

What is the Nature of the Relationships (if any) That Vintage Volkswagen Owners Form with
Their Vehicles and with Other Vintage VW Owners?

by

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The members of Pamela Charach's Thesis Committee certify that they have read the thesis titled What is the Nature of the Relationships (if any) That Vintage Volkswagen Owners Form with Their Vehicles and with Other Vintage VW Owners? and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of MASTER OF ARTS IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION:

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Abstract

Drawing from qualitative, open-ended interviews, this research focuses on the nature of the relationships that vintage Volkswagen (VW) owners form with their vehicles and with other vintage VW owners. It revealed that VW owners form deep bonds with their vehicle(s) that enrich their lives, consequently granting them access to a subculture of hobbyists and enthusiasts, which is also rewarding in many ways. As detailed in the audio documentary accompanying this brief paper, participants spoke passionately about 1) why they love vintage Volkswagens; 2) the community and connections that result from vintage VW ownership; 3) the happiness that ownership brings; 4) the struggles that ownership brings and how that impacts outlook on life; 5) the relationships and attachment that develop between vehicle and owner; 6) and finally, the benefits and qualities of life with a vintage Volkswagen.

A bird's eye view of most North American cities reveals a landscape dominated by a vast network of roadways (Best, 2005). With the global number of vehicles outpacing human population growth by three times, it is undeniable that cars are inextricably linked to everyday life (Best, 2005). Consequently, the utility and environmental impact of vehicles has been well studied (Best, 2005; Maxwell, 2001). Conversely, the social intricacies of how car use creates meaning with others and with the self has received much less academic attention. Therefore, I have investigated a particular subset of car owners - vintage Volkswagen (VW) owners - and the relationships they form both with their vehicles and with other vintage VW owners. Indeed, consumers can build material relationships with their vehicles that, in the situation of vintage VW owners, grants them access to a subculture of hobbyists and VW enthusiasts (Arnould &

Thompson, 2005; Jackson & Hogg, 2010; Muir, 2001; Ristau, 2012; Selinger, 2021; Sheller, 2004). Material items can be very powerful. What may be a mundane object to some can be incredibly meaningful to others, and help form identity, practice, and thought (Bull, 2001; Lemonnier, 2012). This ethnography, an in-depth examination of a subculture's approach to life (Vannini, 2018), seeks to uncover what meaning vintage VW vehicles have to their owners (if any), and the nature of the relationships that form amongst members of the subculture.

This study draws from and contributes to research in material culture (Dant, 2005; Lemonnier, 2012; Miller, 2001), the new mobilities paradigm (Redshaw, 2008; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2000), and consumer culture (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Sheller, 2004). It also draws from and contributes to knowledge about vintage VW culture (Muir, 2001; Ristau, 2012; Wilson, 2018; Wilson & Obrador, 2022). Data were collected through 10 semi-structured, in-person, audio-recorded, one-hour interviews with current vintage VW owners in the Lower Mainland and on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada until theoretical saturation was reached (Fugard & Potts, 2019). The goal was to uncover why and how a vintage VW owner is attached to their vehicle, and how this material relationship influences their relationships and communication with other vintage VW owners. Only owners of vintage vehicles, such as VW buses and bugs from 1985 and earlier (Selinger, 2021), were selected for the study, as these vehicles are considered "cultural icons" that "people identify with" (Ristau, 2012). Moreover, these specific vehicles bring about conversations and connections that are not necessarily prompted by other, more standard vehicles (Ristau, 2012). Conducted through the lens of the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006), this study contributes to what is currently a small body of knowledge about the connections and relationships between vintage VW owners and their vehicles, and with other owners.

Although there is room for future research to uncover additional information, this exploratory study sheds light as to how vintage VW owners become attached not only to their vehicles, but also to other owners, as co-members of a particular subculture. The results of this study, shared in podcast form through a six-episode documentary mini-series, have the potential to inspire individuals to connect with something or someone (or both), adding depth, passion, and/or purpose to their lives (Bull, 2001; Lemonnier, 2012). The podcast link can be found in Appendix A. By sharing these findings with the general public through a free podcast on Spotify, a broad audience will have the opportunity to understand the individuals who make up this subculture through stories, reflections, and rich, honest description (Vannini, 2018). Information and educational material from social scientific research can be extremely beneficial to public audiences and should not be exclusively available and comprehensible to an academic audience (Vannini, 2018). This is why I have created a podcast – to connect with individuals who may benefit from the information and might not otherwise access it.

