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Driven by Nostalgia: A Study of Classic Cars' Social Representations Among Italian Youth¹

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Abstract

The article will investigate images and social representations of classic cars and the possible stereotypes among their consumers. This study involved a group of 49 students from the Universities of Verona, Venice and Padua, all between 19 and 32 years old, who participated in the Drive your Heritage hackathon at the Classic Cars and Motor Show (*Auto e moto d'epoca*) in 2017. Initially, each student was asked to take three pictures depicting objects or people in the 'world of classic cars' for creative stimulus and to introduce them to the research topic at hand. Subsequently, structured interviews were conducted to uncover possible trends among car owners. The data analysis, which was based on studies about social representation (Secondulfo, 2012, 2015), yielded two main findings: 1) the presence of nostalgia about an un-lived past, which results from a shared family memory or is learned through mass media (films, comics, cartoons, etc.), and 2) that stereotypes about classic car owners among the young people in our sample are based on exclusivity, luxury and care for cars.

Keywords: social representations, nostalgia, classic cars.

¹ The two authors engaged in fruitful dialogue to collaborate on this article. Sections 1, 2, 3, 4.1, 5 and 6 were written by Francesca Setiffi, while Vincenzo Scotto wrote the remaining parts.

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1. Introduction

This article aims to reconstruct the social implications of classic cars as determined by a group of students from the Universities of Padua, Venice and Verona. These students were selected to participate in a ‘marathon of ideas’ (hackathon)² organised by Unismart Padova Enterprise during the Classic Cars and Motor Show (*Auto e moto d’epoca*) in Padova. In this context, a ‘classic car’ is a vehicle at least 20 or 30 years old, whether it remains in circulation or not.

The study was carried out to describe and interpret stereotypes and social representations of classic cars and their owners from the perspective of young people. Stereotypes were uncovered by asking the interviewees to imagine not only the age and occupation of certain car owners, but also the symbols and lifestyles associated with classic cars. In other words, we tried to identify the typical owners of classic cars and their social connotations according to Italian youth.

The theoretical framework, which unites literature about consumption and material culture, is crossed with a common theme of fascination for the past. This fascination idealises a historical era and positions it in the present without many adjustments. First, the research design will be outlined and the socio-anthropological literature, which investigates the cultural significance of cars, will be examined. Later, research results that confirm the possible stereotypes that youth attribute to classic cars will be discussed.

The study of car stereotypes herein is based on our interviewees’ interpretations of the imaginary world of classic cars made up of real or potential owners, fans, mechanics and other enthusiasts, as well as their thoughts on the ‘classic car’ as an object. This basis seeks to unite the corpuses detailing the most frequently communicated perspectives about consumption (Paltrinieri, 1998, 2012) with a distinctly socio-anthropological approach (Secondulfo, 1994, 2012). Compared to previous surveys about social representation, which employed photo stimulus and the semantic differential (Secondulfo, 2015; Setiffi, Lazzar, 2015; Viviani, 2015), in this case the stereotype studies were based on descriptions of the photos the

² A hackathon (or hack day) is an event defined by Major League Hacking as a ‘marathon of invention’. The term ‘hackathon’ was coined in 1999 by American computer companies. Hackathons typically challenge hacker teams to complete the best creative project; today, this type of event organizes expert groups to present innovative projects in many sectors. ‘Drive your Heritage’ was a two-day event organized by My First Classic and the Classic Cars and Motor Show (Padua) in cooperation with Unismart (a fully-owned subsidiary of the University of Padova concerned with technological transfer and innovation in consulting activities) to understand the possible evolution of the classic car market.

interviewees took and on structured interviews. As will be explained in the section about research design and methodology, this change resulted from the specificity of the object under investigation and from the peculiarities of the research sample. Much like in studies previously conducted on this topic, the stereotype is considered a dangerous defence mechanism because it entails prescribed judgements that can lead to discriminatory attitudes. Furthermore, the stereotype remains a mechanism through which the complexity of everyday life is reduced.

