Market Impact of a Consumption Subculture: the Harley-Davidson Mystique

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ABSTRACT -

Subcultures of consumption are distinct, homogeneous groups of people united by a common commitment to a particular set of consumption items or activities. This paper discusses the market impact of one such subculture, i.e., Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners. In prolonged engagement with the subculture, the authors have utilized participant observation and depth interviews to investigate the marketing implications of the "Harley subculture." Four main phenomena are presented: Consumer-initiated new-product development, mass-marketed mystique, extraordinary brand identification, and transcendence of national and cultural boundaries. Existence of these phenomena in other subcultures of consumption is documented, and their implications are discussed.

Subcultures are intriguing social units for market research and segmentation (Zaltman 1965) due to their relative homogeneity of norms, values, and behaviors. Past studies of subcultural consumption patterns have focused on ethnic or other ascribed subcultures, such as African American, Hispanic, Italian, Jewish, and WASP (see, e.g., Hirschman 1981, 1985; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983) which, despite some general commonalities, often display such diversity of consumption preferences as to severely limit their potential as market segments (Deshpande, Hoyer, and Donthu 1986). This research examines instead subcultures that self-select on the basis of shared consumption interests (cf. Donnelly and Young 1988). United by commitment to particular careers, avocations, or lifestyles, certain non-ethnic subcultures, like surfers, skateboarders, hot rodders, and Deadheads, exhibit high degrees of homogeneity that not only carry over into consumer behaviors but actually become articulated as unique ideologies of consumption.

The homogeneous styles and activities of these subcultures of consumption make them significant to marketers as self-defining market segments that tend to transcend cultural contexts (Stratton 1985), demographic cohorts (Pearson 1987), and ethnicities (Klein 1985). Furthermore, their commitment and innovative behaviors carry their market impact far beyond the bounds of normal consumption. Hard-core or high status members of a consumption subculture act as innovators and opinion leaders (Fox 1987), imbuing certain products with meaning that ultimately is shared or consumed by a much larger market peripheral to the core. For example, hard-core punk rockers create styles which are copied faithfully by soft-core members of the subculture and are imitated more loosely by "pretenders" who are peripheral to the core subculture (Fox 1987).

A review of extant ethnography of consumption-oriented subcultures reveals the existence of apparently symbiotic relationships between such subcultures and the marketing institutions that supply the products and services that support the subculture's ideology of consumption. Our data reveal four interesting characteristics of relationships between marketers and consumption-oriented subcultures:

1) Consumer initiated new-product development
2) Mass-marketed mystique
3) Extraordinary brand identification
4) Transcendence of national and cultural boundaries
METHOD

This paper draws from both secondary and primary data. General theoretical and methodological guidance were gleaned from a review of extant ethnography of various non-ethnic subcultures (see, e.g., Fox 1987; Kinsey 1982; Klein 1985; Pearson 1987; Young 1988). Themes suggested within the literature were probed and developed in the context of the authors' ongoing ethnographic study of Harley-Davidson motorcycle ownership.

Ethnographic Work

The first author began ethnographic work as a non-participant observer at the 50th Black Hills Motor Classic in Sturgis South Dakota in August of 1990. Data consisted of field notes based on observation and brief interviews, and of photographs, taken not only at the rally but also along the road from the author's starting point in Ames, Iowa. During the week of the rally an estimated 300,000 motorcyclists, the majority on Harley-Davidsons, passed through the small town of Sturgis. Published accounts of the rally (e.g., Urseth 1990) served to triangulate the researcher's observations.

