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Document version:
Peer reviewed version

Publication date:
2017

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

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Saabism and Saabists

A digital ethnographic analysis of Saab culture

by

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August 2017

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Abstract:
Both Simmel and Goffman were deeply persuaded that the big things in society, in actual observable reality are made up of a dynamic and complex system of interlocking and interacting small things. In this paper, I wish to examine the online-offline communicative and semiotic practices of one such “less conspicuous” social group: the Saabists. Based on long term digital ethnographic research I will provide a description and analysis of how Saabists discursively and semiotically construct identity on-and offline in a transnational niche. Saabists, I will argue, are a translocal and polycentric micro-population sharing a ‘culture’ – Saab culture or Saabism - and an ‘identity’. I clearly argue in favor of a materialistic approach to identity and group formation. The reasons therefore are evident: Identity should not only be understood in a certain chronotope, but is also embedded in ‘infrastructure’, what Arnaut, Karrebaek and Spotti (2016) call Poiesis-infrastructures.

Keywords:
Micro-population, culture, (digital) ethnography, Saab and Saabism.

Word count: 7966 (including references and captions)
Images: 5

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Introduction: Saabists and Saabism

“... there exist an immeasurable number of less conspicuous forms of relationships and kinds of interaction. Taken singly, they may appear negligible. But since in actuality they are inserted into the comprehensive and, as it were, official social formations, they alone produce society as we know it.” (Simmel 1950: 9)

Georg Simmel wrote these words about a century ago; Erving Goffman used them to open his PhD dissertation some decades later. Both Simmel and Goffman were deeply persuaded that the big things in society (call them “social structure” or “society” at large), in actual observable reality are made up of a dynamic and complex system of interlocking and interacting small things. Consequently (and Goffman demonstrated this abundantly), investigating seemingly unimportant social groups can lead to fundamental sociological insights. Certainly in an age where the ‘offline’ social world can no longer be seen as pristine and autonomous, but rather as deeply pervaded with new ‘online’ dimensions, such exercises may contribute something substantial to our general understanding of the dynamics of contemporary society, and as so often, communication modes and patterns offer us evidence of exceptional richness and immediacy. In this paper, I wish to examine the online-offline communicative and semiotic practices of one such “less conspicuous” social group: the Saabists.

On 17 January 2010, the world witnessed a first impressive manifestation of Saabism: the passion for Saab cars. At the time, General Motors, who owned the Swedish car brand, was on the verge of bankruptcy. Saab drivers around the world organized a Saab Support Convoy. In Trollhättan (Sweden) alone 1500 Saabs and Saab-drivers came together to show their love for the brand. Most of them had a printed paper hanging on their car saying: Save Saab. In The Netherlands around 600 Saabs drove in a convoy from Soesterberg to Muiden. In Russia, Taiwan, China, Italy, Daytona U.S. and dozens of other countries similar events took place. They were organized bottom-up by Saab-fans worldwide who used their online media to mobilize and coordinate this event on an almost global scale.
After the bankruptcy of Saab in 2012, the world witnessed another manifestation of Saabism. Saab Club Nederland, Saabforum.nl and the famous Saab-blog SaabsUnited called for a global chain of events under the banner: ‘We are many, we are Saab’. In the weekend of 14 and 15 January 2012 110 events were set up in 75 countries in Africa, Asia, America, Australia and Europe. In the Netherlands alone, 5000 enthusiasts showed up with 1500 Saabs.

In a reflection on these global chains of Saab events in 2012, the blog SaabsUnited (2012) wrote a post titled: ‘The Saab culture has to stay’:

‘Saab has a rich, strong culture, even without the production of new cars. We like to put our strength and emotion into the factory and museum in Trollhättan. But the fact of the matter is, our Saabs still exist, just as you and I do! This past weekend we all rallied together and had a wonderful time talking Saab. Correct? And there is absolutely no reason in the world why that cannot continue on. Face it, we aren’t the best at buying new cars to support the need for them, right now anyways. [...] My suggestion is think every day as a mini-rally. Let’s show the world how much our cars mean to us, how much our Saab friends mean to us, and take the time out of our busy lives for gatherings. If we are indeed that strong of a group, we can weather this storm too, and move into a beautiful future together. We are Saab’s history. [...] I’m working with a friend to possibly get a new Saab club started. It would focus on preserving the Saab culture for the future. We would love to see you all join us in embracing the future. Here’s to Saab!’ (Saabsunited 2012)

The examples above let us understand that something trivial as a car brand, a consumer product, cannot only be very important in the lives of people, it can be a crucial ingredient of a niched culture (Blommaert & Varis 2015). This Saab culture and the feeling that one shares or is part of that population of Saab-enthusiasts mobilized thousands of people around the world. Those people, who in many cases had never met offline nor online, felt connected to each other and acted on –and offline as a transnational population (Maly & Varis 2015). They communicated with each other and organized themselves on a global scale.
These two outbursts of Saab culture were exceptional in size, but not unique. Many Saab-enthusiasts felt connected long before the bankruptcy. And even today, four years after the bankruptcy of Saab, offline meetings in the Netherlands alone occur almost on a weekly basis and are partly organized through an online forum for Saab-drivers: Saabforum.nl. The core of these Saab-enthusiasts define themselves as Saabists: They do not only drive a Saab, or love this specific car brand, but are infected with Saabism: the love for Saab. Saabism among Saabists is generally described as a kind of virus that you can trap. Once you’ve got it, it is very hard to get rid of. Saabism is a way of living, a lifestyle and a culture (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Saab is a lifestyle – meme published on Saab Türkiye (Official) Facebook – page

