Japanese Car Culture

An ethnographic study from the scope of a digital media student and Japanese car enthusiast

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DIGC330 Digital Asia
2014
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ABSTRACT

Let’s set the scene. Clear skies, warm sun rays, and the crisp air of an early spring morning. Most of Wollongong is gently waking amongst warm sheets and sleepy eyes.

It’s already been a few hours since we started. The clunky sound of the garage door opening, the low deep burbles of cars pulling up one by one, and the ticking metallic sounds of rackets clicking away from underneath my old BMW.

These days start the same way. Early coffee for that sleepy morning fix; deep fried takeaway for that much needed midday feed; and the sounds of clanging beers at the end of a day well done. These sort of days make up much of the cycle. Car culture, no matter the genre, is underpinned by this fascination of the automobile; making a mark on your machine. Defining a personal identity through your car.

But where has this fascination come from? How did I develop a love for Japanese automotive? What type of environment fosters such a culture that can become so iconic it is celebrated around the world?

This document in a non-linear, personal exploration of a culture that has emerged itself within my life. It attempts to solve some of these questions.
FOR THE LOVE OF CARS

Picture this. You’re walking on the side of the road towards university having parked what feels like a state away somewhere in Keiraville. You’ve gotten up early, packed your bag full of books and a lazily made lunch for a long day ahead. It’s barely 8:30, it’s cold, and you’re hating how much more you have to walk.

As you go to cross the road, amongst all the sounds of commotion, cars, buses and the birds, amongst all that - bam! You hear it. Your head turns. Your ears stand up. That sound!

A quick head turn.. Nothing!.. ...
..and then again, you hear it. You stop. Look around. Your head racing. What is it?

And again, you hear it. Except this time its getting louder. Closer. That deep burble. That distinct noise. Like a classical music piece, this noise is so distinct, so sweet; it instantly puts a smile on your face.

You look around. Again nothing..

...MMM, its much louder now. The noise bouncing off the trees – you look up at the roundabout, its go to be just over there. AND IT’S COMING THIS WAY!

Wait for it...Wait...Bam! There it is!

As it downshifts, you hear the turbo wiz its own crescendo as the exhaust lets out an aggressive purr. The boost builds as the driver throws it into second; heads right through the roundabout and floors it up the street.

In a second it flashes by you.

And then it’s gone. Yet you’re still standing there. On the street. Your feet have long stopped walking. Your body fixated on the glint of colour of what was the car that just pasted you. You’ve got a smile from ear to ear.
That’s what happens to me on a daily basis. At uni, around town. It can happen anywhere, anytime. Just when you doing something important and nothing can break your concentration, it happens. That’s what its like to be a car guy.

To be honest, I can’t recall my first experience with Japanese cars. My dad is definitely a lover of cars, so his influence definitely translated itself on to me during my childhood. But what’s different about me and dad is, my love for getting dirty. He loves the look of cars, the hard work that goes into them, the personal craftsmanship an owner leaves on their machine. He loves his Subaru WRX STI, but he loves leaving his mechanic to the do all the dirty work.

That’s where we are different. I love getting stuck in. Breaking things. Throwing things. Making mistakes. Working in the light. Working in the dark. Working in the sun. Working in the rain. Hating my car. Ignoring it for a week. Ignoring it for a week or two. Hating how much I’ll have to work to buy this, or pay for that. Fixing it. Finally getting the courage to jump back in. And falling back in love with it by the time I’ve reached the top of my street all over again.

And that’s what it’s all about. The love of it. That love for everything to do with cars. Magazines, blogs, videos, car games, photos, posters, long drives, track days, drift days, heading to the race track to watch your favourite series, car meets, hangouts, BBQs, car discussions, helping out friends, arguing about which brand you’d buy, why I did this, why’d you do that. That’s what car guys do.