Rallies provided excellent opportunities to participate in and observe certain aspects of the subculture of motorcycle enthusiasts. In March of 1991 the second author observed retail preparations for Bike Week at Daytona, the nation's largest rally. The first author conducted participant observation at two motorcycle rallies in the company of key informants during June and July of 1991. The first was attended primarily by BMW owners, however other brands were represented including Harley-Davidsons and British bikes. The second, a "Freedom Rally" sponsored by ABATE (a national organization that lobbies for legislation affecting biker liberties, most notably helmet laws) of Iowa, was attended almost exclusively by Harley-Davidson owners, although a handful of European and Japanese bikes were observed. In August 1991, on motorcycles provided by Harley-Davidson from their test fleet in San Dimas, both authors participated in the Western Region Rally of the Harley Owners Group (HOG) in Santa Maria, California. HOG Rally participation was limited strictly to Harley owners. We rode in the company of a Los Angeles based chapter of the organization that took us in and treated us as fellow chapter members.

In addition to observation at rallies, we have also gathered extensive interview and observational data in other venues. We developed close research relationships with several key informants who provided interviews as well as access to various formal and informal settings with other motorcyclists. Interviews were conducted conversationally in naturalistic sites such as informants' homes (or more commonly garages), motorcycle swap meets, club meetings, rallies, rides, bars, and restaurants with field notes recorded afterward via microcassette recorder and subsequent transcription. Immersion in the subculture has also led to familiarity with publications targeted to various subgroups of bikers. Close reading of such magazines as Biker, Easyriders, American Iron, Supercycle, Enthusiast, and Hog Tales, as well as rally publications and newsletters, assisted in the interpretation of interview and observational data.

In order to gain a marketer's perspective of Harley ownership we conducted interviews at Harley-Davidson's corporate offices in Milwaukee with key members of the organization including the president of the motorcycle division, the vice-president of motorcycle styling, the public relations manager, and the director of business planning. In addition, we have conducted interviews with four Harley-Davidson dealers in Iowa and Oregon and with dozens of vendors of biker accessories, clothing, and paraphernalia at swap meets and rallies.

Sampling

Informants have been selected purposefully to represent different types of Harley owners identified in the course of ethnographic inquiry. For example, the first author attended meetings of one HOG chapter comprised almost exclusively of "Ma and Pa" bikers (semi-retired or retired, working-to-middle-class couples) with a preference for "dressers" (Electra Glides with hard saddle bags, trunks, fairings, and other amenities). In contrast, we rode to and from the Western Region HOG Rally with a HOG chapter comprised largely of "FLBs" (rich urban bikers), richly costumed in leather and riding customized "Low Riders" and "Softails" (bikes with more "chopped" appearances and laid back riding positions). Another group we have begun to access is a club which stages "runs" (organized rides), dons "colors" (uniforms of gang affiliation), and conducts business at a clubhouse in much the same fashion as is documented for outlaw clubs such as the Hell's Angels. One informant (who sees himself as an anti-yuppie) maintains no formal group affiliation; nevertheless, he frequently rides with an informal group of friends who recently also have become Harley owners. Yet another informant, a quintessential yuppie who rides primarily with enthusiasts of European cycles, traded his late model BMW for a new Harley Electra Glide Sport which, after a year of riding, he traded back in to reclaim his former BMW.

Purposive sampling (Lincoln and Guba 1985) proceeded in such a way as to provide coverage of and access to the wide variety of bikers identified in the course of the field work. The validity and scope of emerging interpretations were challenged by actively seeking limiting exceptions, and by triangulating data with multiple primary and secondary sources.

Analysis

Direct analysis of observational and photographic data was in part a function of interpreting symbols, especially those of widespread manifestation in modes of dress, grooming, and motorcycle customization. Analysis of the meanings of biker symbolism served two important functions: first, it proved revelatory of the underlying ethos of the subculture (including values both common and divergent among subgroups), and second, it allowed us to track the movement of embodied meaning through the subculture. Because of the public nature of biker display the meanings of biker signs and symbols were determined in the context not only of their use within the subculture of consumption but also of their broader use outside the subculture. Meanings attributed by the researchers to various symbols were derived and validated through interviews, member checks, and close readings of biker literature both scholarly and popular. Although most symbols allow for multiple interpretations, certain meanings make more sense than others when viewed in the context of an holistic pattern, system, or constellation of symbols taken together. By considering such constellations of symbols, subtle differences in the usages of individual symbols by different subgroups could be determined.