Digital ethnography and data

Saabists occur in a social world where ‘offline’ and ‘online’ resources and practices are inseparable. On the basis of long term digital ethnographic research (Hymes 1996; Blommaert & Dong 2010; Varis 2016; Pink e.a. 2015), I’ll show how a consumer product, a Saab, can become the fundament of a transnational niched culture. The different online media dedicated to Saab, I will argue, function as structuring instruments or better as identity infrastructures of that population. These infrastructures facilitate interaction and
communication between different members. I clearly argue in favor of such a materialistic approach to identity and group formation. The reasons therefore are evident: Identity should not only be understood in a certain chronotope, but is also embedded in ‘infrastructure’, what Arnaut, Karrebaek and Spotti (2016) call Poiesis-infrastructures.

Under Digital ethnography I understand a specific approach to research ‘on online practices and communications, and on offline practices shaped by digitalisation’ (Varis 2016). It was conducted on –and offline, in Belgium, The Netherlands and on a global scale. I especially focus on the online-offline nexus.

First of all, there was the digital field. I was a regular observer and participant on different online media dedicated to Saab over the last 7 years. Saabforum.nl was the most important digital field for observing and participating in online ‘Saab talk’. These talks were held in public threads and through personal messages with members of the forum. This was supplemented by a daily monitoring of all kinds communication on Facebook-pages like the Saab Turbo X Club, SAAB 9-3 9-5 België – Nederland, Saab Türkiye (Official), Swedish garage, Saab Klub Polska, Saab Club Romania, SAAB, Saab Italia, and many more. Of course, classic Saab fora and blogs like SaabsUnited, Saab Central and Saab Planet were regularly visited and their uptake on other social Saab media was monitored.

The digital field was supplemented with an offline field. I attended Saab meetings, observed people ‘talking Saab’ during these meetings and participated in such talks. I talked to (and chatted with) Saab mechanics, Saabists and key-figures in the Belgian and Dutch Saab world. These talks were rarely in the form of ‘classic interviews’ and occurred on- as well as offline. I talked with mechanics while they were working on Saabs or when I was hanging around in their garage. I engaged in online talks through personal messaging, mails and on fora. I observed Saabists talking about their cars or more important things in life and participated in such talks.

This ethnographic approach enables me to produce thick descriptions of the lived reality of the Saabists I study. The focus on the embeddedness of that niched culture in the digital infrastructures allows me to bypass methodological nationalism and try to make sense of the
complexity of this transnational social group. Digital ethnography is still committed with the study of contextualized ‘actions’ but it is important to realize that the networked society poses new challenges to our notion of context. The technological properties of the online world (such as persistence, searchability, replicability and scalability) shape the online interactions (Varis, 2016). Context in the networked society is a very stretchable and complex thing. Digital ethnography therefore builds on the ‘traditional ethnographic approach’ and its attention to context and contextualization we described above, but addresses ‘new types of issues related to contextualisation’ in a digital environment.

In case of this research, not only the discourses of Saabists, but also their cars are also analyzed as contextual meaningful signs. The modifications, the brands and styles are indices of the sociolinguistic conditions of production (Blommaert & Maly, 2016; Maly, 2016). In their local (offline) context, a certain upgraded Saab can be very seen as very cool. Once photos are posted online, a very common thing among Saabists, the upgrades on their cars do not only address friends or family but in many cases also – consciously or not - a national and transnational group of Saabists. When that happens, we see a potential infinite number of contexts collapsing – a phenomenon known as context collapse. What is cool according to the local addressees of the car, is not necessarily cool in the eyes of Saabists looking from other contexts. Indexicality doesn’t travel well. And context is crucial in our understanding of the meaning of that post. Time and space becomes a very fluid thing in such networked context. A cool Saab shared on a local Facebook page in Turkey can function as a role model for Saabists around the world and this influence can be detected long after the first post.

**Saabism, Saabists and micro-populations**

I see Saabists as a micro-population. Maly and Varis (2015) introduced this concept to describe and understand culture and identity construction in times of superdiversity (Blommaert 2010; Maly, Blommaert & Ben Yakoub 2014). They argue that, in times of high mobility, new communication technologies such as the Internet, as well as the neoliberal logic of consumption and commodification, culture has become a complex trans-local, polycentric and niched affair.” (Maly and Varis 2015)
I’ll argue below that Saabist and Saabism or Saab culture is an illustration of this conception of culture. Following points will be addressed:

1. Having a Saab is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to be a Saabist. One has to identify oneself as a Saabist through a particular identity discourse. Saabism, I will argue, cannot be disentangled from the Saab brand, its marketing discourse and its semiotics. This identity discourse is also embedded in the classic infrastructures – Saab garages and specialists that facilitate interaction between Saabist masters and newbies.

