. In order to effectively and professionally represent the materiality of the car, there was a certain modus operandi
adhered to by the various salespeople and employees of Flash Motors, which were further reflected in the words and views of Chatty,

> When cars come into the dealership salespeople video and post it. If we get customers from out of the province, then guys will take pictures and post it to see the features as it makes it easier to decide if they want it. Some guys ask how can I buy a car if I don’t know it but then you can see it with the post online. There’s a buyer for every single car, it might not be at our dealership but another dealership might phone and say they want that car.

His answer provided a crucial point of discussion because through social media, this particular dealership was able to bridge physical distances by using social media to assist with out-of-province sales. This meant that if a customer from out of the province was interested in purchasing a particular car from that dealership, then the dealership would send them pictures of the car, the mileage reading and other relevant details as requested from the customer through social media. Although McArthur (2009) argues that social media lacks the richness of physical interaction between humans, the data brought to awareness by Chatty questioned McArthur’s notion. In the case of Flash Motors, social media actually helps with physical car purchases as it bridges geographical distances. In addition, human interaction is still conducted via telephones calls and emails. As such, social media simply modifies media-richness by including more forms of communication, rather than, as McArthur suggests, undermining it.

The way in which in actual geographical distances and locations become easier to negotiate through the use of social media. To an extent, this made the buying process easier as customers and the dealerships do not have to outlay any financial resources in terms of travelling around to process the deal. Furthermore, if there was a customer who desired a particular car, through the “Flash Cars” South African dealership network, cars would be found and moved around based on customers who would want that car depending on their
location around South Africa. The users of social media, in this case both Flash Motors and the consumer to access and view cars for sale and people willing to buy those cars. McDonough (2014) describes the flow that information and products (cars) can have which has been enable through social media by rendering geographical distances less important than it once was. Using his understanding of the movement of information and products, then we can see that Flash Motors can connect with people around South Africa not just specifically in the Johannesburg area in order to sell cars and parts they offer. Ultimately, social media serves as a conduit through which information (car postings) is able to flow and move between these geographical distances.

Tilly described how she only had more freedom in terms of posting content when it came to customer deliveries as she would add some input from the customers themselves. When it came to vehicle deliveries, certain dealerships focused on creating a dramatic event by involving smoke machines and dramatic music particularly when it came to delivering high performance vehicles as the delivery reflected the characteristic of the car itself. Through the use of smoke machines and so on, the materiality of the car was enhanced and magnified as the smoke would create a sense of mystery to the new owner of the car. When the smoke would clear, the materiality of the car in terms of the metal, sculpture and performance would be laid bare to be experienced by the owner of the car. This was then directly captured through video equipment and uploaded onto their various social media profiles further extending the materiality of the car and the sensual aura of the delivery/hand-over experience into the virtual space for many other people to see. In turn, this video allows for the views on social media to feel as if they are a part of the experience of buying a new car at Flash Motors. In some instances, the viewing of this delivery video online would result in more customers purchasing cars from Flash Motors in order to partake in this sensual experience of
the materiality of a Flash Car. These delivery videos showcase perfectly how social media helps to transfer experiences of both a sensory and material nature of the car from the actual world into the virtual world.

![Image of a high performance vehicle handover at Flash Motors]

*Figure 6: A screenshot from a video of a high performance vehicle handover at Flash Motors. In this video, the black cover is lifted off the vehicle (pictured over the roof of the vehicle) whilst dramatic music is played and smoke (seen to the right of the vehicle) is released adding to the theatricality of both the vehicle and handover itself.*

*Picture Credit: Flash Motors*

Throughout my numerous discussions with these colleagues I got the sense that there was an ease of use with social media. From a parts managerial perspective Shaun said,

> Word of mouth, you can never chat to many people as compared to a like and share, the second you do that all the people who follow you/your friends will see that post. Then they click and like and then all of their friends will do the same. It exponentially grows. Radio is redundant, everyone listens to podcast, digital radio, TV streaming
services that’s because people don’t like what is being played etc. Print media, magazines are still being sold. Most people are connected to social media except the “ballies". A big factor is that it is free which is an attracting factor, all you do is type ‘stance meet’ and post and boom you’ll get all the info. As people like and share it a thousand times, it connects to lots of people. Social media is quick and free.