Following past studies devoted to analysing social representations of women's work (Setiffi, Lazzar, 2015), which highlighted the strong contribution of clothing in constructing stereotypes about employed women, this survey accounts for the general meaning of a stereotype, which is 'the cognitive nucleus of prejudice, that is to say the set of information elements and beliefs about a certain category of objects, re-elaborated in a coherent and tending stable image, able to sustain and reproduce the prejudice against them' (Mazzara, 1997: 16). However, this definition ignores its more nuanced meaning of 'the tendency to consider in an unjustifiably unfavourable way the persons belonging to a specific social group' (Mazzara, 1997: 14). Stereotypes and prejudices often possess negative connotations because they are associated with simplified ideas and images that adversely affect certain social groups. However, a more general conception of stereotypes is concerned with the 'nature of mental processes and their typical way of functioning' that can be expressed in positive, negative or neutral representations. Regardless, as a mechanism to simplify social reality, stereotypes are formed based on three different variables: the degree of social sharing, which allows a stereotype to be part of a society's imaginary culture, the level of generalisation, which represents the stereotype's degree of diffusion within the same culture or between different subcultures and finally the stereotype's rigidity, which concerns the tendency of stereotypes to persist over time (Mazzara, 1997).

Social research focuses more on how stereotypes are stigmatising 'coherent and rigid enough of negative beliefs that a certain group shares with respect to another group or social category' (Mazzara, 1997: 17). In our case, the research goal was to detect neutral stereotypes – those about owners of classic cars – and to detect the degree of similarity between respondents' assumptions and classic car owners' real traits. The study's results confirm the enormous explicative potential of the photos collected in previous studies in understanding stereotypes and social representations (Secondulfo, 2012, 2015) and in analysing the characteristics of classic car owner stereotypes that follow the ideals of power, elegance, masculinity, seduction and social success typical of the 1950s and 1960s. According to the youth who were interviewed, classic cars and their owners – in addition to representing a form of the famous

‘conspicuous consumption’ of Veblenian memory – symbolise a passion for the care and conservation of the history of automotive objects, since they are a key fascination in the nostalgic consumption of second-hand goods (Migliorati, 2014, 2016). The research results might have been obvious if the study examined a community of classic car enthusiasts, who would naturally share an interest in similar lifestyles. However, in our case, we studied a group of young people with an interest in the automotive industry (for personal and/or academic reasons) but who do not belong to a specific hobbyist community.

2. Research design and methodology

The study reflects on consumption and material culture with the aim of detecting stereotypes concerning the ideal characteristics of classic car owners and their presumed lifestyles through visual and textual research techniques. As mentioned in the introduction, studying a stereotype first requires verifying its existence in terms of social sharing, generalisation and rigidity, and then trying to understand its relative peculiarities. Regarding the stereotype’s existence, we can confirm that the research outlines an almost homogeneous set of images and testimonies related to the social meanings in the world of classic cars, including descriptions of hypothetical drivers, the activities they carry out with their cars and the reasons that led them to buy their vehicles. Classic car owners’ imagined daily lives (Grassi, 2006), which emerge from the interviewees’ words and photos, include two key factors: luxury and a passion for the past.

The sample consists of 49 students (4 females and 45 males) from the Universities of Verona, Venice and Padua, all aged between 19 and 32, who participated in the Drive your Heritage hackathon at Fiera di Padova in 2017. The sample selection and composition, as well as the location in which the research took place, influenced the research’s strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths include not only the five hours spent with the interviewees to coordinate the collection of photos and the administration of interviews, but also the opportunity to collect three photos from each interviewee to assess their views of classic cars from inside the halls of the Fiera di Padova, which housed both the study and the auto show. On the other hand, the study’s main weakness is its sample’s high homogeneity, as the students all share a common interest in the automotive sector and the potential development of the classic car market. However, this weakness is mitigated by the fact that car stereotypes are widespread among those who are familiar with car-related

phenomena; oftentimes, those who do not care for classic cars are unlikely to have reflected on their owners and, consequently, the stereotypes about them.

Drive your Heritage began with sociological research that included the collection of photos and interviews, continued with the design of market evolution strategies and concluded with the evaluation of the projects. Data collection ended before the strategic project phase began. This procedure guaranteed the neutrality of the information collected from the research group; at the same time, it allowed the sample to reflect on key themes and concepts that were useful in subsequent phases of the hackathon.