Method

In this qualitative study, I used purposive and self-selection sampling to recruit research participants, as I sought to study a particular subset of individuals in a particular region (Berndt, 2020; Gill, 2020). I posted in two public groups on Facebook, outlining participation criteria, and inviting vintage VW owners in British Columbia's Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island to get in touch for further details. An example of the post can be found in Appendix B. Nine participants were successfully interviewed through these two posts. Five came from the Vintage Volkswagen Club of Canada, and four from the Vancouver Volkswagen Club. The tenth interview was a couple who pursue the hobby together and were recommended by a friend. Thus,

I completed 10 interviews with 11 people, all above the age of 18. Seven interviews were conducted in the Lower Mainland, and three on Vancouver Island.

As participants reached out, I began scheduling and conducting interviews. Three took place where the VW owners work on their vehicle(s), to situate myself within the research context. Another interview was conducted in the participant's Volkswagen bus, and the remaining six were in the participants' homes, four of whom kept their vehicles on their property, so they were able to show me their car(s) after the interview. I chose semi-structured interviews, as they allowed the conversation to flow organically, while ensuring all questions were answered, regardless of order (Gibson & Brown, 2009). If a participant had deeper insights to a particular question, I had the freedom to explore it further (Gibson & Brown, 2009). It was important to think critically during the interviews, to ensure tangents were not being followed if extraneous to the study (Gibson & Brown, 2009). I stopped seeking participants once saturation was reached and no new information was emerging (Fugard & Potts, 2019).

For each interview, I had five background questions and 13 questions specific to my research question. Questions can be found in Appendix C. The background questions allowed me to gain an understanding of each participant's history. By asking how long they have owned VWs and how many, I was able to establish how entrenched they are in the culture, and the extent to which this hobby is a part of their life. By asking if they attend VW events, I learned if the hobby extends beyond them as an individual and brings them into the community. It also helped me learn whether this is a standard practice. Moving into the research-specific questions, the first five investigated the owners' relationships with their vehicle(s). These questions were open-ended and allowed participants to speak from the heart, while exploring the joys, struggles, and meaning that have come with owning a vintage VW. They highlighted what draws people to

the hobby, why it matters, and what it has added to their lives. Questions six through 11 sought to uncover the nature of each participant's relationships with other vintage VW owners through broad, open-ended questions, which got more specific and leading as the conversations went on. I was trying to understand what makes these relationships unique compared to relationships with individuals outside the subculture. Question 12 prompted the interviewees to reflect on how the vehicles and the community have contributed to their life, and question 13 allowed the interviewee to share anything else they felt was important or relevant. This resulted in a robust set of data that provides insight into the lives of community members as they understand it and tells their story from their perspective (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

Prior to conducting this study, it was apparent that this subculture was worthy of investigation. Based on their meet-up events and observed behaviours, such as flashing the peace sign at one another as they pass, vintage VW owners seemed to have a unique way of connecting and communicating with one another (Ristau, 2012). Investigating and gathering information directly from the source allowed for insights that an observer may not have been able to draw (Vannini, 2018). Informed consent was given prior to interviews through a waiver, and all participants could opt out at any time. Because what the participants said was unlikely to affect them negatively, with their permission, I used first and last names, with the exception of three people, who opted for first name and last initial (Coffelt, 2017). Although no one opted for this, if someone wished for their information to be confidential, the use of a fictitious name was offered (Coffelt, 2017).