Most people don’t understand it. “You spent how much on that new steering wheel?” “You went for a drive for no reason? - Why?” “Why is it so loud?” “Why is it so low?” “I swear it spends more time in your garage then actually drivable”

But that’s what makes it so great. It's a mutual love for machines, shared between mates; shared amongst complete strangers. Not everyone's tastes are the same. Not everyone's favourite car is the same. Not everyone's love for cars is the same. But it's about that love. That common ground. And it’s something others wont understand. Can’t.
OLD HABITS DIE HARD - EARLY CAR CONSUMPTION

Reflecting on this question, I’m drawn back to my childhood instantly. Some of my first memories are of images racing up and down my grandparent’s concrete driveway on my toy rider, in industrial Cringila, in absolute bliss. Too fast for my grandmother to catch me, I would ignore her pleas to slow down - tearing back and forth to a point of exhaustion.

Later memories are dominated by the clicking sound of Hot Wheels and Matchbox cars. As an infant, a steady love for colourful die-cast cars developed from my father’s interest in cars, with a new $2 toy added to the collection each time we took a visit to the shops. Whilst each car in my collection had its place, my parents recall how I had developed my own taxonomy for them. Cars that were the new, cool ones; the less lucky ones I would to smash together; the ones I would share with friends and the secret, precious group I kept away from others, in fear of their less delicate hands damaging their precious paint.

Distinctly, quirks like preferring the ‘cool’ Hot Wheels models, fitted with bigger wheels and more dynamic paints, over the more sensible, more realistic Matchbox, cars are early clues to the development of my sense of automotive style and desire. Whilst Redlinederby actually found that the bigger wheel and axle combo offered by Hot Wheels actually made them car faster in a straight line over its Matchbox cousin, I was more worried about the way they looked, how low they were, and what model of car the Hot Wheels model was depicting. In studying my ethnographic experience with Japanese car culture, I can conclude my early ability to recognise these variations, and articulate decisions based on my own preferences, are indicative of my early interactions with car culture, and in part, indicative of the development of my own identity, which cars made up a considerable part.

Additionally, examining these behaviours with reference to Becky Francis’s findings, my behaviour, in being able to recognising small intricacies in different die-cast Hot Wheels and Matchbox cars, was an important tool that taught me early lessons on style and composition. The Rockhampton University Professor, Francis, 
recently found that toys children played with as they developed into young children can have a direct impact on the career choices they make later in their lives. A similar study conducted by retail group Argos, found that over 60% of adults working in design led jobs, such as architects and designers, enjoyed playing with building blocks as children. Having chosen to study within the Design and Digital Media based fields, I can consequently assert these early interactions with Hot Wheels and Matchbox cars as been reflections on the development of my own eye for detail, and design; a particularity which would ultimately lead me down a specific career path.

Having stated all that above, it wasn’t until later when I received my first Playstation, equipped with the legendary Gran Turismo, did my love for Japanese cars emerge. Up until this point, I was still negotiating my way through the automotive influences found within the Australian Automotive Climate - The timeless appeal of big American Muscle vs. the exotic sounds of Ferrari, Porsche and Lamborghini supercars vs the little, unfashionable turbo imports from Asia and of course, Australia’s home grown battle, Holden Vs Ford.

I visualise this dynamic automotive environment as similar to that of a highway. For new members, at each off ramp represents an opportunity to settle on a specific genre of culture - American Muscle; Euros; Australian V8’s - but until they find the one that suits them most, they continue on negotiating this journey. For me, my off ramp was stumbling upon Japanese cars such as the Subaru WRX STI and the Nissan Skyline GTR.

Whilst from a young age, I had taken to Holden with V8 Supercar racing, an appreciation, albeit virtual, for Japanese over time formed through playing Polyphony Digital’s Gran Turismo. From an auto-ethnographic perspective, I deem Gran Turismo as to have had an educational effect on my young mind. My game time, coupled with my dad’s limited gaming ability time, meant we were soon swapping modifications, testing out new cars in Arcade mode to purchase with the career mode and transferring data from one memory card to another. His car was black, mine was blue. For me, Gran Turismo would kick off my love for Japanese automotive. For my dad, Gran Turismo had a deepening effect in his interest in
Japanese cars. Whilst it wasn’t the actual car he came to play in the game, the attributes of the STI he came to know and love during the early 2000’s would eventually lead him to purchase his own in 2012. And for my youngest brother, who was too young to understand Gran Turismo, it would come to play a huge role in establishing an environment within our home to which his own love for cars would soon flourish.