The methodological choice of using visual and textual tools is coherent in a research design meant to interpret the existence of stereotypes by adopting perspectives from material culture studies. Compared to the studies already conducted about social representation and stereotypes based on the joint use of photos and questionnaires (Secondulfo, 2015; Setiffi, Lazzar, 2015; Viviani, 2015), this study uses different tools to understand stereotypes despite sharing the same research design and objectives. Based on the experimentation of the previous study, which combined the joint administration of the semantic differential and photos (Secondulfo, 2015), we have collected structured interviews. We consider this a hybrid technique because it ensures the standardisation of key information while presenting an opportunity to collect interview-driven data to discover the unknown (Corbetta, 1999). Specifically, each student was first asked to take three pictures to represent their idea of the 'classic car world' with different shots. This also allowed them to be creative and introduced them to the research at hand. The students were free to take pictures of people, objects, and anything else at the event. Subsequently, structured interviews were conducted to uncover the students' conceptions about the values and lifestyles of classic car owners. The following sections will be devoted to examining the literature central to the construction of this research and to discussing the photos, the descriptions associated with each shot and the interviews.

3. Prosthetic body: the car as a symbolic mediator of status

The perspective adopted in this research is derived from consumer studies, which is characterised by rich lifestyle literature (Sassatelli, 2004) and is concerned with material culture starting from anthropology (Miller, 1991) to sociology (Secondulfo, 1994); for some time, the field has dealt with investigating the meanings of objects that go beyond their function. The conjunction of the two approaches is well summarised by the concept of the 'prosthetic body'. In the request for social recognition of which consumption

becomes the bearer (Setiffi, 2013), the biological boundaries of the body are confused with social ones. Objects thus become a manifestation of 'power' in social relations. The body prosthesis analysed in the article is the automobile as an object of socio-anthropological study. In many cases, historical and sociological studies have studied the automobile and its consumers, highlighting its ability to communicate the owner's status. In more recent times, research analysing cars' practices and meanings are in many cases attributable to the sharing economy (Arcidiacono, Mainieri, Pais, 2016; Setiffi, Lazzar, 2018). This economy highlights a change in the relationship between consumers and cars, which has become more oriented towards sharing ownership. This anthropological study of cars allows us to grasp the explanatory power of material culture. One way to find out if a specific form of object consumption is attributable to a cultural specificity must begin by demonstrating that this form of consumption, and consequently the related object, differ in their cultural contexts (Miller, 2006). Therefore, if we ignore the car as a means of travelling between point A to B, we can understand its other meanings (Miller, 2001, 2006). This other meaning is strongly dependent on the cultural context in which the related research is carried out (Young, 2001; Verrips, Meyer, 2001; Arcidiacono, Mainieri, Pais, 2016).

With the aim of studying the consumption of classic cars from the perspective of material culture, we have come to consider the prosthetic body as a concept capable of merging sociological and anthropological studies. Generally, from a sociological standpoint, the car highlights the owner's need to satisfy social expectations that derive from the consumer's desire to be recognised in social circles. Following a more anthropological perspective, the car assumes the role of extension of the subject's body identity. The prosthetic body is not a peculiarity of contemporary society: 'the history of man is, among many other things, the story of a progressive artificialisation of the body, the story of a long march towards an ever-greater instrumental enrichment in our relationship with reality' (Maldonado, 1997: 140). Prostheses are new artefacts that are partly constructed by consumerist society and intended to 'substitute (and complete) the inherent lack of performance of our body' (Maldonado, 1997: 142); these are motor, sensory and intellectual prostheses. The motor prostheses are devices designed to 'increase our performance of strength, dexterity or movement' (Maldonado, 1997: 142), shape materials (e.g. tools), or facilitate mobility to broaden our range of action. For the purposes of discussing the results of the investigation, the concept of the prosthetic body is essential to understand how the interviewees conceive of object relationships that can be traced back to the idea of the body as a recipient of tradition and learning. This conception uses 'the set of material objects co-invented and produced with sensory-driving behaviours

that allow their incorporation and use' (Warnier, 1999: 34). The driving pipelines, central to Warnier's thought, are 'gestures or series of gestures that, by force of repetition, can be accomplished without effort and particular attention, with effectiveness in the greatest economy of means' (Warnier, 1999: 34).

These gestures, which can be those of athletes, artists, artisans, pilots or housewives, form the object of a 'praxeology' or 'science of motor action' (Warnier, 1999: 17). The photos and narrations collected in the context of this research highlight all the peculiarities of the prosthetic body, and its constitution refers to the dialectical relationship between the individual and society and to how objects are perceived and incorporated in sensorial-motor behaviours – or, as in the case of our research, how the use of the auto-object is perceived.

