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Reframing brand experience: The experiential meaning of Harley–Davidson

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ABSTRACT

Beyond branding as a differentiation strategy, branding theory now recognizes the significance of social, cultural, and political relationships relating to brand consumption. In focusing on the consumer's experience of the iconic brand of Harley–Davidson, this work reports on more than three years of ethnographic research undertaken in Australia. The outcome is a description of the experiential meaning of Harley–Davidson for Australian consumers. The findings confirm and extend previous research (Martin, D., Schouten, J., McAlexander, J., Claiming the throttle: Multiple femininities in a hyper-masculine subculture. Consum Mark Cult 2006; 9 (3): 171–205.; Schouten, J.W., McAlexander, J.H., Subcultures of consumption: An ethnography of the new bikers. J Consum Res 1995; 22 (1): 43–61.) investigating the Harley–Davidson subculture. These findings are also particularly informative regarding the consumer's brand experience. The article argues that personal experience of Harley–Davidson embedded in a collective social act (in this case, the Australian HOG community) is a spectacular (postmodern) symbol of freedom, where the rebel image of the bike and the brand is consumed by (predominantly mainstream) consumers, thus highlighting the co-construction of the consumer's brand experience. Recognizing this co-construction of brand experience enables brand managers and marketers an opportunity to manage and market brands from the fundamental level of what a particular brand means to consumers.

Branding is an effective differentiation strategy that enables a statement of identification for the product, the firm, and the consumer. Understanding that brands constitute a form of identity suggests brands hold more than the functional value of the product. In contrast to a functionalist view, an experiential view of brand consumption is emerging in the branding literature as a more comprehensive way of understanding brand–consumer relationships. More specifically, increasing numbers of people recognize effective branding in the socio-cultural experience surrounding brand consumption. Harley–Davidson is an exemplar case in this regard, as demonstrated with Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) study of the (American) Harley–Davidson sub-culture and later with Martin et al.'s (2006) feminist re-inquiry. However, there is high regard for Harley–Davidson throughout the world and yet Schouten and his colleagues have confined their research to the USA. By investigating the Harley phenomenon beyond American shores, this work both confirms and extends earlier research efforts. Through an application of Holt's (1995) fourth dimension of consumption, consuming as play, as an analytical frame, the findings illustrate how one can find the meaning of Harley–Davidson in the consumer's brand experience. This paper argues that personal experience of Harley–Davidson embedded in a collective social act (in this case, the Australian Harley Owners' Group, or HOGs) has become a spectacular (postmodern) symbol of freedom. As this ethnographic description of the experiential meaning of Harley–Davidson demonstrates, the consumers emulate and enjoy the rebel image in consuming the bike and the brand. Through consumption, therefore, users co-construct the brand experience (Hackley, 2001), giving brand managers and marketers an opportunity to manage and market the brand from the depths of the identified experiential meaning.

1. Review of branding literature

The proliferation of products gives rise to differentiation strategies, including branding, that aim to achieve competitive advantage (Aaker, 1998). From this contextual need, various branding typologies depict a range of brand concepts and various ways of understanding consumer behavior. In terms of branding, McEnally and de Chernatony (1999) explain that beyond a simple identification device, brands can develop a distinct personality and even iconic status with a complex identity aligned with social and political issues. However, as Holt (2002) highlights, theoretical understanding of what branding entails continues to evolve.

Similarly, in terms of consumer behavior, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) juxtapose Bettman's (1979) rationally based information processing model with the experiential view on consumer behavior. In their study of the consumption of novels, movies, performing arts, and sporting events, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) highlight the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of consumption experiences. Holbrook et al.'s (1984) investigation of sports, games, and

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other leisure activities, as well as Arnould and Price's (1993) study of the extraordinary experience of white-water rafting, and Celsi et al.'s (1993) study of the high-risk adventure of sky-diving all give further focus to the experiential aspects of consumption. Loroz (2004) provides an exposé of casino gambling among older consumers to show that the experience of gambling and other forms of experiential consumption may reinforce and indeed enhance self-concept. This view is in line with Holt's (1995) theory of the evolution of how consumers consume, where consuming is more holistically considered as experience, as integration, as classification, and as play. Holt (1995) further delineates play as including the sub-themes of communing and socializing. The experiential view of consumption has therefore advanced and enhanced theoretical understanding of consumption, indicating an experiential view of branding may also be fruitful and worthy of investigation.

As symbols within popular culture, brands can effectively position a product in terms of unique functional benefits (Aaker, 1991; Gardner and Levy, 1955). This early functional view of branding is now advanced as an organizational process to the point where it makes a product meaningful (Kay, 2006; Klink, 2003). Raising consumer awareness of the brand and communicating the brand image (Keller, 1993) enables consumers to engage with the brand, providing an opportunity for the corporation to build brand equity. Yet, while a functional but unique positioning may differentiate a brand in a competitive field, the personification of brand attributes generates brand personality (Patterson, 1999). Personalizing inanimate objects (Aaker, 1997) and humanizing brands (Levy, 1985), infuses them with a distinct personality simplifying brand choice and encouraging a preference for particular brands (Sirgy, 1982). Consumption constitutes culturally what a brand means to consumers, with marketing communications reinforcing the branding (McCracken, 1986). Conversely, brand personality may reflect those consumers consuming the brand (McCracken, 1989). Either way, brand consumption serves a symbolic function (Levy, 1959; Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Wattanasuwan, 2005) with the brand demonstrating who the users are (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Escalas and Bettman, 2005), or maybe aspire to be.