Whilst I would argue, at the core of my passion is a love for many different makes and models, both Japanese and non-Japanese the original Gran Turismo gave me an avenue in which to further explore my interests in cars, and a platform to quickly grow a love for the automotive way of the Japanese. Hot Wheels had inflicted an interest in me, Gran Turismo a platform to explore further. Together, they were key forms of early car culture consumption.

Whilst Gran Turismo is widely regarded as one of the most successful early video games in history - having brought a whole era of Japanese performance vehicles to a generations fingertips - I would argue allowing players to create their own, individual narratives (through car purchasing, colour selection, and modification choices - power vs. handling, performance vs. tuning) within the game as where the true power of the gaming title lay. Gran Turismo taught me early lessons about modifying cars, and the intricacies behind tuning their performance. As well as this, the gave me the ability to decide for myself my own ‘automotive legacy.’ I collide these terms together to describe my identity within car culture: a representation of the rules and preferences I established and up keep for myself in relation to cars.

Kurt Squires’ study into open-ended simulation touches on this ability to generate identity within “sandbox” games, arguing these types of games posses the capacity to recruit diverse interests, forge creative problem solving, and enhance productive acts. Evident through his study of games Replaying History, Civilization III and the Grand Theft Auto series, sandbox games create the virtual parameters for gamers to play within, but leave gamers to interact within these parameters in their own, individual way. With reference to Replaying History and Civilisation III, Squires found “..players spent hours opening maps and exploring new territories; others were constantly negotiating with other civilisations. Some turned the games into a colonial simulation, enjoying playing events and then comparing them against historical accounts…. As was made evident in the GTA series, these different play styles seemed to emerge from the players themselves, as they played the game.” (Pg. 180).

Whilst Gran Turismo did not, on face value, offer the same freedoms with regards to open game maps and character freedom, what it did
do, was allow me to explore and test cars, on different tracks, and under different circumstances, leading me to make decisions based on their performance. I was afforded the ability to modify and race these cars, in doing so deciding which cars suited my own style and which did not - what I liked, and what I didn’t. I interacted with the game narrative in my own way - I choose Subaru over other manufacturers as I loved the look of the WRX STI and the distinct noise of the Boxer motor but as well, I was taken by the AWD drivetrain, that guaranteed huge amounts of mid corner grip. Similarly, I chose to develop my cars throughout the races, modifying them to levels worthy of cars in higher performance brackets. I chose to drive in a way that best attempted to reflect a real racing style; smooth car control, and realistic racing lines. This was my own identity I had created through Gran Turismo gameplay.

In comparison to this, I recall a close friend who I came to spent countless days playing with. His own style of racing dictated by an ultimate desire to win. He would choose highest kilowatt car for each race. In career mode, he instead chose to buy and sell freely, with little interest in the modification features. Additionally he chose to race in a driving style with winning as the only option - ignoring the simulation goals of the game entirely.

Essentially, as a game, Gran Turismo, afforded me the ability to dictate my own automotive narrative at a time where driving, nor any form of car ownership was an option. I learnt about Japanese automotive, over time consolidating this understanding, and constituting my own car related identity. As Squires found, the success of such open-ended games are centred on these freedoms afforded to gamers. In Gran Turismo, I experienced the game within a direct interaction of my own contexts: it enabled me to “..explore different aspects of simulation..” according to my own interests (pg. 181).

Hot Wheels and Matchbox cars taught me an attention to detail, and a love for the road going car. I hated any model that wasn’t based on a true to life model – what was the point of a car that wasn’t real? Indicative from these early choices was how I was beginning to notice little details of each car - and subsequently, the decisions I made about what I liked and what I didn’t. Whilst at this time my parents would have none the wiser, these early interactions were teaching me an appreciation for cars, a love for these fascinating vehicles I could see on the road every day.

Two decades on, and my love for cars is the same. I’ve chosen a career based on creativity and attention to detail. I guess the old saying ‘old habits die hard’ couldn’t be any more true.
Car culture is very much about defining one’s own identity through their vehicle. Practices of modification within their own right exist as key aggregators to these cultures. At any one time, there are thousands of different styles and demographics of associated automotive cultures that are dynamic in their own way, and are the meeting points for like-minded car enthusiasts. The car, in its rawest form, is a cultural icon, a pervasive and accessible possession that is personal in a manner that few other goods are. Vehicles are “a blank canvas that allows [the] owner to paint himself in any fashion desire” (Hill, 2006). Within the banner of Japanese car culture, these sub-genres exist more clearly defined, than any other car culture from across the globe. Cars are mediums for which enthusiasts to engage subjectively with their own identity, and with the wider notions and ideas of political and social society. Cultural automotive styles such as Retro, Show, Race, Stance, and VIP by no means exist only within Japanese car culture, but it is the degree in which these cultures define themselves that sets Japanese car culture apart.