4. Case study: classic cars

Before discussing the study's results, it would be helpful to clarify which classic cars we asked the respondents to talk about with photos and words, as well as the set of ideas, objects and people that constitute their conceptions of cars over 20 or 30 years old. In Italian legislation, there is a distinction between a 'classic vehicle' and a 'historical vehicle'. Art. 60 of Italian traffic laws defines classic vehicles as transport vehicles whose free circulation has been compulsorily cancelled by public administration and must be registered at the department of transport. Conversely, cars in the 'historical vehicle' category, which are governed by art. 63, law 342, are all vehicles registered for at least 30 years (or 20 years in the case of some Italian regions) that are exempt from taxes. In asking the interviewees to describe how they picture past cars, the regulatory distinction between 'classic vehicles' and 'historical vehicles' has not emerged. However, because this distinction only exists at a legal level and is not present in the mental images of our respondents, it allows us to discuss the different 'historical weights' associated with automotive objects and the different forms of memory they carry (Migliorati, 2016). For the purposes of discussing the research results, we will combine classic and historical vehicles within the 'classic cars' label to include a host of cars from the past.

4.1 Consumption and nostalgia: the revival of the past

The world of classic cars seen through the eyes of young people is an emblematic point of observation to see how the culture of Western consumption can at once value innovation and forward-thinking solutions and

goods (e.g. technological devices and apps) and also commodify collective memories, suggesting a reinterpretation of economically or socially successful objects from the past. Just as no memory is the 'mere preservation or the mere reproduction of the past' but a careful selection in constant reformulation because of a set of processes (Jedlowski, 2000), nostalgia, as Fred Davis (1975) reminds us, is at the same time an individual feeling and a socially shared emotion. Nostalgia is the 'dream of a past time accompanied by an intense dolceamara [bittersweet] emotion' and 'a basic feeling for the management of the present, the aesthetic orientation of everyday life, the formation of emotional and social bonds'. The main form of this historical appropriation is given by fashion that collects pieces of the past, present and future in a sort of 'warehouse' (Morreale, 2009: 16). We can always resort to fashion to consider nostalgia as an 'embellishment process [...] a sort of cure that sterilizes the past' (Affuso, 2012: 117).

In addition to fashion, what link is there between nostalgia and consumption? What makes the relationship between consumption and nostalgia peculiar is that the memory on which the nostalgic consumption of goods and services is based often refers to a historical period that the consumer has not experienced in the first person (Autio, 2015). Interpreted through this perspective, nostalgia is a flow of communication that is incorporated into objects without having to account for the past to which it belongs. Like fashion, classic cars also refer to a 'timeless' past; in fact, 'if nostalgia has now assumed the end of the sense of historical temporality, the past can come back (and in fact comes back often) in the form of image, because it is something spatially located' (Morreale, 2009: 16).

This selective gaze towards the consumption dynamics of different epochs has been deepened by socio-anthropological research (Secondulfo, 2012, 2016) from which emerges a 'conquest' by the used objects of spaces traditionally governed by goods (new objects by their very nature) and by those of corporate orientation and marketing (Schivone, 2017, Ostilio, Donato, Carù, 2012) who coined the term 'retro-marketing' to identify how the past and nostalgia are fundamental drivers of purchasing decisions.

Objects embody different amounts of memories 'of collective representations of the past' (Migliorati, 2016) and classic cars are carriers of a type of 'affective' memory typical of those objects that 'incorporate so many stories' and 'precisely the fact of containing so many symbolic meanings is what defines its value as things used' (Migliorati, 2016: 153). The peculiarity of the nostalgic imagery of classic cars is granted by their ability to arouse an emotional memory that can involve the passage of the vehicle from generation to generation (one comparison proposed by Migliorati is the transfer of the father's clock to his child). However, cars can be separated from a

generational link while maintaining a 'nostalgic-affective' dimension of memory. Based on the interviews, generational transmission is a common feature in the perception of classic cars. When asked about potential classic car owners, one respondent described 'a business man and his son with a shared passion for and desire to take the old family car' (male, 23 years old).