2. It is important to stress that even after the bankruptcy of Saab in 2011 the Saabist population is still alive and kicking. The Saab company is thus not the only identity infrastructure (Maly & Varis 2015). Saabist culture is supported by numerous online media. Some of these media like the blog Saab Planet operate on a global scale, other media like Saabforum.nl or the Facebook page of the Polish Saab Klub work on a lower scale. These infrastructures, I will argue, create and sustain a transnational micro-population – the Saabists - with a polycentric and layered culture known as Saabism. These infrastructures functions as normative centers in which novices can integrate by interacting with and learning from the masters who manage the appropriate Saab talk (Becker 1963).

3. To come to grips with Saabism as a cultural phenomenon I’ll adopt the concept of culture-as-accent (Blommaert and Varis 2013). Driving a Saab is not enough to make you a Saabist. Managing the details is important and complex as there are different centers operating on different scale levels at the same time. Saabists need to become knowledgeable of the norms to become accepted as a Saabist.

**Saab and the Saab-driver**

Saab always positioned itself as a Swedish company building durable, functional, intelligent and safe cars inspired by the aviation history of the company (Saab 2005: 4). It subscribes to the Scandinavian design dogma of form following function. This explained the expensive curved windshield, the driver centered cockpit in Saabs and the overall design of the car. Safety was another core-value of Saab. The Saab 99, for example, was the only car that did
not had to install a roll cage before it could enter races. Saab also invented anti-whiplash seats and their cars already had strengthened doors and crushable front and rear-ends in the seventies (Saab - Scania 1983). The safety-tests and -engineering chipped away profits.

That image of safety and the Scandinavian heritage was a reoccurring motif in the advertisement campaigns of Saab. Saabs were made out of the qualitative Scandinavian steel, capable of surviving a crash with an eland and made to be safe even on snowy roads (Saab 2005). One of the most famous ads, produced by Ogilvy, positioned Saabs as cars for winter (Ogilvy 1985: 13). Functionality, safety and durability were keywords in the promo talk. The Saab 99 for instance was sold by a seemingly factual and rational discourse on safety, interior dimensions and the space of the trunk (Saab, 1976). In the eighties of the 20th century, Saab promoted the 900 with the dry baseline ‘The most intelligent car ever build’. The title of the sales brochure of the Saab 900 was: ‘Well thought through and correctly constructed’ (Saab - Scania 1983). In the pre-General Motors -advertisement brochures the rational and dry tone is remarkable.

In the GM era, the Scandinavian heritage was enormously highlighted. Saabs where still linked to the cold climate, to design and functionality but they were also targeted as a premium brand for sporty young people. Under GM, the differences between Saab and other brands became more and more a marketing construct. Of course, Saabs had always shared components with other cars. The old 900’s engine had a Triumph origin and the V4 in the Saab 96 was from Ford, but under GM, this sharing of components was taken to new heights. The Saab 9-7 was nothing more than a rebadged Chevrolet Blazer and the 9-2 was a rebadged Subaru. The new 9-3 diesel engine came from Fiat, the brakes and numerous other parts could also be found in Opels and Cadillacs.

At a time when Saabs became a globally mass produced products, GM paradoxically positioned Saab as a premium Swedish brand. Mass production went hand in hand with niche-marketing. To create an aura of authenticity old identity ingredients like the Scandinavian roots were highlighted. To sustain the myth that Saabs were winter-proof, Journalists were invited on marketing trips to drive the new Saabs in Jukkasjärvi, Sweden. Even the rebadged Saab 9-2x, was sold with clips picturing the car in snowy landscapes. The
mythology (Barthes 1957) took over. Saabs were now sold with the one-liner ‘Move your mind’ (Saab 2003, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) and sporty young individuals were targeted. In the GM-era, you did not just buy a Saab Car, you bought freedom (Saab 2011: 79), you showed yourself as a true individual (Saab 2009b: 5).

Driving a Saab, in essence nothing more than a consumption practice, is marketed as an identity emblem. The jump from the purchase of a car as a consumption practice, to Saab as an emblem of one’s identity, according to Blommaert and Varis (2013) is found in the ideological concept of ‘choice’ in the context of the ‘free market’ ideology. It is choice that redefines an ‘unfree relationship’ (you need to money to pay the car sales person to obtain the car) into a ‘free relationship’: You as an individual assesses the car’s characteristics and its mythologies before you choose one. And because it is your choice to buy that specific brand of car, it becomes an emblem of a deep expression of your identity as an owner (Blommaert and Varis 2015). Or as a member of Saabforum.nl told me: ‘I like to believe that I see a little bit of my own personality in the designs and the philosophy of Saab.’ Choosing a Saab equals communicating yourself as different from the mainstream, as an individual that cares about ‘independent thinking’ (Saab 2009: 2) because ‘[w]ith Saab, we see just see things differently’ (Saab 2005: 4-7).