Shaun’s answers provided an interesting analysis of the current trend in this community. Social media had a far wider reach compared to speaking to people individually. There was an exponential connection of people with shared interests through the process of liking and sharing. Also, in a technology and service orientated society, there was such a variety of entertainment media available, if a person did not like a certain show or song they simply changed to a different entertainment media that broadcasts something they liked. A very interesting idea he raised was the fact that social media was assumed to be reserved for the younger members of society. He suggested the reason for this was that it is quick and free which was a major pull factor for a younger generation who valued such qualities in products. Resultantly, social media has become the new medium through which car enthusiasts can experience and partake in the materiality of car culture without outlaying large financial resources to own such cars etcetera.

Social media has modified or altered the way that car enthusiasts can engage in car culture. A clear example of creative destruction is present as described by Schumpeter (1975) in which he states how technology can over time, be replaced or modified with better and more efficient forms of technology. In terms of social media, it has made other technologies such as radio and television redundant simply due to the fact that social media is able to connect with a wider audience of people with relative ease and crucially, cheaper costs of advertising. The material value both in terms of the car as an item made by various manufacturing

14 The term “ballies” is a South African slang term to describe middle aged to elderly people.
processes and subsequent emotional appeal as a result of such as processes is harnessed by car makers and the social media managers to entice more people to become a part of their brand as described by Urry (2004) and Lutz (2015) in which they describe how car manufacturers are aware of the social importance and value attributed to their cars by enthusiasts and fans of their brand ultimately showing how cars can have deep emotional meaning which outweighs the symbol of mobility which cars represent. The above answer by Shaun was paralleled, supported and further extended by Chatty,

Everyone is on it; it is the cheapest way of advertising especially with way it can snowball. It can either make your brand or if a customer had bad experiences it can snowball into something really nasty. It’s the same with social media- it has positives for what it can do for a brand. Word of mouth works a lot here and 80% of my customers are referrals meaning that half my work is done in terms of getting customers in the door. Obviously, you got to tweak a few things in terms of budget but you already got the customer. This is where social media steps in where my clients can see, like and share. It is good and bad for me purely in terms of the reach it has and relative costs.

As Chatty gestured towards the window at the back of Shaun’s office, a Flash Motors shuttle service could be seen transporting people who brought their Flash Car in for a service and other maintenance work, he also suggested a critical point of departure in the sense that some modern car buyers no longer valued the car as a status symbol but rather as a mere tool of transport, somewhat reflected in the work of Sheller (2003) and Jeske (2016) as they describe how the car serves a dual symbolism of movement on a physical level of transport and a deeper level of emotional movement. This dual meaning itself reflects the current values within the younger generation of society in terms of the commodification of a service driven society rather than that of a product driven society. An example of such is car sharing services such as Uber that provide a service for a small fee rather than actually buying a car with many associated costs of ownership. However, for those people within society who still valued the car as an object of symbolic meaning, social media has enticed them to visit their preferred brand and eventually purchase their product. Once a prospective sale is reached,
Chatty then makes adjustments in terms of pricing and discounts to help “sweeten” the deal as it were, to finally confirm the sale.

I further asked Chatty what he meant when he said that social media can be negative for companies like Flash Motors,

Like I said, no brand is perfect. I’m not a perfect human being. We are one of the better brands that people aspire to, but our cars are still built by people and parts are mass-produced and there could be a defect somewhere along the line and sometimes customers aren’t happy they post it on social media. It can leave a bad taste in the mouth. But sometimes it gets looked at but after a few days its forgotten but it tarnishes the brand name as a result. Sometimes the brand works to get it sorted as soon as possible. If issues arise, respond as soon as possible and nip it in the bud, come to an agreement and fix the problems.

Whilst Chatty gave his response, I noted that he stressed the idea that car brands should identify issues immediately once posted on social media before it gained momentum and spiraled into larger issues which could negatively affect that brands image. He described if they received a complaint on social media, they would often reply to the person who posted the comment asking them to privately message them (Flash Motors) so the issue could be rectified in a “private” space rather than being displayed for public comment. Solutions to problems mentioned by customers could vary based on the severity of problem from mechanical issues with cars or poor service to name a few. The solutions offered to problems demonstrate how there is feedback from the virtual into the materiality of the actual world. If the problem was a mechanical problem with the car, then often a courtesy car would be given to the customer whilst their car is being repaired. If the problem was non-mechanical, that is, an issue with poor service from the dealership then private steps would be taken to deal with the person at fault.