However, to reference Migliorati's (2016) category of affective memory, which encompasses forms of 'élite' second-hand objects, we think that the young people we interviewed consume classic cars in a nostalgic-affective way that somehow mitigates the second-hand characteristics from the epoch in which classic cars were produced. It is not the refusal of technological innovation that guides these youth, but rather the paradoxical coexistence between past and future conceptions of cars. In this regard, there are various references to past characteristics of driving that differ from those of today, which are characterised by the replacement of driving skills with machine-governed performance. One interviewee suggested that 'classic cars represent the elegance of driving and the passion for ancient and material things in a world that is becoming increasingly digitised' (female, 23 years old). On the same note, 'The sensations you feel when you are driving are indescribable. With new machines, there is no longer the bodily connection that there once was' (male, 23 years).

Classic cars are part of the nostalgic imagery of the young people we interviewed, which represents pieces of bittersweet authenticity of memories never lived and usually of an object never owned. The image that emerges is likely characterised by a form of distortion or 'vague' nostalgia (Margalit, 2009). However, the research has focused on investigating how young people perceive classic cars by exploring their strong propensity to revive the past.

4.2 Classic cars between the real and the imaginary

After delineating the characteristics of nostalgic consumption and having introduced the capacity of classic cars to induce a form of nostalgic-affective memory, we now move on to describe images, objects and sources of communication that contribute to building the images of classic cars for the youth we interviewed.

First, the analysis will interpret the most exemplary images of the world of classic cars (people, objects, etc.), including various brands or models of classic cars and the sources of their imagination (films, cartoons, comics, etc.). Second, it will also include contemporary vehicles that will become classic cars in the next 30 years, according to young people.

Let us discuss the first point. As referenced in the methodological section, we asked the interviewees to take three representative pictures of

everything concerning their conceptions of classic cars, as well as other cars, car users, spare parts dealers, etc. and to describe the motivations that pushed them to choose those three particular shots. The photographic material was collected as part of an exhibition dedicated to the automotive sector with a section reserved for classic cars; as such, the location where the research took place encouraged and assisted the collection of the shots. We can divide the photos and their descriptions into five categories³: 1) fragrance of the past (Fig. 1); 2) social distinction (Fig. 2); 3) legendary era (Fig. 3); 4) passion for the car (Fig. 4), and 5) makers (Fig. 5). The first category includes data (photographic and otherwise) that underline the object's sacredness. In the second category, images and descriptions apply based on the prestige of owning a classic car. In the third category, the objects and people photographed or described recall a period of history (e.g. the hippie era), while in the fourth category the data exhibits devotion to the care of classic cars. Finally, the fifth category includes images that show the stands dedicated to the exchange, purchase and sale of spare parts.

FIGURE 1. Fragrance of the past.



Source: Fieldwork 2017

FIGURE 2. Social distinction.



Source: Fieldwork 2017

FIGURE 3. Legendary era.



Source: Fieldwork 2017

FIGURE 4. Passion for the car.



Source: Fieldwork 2017

³ For each category, a photo and a relative description of the typology was selected.

FIGURE 5. *Makers.*



Source: Fieldwork 2017

Figure 1 - Description: 'Many owners of classic cars buy the cars of their childhood to relive past family passions of years gone by and to evoke the same emotions in their children' (male, 21 years old).

Figure 2 - Description: 'A car full of luxury and first in elegance [...]' (male, 24 years old).

Figure 3 - Description: 'This is the famous Volkswagen van that takes us back in time to the legendary '60s and '70s and to the famous Woodstock concert' (male, 22 years old).

Figure 4 - Description: 'In this shot, I have immortalized a collector of vintage cars whom I met today. The passion with which he told me of his memories related to these cars particularly excited me. In his shining eyes, I saw what it means when someone says, This is my car' (male, 29 years old).

Figure 5 - Description: 'In the world of spare parts, the deed of sale is a way to meet new people, to learn the history of the parts purchased and to share a mutual passion. Vintage cars are objects of passion' (male, 23 years old).

In addition, we assessed which cars the respondents preferred. In some cases, the nostalgia of an unlived past guided the tastes of young people towards certain car models, such as the Volkswagen T10 (commonly known as the Van), which represents the hippie culture of the 60s.