This idea of Saab being different and being driven by ‘special individuals’ is reproduced in discourses of Saabists and car reviewers. Car nut and comedian Jerry Seinfeld states: ‘if you don’t like weird, then Saab is not for you. [...] they were so unique, so individualistic in everything that they did.’ (Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee 2015). Top Gear presenter Clarkson for instance presented the Saab driver as a very specific type of person: ‘a bit of a leftfield architect with a black polo neck’ (Top Gear 2011). During an interview, Marc De Hondt, owner of SaabSupply in Belgium, spontaneously refers to this episode of Top Gear. “Have you seen that episode of Top Gear on the Saab driver? Well, when I look at my customer base, that is really correct. The Saab-driver is understated.” On other occasions, Clarkson labels Saab as the car that nice people drive (Volkskrant 2009). And in the urban dictionary Saab drivers are defined as ‘Quirky, successful, understated individuals who shy away from the stigma of driving a BMW or Mercedes’ (Urban Dictionary).
**Saab drivers and Saabists**

Marcuse (1964) pointed out that in capitalism shared consumption practices lay the basis of ‘a social and culture group’. Marcuse was speaking in Fordist times, where mass production for all was the rule. Today, in the neoliberal phase of globalization, we are witnessing niched globalization (Blommaert 2010) which results in an enormous fragmentation of the socio-cultural domain (Appadurai 1996). The main argument of Marcuse, that people build groups on the basis of shared consumption practice, still sticks but now occurs in a global niches.

So what makes a Saab driver a Saabist? Following post on Saab Central, an American based Saab forum can enlighten this further. The thread deals with the question: ‘What is a typical Saab-driver/owner’? One post of C. gets the thumbs up from many other members:

‘As for Saab drivers- a majority are like every other car driver; it's a "nice" car that they can afford that gets them from A to B. Most drivers only care that it turns on, doesn't guzzle fuel, and has gizmos.

These forums on the other hand have a bunch of people who are or think they are; erudite, "car people, well read, well informed, moderate, eccentric, non-mainstream, friendly, full of camaraderie, most are at least mechanically inclined, and some are truly brilliant. We as a lot tend to have disdain for the ostentatious, the flagrant, the wanna-be's, the sheeple, and those ignorant by choice. We appreciate the arts, good food, and good humor, and are generally a sedate amiable bunch.” (SaabsUnited 2011)

The poster differentiates between (a) people who just happened to be driving Saabs and (b) Saabists that gather online and are infected by Saabism. Driving a Saab can thus be an index of Saabism, but it is not enough (Blommaert & Varis 2013; Maly & Varis 2015) to make one a Saabist. People today can buy a Saab because it is good value for money, not because one loves Saabs. Being a Saabist is not only about what one drives, but also how one drives and why one drives it. The Saabist has a true passion for Saabs, loves to communicate with others about their Saabs and know how to get the semiotic details right. Marc De Hondt indicates that the major differences between the Saab-driver and the Saabist are found in
the transition from the individual who likes and drives a Saab, to the aficionado who gathers online and offline. Saabists live for their Saabs (Personal communication 2016). Remco Veldman, owner of Velteck, when self-identifying as a Saabist, agrees with this: ‘If you, after a full day of working on Saabs, go home and spend your evening on the Saabforum communicating with other Saabists on Saabs. Then you are a Saabist.’ (Personal communication 2016).

Being a Saabist first of all means that you have a passion for Saabs. Saabists self-identify with the brand. They are affected by Saabism. For Saabists, their Saab is not just a commercial product; it’s not just a car they like. The Saab is a true identity emblem, the Barthesian mythology surrounding Saab indexes who they are. The first prerequisite of becoming a Saabist is being a Saab-driver. A Saab driver not only drives a Saab, also has a certain style, a presupposed shared way of driving and a specific identity discourse. Let’s listen to the blogger behind ‘Saab vs Skepticism’ about what makes a Saab special:

“There’s just something about the way they feel, you start off by enjoying the more cosmetic side of car ownership; the fact that it’s far more of an individual choice, they look a little different. And from my own experience, the dealers and specialists I’ve ever dealt with, aren’t arrogant, they’re all friendly and all love SAAB’s too.”