There were some similarities in Chatty’s and Tilly’s responses in the sense that social media was great for promoting positive aspects about brands however it could have deeply
impactful repercussions in the sense that if there was a poor product or service experience it could easily get posted on social media and through various shares, it could spiral out of control which could have truly negative and hurting effects on the brand image as a whole. Also, the way in which such negative comments were handled can influence the manner in which issues were resolved. Due to the fact that people spent such a large sum of money to purchase a Flash Car, they expected a certain level of service in return, however, if these standards were not met it could have a further negative impact, that’s why she stressed that there needed to be correctly trained people handling social media accounts in order to avoid such issues. These people should have strong interpersonal skills as well as knowledge of the Flash Motors product/service offerings to understand and resolve conflict instead of exacerbating conflict and disagreement. It was particularly easy on social media to be harsh and hurtful to companies and employees who monitor the social media accounts of those companies due to the anonymity that social media provided. Building upon the negative comments proliferating virtual spaces, Shaun mentioned,

I think there a lot of negative people out there, so if I post a picture of a stance\textsuperscript{15} car then I get comments about why did I modify the car like that, why I chose those wheels and they start the negative side. Sometimes the wrong people see the post and spread hate but at the same time, the right people will see it and appreciate it. If the hate continues you can just delete a comment and unfriend him. Nowadays a button does it but in the old days fists did it.

Shaun’s reply provided a holistic repercussion towards social media as he described how there were a lot of negative people on social media who thrived on spreading hate due to the anonymity and lack of face-to-face interaction on the Internet. Sometimes, the wrong people saw these comments and further shared it which propagates negativity on the Internet. However, there are those people who appreciated and respected the various posts of modified

\textsuperscript{15} A stanced or “slammed” car is a car that has been modified in terms of suspension in order to achieve the lowest ground clearance often achieved through altering suspension geometry, springs and so on.
cars from stance cars to race-built cars etc. In his opinion, he mentions that if you don’t like a comment on your post you could simply delete it and carry on with your life, he amusingly mentioned that nowadays a (like/dislike) button does what fists would do whilst enacting a small action of fisticuffs. The above-mentioned ideas show how cars are important material items in car enthusiasts lives. Enthusiasts would often display intense passion for their preferred brand or style of car that they would defend it by taking extreme measures of posting negative comments showing how cars are highly emotive material objects (Sheller 2003; Lutz 2015). Social media with a specific locus on car-related pages on groups, has become liberal spaces for engaging discussions about the materiality to occur. There are often large participatory numbers within these groups and often there were disagreements between the participants which sometimes escalated into serious issues but more commonly, people often ‘unfriended’ the person in order to dissociate with those negative comments. Agreements or even disagreements highlight how cars are important material items in the lives of car enthusiasts which has been transferred into the virtual space of social media.

5.1.2) Social Media: A Powerful Tool for Powerful Cars

One sunny Saturday morning I visited the dealership again to get a feel for what it was like during the weekend. It was significantly busier with a lot more people walking around, and a much more busier servicing and parts department. Many people were standing around, interacting with the cars parked on the dealership floor – they were climbing in and out, holding the steering wheel of cars they climbed in to, to get a feel for what the car would feel like once it was in their possession. As I walked past Chatty’s desk I overheard a conversation he had with a potential customer where the customer described how he saw an advert on social media for the massive discount weekend specials they had for certain Flash car models. Social media has a meaningful impact in bringing people to dealerships (Lutz
and creating action from them through advertising campaigns and showcasing of the materiality of car culture. From the above paragraphs, social media clearly held an important role in the lives of these motoring industry professionals. Social media is a powerful tool that is continually being adapted to the car industry as demonstrated by “Flash Cars.” With this in mind, understanding social media in its role as advertising and marketing tools used by dealerships is discussed further.

Amongst a plethora of various social media pages of unending car dealerships, each dealer has to create a unique impact to make their page stand out from this unending database of dealerships. I found this particularly noteworthy especially when these dealers became part of a larger brand image. I asked Shaun how did they, as a dealer, add to the impact of their social media posts – this is what he said,

“Impact is what you make it. You emphasize what you want people to see – gotta intrigue people. We choose what you want to see. Social media focuses on the first thing you see you’ll remember. The first thing you see needs to give you an impact. Same like catchy tones on radio etc. It’s all about the services and products offered. Target groups are important. Social media turned into marketing. If you Google your name and you aren’t in the top three results, you’re a nobody. If it’s not there you’re not doing it right. It’s all a race about who sees social media posts, even with dealerships so they’ll come here first.”