Usually, utopian pasts crafted by film and television programmes are 'creators of nostalgia'. Television often used nostalgia to reach a 'massive and conscious exploitation' in the late 1980s and boomed in the following decade (Morreale, 2009). As for classic cars, a key 'producer of nostalgia' is the television programme *Wheeler Dealers* (Italian: *Affari a quattro ruote*), which features an entrepreneur and a mechanic intent on buying used cars to repair and resell them. The programme showcases obsolete or collectable cars from decades past – often popular ones – and retraces automotive history. The

narrative used in the television format recalls what Davis (1975) calls 'simple nostalgia', which entails a longing for the past. The language used in the programme is highly similar to that used by the interviewees.

The cinematographic sources most prominent in the minds of young people interviewed are the famous *Fast & Furious* film series⁴, by which young people have defined their favourite 'legendary' cars from different epochs⁵; James Bond movies⁶, from which derives the preference for the Aston Martin DBS and the *Back to the Future* saga, which made the DeLorean DMC-12 famous. While *Fast & Furious* is clearly linked to the generation of the interviewees, James Bond films and *Back to the Future* are part of a more common mass media consciousness and are less linked to generations (D'Amato, 2007). In addition to cinema and television, even cartoons can spark passion for a specific car model. This is the case for *Lupin III* with Mercedes Benz, and an interviewee specifies another example: '[The] Jaguar E Type has become an icon in common thought as the car from the "Diabolik" comics' (male, 24 years old).

Passion for certain models also derives from cultural heritage, which, according to our interviewees, is among the stimuli that pushes people to favour a specific classic car (such as the Red Alfa Romeo from the sixties, which is considered a family passion).

Another important aspect that determines one's preferred classic cars is their relationship to sporting events, specifically cars that have won world rally⁷ titles. Many interviewees also proved to be enthusiasts of cars' builds and features: 'The [Porsche 930 turbo 1975's] majesty, good proportions, powerful engine, and aggressiveness transpire from every angle from which you look at it. With a 6-cylinder boxer engine positioned cantilever behind the two rear wheels, it was one of the first supercharged production cars to appear on the European market' (male, 21 years old).

One last important detail that some youth mentioned regarding their choice of classic cars is whether it was made in Italy, as in the case below where a student refers to the historical and popular Fiat 500: '[The Fiat 500 is] the best and most elegant expression of the essence of Italian design' (male, 26 years old).

After reviewing the status quo of classic cars as identified by photos and narratives, we may now analyse the second and last point concerning vehicles that, according to the youth, will become classic cars in the next 30 years. We

⁴ Installments of the *Fast & Furious* movies were released in 2001, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015 and 2017.

⁵ Mustang Shelby, Plymouth Barracuda and Alfa Romeo Giulietta cabriolet.

⁶ The car is present in seven movies and it is used by the principal character, 007.

⁷ FIAT 131 Abarth, Delta 4WD, Porsche 911-1963, Porsche 930 Turbo 1975.

encouraged them to reflect on the possibility of buying a classic car in the future. It should be noted that this is an illusory expectation of having a classic car or not, but we asked students to choose a car based on their personal tastes regardless of their chances of ever buying it.

Interweaving the past, present and future helps us outline the representation of the interviewees. Passion is a common thread that unites the narratives in four different categories: innovation, luxury, pop and sport. It is interesting to note that in the students' minds, electric cars represent innovation. Indeed, such cars constitute an innovative phenomenon⁸ that stands out from cars currently in circulation. This epochal innovation is comparable to the creation of the internal combustion engine⁹ which enabled the development of the steam engine.

Another noteworthy aspect is most respondents' propensity to enjoy luxury cars¹⁰. This allows us to hypothesise about a preference for objects (in this case, cars) that allow people to distinguish themselves. In this regard, the cars that we can identify as the most popular¹¹ are mentioned sporadically in relation to luxury cars.

5. The world of classic cars: towards a nostalgic stereotype

The analysis of the data related to the photos and descriptions that populate the conception of classic cars – and those that will be classics in the next 30 years – and the sources from which the young have drawn inspiration to identify their favourite classic cars opens the way for two further questions: what distinguishes classic cars from the 'traditional' second-hand object? Is it possible to predict the characteristics and lifestyles of classic car owners?