Here we see two constantly reoccurring elements in the identity discourses of Saabists. First, Saab drivers and their dealers are nice, friendly and non-arrogant people. Second, Saabs are different, they look different and they are constructed differently. As a result they attract ‘real individuals’, that don’t want to drive a common, mainstream VW or worse an ostentatious BMW or Bentley. Saabs are for ‘quirky individuals’ that stand out from the masses, but don’t want to brag or attract attention. One courant image of the stereotypical Saab driver in the Netherlands is a pipe smoking grey man with a beard. Peter Haaima (famous Saab dealer in The Netherlands) states that ‘Saab was technical, ingenious, a car driven by special and quirky people. A typical Saab driver does not live in a row house, but is a doctor, advocate, writer or has another liberal profession’ (Volkskrant 2009 [my translation]).
In an interview with the Dutch Newspaper De Volkskrant (2009 [my translation]) Saabist Willem Bierama says that ‘A Saab driver wants to distinguish himself. It’s not a mainstream car.’ Dennis Leu from Singapore, in the online Saab Turbo X – world a well-known Saabist, explains what he loves about his Saabs: ‘They have the performance without the flashiness and are good value for money. They also look a little quirky’ (The Straitstimes 2016). The semiotics of the car – without flashiness – are mirrored in the identity discourse on their drivers: they are understated too. In China, Saabists refer to the Chinese word Mensao to explain why they drive Saab. Mensao translates as a kind of ‘coolness’, where people stay and appear calm and inconspicuous on the surface but deep ‘inside they are extremely passionate and ready to explode in performance’ (Dong 2016: 187). Very interesting is that Saab advertisements in Chinese precisely point at that same characteristic of understated performance (Dong 2016: 189). Chinese Saabists, just like Saabists around the world, not only describe their Saab cars, but also themselves, using this same concept.

Saabists, just as Saab-drivers in general are described as a special category of people: creative, quirky and individual people. The intertextual connection (Blommaert 2005) between the marketing talk and the identity discourses of the Saabists is explicit and even more remarkable, it operates on a global scale within that specific niche. Saabists are not just individual Saab-drivers, they imagine themselves as a distinctive group of people – a micro-population - and in some cases even as ‘a community’. During the support-rallies of 2010 and 2012, different key-figures and Saab media talked about a global Saab-community (see for example entries on following sites: Saab Blog 2015, SaabsUnited 2011 or Saab vs Scepticism 2014). This was unique. The large rallies allowed Saabists to imagine themselves as one big global Saabist community. That ‘community feeling’ was chronotopic and deeply embedded in specific infrastructures= It was enabled by the circumstances – Saab going bankrupt – and by the strong interaction between different key-Saabists embedded in different infrastructures (Saabform.nl and SaabsUnited) that facilitated these rallies.

In ‘normal circumstances’, Saabists would identify with the brand on an individualistic basis. This identification is a key-ingredient of their group identification as Saabist. This Saabist micro-population is a very complex, layered phenomenon that is deeply embedded in the infrastructures where Saabists meet and interact, on- and offline. The old national Saab-
clubs would for instance facilitate strong and stable local communities. While the Saab-fora would facilitate interactions that can be categorized as networked-individualism (Miller 2011), over small loose digital groups who regularly interact with each other in one forum thread based on one Saab model, to a small community of people interacting regularly on- and-offline.

The official Saab discourse is thus only one structuring ingredient of the identity of that population, the different online fora are as important. Saabists, and this differentiates them from the classic Saab driver, are not known for buying new Saabs and a lot of them are ‘mechanically inclined’. Saabists work on their cars or at least upgrade them. The communication on online fora help Saabists to upgrade and do the mechanic maintenance of their Saabs. This is a last key-characteristic of Saabists: Saabists are active on different online fora for a dedicated to Saab and Saab culture. Without digital Saab media, Saabists would have been limited to small clubs and individual Saab drivers. As Anderson (2006), already pointed out long ago, the sharing of media create a necessary condition for an imagined community. The transnational Saabist-identity is embedded in these digital infrastructures.

**Infrastructures of Saabism**

We would thus be wrong to see Saabism as a purely global monoculture or Saabists as homogenous community. Saabism or Saab-culture is complex. It is a layered, polycentric and transnational cultural phenomenon constitutive of a micro-population. Some of the identity emblems and practices are truly global, others operate on an individual, local, regional or national scale. These scales can be connected to different infrastructures of identity (Maly & Varis 2015).

The former Saab company, the many dealers and marketing bureaus hired by Saab can be identified as supporting infrastructures of the global identity ingredients. Saabists interact with these discourses and present themselves and their cars as (kind of) unique, as different from other brands, as understated, safe, reliable and durable. These global dimensions manifest themselves in reoccurring topics of Saab-talk.
Saabists around the world differentiate their cars from the ‘in your face’ image of BMW or Mercedes on the one hand, and ‘johny’ cars like ‘Fast and the Furious’ tuned Honda’s or VW. The semiotics of ‘understated coolness’ are not only mentioned as a distinguishing factor of the brand, it is also seen as reflecting their own identity as Saabist. When winter sets in, lots of pictures come online showing Saabs with and in the snow, reproducing the motif of Saab as winter cars. These pictures trigger communication about the ‘true habitat’ of Saabs, and the fact that these cars feel ‘at home’ in the snow.

On micro-media like Saab Planet, one reoccurring type of posts is called ‘Saab Saves Lifes’ and discusses how people survived horrible accidents because they were driving Saab. Another popular item in Saab-talk is the durability of the cars and their long lifespan which manifests itself in pride of high mileages of your Saab. For many car owners, high mileages would equal a rundown, old car and thus identify its owner as poor. In the Saabist scene it is an object of pride or to quote a caption from the profile of a Saabist from Saabforum.nl: ‘There are no old Saabs, only new owners’. The famous Saab-blog Saab vs. Skepticism (2014) hosts a ‘high mile club’ where Saabists from around the world submit pictures of their cars and the high mileages of their Saabs. Similar topics exist on Saabforum.nl and on Saab Central.