The above reply revealed a competitive perspective towards social media in a sense that social media and the various digital spaces that dealerships occupy had become a place filled with immense competition in order to receive the most number of visitors in actuality. Using the Flash Motors dealer floor as an example, they were known as the premier dealer in Flash Cars within the greater Johannesburg area with strong ties to the local track racing scene as well as selling high performance Flash Cars. They used their reputation to their advantage by creating a floor design similar to that of a racetrack with red and white floor marking
reminiscent of a race track. In addition there were many posters on the dealer walls describing and chronicling their involvement in the South African racing scene.

*Figure 7: An elevated view of a portion of the Flash Motors dealership floor. In this section, the high-performance versions of vehicles are displayed.*

*Picture Credit: Flash Motors*

In order to “win” the social media competition, a certain level of impact or “wow factor” needed to be added to these posts. When it came to adding to the impact of cars, a special importance should be placed on the features that are emphasized in order to attract a potential customer through the means of social media postings. Chatty described,

Design and styling, Certain car brands are synonymous with performance. Customers are so learned about products nowadays cause of the Internet they already know what they want. They just want to have tangible look and feel of car and take it for test drive. South Africa is one of those markets where everything on paper goes. Although customers are learned they don’t really know about the drivability and other aspects of the car. “Flash Cars” posts a lot on social media so they want a lot of people to see
it. There’s always “bums for seats” - there is a car suited for every person. Although social media does play a lot in a brand’s sale but nothing beats a test drive to get a physical tangible, touch feel and smell. Social media is making it easier to inform the customer but our jobs are still to push the extra.

His reply spoke directly to the main premise of my study which is the ability that social media has in terms of bridging the actual and virtual worlds. This was because he mentioned that the Internet and social media was able to inform the customer about the different features of their referred car, making the customer aware of the various features and indicative pricing which ultimately lead the customer to take action and visit actual dealerships in order to finalize deals and indeed, get a sensory appreciation for the car in terms of the look and feel of the car which contributed to the symbols of status, performance and desire which cars instill in enthusiasts lives.

Taking all the above mentioned perspectives into consideration, I found myself asking if social media was the most efficient way to showcase and exhibit car culture. These were the responses I received. Tilly said,

Social media is a good way to get out there. Social media is going to get bigger and the next generation is being born into social media, parents are already creating profiles for them so that where it’s at. But car enthusiasts are people who still prefer to touch and feel and lots of those people get to hear about events cause of social media.

The response given by Tilly highlights her opinion on current trends in society in which future generations already have social media profiles or avatars created for them by their parents which ultimately means that they will be exposed to social media from a young age. It becomes an indoctrinated routine for the new generation resulting in importance placed on the use and perceived presence on social media. According to Miller et al (2016), the “normative” nature of social media is crucial in understanding digital anthropology. They describe how children of different societies grow up to form and continue certain traditions of that society. For example children of farmers will learn through observation the necessary
methods of farming done by their parents and eventually continue those methods once they are older. In the same sense many parents often have multiple social media accounts which their children are exposed to from a young age. This in turn promotes a society that values social media and to an extent, an aspect of digital sociality which increases with each passing generation (Miller et al 2016: 23). Miller et al also describe how the use of social media has been localized or adapted to specific regions of the world based on the values of that culture (Miller et al 2016: 14).

However, with the new social media generation, Tilly argued that people who are interested in car culture still like to involve themselves in the actual sensory experience it offered in terms of the material tangibility of the car such as touch, smell and sight. The sensory experience offered was further substantiated in Chatty’s statement above where he described how social media helped to bring customers in to the dealership but social media still could not beat the feeling of seeing and touching the car, smelling the interior and hearing the exhaust tone offered by the actual experience of the car. Social media has made the general public aware of dealership events such as the unveiling of new models and services which formed part of this sensory experience. Shaun provided a reflective reply,

> Since so many people share your own values, if you post your own car you can see how many others like it and share the same interests. An example is that there was advertising predominantly on social media for a “Flash Cars festival” as everyone checked their Facebook and other social media. There was exponential growth from twenty ‘likes’ to fifty, ninety and so on.