Bozouku and Kyusha culture are two key examples of peripheral Japanese car subcultures. Similarly to the Rat Rod styles in American, and Bikie culture, which emerged in post-war American society and has since spread globally, members of these cultures exemplify behaviors and demonstrate behaviors that purposefully oppose specific notions of current cultures. For the original members of Bozouku culture, driving around at early hours of the morning revving their engines loudly and creating a ruckus was a way of pushing the boundaries of acceptable behavior; a personal form of protest against the societal discourses that were valid at the time. Similarly, Kyusha has its own identity; a culture that revolves around the appreciation, and modification of timeless, vintage Japanese vehicles. Again, these decisions are direct statements about their own personal values and identities. With ‘...goods a visible part of culture’, the vehicle plays a fundamental role, as a personal, non-verbal confirmation of these beliefs. These Vehicles constitute “a pattern of meaning inherited from the recent past.. for the interpretive needs of the present”. (Douglas and Usherwood, pg. 83).
Whilst these deep rooted cultural tones and sub tones are yet to emerge to such an extent within the Australia Japanese car culture, ideas of culturally constructed identity are recognizable through other distinct clues – more specifically, the cars enthusiasts choose to drive.

Within the Australian automotive context, a rich racing history combined with entire generations of Australian’s brought up on the affordable, Australian family saloon underline a national cultural connection to the Holden Commodore and Ford Falcon. Whilst over the last two decades the influx of overseas models and manufacturers, coupled with shifting focuses of the Australian driver have come to absorb a significant portion of the market once dominated by the Australian built saloons, the Commodore and Falcon still encapsulate the principles of Australian automotive. Furthermore, with at the current time Holden offering over ten different performance variants of their Australian built Commodore, these vehicles are indicative of much of the performance engineering ethos of the Australian automotive landscape.

Whilst these Australian saloons are not directly related to this current ethnographic study, they play a fundamental role when analyzing Australian Japanese car culture. In Japan, the basis of Japanese car culture is making use of, in many cases, the ordinary Japanese car. Ignoring cult classics like the Nissan Skyline GTR and the Mitsubishi Evolution, the majority of modified Japanese cars start life at their core as ordinary transportation vehicles. In the same way the Holden Commodore and Ford Falcon make up such a part of Australian culture, these cars are intrinsic to the roads of Japanese. Consequently, it becomes second nature for the Japanese enthusiast to modify a car taken from the everyday roads of Japan. Through their practices of modifications, these owners are to set themselves apart – to demonstrate an expression of their identity.

By examining the popularity of foreign Japanese car cultures, such as those in Australia and Europe, the true depth of Japanese automotive influence reveals itself. In a country dominated by car traditions so deeply rooted within Australian culture, the dynamic, yet peripheral Japanese car culture occupies a significant part of Australian automotive climate. For the Japanese car enthusiast within Australia, the choice to drive a Japanese vehicle; be it for looks, performance, style or unique factor, goes directly against the cultural trends and underpinnings of dominant culture within Australia. Furthermore, most enthusiasts will agree when stating that these decisions in fact are not decisions made consciously; they are not actively considered – instead, in one way or another, enthusiasts become enthralled by the ethos, the magic of these vehicles.
THE AUTOMOTIVE CLIMATE OF JAPAN

The experience of car ownership is one that is vastly different across the globe. From the ‘Yank Tank’ legislation in Cuba which made the purchasing and reselling of vehicles manufactured later than 1959 impossible by law, to the severe costs of car ownership in Singapore, to the open speed limits of the German Autobahn - the legislative, economic and social environments have a fundamental effect on the characteristics of national car ownership. Whilst over the last two decades, mainstream media productions such as the British Top Gear series and movies like the Fast and the Furious franchise have only intensified global automotive interests, these national environments play an absolutely dominant role in the fostering of national car culture.