Data from interviews and observation field notes were coded, compared, collapsed to categories, and abstracted to yield interpretive themes. For example, the emergent theme of "grass-roots research and development" was derived as an abstraction of observations with such labels as "shade-tree mechanics" and "armchair design." These categories were created to encompass individual coded observations such as "Chrome-Magnon's custom controls" and "consumer-commercialized belt drive." Variations on this process of abstraction are described by McCracken (1988), Miles and Huberman (1984), and Glaser and Strauss (1967). A back and forth process of data analysis and literature review yielded the four themes that form the basis of this paper.

FINDINGS

There exists, centered in North America, a subculture formed about an ideology of consumption with the Harley-Davidson motorcycle as its principle icon. Perhaps the most obvious impact of the subculture is its existence as a tight cluster of market segments united by common thread: commitment to a particular product, its symbolism, and the values it represents. The structure and ethos of the subculture are discussed elsewhere (Schouten and McAlexander 1991); this paper deals with the marketing implications of the relationship between the subculture and the Harley-Davidson Motor Company. In doing so it draws parallels with other consumption-oriented subcultures and their symbioses with marketing institutions (Fox 1987; Klein 1985; Moohrhouse 1986).
One of the most interesting phenomena observed among Harley owners is their tendency to develop both technological and stylistic advancements in motorcycle equipment and clothing. Such "grass-roots r & d" is not unique to the biker subculture, but is in fact visible in many subcultures or groups that exhibit extraordinary commitment to a particular class of products or consumption activities. For example, many important technological advancements in skydiving equipment have been conceived and produced by skydivers themselves in cottage industries (Lynn and Snow 1986). A similar phenomenon is highly visible in the surfing subculture, the core members of which have typically been responsible for major advances in both surfboard and clothing design. The hot rod subculture, dedicated to technical and aesthetic modifications of American production automobiles made an indelible impression on the Detroit auto industry stimulating demand for production hot rods, accessories, and special interest magazines (Moorhouse 1986).

Harley-Davidson's heritage is one of responsiveness to grass-roots innovation. The company itself began as a backyard operation in 1903. In Harley's "modern age", Harley-Davidson continues to maintain an intimate relationship with riders through activities like corporate sponsorship of and participation (by top level executives, managers, staff, dealers, and assembly-line workers) in rallies. Consequently, the designers of production motorcycles, accouterments, or parts are likely to echo styles originated at the core of the biker subculture. Examples include slightly extended forks, highway foot pegs, pullback handlebars, sissy bars, and a proliferation of chrome and tooled leather, all engineered to create the look of the biker's custom "chopper." Official Harley-Davidson clothing is also suggestive of styles created by hard-core bikers. For example, the black leather vest with insignias that serves as the uniform for members of the Harley Owners Group bears a striking resemblance in form and function to outlaw colors, i.e., the insignia laden, sleeveless jackets that identify members of various outlaw motorcycle clubs.

Despite Harley-Davidson's wide range of official accessories, field research suggests that a high level of consumer-initiated innovation still continues. For instance, a photocopied flyer posted in Oregon Harley dealerships advertises a belt drive "designed by an old Harley rider for Harley riders" that can be retrofitted to old Harleys. Another example comes from field notes from a HOG rally in Santa Maria, California. One key informant, whom friends jokingly have dubbed "Chrome-Magnon," has designed a full set of foot pegs, shifter, and brake pedal to provide a more comfortable, extended riding position while accommodating an oversized, side-mounted carburetor on his Harley Softail. This hardware has recently been given to production and distribution through a large Southern California accessories retailer. Casual conversation with rally participants also turned on occasion to ideas for other accessories such as chrome clocks mounted on gas caps or handlebars.

