

**Pilot Study: Consumer Behavior of Automobile Enthusiasts: Their  
Automotive Leisure  
Related Pursuits**

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## **Abstract**

A study was conducted with members of the Mississippi Classic Cruisers (Madison, Mississippi), an automobile enthusiast association consisting of owners of re-stored vehicles, street rods and muscle cars, from September through December 2005. Surveys were randomly distributed to twenty-five individuals of the association from a membership over 200. The respondents were requested to complete a 44-question survey that primarily focused on the 1) enthusiast's depth of involvement in the car culture hobby 2) personal interests beyond building, driving and displaying their respective automobiles, and 3) enthusiast's demographics. Twenty returned surveys represented an 80% return rate.

## **Introduction**

A 'car culture' phenomenon exists in America since the inception of the 'horseless carriage' and is readily visible via television shows, manufacturer advertisement, automobile and truck magazines, media commercials, motion pictures, plus yearly national and international manufacturer automobile shows. In addition, there are several niche automobile enthusiast associations at the national level, plus a multitude of local car clubs in every state both of which promote car shows and events throughout the year.

Historically, during the affluent post-war WWII years of the 1950-60s car enthusiast activities were symbolized by 'hot rods', 'drag' races, 'customized' cars and street rods. This 'Golden Age' time period, described by Hirsch (1985) and Ganahl (2000), helped influence Detroit's major automobile manufacturers who responded with the 1960's factory 'muscle cars', the 1970's 'pony' cars, and the nostalgia market of

1990-2000's as represented by Daimler-Chrysler's Prowler (roadster) and PT Cruiser (woody station wagon), General Motor's SSR (street rod pickup truck) and Ford Motor Company's Thunderbird (sports car). Today, manufacturer's media describe and promote their current automobiles as 'heritage design', not retro or nostalgia-styled designs, and are recognizable by Daimler-Chrysler Corporation's 300-Series Chrysler, reminiscent of the 1955-1961 'Beautiful Brute' recognized as a "modern classic" by The Milestone Car Society (Gunnell, 1992). Invoking images of the 'muscle car' era of the 1960s, but updated for the 2000's, is the Dodge Charger and Dodge Challenger, General Motors Corporation's Pontiac GTO, Chevrolet Camero and the Chevrolet HRH (High Roof Hauler, ala, Suburban) along with Ford Motor Company's 500-Series Ford.

In the 1970s interest in American automobiles began to wane due to multiple economic factors such as gasoline shortages, elevated fuel prices, and the influx of fuel efficient foreign cars into American markets. However, a latent interest was fulfilled for the American automobile hobbyist, primarily 'baby boomers', because several enthusiast organizations were formed, and currently exist, such as the National Street Rod Association (1970), the Kustom Kemps of America (resurrected in 1980), the Good Guys Rod and Custom Association (1986), the Kustoms of America (resurrected in 1994), and the American Muscle Car Association (2001).

Fueling the automobile hobby phenomenon is the automobile related components specialty market supported by enthusiasts who build, drive and display their street machines (Esparza, 2000). The Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) represents a \$29 billion industry composed of 3,900 member companies and 100,000 members world-wide (Hwang, 2004). SEMA (2002) has identified seven generally

acknowledged, and well-defined niches, where enthusiasts spend substantial amounts of money on their automobile hobby: light-trucks, race cars, off-road vehicles, restored/restyled cars, street-performance machines, street rods and custom cars.

Currently, Gobetti (2000) noted there are an “estimated 350,000 rods and customs registered in the United States” and an additional “50,000 under construction” and DeWitt (2001) stated that the resurgence of interest in authentically styled nostalgia rods is due to adults who often focus their attention on ‘important’ cars of their youth.

### **Methodology and Instrumentation**

The researchers followed University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board protocol and procedures to conduct the investigation. A survey tool composed of 44 closed-end questions, as identified above, was randomly distributed to 25 members of the Mississippi Custom Cruisers car club headquartered in Madison, Mississippi. Each survey was issued with a self-addressed, stamped return envelope for data collection purposes. A total of 20 surveys were received for an eighty (80) percent return rate. A descriptive method of research with SPSS computer software was utilized to analyze the cumulative data.

### **Data Analysis**

Data obtained from 20 respondents indicate the typical enthusiast is a married (85%) Caucasian male (100%) still employed who own a home, condominium or townhouse residence (100%) located in a suburban Mississippi area (55%) with a household of three to five members (55%). Seventy-five percent of respondents identified a total family income that ranged from \$35,000 to \$149,000. The education level of ninety percent (18) held an associate to post graduate degree which represented a

variety of white-collar occupations (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Occupations (n= 18)**

<b>Career</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Self-Employed</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Executive</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Technical</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Sales</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Attorney</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Political</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>1</b>

A self-defined level of passion for the automobile hobby ranged from ‘some passion’ (20%-hobby appreciation), ‘moderate passion’ (45%-great enthusiasm) to ‘die-hard passion’ (35%-extreme interest). The primary reason for this hobby was discretionary income (100%) reflected by fifteen (75%) respondents who owned two to four additional street machines beyond their primary street machine (see Table 2). Other reasons characterized it as a fun hobby (17 or 85%), being with friends (11 or 55%), nostalgia (11 or 55%) and investment purposes (7 or 35%). Eleven respondents (55%) indicated a son or daughter was involved with them in this hobby.