As Belk (1988, p. 160) suggests, "We learn, define, and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions," where possessions are nurtured, groomed, and held in high esteem as part of the extended self. For some brands, this view even extends to sacredness (Belk et al., 1989) and a cult following, as Belk and Tumbat (2005) demonstrate with the Macintosh brand. Holt (2003) also highlights the mythical dimensions of brands such as Apple and Harley–Davidson, focusing on the iconic symbolism of brands that go beyond a conventional marketing approach. As Holt (2003) explains, iconic brands evolve not by any distinctive feature, benefit, or product innovation but because of the deep cultural connection they develop and nurture. Elsewhere, Holt (1997) highlights the limitations of focusing on lifestyle and values associating with consumption and preference for particular brands. Instead, he advocates the importance of embedding socio-cultural context and consumption within everyday life. More specifically, Rook (1985) shows the consumption rituals embedded in everyday life in the simplest of tasks; so, for example, personal grooming rituals become highly complex and intense. Moving beyond the individual and looking at the collective in terms of consumption rituals, Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) adopt Thanksgiving Day as their text and interpret the symbolic and semiotic meanings of this holiday. Effectively, consumption is more than purchase decisions and brand choice. As Fournier (1998) suggests, brand choice is not about choosing brands but rather the meaning that brands bring to consumers' lives. According to Fournier (1998), the brand is an active relationship partner for consumers, with the animation and personification of brands legitimizing this partnership. Fournier (1998) recognizes the consumer–object relationship as validated in the lived experience of a particular product or brand. Demonstrating this point, Fournier challenges brand loyalty theory suggesting rather than being loyal to brands, consumers become involved with the brand and effectively define what that brand means through action. Notably, this point differs from the co-creation focus advocated by for example, Ramaswamy (2008) and Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) where organizations are learning to engage with informed consumers to ensure the value of a product meets consumer needs. Differing ontologically from the co-creation argument, the focus here is co-construction of the brand experience. Through brand consumption, consumers define the brand while simultaneously the brand defines the consumer. In this way, the cultural authority of brands is shifting away from the firm and towards the consumer. Through experiencing a particular brand, consumers come to know what that brand means, even if that meaning is outside of what marketers might originally intend (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002), or recognize as a potential.

Fundamentally, as Firat and Venkatesh (1995) suggest, consumers are actively producing modern culture through consumption. Consumers are establishing a shared consciousness and (co)constructing their world(s) and communities, through consumption, specifically brand consumption. This shared consciousness surrounding brand consumption is a recognized foundation of a brand community (Cova and Pace, 2006; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), which the shared experience of various rituals and traditions helps to strengthen (McAlexander et al., 2002). Social interaction then develops as a linking value, in Cova's (1997) terms, beyond the functional value of the product. Taking this notion a step further, Cova and Cova (2002) discuss postmodern consumption in terms of tribalism and suggest postmodern consumers are not really interested in the objects of consumption. Rather, the relevant social links and identities of a particular object, like a Harley–Davidson motorbike, hold consumers' interest.

The notion of tribalism derives from Maffesoli's (1996) investigation of the emergence of new forms of social organization and interaction present in everyday life. Arguing that institutions have lost the ability to unify society and that identity based on aspects such as nationality, occupation, gender, etc., are fast dissolving, Maffesoli (1996) identifies a connection between dispersed micro-groups, and develops the concept of neo-tribalism. Understanding modernity as a predominance of narrow rationality and rationalized "social," Maffesoli (1996, p. 11) suggests that an empathic "sociality" where relations between members of the neo-tribe are largely non-rational, affectively charged, and rooted in the moment is replacing the modern mass society. For Maffesoli (1996), neo-tribes generate bonds rooted in experiential sentiments and passions, which collective rituals, customs, and lifestyles reinforce. Maffesoli's (1996) theory of neo-tribalism therefore helps to explain many prevalent features of postmodernism, especially the fragmented and tentative nature of socio-cultural identity.

Also recognizing that people identify and connect via objects of consumption, Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) investigation of the American Harley–Davidson subculture reports several themes including structure, ethos, and transformation of self. The complex social structure of the Harley–Davidson subculture that Schouten and McAlexander (1995) describe reflects the social, political, and spiritual dimensions of a broader biker ethos, with various factions uniquely interpreting these dimensions within the subculture; some more closely aligned with mainstream values than others. Regardless of a biker's orientation, however, in this communal fabric of relationships (Martin et al., 2006; McAlexander et al., 2002), status and identity are predominantly gained through experience and participation (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Through such cultural practices, newcomers become acutely aware of their lowly rank in this commitment-based hierarchy. Effectively, core members perform for both an internal audience (newer members) and an external audience (outsiders) whereas newer members perform as a means of transforming themselves and their status.