To answer the first question, we must recall reflections on the new-used dichotomy (Secondulfo, 2015, Setiffi, 2010) that bring out a clear distinction between the relational circuits within which new and used objects are socially 'authorised' to circulate (Leonini, 1998; Bartoletti, 2002; Secondulfo, 1994, 2015), which entails second-hand objects undergoing symbolic decontamination to be included in the processes of exchange and consumption. Unlike other goods, the second-hand car does not carry a stigma like used clothes and furnishings do, which constitute sets of objects

⁸ The Tesla Model S, one of the most frequently mentioned cars among interviewees, is a completely electric car. It was first produced in 2012.

⁹ Contemporary cars mainly use internal combustion engines.

¹⁰ Here, for luxury cars we refer to cars which have more than 185 KW of power according to the law per 214 December 23, 2011.

¹¹ Utility cars or sport utility vehicles (SUVs).

particularly close to the body and which are therefore perceived as symbolically contaminated by the previous owner. Without neglecting the fact that in general, classic cars are expensive and therefore place their owners in an affluent social class, new and used are categories that oppose and recall the pure and impure dichotomies (Douglas, 2003) and order and disorder (Pasquinelli, 2004). However, recent studies highlight how this demarcation that once clearly separated the categories of new and used is often decidedly less clear nowadays (Secondulfo, 2015; Setiffi, Lazzar, 2015, Viviani, 2015). To reference the above-mentioned concept of the prosthetic body, we can state that the car, although it is an object in which sensorial-motor conducts are particularly visible (Warnier, 1999), is less influenced by the stigma suffered by most second-hand objects.

Adopting a study approach of material culture to investigate the meanings that students have associated with the world of classic cars unveils a clear distinction between the types of cars detected in the research. In the students' imagined world of classic cars, whether in circulation or not, passion manifests in two ways: passion for an era old enough to be mythologised and passion for taking care of a vehicle.

Focusing on the passion for the past and considering the data derived from interviews, the students possess an idea of the 'noble used', a concept that derives from previous studies to classify collectibles (Secondulfo, 2015) and that, in our case, refers to discontinued cars. They also identify 'vintage' cars, which are vehicles still in circulation and that are at least 20 years of age. Time is a key variable in determining the distinction between noble used and vintage cars. The vehicles housed in museums are collectible items by nature, so such cars remain uncontaminated (Secondulfo, 2015), enjoy a popular identity in collective memory (Migliorati, 2014) and are well suited to be classified under the category of noble used.

Following temporal proximity, below are classic cars still being produced that are not subject to symbolic decontamination paths (cleaning, etc.) because they fall into the vintage category. These cars (still in circulation) are symbols of a 'mythical' era, revived today mainly by the media (think of the Vespa V 50 of 1963), which transform the imperfections of the used goods (e.g. imperfections, breakages, etc.), which are usually considered negative, into a source of value. In this regard, one interviewee's description of the Vespa is particularly significant: 'An icon, a myth, a legend. It accompanied several generations and still accompanies them today. The essence of being carefree, free and lively is expressed by the vehicle's thousand different colours' (male, 22 years old). The same applies to Mercedes: '[The Auto Mercedes Benz] is a refined car characterised by its burgundy colour and being vintage. Its defects and wear make it unique and suitable for all. It is the line between the

Mercedes of yesterday and today' (female, 22 years old). Another interviewee elaborated on the appeal of classic cars: 'Is it better to have a fully restored historical vehicle in brand-new conditions as if it came out of the factory, or an original one that shows signs of age? The historical patina, as seen on buildings, certainly tells much more about the history and use of the vehicle and creates a certain charm' (male, 24 years old).

Our interviewees' conceptions of classic cars, in addition to being formed by photos and evocative descriptions of an evocative era, consist of a passion for the care and restoration of cars. This is typical of the consumer of second-hand products because classic cars are, as a student stated, 'a piece of history to live and feel with [one's] own hands' (male, 22 years old). The passion for the restoration and care of vehicles are common among the interviewees and derive from the desire for an exclusive relationship with the object capable of materialising the sensory-driving behaviours of which Warnier speaks (1999). Regarding the restoration of the car, 'the care with which an enthusiast cleans the bonnet of his car is as impressive as those who buy a very expensive sports car and take great care of their investment. Just think that initially [the Lancia Delta GT] was designed to be an everyday car for the people' (male, 24 years old).