**Table 2: Yearly Income (n=17)**

<b>Yearly Income</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>\$35,000 - \$49,999</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>\$50,000 - \$74,999</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>\$75,000 - \$99,999</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>\$100,000 - \$149,999</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>\$150,000 - \$250,000</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>\$250,000+</b>	<b>1</b>

Along with their membership in the Mississippi Classic Cruisers association eight individuals (40%) were members of national organizations identified as the Good Guys Rod and Custom Association, Corvette Club of America, National Hot Rod Association and/or a specific manufacturer association. Eighty percent (16) searched the Internet regularly for web-site information, to order or ‘browse’ for hobby-related purposes

from one to six hours weekly. A total of 19 (95%) respondents stated they gave daily thought to their hobby with ten at less than 30 minutes whereas eight estimated they spent more than 30 minutes per day.

Media influences appeared to be a positive factor on the enthusiast's hobby. For example, eighty percent (18) regularly read automobile publications daily (5%), weekly (40%), or monthly (80%). The three most noted publication subscriptions were 1) *Motor Trend*, 2) Chevrolet-related magazines, and 3) *Hemming's Muscle Cars*. A plethora of network and cable channel television productions related to the automobile/truck hobbyist (currently identified at 14 weekly shows) was evidenced by eighty percent (17) of the respondents identifying American Hot Rod (Discovery Channel), Horsepower TV (Spike TV) and Overhaulin' (TLC) as the most viewed.

Information gathered indicated respondent's placed a high monetary value to, and an emotional ownership for, their automobiles (see Table 3). This is evident by a Mississippi antique license designation for 14 cars (70%) and 18 owners (90%) stated they do not drive these vehicles on a daily basis. Ten (50%) respondents drove less than 1000 miles, five (25%) owners drove less than 2000 miles while five (25%) owners drove 3000 or less miles per year. Monetary investment in their automobile ranged from \$10,000 to \$80,000 with a majority (13 or 65%) owners in the \$10,000-\$30,000 range. During the previous 12-month period (January 1 – December 31, 2005) five (25%) respondents indicated expenditures of less than \$1000, nine (45%) spent \$2000 to \$10,000 and three (15%) spent \$10,000 to \$20,000 on their respective automobiles.

Table 3: Vehicle Value (n=20)

<u>Investment</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
<b>Below \$10,000</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>\$10,000 - \$30,000</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>\$30,001 - \$50,000</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>\$50,000 - \$80,000</b>	<b>2</b>

Although forty percent (8) respondents indicated they purchased their cars as finished, or 'turn-key' products, the remaining sixty percent made financial decisions to modify and/or alter the car with fifty-five to seventy-five percent fees paid to outside providers for service on chassis, mechanics, body construction, painting, electrical, engine building, upholstery and drive-train costs. Necessary after-market components generally were purchased from car show vendors (67%), auto parts stores (64%), other individuals (62%) or on-line outlets (56%). Due to the average enthusiast's age level of fifty-one years along with low annual mileage the insurance rate of \$500 or less presented a low yearly expenditure for the hobbyist.

Generally acknowledged by automobile enthusiasts is a combination of building and displaying his/her street machine for enjoyment through travel. Survey respondents acknowledged participation at (car shows or 'rod runs') at the local, regional and national level. During the identified 12-month period fifty-five percent (11 respondents) attended local events, eighty-five percent (17 respondents) attended regional events and forty-five percent (10 respondents) attended national events. Accompanying the enthusiast to these events was predominantly a spouse and off-spring. Approximate expenses identified at 'the last attended event' were gasoline (11, or fifty-five percent of the respondents, spent \$50-\$100), meals (9, or forty-five percent of the respondents, spent \$50-\$250), lodging (8, or thirty percent of the respondents, spent \$101-\$250), registration fees (12, or fifty-five percent of the respondents, spent \$50-\$100), memorabilia (5, or

twenty-five percent of the respondents, spent \$50-\$250) and alcohol (11, or fifty-five percent of the respondents, spent zero money).

The enthusiasts were eclectic in their choice of street machine ownership with manufacturer representation of Cadillac (1), Chevrolet (9), Ford (4), Opel (1), Oldsmobile (1), Pontiac (1) and Shelby Mustang (3) from model years 1931 through 2005. Eras represented were 1930s (1), 1950s (2), 1960s (8), 1970s (6), 1990s (2) and 2000s (1).

### **Conclusions**

Technological advances often best reiterate the consumer behavior of automobile hobbyists on why they do what they do. Consumers involved in car collecting, driving and showing them have a passion for their activities plus an on-going desire to gain more related information and knowledge. Discretionary time and money allows personal choice as to how, what and where to spend it. The car culture is supported by many Americans as a leisure pursuit, one at the grass-roots of our society, and steeped in individualism and nostalgia. It is strongly marketed by specialty industries, print and non-print media, automobile associations, Internet and automobile manufacturers.

### **Results**

The returned surveys were analyzed for question clarity and content value. Several questions were deemed irrelevant and thus were removed, while other topical questions were included. A new survey was designed with 50 questions to be used nationwide through standard survey mail-outs, on-site distribution at major enthusiast association events and through a Internet website. Data gathered is expected to be published in related academic leisure/recreation publications along with oral presentations at selected conferences of the leisure services industry.

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