As has been alluded to for much of this ethnographic study, Japanese car culture has affirmed itself as the most profuse and alluring of its type globally. With such a celebration of this automotive culture occurring every day beyond the borders of the Asian continent, one must question the type of environment that has come to foster such a culture? How can a national culture develop to a point whereby it becomes celebrated in other societies across the globe?

For the purpose of this study, this discussion will examine the Japanese automotive climate, comparing it to that of Australia’s when possible. With the general lack of conclusive comparison data, any claims made are purely based on my own ethnographic scope. When examining the figures above, the geographic difference between the two nations is immediately apparent.
The boarders of the Japanese nation fit snuggly within the Australian continent 22 times. Japan has the 10th largest population in the world, with a ratio of 370 people per square kilometre, whilst Australia just 4. From an automotive perspective, this means a huge amount of motorists, and a huge amount of vehicles on Japanese roads. Japan’s roads are known for being some of the most astounding pieces of engineering in the world, and with 76 million cars on the road, it is no wonder why. As well as this, eleven of the world’s leading automotive companies are Japanese. Each of these companies makes use of local production, producing in excess of eight million vehicles for Japanese roads in 2013. From an automotive climate perspective, such a strong industry has direct implications on creating a nationalistic automotive culture.

Figures indicate there are almost 6 automotive vehicles for every 10 people in Japan. Whilst Australia has a higher figure of approx. 7 cars for every 10 people, this is due to the vast size of the Australian continent. The sheer disparity between the two environments is perhaps better visualised when examining how many cars reside with each square kilometre. In Australia, there are approximately 4.5 vehicles per square kilometre; in Japan, a staggering 219. But even more staggering, is the figure revealed when examining the amount of Japanese vehicles that would reside within each square kilometre of Australia, when scaling the Japanese automotive population to that of the size of Australia. If the Japanese automotive population is scaled to the size of Australia’s size, 218 Japanese vehicles would reside within each and every Australia square kilometre;

<table>
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<th>Country Size (km²)</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>Australia</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>347944 (21&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;)</td>
<td>7 692 024 km² (5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>128 650 000 (10&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;)</td>
<td>23 632 100 (51&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age (years)</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>37.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP (Billion, $USD)</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earnings per household ($USD)</td>
<td>25 066</td>
<td>31 197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicles on the road</td>
<td>76 032 150</td>
<td>1 694 414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicles per 1000 people</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Automotive Manufacturers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automotive companies manufacturing within country</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
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Figures obtained from Wikipedia,
approximately 48 times greater than Australia’s current figure. Evidently, these figures indicate the colossal magnitude of the Japanese automotive population. For a country so small in terms of geographic size, Japan possess possibly the most dynamic, and tremendous automotive environment in the world.

The sheer volume of vehicles on Japanese roads perhaps is further influenced by the national automotive manufacturing sector, which is the world’s leading industry. Over 4 million new vehicles are exported from Japan to foreign markets each year. Considering this vast environment, it should come to no surprise the market saturation of vehicles available to motorists. At this time, Toyota offers 37 different cars to Japanese motorists. In contrast, Toyota Australia offers Australian motorists a total of 24.

This saturation also results in a huge used car market. The amount of cars available to motorists, in combination with the strict and problematic ‘Shaken’ Japanese registration system, makes keeping cars three years and older on the road for the average Japanese motorist an expensive investment. Japan’s ‘Shaken’ is the bureaucratic system of determining the worthiness of a car registration. Each ‘Shaken’ can cost up to ¥100 000 ( $1000 AUD), but costs associated with ensuring vehicles pass Shaken laws increase for every registration renewal, makes selling vehicles at the end of a registration period more viable for Japanese owners. Consequently, Japanese motorists are been noted for regularly updating cars maintaining ownership for approximately the first five years of their life - half of the period an American motorist maintains their ownership. Whilst the disparity of registration costs in Japan and Australia is not overly vast, considering the Japanese households earn on average 20% less than their Australian counterparts, high-registration costs are indicative of purposeful legislation to guarantee a constant high standard of automotive vehicles on Japanese roads. For the individual motorist, updating vehicles every five years, demonstrates a cultural, and financial acceptance of such policies.