The idea presented above highlights how social media connects people who shared similar values about car culture by creating a safe and constructive space for engagement between enthusiasts. Dealers and brands have recognized social media as a new space to connect with car enthusiasts and they have used social media as a predominate form of advertising when compared to radio and print media etcetera due to the exponential way it can be shared
between communities. This implicitly means that dealers such as Flash Motors can connect and reach a vast audience of car enthusiasts rather than being isolated and unable to gain correct exposure to enthusiasts if it was not for social media. An example given by Shaun was a festival of new cars and experiences held by “Flash Cars” had mainly advertised this event on social media, there was only one radio advert that played intermittently.

Chatty motioned towards Shaun who then asked me to join them on a walk to the Flash Motors workshop to show me some of the work they do. We exited the “dungeon” through a door on the opposite side of the elevator which opened up to the back of the workshop. The workshop was a hive of activity and noise with pneumatic torque wrenches sounding off, tires squealing across the clean, whitish-grey epoxy flooring and cars being driven on the multiple ramps to be hoisted into the air so technicians could inspect the under-side of the Flash Cars. Shaun showed me some of the tuning work they undertook from the installing of racing stripes on the bonnets and roofs of Flash Cars to more intricate aftermarket vehicle ECU or Engine Control Units “remapping” where the car’s electronic brain is reprogrammed to tell the various car parts like engine, turbos and cooling fans to produce more power. The “Flash Cars” which had their ECU’s being remapped looked like human patients on ‘life support’ as there were many cables and connection points protruding from the various diagnostic points located in and out of the car. On the other hand, Chatty shows me brand new Flash Cars that were being driven into the workshop directly off a delivery truck located at the entrance of the workshop. He described to me how these cars need to be “PDI’d” or “Pre-Delivery Inspected” where all the cars functions are tested, fluid levels like oil and coolant are checked and topped up ready to be delivered to their new owners. Chatty took some quick pictures of these new Flash Cars to send to the owner to build the excitement of
receiving a new vehicle. He said that he would send these pictures to Tilly who would then post some pictures of the new vehicles being offered at Flash Motors.

5.1.3) Selling Metal Dreams

Whilst we were walking through the workshop, some technicians could be seen on a small platform overlooking the workshop floor. These technicians were on a tea break. Almost each technician was busy on their mobile device, using the ubiquitous thumb or index finger swipe to scroll up and down their various social media feeds. The majority of the time, people who worked within the car industry were often ‘petrolheads’ or car enthusiasts themselves. As a result, these salespeople or parts managers sometimes occupy a dual position as they often shared their own personal narratives on their private social media “avatars” and a different set of narratives on their corporate avatars, often dictated by their employer. The idea of the private and public avatar lends itself to an example of a dual embodiment scenario whereby these salespeople have alternating “bodies” afforded to them virtually by social media but still constrained by rules set forth in the actual world, showing how the body or bodies we possess can be used to experience the world around us as described by Desjarlais and Throop (2011). Speaking from a dealer perspective, Chatty said

I’m old school, not ‘tech’ advanced like younger guys. I mainly use Facebook, I’m more inserted in to Facebook as I’m accustomed to it. I mainly share “Flash Cars” South Africa status, I will like and share what has been posted and therefore my friends and clients can see it as well. I share as many delivery pictures as well. Tilly includes my clients and my deliveries in my timeline. Even when I sit at home and I go through Facebook and if “Flash Cars” South Africa posts something good or interesting, I like it and share it. And lots of my customers like and share it also and it snowballs like that. It’s a good form of advertising. Lots of people I sold cars to became friends. I love customers that buy cars from my dealership and me.

Chatty described how he mainly uses Facebook simply due to the fact that he found it easy to use and has made more connections on this platform. An emphasis should be placed on his
vocabulary when describing his use of Facebook as he is the only participant who described how he is “inserted” into Facebook suggesting a form of transhuman enhancement where he is located in digital space further extends his reach as both a car enthusiast and salesperson. Desjarlais and Throop (2011) and Csordas in Wolputte (2004) argue that the very words we use to describe our own lives further strengthens our link to our lived experiences. A noteworthy point was that even though he would be at home browsing Facebook, if his employer brand or dealership posts something interesting he will share the post, thereby continually embedding himself in the “virtual space” of the dealer which further re-iterates the ability social media has in blurring spaces and existing in multiple spaces with no clear boundary between the virtual and the actual (Boellstorff 2012).