Apart from these general characteristics of the Saabist-identity, a lot of Saab-talk is dedicated on discussing upgrades. The absolute top, and truly global identity emblems are delivered by Saabs authorized tuner: Hirsch Performance. When you drive a fully Hirsch-upgraded Saab, you definitely show yourself as a true Saabist to your peers. Hirsch provides subtle upgrades on Saabs (and thus in line with the ‘spirit of Saab’) and can be recognized by the little deer. This little detail on the trunk or in the grill of a Saab indexes a special Saab (see figure 2). Here we see the ‘nano-politics’ involved in managing the variety of semiotic means in specific constellations. This understated symbol is only readable for people in the know – Saabists. And it are these peers that ratify these semiotic features as proof that its owner has to be a real Saabist.
Other specific Saab tuners and shops like Maptun, Neobrothers and Nordic Performance operate at lower scales. They are quite popular, and they get respect, but they are especially loved by Saabists who like a bit more extreme tuning. In that sense, they show more influences from the non-‘Saab-like’ tuning-culture. On the Facebook page Saab Turbo Club of Sweden, these type of upgrades – closer to the tuning culture, than the ‘understated-ness’ associated with the Saab brand – are quite normal. The demo-cars that these companies have produced and the (custom tuning) parts they sell for Saabs make them influential in a specific niche within Saabist culture, whereas Hirsch performance will be respected by almost all Saabists.

Apart from the Saab company, Saab tuners and Saab shops, the most important Saabist identity infrastructures are the Saab media. Especially after the bankruptcy of Saab, the
different (online) media and blogs like Saab Central, SaabsUnited, Saabnet, Saab vs Scepticism or Saab Planet became important identity infrastructures. Some of these online media operate on a global scale, other on a national or transnational scale. Especially the posts on Saab Planet are widely distributed on all kinds of social media dedicated to Saab. You’ll find posts referring to that blog on national Saab Facebook Fan pages in Turkey, The Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Lithuania and many more.

Several Saab Facebook pages operate at a lower, national scale, using the national languages and subsequently group Saabists on that national scale or operate on a transnational but mono-linguistic scale. Saabforum.nl, for example, is based in The Netherlands but functions as a very important transnational infrastructure for Dutch and Belgian Saabists. Daily, Saabists interact with each other on different topics, ranging from mechanics to discussing the semiotic features of certain cars. The Belgian and the Dutch Saab Club have their own sub-forum, but it would be wrong though, to see Saabforum.nl as the online infrastructure of these clubs. The Dutch Saabforum is more than an umbrella forum. Its members are not necessarily connected to the official national Saab clubs and the members of Saabforum.nl organize events on their one. A lot of what these national and transnational, online and offline Saabists groups do, also gets picked up by Saab media like Saab Planet. Local events get englobalized and communicated to a much larger group of Saabists, from all corners of the world.

Next to these online media and the regular ‘old skool’ Saab clubs, we can identify another type of infrastructures that is crucial for Saab-culture: the garages and specialists. A lot of the former official Saab dealers started selling other brands or just stopped. Some of them, mostly key-figures in the Saabist - world, decided to specialize themselves in the maintenance of old Saabs, selling second hand Saabs and very special Saabs. Some of the owners of such Saab garages and specialist in Saab parts like Marc De Hondt from SaabSupply (Kruibeke, Belgium), Peter Mink (Breda, The Netherlands), Remco Veldman from Velteck (Drachten, The Netherlands) or Lafrentz (Berlin, Germany) form key-infrastructures in the Saabist scene: they provide the infrastructure that answers the needs of the population. And it would not be a rare sight to see Saabs with French, Dutch, German number plates standing in a Belgian garage for maintenance.
Culture-as-accent: Saabism and getting the details right

These interconnected infrastructures support and create a polycentric and layered cultural phenomenon. Being integrated in Saab-culture means that one not only has knowledge on where to find parts or where to find mechanics but also on what is cool and what is not. Or better what is Saab-like and what is not done. Getting the semiotics right is important and on – and offline Saab-talk informs Saabists on the norms within that niche (Becker 1963). Only by participating in such Saab-talk, one becomes knowledgeable of these norms. Saabforum.nl or the fora from Saab Central are thus not only online hang-outs; they are also online learning environments where one can make ‘a career’ within the community (Becker 1963).

Beside the technical stuff, its members are introduced in distinguishing what semiotics are Saab-like and which are not, what counts as a ‘normal’ Saab and how to recognize a top of the line Saab and truly special Saabs. Newbies would not spot the differences, but Saabists masters would. In the case of an old generation 9-3 (build between 1998-2002) the normal one would be a 9-3 S 2.0i without turbo, without leather seats, and without an automatic airco. A cool one should at least have a 2 liter engine with a full pressure turbo and the SE – spoiler package. The top of the line 9-3 would be a Saab 9-3 2.3l Viggen in cosmic blue with a sun roof. The truly exceptional model would be a Hirsh Troll R Saab 9-3 aero or Viggen. On small detail would give it away: the Troll R –logo on the trunk of the car.