Another important element of imagined classic cars is their durability, which, according to an interviewee, allowed their passage from generation to generation: 'They were built better; today, cars are designed as a means of transport that must last for a long time. Once it was designed thinking that the car would be passed from hand to hand, from father to son' (male, 21 years old).

From the data collected in the study, we can conclude that while the stereotypes about classic car owners are unique, they can manifest in two ways. Citing the words of an interviewee, one would be more business-related while the other points to the owner being more 'passionate'. We think that passion is the central element to describe the stereotype of the owner of the classic car in which different dimensions coexist: 1) exclusivity, 2) luxury and 3) competence in the restoration and care of the object.

Exclusivity is a dimension associated with luxury, but it is a container of meaning that can also concern, in addition to the manifestation of the status symbol, a special and exclusive link to childhood memories of which classic cars can be a constitutive part, as used objects often lend themselves well to the intergenerational transmission typical of past societies (Di Nicola, 2016): '[I imagine the owner of a classic car as] usually middle-aged, [a] car enthusiast [and a] wealthy and elegant [person] who wants to experience the life that he desired as a kid, or maybe relive the emotions of his father or grandfather who first owned it' (male, 25 years old).

The dimension of luxury in classic cars is fully identified by the conspicuous consumption of Veblenian memory for which the communication of the status symbol is a sign of social mobility. The spirit of the classic car does not ignore car meetings or typical car shows, and these cars and/or motorcycles are the ultimate expression of elite status.

Finally, the care of the object that constitutes the third and last dimension of the stereotype about restoration is described: 'Take care of the car in the individual details, restoring it as if it had left the dealer a few minutes before even tens of years later. It is a real passion' (male, 23 years old).

Our research has thus identified a compact body of ideas that we can classify as neutral stereotypes, which are devoid of value judgements, about classic car owners that express a strong curiosity and passion for the past. This passion is either based on exclusivity and luxury or on competence and care for the object. We found that the classic cars the young people envisioned were very similar to media translations (as in films and television series) of historical periods sufficiently distant from the present to be mythologised, but recent enough to be remembered or at least imagined. The nostalgic consumption of classic cars is therefore a way through which the second half of the twentieth century, which the interviewees never experienced, is brought back to the present day and faithfully depicted without being reinterpreted, which can be reaffirmed by families' memories and media portrayals.

6. Conclusions

This study investigated the social representations of classic cars according to a group of young students. Through the combined use of photos and structured interviews, we have identified stereotypes about classic cars and their owners. The photos were taken to stimulate the interviewees to represent in three different shots the ideas, emotions and peculiarities of their conceptions about cars. The narratives gathered through the interviews allowed us to decode the students' visual interpretations and, subsequently, push them to hypothesise about the characteristics of classic car owners regarding age, lifestyle and reasons for driving cars older than 20 years. The results corroborate studies already conducted on the centrality of time in the processes of commodification and de-commodification (Secondulfo, 1994, 2015; Setiffi, 2010, 2013), as well as studies detailing the relationship between objects and memory (Migliorati, 2014) that enables the classification of goods or things depending on their link to the past and on their portrayal in media, which is capable of arousing nostalgia for objects (Morreale, 2009) even in those who never used them (Autio, 2015). However, our results are unique for

at least two reasons: 1) studies about classic cars from a socio-anthropological perspective are scarce among national and international literature (except for anthropological studies in the car sector; see, e.g. Miller, 2001), and 2) our study asks students to interpret stereotypes about classic cars instead of their direct consumers, which reveals how the interviewed youth have been influenced in different ways about cars – specifically, they identify passion as a key factor in explaining why discontinued cars continue to garner fascination despite their substantial technological differences with modern cars.

The car and its owner are stereotyped under the aegis of passion with three distinct attributes: exclusivity, luxury and care for restoration. Nostalgia, which is now a mainstream selling point in modern marketing campaigns in the world of the new (Migliorati, 2014), is a leitmotif of passion that mythologises the past and whose objects are central in understanding the demand for social recognition mediated by consumption and material culture – and, perhaps, in seeking stability and familiarity in a fast-paced and ever-changing present. Our study investigates the niche topic of classic cars as a symbol of nostalgia of an un-lived past; in doing so, it underscores how the technological features of contemporary cars are united with the nostalgia of classic cars by not only the passion for driving, but also the passion for caring for cars as meaningful objects.

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