Chatty went on further to describe a small aspect of his own job description, extending the importance of social media in sharing the materiality of cars online,

“Flash Cars” doesn’t allow posting of any brand harming images such as champagne on deliveries as they feel it promotes drinking and driving. Although “Flash Cars” makes fast cars it’s all about being responsible to society. Some customers ask where is my champagne and we explain to them why don’t give it and so on. Apart from being a brand ambassador I follow BMWBlog, autobuilt.de, beemer1. I must be honest is that I can go more to visit competitors to see what products they offer. I don’t really follow other dealerships. Some customers question as I work Flash Motors but I follow Speedy Cars [another dealership that sells the same cars built by “Flash Cars”].

Here, Chatty demonstrated how he had the freedom to share any content he liked although there was a clear mandate not to promote ideas of drinking and driving or other harmful images. As he is a brand ambassador he always shared content of his own brand with a focus on his own dealership. Chatty demonstrated a strong sense of localized brand loyalty as he only follows his own dealership, showing that the materiality in terms of work environment of the current dealership holds high significance to him. Further, the representation of the materiality of the car in positive manner, that is, without associations to drink driving implies
that dealerships such as Flash Cars aim to increase the social value of cars (Kopytoff 1986) by associating the brand with a sense of social responsibility. Overall, he uses social media to look at global websites which further exhibit the materiality of cars in order to better understand the products he sells.

Tilly further elaborated on her particular job title, however, as a social media manager for “Flash Motors” she provided interesting details into the inner working on finding the balance between virtual and actual worlds,

Customer delivery, specials. I used to do more extensive advertising but due to Consumer Index it has changed. Social media has a range (seventeen kilometers) in which you can influence your dealership or business but it infringes on other dealers so “Flash Cars South Africa” banned those sponsored ads. Each dealer has an area of responsibility if you are in the north of Johannesburg, that’s your target area and if you go over that you are infringing on franchise standards. It is unfair if Sandton “Flash Motors” advertises in your areas and vice versa. It’s not the greatest since I do lots of deals like that but since it happened I only done one.

She further mentioned the limits she has when posting,

Anything I think would be useful to the consumer from servicing etcetera I will post. Being responsible for the Facebook page we [this dealership] has around six thousand three hundred followers and I use my own perspectives as I am relatively young so I know Facebook.

Tilly described an informative idea in the sense that each dealership had a “range of influence” in which they advertised. This range of sphere of advertising has a strong relation to Miller et al’s (2016) idea of scalable sociality where a person or in this case, an organization, can choose their range of reach or influence in terms of how many people they impact through the use of social media. The advertising range also limits the virtual presence of that dealership to prevent unfair advertising. Ironically, Tilly described how she had processed a few deals by infringing on other dealers areas but now since head-office was tightening down on the advertising methods through social media she could not continue to do that. The type of content she mainly advertised was that of service deals, special offers
and similar postings. She suggested that as she was still relatively a young age, she knew social media etiquette so she was able to maximize this dealer’s identity on social media. Theoretically, using Appadurai’s (2015) ideas of the ability of objects have in exhibiting materiality, Flash Motors is able to only advertise facts that are true and not cause internal tensions between other dealerships which also sell Flash Cars.

After pausing to answer a call from a customer who enquired about the price of a new aftermarket exhaust, Shaun gave his input,

Social media is mainly to do with interests, used to complain and check up on other people and how they are doing in life although they don’t necessarily want to phone them. For people like me who like cars I just want to share so many pictures about cars, so people log on in the morning and they know they will check a post about cars. Social media is split into two categories of people, (1) people who complain spread negativity and generally be negative and (2) Social media is all about what you like, if it is flowers then I will post about flowers but if it cars then I post about cars. No posts about politics etc.

Another reflective response given by Shaun suggested that social media was divided into two groups of people. It was a reflection of the contemporary society that the negativity is flourishing based on types of content posted such as stance cars. He joked that people posted what they like, if they liked flowers then they would post flowers almost continuously, nothing else would be posted.

5.2) Conclusion

The above has described my experience at “Flash Motors” which has brought to light the inner working of this dealership. I focused on understanding how they use social media to exhibit the cars and products they sell. More importantly, it showed how the people who work at this dealership are skilled at their professions and how willing they were in sharing their opinions as both employees of the larger “Flash Cars” network as well ordinary citizens
of South Africa who use social media. Through the core theme of materiality, strengthened
with the theme of social media, this chapter was able to demonstrate the interrelatedness
between each of these themes which is prevalent in society. This demonstration was evident
in the capturing of the emotive aspects of Flash Cars such as design and engineering aspects
to the way in which the materiality of not only this particular car dealership but the larger
Flash Cars South African network can be experienced anywhere within the country
regardless of geographical location.