Figure 3: Details matter – A viggen Troll R.

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'Details’ like the Hirsch logo and the word Troll would flag their uniqueness. For outsiders, all these different Saabs would look rather similar. Only people in the know – Saabists - would spot and be able to read these little details that index a very specially constructed and exceptional car. Thus little differences or accents for the outsiders, are experienced as very substantial differences for the insiders. Blommaert and Varis (2015: 2) coin this as culture-as-accent. Culture-as-accent is part of consumer culture, and is defined by two opposing forces: ‘a strong tendency towards uniformity and homogeneity on the one hand, and the inflation of details as metonymic marks of the total person on the other.’ This rough outline of culture-as-accent points to the relation between identity and culture and draws our attention to the importance of the management of details (Barthes, 1957 & 2013), (of getting) it right. Let us take a look at the following conversation on Saabforum.nl (2015):

(A.) And I am, from September onwards, 1 of 20 who has bought an original Hirsch exhaust for the V6.
(H.) There is also a reason for that [why only 20 were sold; my addition] .... Namely that the Ferrita exhaust is better and costs 400-500 euro less (I also had the Hirsch, but sold it again. The Ferrita reduces the turbo lag ...) [...] (A.) Personally, I don’t find the Ferrita beautiful. Too much aftermarket. I did not buy it for more power, but for the looks. I, with my 256 horsepower, do not have a need for more. [...] (H.) If you are only concerned with beautiful, I advise you to buy larger end pieces and weld them onto your standard exhaust. Costs; 90 euro (A.) I also could have bought Johnny wheels for 400 euros and LingLong tires ... And an open air filter for the sound.... Hello I drive Saab not a baseball-caps-Honda.

This piece of dialogue was part of a thread of four pages dedicated to all the Hirsch upgrades of A on his Saab 9-3ng convertible. His Saab can be seen as an example of a special Saab and no wonder, this was the only critical remark on a Hirsch upgrade in that thread. (A.) clearly follows the esthetic rule within Saab-culture: Hirsch is top of the line, is officially recognized by Saab and makes upgrades especially for Saab. Even more, you could order a new Hirschified Saab straight from the factory. In case of the Hirsch exhaust, the form of the end pipes of the Hirsch exhaust follow the form of the original Saab aero-bumper and fill the
exhaust holes of the diffuser perfectly. That is why many Saabists only approve of stock or Hirsch exhausts on their Saabs.

Saabist (H.) throws in a technical argument against the Hirsch upgrade. It is telling that he immediately hedges his critique by stating that he - as a true Saabist - has first bought a Hirsch exhaust, but sold it again because the Ferrita produces less turbo lag and is cheaper. Critiquing a Hirsch upgrade, needs extensive argumentation.

This conversation gives us insight into the norms of the Saab-community. After the last commentary of A., H. did not reply anymore, suggesting that while on the technical side he can be right, the argument that a real Saabist should maintain a distinction between Saab-drivers and the ‘johny’s’ who drive ‘baseball-caps-Honda’s’ is hegemonic within the context of Saabforum.nl. Being a Saabist, according to A., it is necessary to show that one has class. You can upgrade your car, but not with ‘aftermarket’-stuff – that is vulgar – only with (highly expensive) Saab-like products from the Saab house-tuner Hirsch performance.

Being a Saabist, means you not only recognize these details, it is something you need to manage. Your Saab and the way you should upgrade it is not free, but clearly linked to the norms of the Saabists embedded in that particular place. A stock Saab is ok, a Saab with ‘johny –like’ aftermarket upgrades is not.

Important to note is that upgrading one’s Saab according to the norms of Saabism is not necessarily the same in Netherlands as in Hungary, Taiwan or the United States. Depending on one’s integration in certain regional, national cultures or other micro-populations (like tuning-culture), one will evaluate certain upgrades or even certain Saab models (pre-GM-era or GM-era) as Saab-like or not Saab-like. Following example can illuminate this. In Turkey and amongst the Turkish diaspora, we see a small but vivid group of Saabists. One striking feature within that Saab-community is the infusion of Turkish nationalist symbols onto their cars and in the local Saab media (See figure 4).
This picture appears on the Facebook fan page SAAB Klub Polska (2015 a). The owner of the car is of Turkish decent, but the number-plate lets us deduce that he is living in Great-Brittan. The Saab is clearly owned by a Saabist. The owner not only drives a Saab 9-3ng, a picture of the car is also in the banner of his personal Facebook page. What is more, he also interacts in the thread of the Polish Saab Club on his car which means he follows the online Saab-pages. More even, the owner also upgrades his car. This also shows the complexity of these transnational communication patterns and interactions within the Saabist Micro-populations.