As a consequence of regularly updating Japanese motorists, a burgeoning export industry has emerged whereby up to a million used Japanese vehicles are shipped to foreign shores each year. Countries like Russia and New Zealand have developed an appetite
for Japanese imports as they can be compiled and registered for local roads at prices competitive with locally delivered vehicles. In markets like Australia international model imports are limited to strict intakes per financial year, as JDM vehicles often differ greatly from the cars that Japanese manufacturers build for export and vehicles derived from the same platforms built in other countries. Niche imports, such as vehicles only sold in Japan like the cult classic Toyota AE86 Trueno, and powerful Toyota Chaser JZX100, offer enthusiasts unique options of vehicles that are not readily unavailable in local markets. These vehicles often carry with them a higher value, derived from their specific appreciations within automotive cultural groups. Cars not originally sold in local markets but are later imported and sold are referred to as ‘grey imports’. Deregulatory motor industries, such as that in New Zealand, have seen Japanese imports flood the market and dramatically alter the shape of the local vehicle industry.

Whilst Japanese car enthusiasts tend to buck these ownership trends, the process of selling on late model vehicles is extremely beneficial for their behaviour. With reference to the figures, an identical Subaru Impreza is available to Japanese motorists second hand at almost a third of the price for the same model in Australia. Even factoring possible ‘Shaken’ costs, used cars in Japan are far less expensive than in Australia, thus making cars more affordable and as well accessible for the enthusiast. Interestingly, when examining pricing of European vehicles, it is evident European cars from brands such as the BMW or Volkswagen are more marginally more expensive within Japan than Australia. From an auto-ethnographic scope, I would argue such pricing mechanisms again reflect an attitude to maintaining update to date motoring. For the motoring enthusiast, second hand vehicles are more cost effective within Japanese markets. Consequently, Japanese automotive enthusiasts who modify domestic vehicles, such as the Nissan Silvia, Honda Civic and Toyota GT86, are encouraged by the sheer volume of vehicles available within the automotive environment. For those willing to pay ‘shaken’ costs, cars are readily available, at cheap prices. Contrastingly, Australian vehicles that generally maintain a higher value have a direct influence on the automotive enthusiast. Those discouraged by pricing are less likely to invest further in their vehicle into their vehicles, and higher purchase prices suggest the Australian motorist is less likely to change cars frequently.

Specaility wrecking yards deal with specifically with parts sought after by enthusiasts.
As well as having a huge wealth of second hand vehicles available, the excess of cars in Japan makes automotive parts more accessible to enthusiasts. Such is the demand for specific parts, that a entire industry has emerged that specialises in stripping cars of these parts of value and selling them on to enthusiasts. Yahoo Auctions, Japan's answer to eBay, serves as the main gateway for these transactions. The readily available nature of automotive parts drives companies to keep competitive prices, which are affordable to the average enthusiast. This affordability fuels an environment whereby the average Japanese individual can engage with their passion in modifying vehicles.

To conclude, the colossal nature of the Japanese automotive climate has initiated a cultural environment whereby cars are such a dominant element within society. The sheer amount of cars on Japanese roads each day remains unmatched by another nation in terms of scale, and in itself has given birth to an entire industrial sector to which Japanese manufacturers lead the way. For car enthusiasts, the saturation of vehicles has seen cars progressively become a cultural icon. Japanese motoring has given birth to an automotive legacy that is individual to the Japanese nation and celebrated by car enthusiasts across the globe. Japanese car culture is self-feeding: The sheer volume of the Japanese car industry fuels an appreciation of the individual's vehicle, which fuels a demand for high volume of vehicles and parts used by car enthusiasts.
DEFINING JDM?

The term JDM (Japanese Domestic Market) refers to the local market for domestic goods in Japan. The term was first used by corporations to differentiate between domestic and international production markets.

Within car culture, the meaning of JDM has over the past two decades evolved and morphed away from its original intended use, and now stands as a term loosely used to describe the specific Japanese-esc automotive style. JDM is nowadays a term used to describe anything from ‘stickerbombing’ cars (covering entire parts and panels of vehicles in sticker collages), to lowered vehicles, and front mounted intercoolers. While these attributes may have been derived from original Japanese styles, the term JDM presently remains in a convoluted state. In an age where the Internet has played a fundamental role in colliding popular automotive culture, and the traditional boundaries of car culture have become convoluted, does JDM still stand for JDM? What is JDM? And what defines it?