Upon further introspection, when looking back, the central argument of this chapter was to
understand how dealerships exhibit the materiality of cars on social media – and showcase
the materiality of the car in the virtual space by understanding the process in which physical
dealership culture such as new vehicles information and sales are captured, uploaded and
shared in to the digital space, I was able to depict how dealerships are adapting to social
media and transfer the materiality of the car into the virtual world. An emergent finding was
that social media is also used as a marketing tool to reach many people in different
communities in order to promote the brands, products and services of this particular
dealership. Analytically speaking, social media is quickly becoming a new avenue to
understand ideas of tangible materiality as the creation of immersive delivery videos directly
enhances the attraction to the materiality of cars which exponentially increases car
enthusiasts “pull” towards this car dealership in both the actual and virtual worlds.

This spoke directly to the sub-argument of this chapter – the ability that social media had in
transferring real world experiences into the virtual world and vice versa was also highlighted
as social media has radically transformed the way in which businesses and individuals go
about conducting business, showing that the materiality of the car has the ability to create
connections (Appadurai 2015; Ingold 2007) which are enhanced through social media. An
example of one such transformative characteristic was the ability for a dealership to conduct sales across the country, not just in their immediate area of influence as social media helped to mitigate geographical distances, opening up new sales opportunities for the entire country, showing that the materiality of the car itself was able to move geographically. Consequently, as the digital footprint of this Flash Motors car dealership was sizeable, there needed to be correct social media etiquette when handling any negative or indeed, positive issues, as evident in the manner in which social media managers need to moderate and attend to any negative comments on social media about their brand. This was an example of how a virtual interaction was able to take place and prevent real world altercations such as law suits and brand image damage. At the same time, through social media, a vast amount of virtual interaction could take place which helps to facilitate real world communication such as the purchasing and selling of vehicles and services, especially as geographical boundaries are becoming more challenging to pass through. Ultimately, this shows that the pre-existing ideas of materiality are being redefined as social media acts as a catalyst through which action can occur rather than going into the dealership in actuality as prospective car buyers or enthusiast can use car dealership pages to engage with the dealership to find out pricing on cars and parts or rectify mechanical issues.

After spending time here at Flash Motors, during a moment of retrospection I am able to recollect my countless hours spent shopping around the virtual dealership floor for a “dream” configuration of my car, watching videos and clips of these cars in action and engaging in intense debates about these cars with other car enthusiasts around the world through various forums, discussion boards and social media posts.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

Computer technology such as the Internet and social media has allowed for great advances in human connectivity and communication. This study has explored the way in which the car has served as a deeply intrinsic material object, acting a nexus point for human interaction particularly in digital spaces of social media. Holistically, this study has addressed ideas surrounding the transference of physical interaction to the digital space and remaking of the body through computer technology assisted mediation.

As exhibited in Chapter Three, the car has a deep-rooted meaning within the lives of enthusiast which is shared through social media. This shared meaning of the car helps to unite and bring enthusiasts together around the car. Social media also helps to mobilize car enthusiasts to attend car events as seen in how the entire event described in this chapter was solely organized on social media and in doing so, created a cyborg public where a hybrid of actual and virtual experiences exist. Building upon the theoretical framework of publics using the works of Kosselleck (2012), Warner (2002) and Habermas (2004) to name a few, this chapter discussed how car events such as Supercar Sunday exhibited strong theoretical examples of the creation of hyper-localized spaces.

In Chapter Four, we saw how social media caters to car culture by understanding how the social media personalities and enthusiasts themselves use social media to engage in this culture. A key idea discussed was that social media personalities use sensory experiences of sight and hearing to amplify the transference of embodied experiences between virtual and actual worlds. Additionally, car enthusiasts engaged in related processes of transference by sharing videos and communicating with content creators through the forms of comments and
“likes” on various social media platforms. Conceptually, social media personalities I have chosen for this research created their own unique “identity” though customizing their home pages and video style, ultimately creating a personalized area of virtual space, as suggested by Lange (2007) and boyd and Ellison (2008) who describes how people can make embodied spaces by employing techniques which claim or demarcate the space. The enthusiast’s perspective on social media has related to the way in which human sociality in terms of communication and phenomenological experiences are lived by the enthusiast in the virtual space of social media, as perpetuated by McArthur (2009), Coleman (2010) and Desjarlais and Throop (2011) to name a few.