The upgrades cause a vivid interaction on the Facebook – page of Saab KlubPolska. The discussion starts with an ironic question to spark up the debate: ‘[What] if there were no wind deflectors...?’ The wind deflectors on the pictured Saab are clearly not stock, and they are not commonly used in Poland, but they were never before the subject of a discussion. On the contrary, some Saabs with wind deflectors are seen amongst the ones that the Facebook members of this Polish Saab Club find super cool (Saab Klub Polska 2015b). The deflector an sich is thus not a show stopper.
The comment is subtly and implicitly (in line with Saabists’ presupposed friendliness) targeting a far more obvious modification: the Turkish flag on the back window. This is not something that immediately aligns with the ‘understated-ness’ that is associated with driving Saab. Not coincidentally this is also the topic of the Facebook conversation. It is in such interactions that we see the polycentricity within Saab-culture illustrated. The owner is not only a Saabist, he is also a proud Turk and is thus not only oriented to ‘Saab-culture’ but also to the Turkish nationalistic norms. As a consequence he does not see a contradiction between being Saabist and sticking a Turkish flag on his rear window. On the contrary, the owner states (in Polish), that the Turkish flag is the best thing on the car. The Polish commenters are not so convinced and several of them hint that for them, the Turkish emblem should be removed.

A similar discussion on nationalistic symbols on a Saab also erupted on Saab Central. One member of that forum showed off his newly wrapped Saab (Saab Central 2015). The whole car was wrapped in the American flag. Even though, most members of Saab Central are Americans and would identify themselves as American patriots, the member did not receive one positive comment. Saabs are Swedish cars, so if you wrap them in a flag, it should have been the Swedish flag, was the general line of commenting.

In the niche of Saabism, the Turkish and the American national emblems operate on a lower scale level than the truly global norms of Saab culture. Saabists are thus clearly not a national subculture. The discussion on the Polish Saab Facebook page is enlightening from that global Saabism perspective as well. The Saab pictured used to be a 9-3 Vector, but is now in the process of being upgraded to an aero- the top of the line of that model. The rear of the Saab, with the aero-badge on the trunk, already looks like a 9-3 Aero. The front bumper – as one Polish commentator correctly observes - is still from the Vector package, which is a lower version of that model. Upgrading your Saab to look like an Aero is always met with applause within the Saabist community, but to stick the Aero logo onto such an upgraded car or the adding of non-original upgrades is the subject of heated discussions: In the end it was not produced as an Aero’. This also happens to be the case here: the Aero logo, the wind deflectors, the Turkish emblem and especially the double dual exhaust are all targeted with ironic remarks. The exhaust is ironically renamed as ‘the shot guns in the
back’. Semiotically speaking these aftermarket exhausts index tuning culture, not Saab culture.

Being integrated in the global Saab culture, means that one is able to manage such details. The following Saab found on the Saab Turkey Facebook group, is thus far better integrated in Saab-culture. It has original Saab parts, a Hirsch spoiler, the Hirsch logo, Maptun exhaust, a painted Hirsch diffuser and a Swedish flag:

![Figure 5: Turkish Hirshified Saab — Saab Türkiye (Official) Facebook Page](image)

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I described Saabism as a layered and polycentric community operating in a narrowly intertwined ‘online-offline’ sphere of structured interactions (‘Saab-talk’), revolving around a small set of emblematic semiotic objects and supported by various infrastructures for performing groupness. Some of the emblems to which the members orient circulate and
operate on a global scale, others are only acceptable on a national or regional scale. On the truly global scale, we see that the Saab company itself is still the main provider of semiotic and discursive ingredients. All Saabists praise the uniqueness, understated-ness and quirkiness of the brand. And all participants in the discussion on the Polish Facebook page like the Aero – upgrades, they all like the authentic Saab upgrades.

From the moment one leaves the stock or Hirsch upgrades, discussion starts to erupt. It is at this point that we see that there are different centers to which Saabists orient themselves when upgrading one’s car. The Turkish Saabist from Great - Brittan combined the norms of three centers: Saabism, tuning culture and Turkish nationalism. His stock Saab upgrades get applause, but he harvested criticism for its nationalist Turkish emblems and his orientation to classic aftermarket tuning –culture in general. The semiotics from the non-Saab centers are only meaningful and appreciated on lower scale levels or within different micro-populations. National cultural and identity emblems which Saabists orient only work on that scale, but they do not show integration in the truly global scale of Saabism.

I have shown that Saabists and Saabism are a translocal and polycentric affair deeply embedded in the different identity infrastructures operating on different scales. Saab-talk on different local, national and globally operating Saab media were identified as structural elements of Saab culture and Saabists as a transnational population. In the analyzed Saab-talk, Saabists, clearly differentiate themselves from Beemer-fans or Honda-drivers by reproducing the official Saab discourse. On the other hand, we saw that Saabists could not be described as a homogenous culture. Saabism cannot be understood as a globalized monoculture, nor could it be described as a national subculture. The concept of a micro-population, proved very useful in describing the complex, layered and polycentric nature of Saabism. It allows us to understand the complex context in which people produce identity and form groups outside the classic imagined national communities, and how new online-offline modes of infrastructure and interaction enable such forms of groupness.
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