Mass Marketing the Mystique

Although many custom alterations to motorcycles and clothing may be interpreted as personal, expressive manifestations of product involvement as leisure behavior (cf. Bloch and Bruce 1984), certain cultural innovations, such as the raked profile of a "chopped" motorcycle, appear to emanate from the core of the subculture, ultimately to be adopted more broadly in some form. Certain designs or developments may even be coopted by marketing institutions, "sanitized" or softened, and promoted for mass consumption. For example, the commercialization of rap music has followed this pattern; a cultural form created by the hip-hop subculture of African Americans, rapping has become prevalent in pop music and even in advertising jingles for children's products (Blair and Hatala 1991). Competitive body building, a true subcultural phenomenon, through the promotion of its own icons and mystique to health conscious Americans, has helped establish a very lucrative industry in health clubs, special foods and clothing, exercise equipment, and special interest magazines (Klein 1985, 1986).

The cultural products of subcultures, especially of countercultural groups such as punks or outlaw bikers, may have strong stylistic appeal to certain segments of society while being regarded with fear, revulsion, or awe by others. When confronted with counterculture people may experience simultaneous positive and negative responses. In part at least it is the tension between the resonance and the dissonance with social norms that gives subcultural styles their mystique. Maintaining this tension is a managerial challenge for Harley-Davidson Inc. The company draws potemtic strength from its link with outlaw counterculture; yet a link that is too tight, i.e., that solidifies the company image with the dark side of outlaw bikers, may alienate the upscale market that purchases new Harley-Davidsons.

Harley-Davidson, in its promotion of the HOG (Harley Owners Group) organization and product line, has successfully coopted, sanitized, and marketed the mystique of the "outlaw" motorcycle club. The company adroitly preserves many of the symbolic appurtenances of gang affiliation while, at the same time, distancing itself sufficiently from the negative side of gang membership to avoid alienating the relatively conservative and affluent purchasers of new Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Retained from the outlaw mystique are a sense of brotherhood and outsider status. These are reinforced symbolically by HOG's uniform vest and insignias reminiscent of the outlaw's colors. The organization of a HOG "chapter" (this term parallels gang terminology) resembles that of an outlaw club chapter, especially on the road. The two-column formation adhered to on a run such as the ride to the West Coast HOG Rally mirrors a gang's road organization (McQuire 1986). The psyche of the HOG chapter on a run is a ganglike exhibition of machismo and (albeit mild) intimidation of other motorists achieved through the collective noise of the bikes, the movement through traffic in a solid phalanx, and the overall appearance of the black-leather clad group. However, just as notable as the similarities are the differences between a HOG chapter and an outlaw club. Grooming is more upscale and less intimidating among HOG members. Tattoos are less prevalent. The motorcycles and clothing are newer and more obviously used as costumery. The HOG sponsored rally exhibited none of the outrageous behavior (such as public nudity and sexual exhibitionism) found at Sturgis and ABATE rallies. Instead, activities at the HOG rally included lectures on motorcycle safety and maintenance, and a focus group that discussed HOG merchandise. HOG members appear to be able to partake of the outlaw mystique without ever really venturing into the realm of the outlaw biker.

Extraordinary Brand Identification

Our findings indicate a strong sense of brand identification among Harley owners that translates to extraordinary brand loyalty. Furthermore, we find that very strong brand identification often precedes the purchase of the first Harley, sometimes by years, manifesting as a desire or longing that results in highly motivated brand preference. When discussing their first Harley purchases informants commonly report always having wanted one. Some report memories of their fathers or grandfathers on Harley-Davidsons, and intergenerational and family-centered Harley ownership are featured regularly in publications like Enthusiast and Hog Tales. Other informants are unable to pinpoint the genesis of their loyalty to the idea of Harley ownership, only the general sense that until they owned a Harley any other motorcycle was just a stop-gap. Still others begin riding motorcycles without any particular brand loyalty and eventually develop a specific interest in owning a Harley that may or may not develop into a driving passion. One thing is certain: among Harley owners a sizable share is fiercely loyal. One key informant categorizes loyalty to Harley-Davidsons in the following manner: "There are two types of Harley riders, those who if Harley-Davidsons were conceived and produced by skydivers themselves in cottage industries (Moorhouse 1986).