To make sense of my data, I used the qualitative approaches of content and thematic analysis (Fugard & Potts, 2019; Philipsen, 1997; Schreier, 2019). Additionally, the entirety of this research was analyzed and disseminated through a narrative analysis, as I aimed to reveal the

participants' understanding of reality and share their stories from their point of view (Schreier, 2019). I have shared my findings through a six-episode podcast documentary mini-series, totalling 52 minutes in running time, and through this written accompaniment. In this public ethnography, in which I aimed to paint an authentic picture of a group of people and help the public understand them in a deep and meaningful way, an academic publication was not enough (Vannini, 2018). The current technological milieu had to be taken into account, and I needed to go where the public is, and where the stories could be told in a captivating, artistic style (Vannini, 2018). With approximately 32.5 million monthly podcast listeners on Spotify in the U.S. (Statista, 2022), this was the perfect place to go. Each episode in the mini-series begins with a brief project introduction, followed by a unique episode introduction, explaining the episode theme. Each episode (theme), is a compilation of clips from the 10 interviews, strung together through a narration in which I help make sense of the story. It is important to note that the interviewees tell their stories – I simply pieced them together in a cohesive way. This written accompaniment summarizes the podcast and situates it within the broader context of the relevant literature.

Summary

After completing the 10 interviews and analyzing the transcripts, major themes became apparent, the most prominent of which are episodes in the podcast documentary mini-series. Each person spoke passionately about 1) why they love vintage Volkswagens; 2) the community and connections that result from vintage VW ownership; 3) the happiness that ownership brings; 4) the struggles that ownership brings and how that impacts outlook on life; 5) the relationships and attachment that develop between vehicle and owner; 6) and finally, the benefits and qualities of life with a vintage Volkswagen. Although there were many reasons people were drawn to

vintage Volkswagens (most of which were seen repeatedly across the interviews), such as fulfilling a childhood dream, affordability, simplicity in design, saving items from the landfill, or keeping a piece of history alive, owning a vintage VW consistently led people to a community that shares a unique connection. Not only can owning a vintage VW help bring families together, but it can also create strong bonds amongst strangers, who quickly relate to and show up for one another because of a shared understanding of what they love and struggle over. In addition to creating community, the vehicles also bring their owners personal happiness. Ten of the 11 participants talked passionately at length about the absolute joy their vehicle(s) bring. However, with great joy also comes some struggle. Each participant shared stories of their car breaking down at inconvenient times or becoming frustrated when a rebuild was especially complicated. Yet, in that same breath, an echoing sentiment was that owning something that brings such joy elicits an optimistic outlook on life when frustrating moments present themselves. Between an attraction to the vehicles, the community and connection that comes with owning one, the happiness they bring, the struggles they bring, and how these struggles impact people's outlook on life, it is no wonder that individuals develop deep and meaningful relationships with their material object(s), their vehicle(s). Indeed, the relationship between human and object is very much alive, and it leads to a rewarding life with specific qualities. Many people talked about how the car forces them to slow down, takes them back to a simpler time, gets them doing activities and attending events they enjoy, creates memories, and fills their lives with purpose and passion.

Throughout the analysis, it became apparent that the simple answer to my research question is yes, relationships do exist between vintage VW owners and their vehicles, and amongst vintage VW owners, and these relationships are meaningful. Beginning with the relationship between vehicle and owner, each participant referenced the almost human-like

connection they share with their material object. Shay Clough mentioned how her vehicle is “like [her] kid, literally [her] baby.” People feel so connected to their vehicles because, in Jonathan P.’s words, “It’s its own kind of entity.” One of the most commonly shared sentiments was that expressed by Karen Seaboyer: “You need to be more in tune with it than just another car.” Karinna Amara concurred, “You have to get that feel for them, hear them, have a relationship with it.” The participants feel like their vehicles have a personality, and many even shared that throughout car troubles, they would encourage it, saying things like, “You can do it! We’re going to make it!” Like human relationships, the connection between person and vehicle is rewarding. Kirt G. explained, “It brings us complete joy all the time.” Toni Curtis shared how the relationship, even after 40 years, has not faltered. She said, “They’re like your little friend. [...] I remember the feeling when I got that car, and it’s like an engrained feeling.” The closeness owners feel with their cars can even confound them. Seaboyer explained, “It’s not a pet. It really surprised me how attached I got to this car.” While some feel their vehicles are more “human” than others, there was a resounding declaration of attachment, love, and care for the vehicles.