JDM was first applied in Japanese automotive to describe cars and parts manufactured by companies to a Japanese standard of quality. Products that fall under the JDM bracket are those that comply with the regulations of Japanese law, and thus are legal for use in Japanese automobiles. Applying this notion of products tailored to specific markets, parts created for American vehicles fall under the USDM banner, parts for Australia, ADM and so on.

Up until the mid-1980’s, the Japanese automotive climate was dominated by popular cars at the forefront of automotive engineering and design. These vehicles in most cases were unique to Japan, never exported to lands outside of Asia. Towards the end of the 1980s, ‘shaken’ laws increasingly encouraged Japanese drivers to regularly update their vehicles, and ‘grey-imports’ (cars previously registered in Japan and built to Japanese standards, but later compiled for foreign markets) became an affordable alternative to local vehicles in international markets; particularly amongst enthusiasts, who were taken by the performance of Japanese vehicles. For enthusiasts, ‘the light weight and increasing availability of low cost tuning equipment, (meant that)Japanese cars exhibit(ed) high performance at low costs in comparison to dedicated sports cars’ (Justin Fox, 2010) As the potential for these vehicles was increasingly recognised, grey-imports like the Subaru WRX STI became more commonplace on Australian roads.
Grey-import, JDM cars often featured parts specifically manufactured for the Japanese market. Cars of a JDM standard offered more advanced technologies and performance than the very same cars offered in international markets. For enthusiasts, installing JDM parts to locally sold cars quickly emerged as an affordable way of improving automotive performance through making use of factory parts. (To make use of factory parts is to make use of parts designed, developed and manufactured to the highest quality by the companies in which manufacture cars. JDM factory parts are highly valuable to the JDM enthusiast as they offer levels of quality assurance that most aftermarket part companies cannot offer).

An example of this process is no better demonstrated than comparing factory parts from an Australian delivered Toyota Sprinter AE86 and its Japanese counterpart. Whilst the chassis remained the same, the Australian version of the sportsback Toyota featured a lethargic 1.6lt single overhead cam, carburetted motor. Comparatively, the Japanese version of the AE86, which is now considered a cult classic amongst car enthusiasts, featured Toyota’s free revving, electronically fuel injected, Twin Cam motor, the 4AGE. The value of an Australian delivered AE86 in today’s used car market is between $3000-5000 Australia dollars. A JDM AE86 import? Upwards of $15000.

Whilst there is little in the way of documentation of the cultural shifts within Japanese automotive culture, the nature of the current use of the JDM term is indicative of a higher, progressive evolution in Japanese car culture. The use of the term JDM raises questions about what qualifies as being described as JDM – Are performance parts for Japanese, manufactured outside of Japan considered JDM? What about cars owners who painstakingly assemble domestic cars with JDM parts – are they now JDM? Are the Australian built racecars, originally manufactured by Japanese brands, that competed at the recent World Time Attack Challenge in Sydney considered JDM – or ADM?

Personally, I believe what defines JDM is that flutter of the heart you experience when driving an old Japanese car. Having driven the original AE86, there is something inquisitively special about being behind the wheel of something so Japanese – the feel, the touch. But, contrastingly, having built my own version of an AE86, based on the same chassis Toyota Corolla of the era, and a huge amount of parts taken from JDM AE86’s, I must admit there was something special about that car as well. It may not have been strictly JDM, but the accumulation of parts, made it a special car to drive.
Perhaps the best approach to JDM is summarised by Ben Schaffer of Bespoke Ventures:

“…there is no right or wrong answer for what is JDM. It will mean different things to different people. In a sense, it means the same thing as “cool” except with a cultural twist to it. Nobody can define cool, as it relates to Japanese car tuning culture, it is simply always up for debate.”

References:


PERIPHERAL MEDIA FORMS: DREAM. BUILD. DRIVE

Whilst car culture features rarely within mainstream media (aside from ‘Hoon’ related media panic), domestic and as well global car culture is littered with peripheral groups that exist away from the spotlight, but play fundamental roles in the facilitating culture. Car clubs, online forums, car meets, Facebook groups, YouTube channels all encapsulate these peripheral identities.