The most Harley-loyal group appears to be those people closest to the core of the traditional biker subculture, i.e., those who most closely approximate the look created by outlaw clubs. Signs of their loyalty frequently include Harley-Davidson related tattoos, bumper stickers on their other vehicles, and the frequent wearing of Harley-licensed apparel, even at work or other non-motorcycling activities. Informants from this group tend to have long (even lifelong) histories of Harley ownership. A common pattern is to have begun with a "basket case" (a bike in need of extensive repair) and to have traded up several times to newer or more desirable models. Their predominantly blue-collar status often precludes the purchase of a new Harley; however, their tendency to customize their bikes makes them a good segment for after-market parts and service. Although many perform their own mechanical work, many do not. Mechanical work among this group will sometimes fall to an
Lavish spending on custom accessories is also typical of RUBs, or upscale, baby-boomer enthusiasts. Having come lately to Harley ownership, however, their longevity as owners cannot be determined. Similar to the "preppie punks" described by Fox (1987), RUBs tend to dress and play at the role of biker on weekend rides, at rallies, or for other special riding occasions, but they return to their suits and imported cars the rest of the time. Such signs of peripheral affiliation with the biker subculture would seem to suggest a passing infatuation indulged by relatively high discretionary incomes. If Harley ownership were to pass out of vogue, maintaining the loyalty of such owners might present a significant challenge. On the other hand, certain signs of high commitment (e.g., owner-initiated innovation) among the RUBs may also indicate the formation of a separate subculture with a life and longevity of its own. Longitudinal research with a group of such owners could prove extremely valuable to anticipating the needs and behaviors of this lucrative market.

The subgroup of retired or semi-retired "Ma and Pa" bikers presents a different picture of brand loyalty. Motivated in their motorcycling by travel and comfort they tend to choose fully dressed bikes with features such as radios, intercoms, heated handgrips, floorboards, and full, protective fairings. The same needs that steer them toward Harley dressers also place them squarely in the target market for the very successful Honda Interstate and similar bikes from other Japanese manufacturers. Several informants have owned both Harleys and Hondas, and some profess no particular loyalty. Those that are Harley loyal tend to point to Harley's American heritage and manufacture as their main reasons; they also identify the Harley's unique sound and feel as important. Those who are non-loyal cite performance, features, and overall value as their decision criteria. If Honda becomes successful in positioning the Interstate as an American-made motorcycle for American riders (as current advertising is clearly aimed to do), Harley-Davidson's "Ma and Pa" segment might suffer attrition.

Crossing Cultural Boundaries

Subcultures that form around unique ideologies of consumption possess a uniformity that may transcend racial, ethnic, or national differences. For instance, Klein (1985) found that in the bodybuilding subculture racial and gender differences virtually disappear as members identify themselves foremost as bodybuilders. Stratton (1985) determined that consumption-oriented youth subcultures are prone to cross national boundaries and cultural contexts. Outlaw motorcycle clubs forming outside the U.S. (see, e.g., Harris 1985; Wolf 1991) utilize the same organizational structure, perform the same kinds of activities, and display the same symbols as U.S.-based clubs (cf. Hopper and Moore 1983, 1990; Quinn 1983; Reynolds 1967; Thompson 1966; Watson 1990). At the Black Hills Motor Classic the first author observed rally participants with license plates representing several Canadian provinces, Sweden, and Australia. A group of enthusiasts in Sweden, having gone to great lengths to preserve WWII military-imported Harleys, has recently extended a hand of fellowship to other bikers through a letter to the editor of Biker. In an equally surprising development, Swedish composer Jan Sandstrom has created a "Motorbike Concerto" wherein Swedish trombonist Christian Lindberg imitates the sounds of various Harley-Davidson motorcycles as part of a musical production touring Europe, Japan, and the United States. (The Oregonian 1992). To what extent certain aspects of the American biker ethos (e.g., American patriotism) carry over may be suspect, but given the implications for marketing Harley-Davidsons internationally, the phenomenon merits further investigation.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

An ethnocentric study of Harley-Davidson motorcycle ownership has begun to reveal important marketing implications associated with consumption-oriented subcultures. Seeing owners as part of a subculture provides a theoretical foundation upon which to base understandings and perhaps even prediction of important behaviors. The knowledge, for example, that highly committed consumers, in modifying existing products to meet their personal needs, also tend to become involved in the development of new products may be of real value to a company that monitors such activity through appropriate consumer research.