Similar to the relationships between owner and vehicle, relationships amongst vintage VW owners are very real, and very meaningful. Randy Kandt described the community as a “good karma group” who show up for one another in ways that other strangers may not. For example, Kirt and Jonalyn G., amongst others, shared that it is not uncommon for vintage VW owners to meet and invite one another to camp on each other’s property. Kirt said, “I don’t know if a person owning a Toyota Corolla would say, ‘You own a Toyota Corolla, why don’t you come to my house?’” This speaks to the uniqueness of the community. There exists a shared understanding of what a vintage Volkswagen can add to your life, and the effort it takes for that to happen. This allows people to progress quickly in a relationship, because their shared interest

helps them understand some aspect of one another before getting to know each other. Despite pursuing the hobby independently in their own spaces, vintage VW owners come together and are there for each other. Whether that support occurs at an organized event, such as a car show, or is impromptu, like when one owner helps another who is broken down on the side of the road, there are countless examples of the strength of this community.

Conclusion

Investigating this subset of car owners, vintage Volkswagen owners, and the relationships they form with their vehicles, and with other vintage VW owners, has revealed many social intricacies of how car use creates meaning with the self and with others. The material relationships that vintage VW owners form not only add depth and meaning to their lives, but it also grants them access to an enriching subculture of hobbyists and VW enthusiasts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Jackson & Hogg, 2010; Muir, 2001; Ristau, 2012; Selinger, 2021; Sheller, 2004). Though some may see these material objects as mundane, to the participants in this study, their vintage Volkswagens help form their identity, practice, and thought (Bull, 2001; Lemonnier, 2012). It is my hope that members of the general public will listen to the podcast and be inspired to find something they are passionate about, that they can pour their heart and time into. This research has shown that such a pursuit can lead to incredibly meaningful moments, immediate friendships, and lifelong memories.

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Appendix A

[Click here](#) to listen to the documentary mini-series.

Appendix B



Pamela Charach ▸ Vintage Volkswagen Club of Canada 🇨🇦



January 12 · 🌐

****Please only reply if you own a vintage VW and live in the Lower Mainland or on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada.****

Hi there! I hope you're all doing well. My name is Pam, and I am a master's student at Royal Roads University. For my thesis project, I'm researching the relationships that vintage Volkswagen owners form with their vehicles and with other vintage VW owners.

The study will be published in an academic paper and in a publicly available podcast on Spotify.

As this is an unfunded student project, there is no financial compensation offered. However, I would hope that sharing something you are so passionate about will be fun, and bring you joy.



I would need 1 hour of your time to conduct an in-person interview and learn all about you and your vehicle.

If you own a vintage VW and live in the Lower Mainland or on Vancouver Island and are interested in participating in this study, please email me at pamela.charach@royalroads.ca, and I will be happy to provide more details!

Thanks!



Toni Curtis and 18 others

29 comments

Appendix C

Questions in Semi-Structured Interviews

Background Information Questions:

1. When did you get your first vintage VW vehicle?
2. Why did you buy that first vehicle?
3. How many VW vehicles have you owned in your lifetime, and how many do you own right now?
4. What's made you stick with it?
5. Do you attend vintage VW shows, parts-swapping meetups, or other VW events?

Research-Specific Questions:

1. What do you love about owning a vintage VW vehicle?
2. What struggles come with owning a vintage VW vehicle?
3. Can you tell me about your relationship with your vehicle?
4. What makes a vintage VW special?
5. Is your vehicle important to you? Why?
6. Do you have many friends or connections with people who also own vintage VWs?
7. How would you describe your relationship with these people?
8. When you communicate with them, is it different than the way you communicate with other people in your life?
9. Is there anything you say to these people that individuals outside the VW community would not understand?
 - a. When you pass another vintage VW owner and you honk your horn at them, what does it mean?

- b. What does it mean to flash the peace sign at a fellow vintage VW owner?
 - c. If someone does not reciprocate a honk or a flashing of the peace sign, what does that mean to you?
10. Is there anything you do with these people that individuals outside the VW community would not understand?
- a. When you meet with a fellow vintage VW owner, are there any traditions you have in terms of what activities you do together?
11. What do you love about being part of the vintage VW community?
12. What has this vehicle and being a part of this community added to your life?
13. Do you have any stories you would like to share that are particularly memorable, or any lessons you've learned relating to your vehicle/other vehicle owners?