Lastly, in Chapter Five, there was a focus on how car dealerships themselves transfer the actual materiality of the car into the virtual space and additionally, how the car dealerships are adapting to the new form of digital marketing, connectivity with clients and content creators of car culture content that social media offers. Materiality with pertinence in this chapter referred specifically to the actual car itself – in other words, the tangibility of the car itself as an item of social and material significance (Kopytoff 1968; Miller et al 2016) and the network of relations that are created by the car, the enthusiasts and the dealerships which are they key proponents in the car culture network (Latour 2005; Ingold 2007; Appadurai 2015).

Overall, social media is a powerful tool used in a digitally orientated society (Murthy 2008). A key aim I hoped to explore throughout this paper was the fact that technology, particularly social media and Internet technology has greatly affected the sociality of humans in terms of communication between car enthusiasts and their embodied experiences by transferring experiences form the actual into the virtual and vice versa. In conclusion, social media will continue to be a powerful tool in communication and sharing of experiences within society.
Car culture was a pertinent lens used to help bring out the manner in which social media has affected society. As more people and companies use social media thereby increasing the connectivity between people, we live in an era of tremendous social capital and powerful ways of indulging in our passions-indulging in life!
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Appendix A: Consent/Information Sheet

Dear potential participant

Please read the information below. Please feel free to ask any questions you might have regarding my research while reading or after reading the information below.

My name is Praveer Patel. I am a Masters student at the University of Johannesburg at the department of Anthropology and Development Studies and I would appreciate your participation in a research project about “The Digital Driver: An Ethnographic Study of Social Media Through Car Culture Perspectives.” This project aims to understand how members of the car community use social media to transfer physical experiences into the virtual world. Additionally, this study aims to highlight how social media is able to create social connections based on the shared interest of the car.

1. Your participation in this research is voluntary. This means that you will not be rewarded for participating. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence.

2. Should you agree to participate, I would ask your permission to engage with you in a number of different ways either through participant observation of your activities, semi-structured interviews and/or through viewing your social media profiles or channels. I will request your permission for different kinds of interaction, and you may tell me if you accept one kind of interaction but not another (for example, if you are okay with me viewing and writing about your social media profile, but would not like to be interviewed).
3. All interviews will take place in a location of your choosing. Interviews will be approximately 30 minutes in duration but could be shorter or could be longer depending on your preferences. I will note down your responses and keep these responses in a safe location which only I will have access to. Should you at any time choose to end the interview, you may do so without me questioning why and with no repercussions to yourself.

4. The purpose of this research is to understand how car culture is using social media to aid in sociality and explore the digitalization of this culture.

5. Your identity will be protected at all times. I will do this by using an agreed pseudonym which will replace your real identity for the duration of this study. Any data or responses collected from your participation will be stored in both physical and digital format. These responses will be stored in a secure safe at my residence and on a password protected and encrypted laptop which only I have access to. These responses will be stored for approximately 8-12 months. Also, as I will be using information from various social media profiles and websites I will remove any identifying features. Any publications resulting from this research will not mention your name or any identifying information about you, your employer and/or your company.

6. My contact telephone number is 0824975280. My email is 201307216@student.uj.ac.za. My supervisor, Dr Claudia Gastrow can be contacted on (011)5593931 and cgastrow@uj.ac.za. Please feel free to either contact me or my supervisor if you have any queries or complaints about my research.
If you have read and understood this document, understanding what is expected of you, please consider participating in this research. If you are willing to do this, please sign the consent form.

Name


Signature


Date

Thank you for your time

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Appendix B: Interview Questions

1) What type of automotive content do you post on various social media sites?

2) Do you post any other content not related to the automotive subculture on social media?

3) What car culture related social media sites or profiles do you follow?

4) Why do you think the automotive subculture uses social media so easily?

5) What do you think are the implications or repercussions of social media for this subculture?

6) What features of the car do you focus on for social media?

7) How do you add to the impact of social media posts?

8) Are there any challenges in creating automotive content for social media?

9) What makes the car and the culture around it so important or meaningful to you?

10) Is social media the best way to exhibit car culture?