One of the most significant of these identities remains the weblog. Weblogs have become a highly functional and popular platform for modern creators to post entries and discussions on particular topics. Within car culture, blogging and bloggers have become an a vital part of the cultural cog, giving enthusiasts the tools to document their own processes and submit them amongst the cultural conversations that occur online, further enriching the interactions of the culture. Blogs like ‘Nori-yaro’ and Nigel Petrie’s ‘Engineered to Slide’ are key examples of blogs run by ordinary car lovers, who have developed die-hard followings for their highly popular content and automotive stories.

Nori Yaro gives enthusiasts from across the world an inside look at Car Culture in Japan
Petrie's ‘Engineered to Slide’ blog is Australia's most outstanding example of an automotive blog. Petrie made early use of the blog to document his car activities, but quickly became a household name amongst car enthusiasts world-wide for his outrageous and spectacular, self-fabricated, custom, Toyota Hilux drift Ute. Attached to his build, his regularly updated blog documented the entire build process – the highs of nailing his first perfect weld, to the lows of constant setbacks and redesigns, and ultimately the triumph of his first competitive drive of his machine around Eastern Creek Raceway Sydney (which, ironically, ended prematurely with a broken third gear and a devastated Petrie).

Petrie's blog, like other successful automotive blogs, encapsulates a peripheral nature, as it stands firmly on its own two feet as an alternate story telling portal, whereby the author has been able to document his own personal automotive narrative, and share amongst a worldwide community. Automotive blog's are key aggregators to national and international car culture. From a national perspective, Petrie's ‘Engineered to Slide’ redefined the parameters of what it means to be an Australian car enthusiast, demonstrating the potential of the ordinary human mind when armed with a love for machine and a mind driven by passion.
CULTURAL CELEBRITY: THE GRANDDADDY OF DRIFT

Within culture, small pockets of individuals continually emerge as cultural celebrities – figures who generate hype through newfound style, skills and originality. With the styles of automotive culture forever evolving and transgressing, these figures play a intrinsic role creating trends that shape the future direction of car cultures.

Whilst the digital age has played, and continues to play a role in slowly colliding different segments of car culture with each other, these individuals remain highly important characters in identifying cultures as different to each other. They are responsible for redefining the boundaries of car culture, directly enhancing the environments in which enthusiasts can interact amongst themselves and with their craft.

There remains no more significant figure in Japanese car culture than that of Keiichi Tsuchiya. Now in his late fifties, the former race car driver is part of Japanese folk law, a God to enthusiasts and the granddaddy of one of motorsports most entertaining forms, Drifting. Armed with his almost as famous Toyota AE86 Trueno, in which demands its own reputation as one of Japan’s most well balance driving machines, Keiichi exists as an immortal character in Japanese car culture.

Tsuchiya’s legend has roots back to his early racing days. Unlike other drivers of the same era, Tsuchiya developed his skills and driving flair through Illegal Street racing; driving down precariously steep and technical mountain passes in Japan. Today, this form of driving is widely recognised as ‘Touge’, and represents much of grassroots driving development car enthusiasts take part in Japan.

Tsuchiya’s skills were recognised globally in 1987 when he featured in a film demonstrating his driving skills. His drifting technique was a collision of the limits of his driving skill and the mechanical potential of his AE86, driving the car sideways through narrow corners at high speed.
The film, which remains still in circulation today, is recognised as having inspired a whole generation of drivers, who actively hone their skills and build cars with the purpose of drifting.

Ultimately, Tsuchiya’s driving style created a progression of driving that has now become a significant part of car culture. Drifting, whether grassroots, or at an international level, has fostered an entire generation of enthusiasts, who’s experiences, both within drifting and within other facets of car culture have evolved universally.

Australia’s abundance of Drift events, drift coverage and drift culture are indicative of Tsuchiya’s influence on Japanese car culture. The recent release of the Toyota GT86 is a car that pays homage to Tsuychiya’s driving ethos - light, nimble and fun! Cars like that would not be current without Tsuychiya’s influence on Japanese Car Culture.