For firms that sell a mystique as well as a hard product, understanding and managing the mystique may be critical to long-term profitability. Likely, the management of mystique has direct implications for issues such as licensing, brand equity and promotion. For example, the marketer must consider trade-offs between short-term gains through brand extensions, and the potential dilution or debilitation of the mystique associated with the core brand or product. Aaker (1992). Harley-Davidson as a marketer to a subculture may be in a special position to benefit from brand extension to products like apparel. An important component of the Harley mystique is the creation of envy among non-Harley owners (Schouten and McAlexander 1991). For Harley owners, the donning of Harley licensed apparel by non-owners serves as a visible symbol of envy, strengthening the mystique and providing an additional hedonic benefit. Another trade-off to be considered lies between identification with and renunciation of deviant aspects of the core subculture. Harley-Davidson has successfully borrowed from outlaw biker symbolism while balancing the deviance inherent in that association with such wholesome activities as rider safety seminars and family and children's activities at company sponsored rallies.

One manifestation of the Harley mystique that has important implications for merchandising is extraordinary brand identification to the Harley-Davidson name among motorcycle owners and non-owners alike. For motorcycle owners, Harley licensed products provide a means to include Harley Davidson symbols in non-riding facets of their lives, serving as reminders to themselves and others that they are part of the Harley brotherhood. For one informant, a physician in an upscale clinic, a Harley-Davidson tie tack serves to elicit conversation with patients and peers relating to Harley ownership. Again, pride and the creation of envy appear to be strong motivators, but the conversations he remembers most are those that have introduced him to other Harley riders and led to the sharing of experiences and a sense of brotherhood. Harley-Davidson licensed products facilitate such linkages to the community of Harley owners. For non-owners, Harley licensed products, especially apparel, demonstrate an allegiance to the Harley concept and aspirations to become Harley owners. Although they currently may not be able to afford a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, they can through symbolic identification share in the mystique keep and the dream of ownership alive.

The full cross-cultural implications of a subculture of Harley-Davidson owners are not yet known. However, two factors appear to indicate significant international opportunities for marketing Harley-Davidson motorcycles and accessories, apparel, and other branded products: first, the general tendency of consumption-oriented subcultures to transcend cultural, national, and generational boundaries; and second, the proliferation of American popular culture abroad, evidenced by the ubiquity of American youth fashions, music, and fast foods, and crowned by the recent opening of Euro Disneyland. We have encountered direct evidence of the internationalization of the Harley-Davidson subculture: however, additional research is needed to determine the nature, reach, and longevity of the Harley mystique in non-U.S. Cultures. Furthermore, it is important to learn how the basic symbols of the subculture are used, altered, or reinterpreted when overlain on a non-U.S. cultural background.

The results presented here are drawn from an on-going and emergent study. As a result, there are questions raised in the analysis that cannot yet be answered. For example, the longevity and degree of commitment to the subculture on the part of new, upscale bikers are issues that can only be resolved with more prolonged engagement and longitudinal observations. Additionally, regional and international differences that have suggested themselves in our ethnography need further exploration. Additional research will help us better understand
these variations in the interpretation and expression of the Harley-Davidson subculture, its symbols and its mystique.

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Marketing Strategies. In 1903, 21-year old William S. Harley and 20-year old Arthur Davidson the first production Harley-Davidson, Inc. employs more than 8,200 people and has 1,110 dealership worldwide. Its corporate headquarters are still located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The impact of this threat to Harley, with reference to its current marketing strategies, will be discussed throughout this paper.

2.2 The Harley-Davidson Brand
One of the major competitive advantages in Harley-Davidson's arsenal is the strength of the Harley-Davidson brand. The Harley motorcycle has become.