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Ethnographic study on the Harley Davidson culture and community

Ethnographic
study

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Abstract

Purpose – One of the most powerful and organizing methods in the world today revolves around the activities that individuals participate in and the subsequent interpersonal relationships that give people meaning in life. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – Today's society longs to add meaning and identity to their lives in a variety of ways. A sense of belonging, or a sense of community, has proven very impactful on the lives of many and creates certain changes to an individual's mindset that relate to the specific subsets of culture and consumption to which they identify with.

Findings – The authors find that Harley Davidson has a strong following in the USA and suggest that it might also have one in China.

Originality/value – In this paper, the authors attempt to define and better categorize a subset of the Harley Davidson following, while studying the habits, relationships, and reasoning behind both the new motorcycle owners, and the veterans of the Harley Davidson way of life. The authors will also attempt to analyze the role relationships (spouse, significant other, and friends or relatives) play in the decision to join this niche subculture. Analyzing these potential and newly converted Harley Davidson customers to gain insight and understanding about the deciding social factors at play in choosing this brand over the others is a primary focus. In studying this unique subculture of consumption, the authors hope to better understand the development and rationale of new Harley Davidson riders and to measure certain personal levels of enjoyment on an individual or group setting, and to analyze the impact on ones social image before and after purchase.

Keywords Business administration, Marketing management

Paper type Research paper

One of the most powerful and organizing methods in the world today revolves around the activities that individuals participate in and the subsequent interpersonal relationships that give people meaning in life. Today's society longs to add meaning and identity to their lives in a variety of ways. A sense of belonging, or a sense of community has proven very impactful on the lives of many, and creates certain changes to an individual's mindset that relate to the specific subsets of culture and consumption to which they identify with (Buckley *et al.*, 1998). In this paper, we attempt to define and better categorize a subset of the Harley Davidson following, while studying the habits, relationships, and reasoning behind both the new motorcycle owners, and the veterans of the Harley Davidson way of life. We also will attempt to analyze the role relationships (spouse, significant other, and friends or relatives) play in the decision to join this niche subculture. Analyzing these potential and newly converted Harley Davidson customers to gain insight and understanding about the deciding social factors at play in choosing this brand over the others is a primary focus. In studying this unique subculture of consumption, we hope to better understand the development and rationale of new Harley Davidson riders, and to



measure certain personal levels of enjoyment on an individual or group setting, and to analyze the impact on ones social image before and after purchase.

Besides, our passion for riding Harley Davidson motorcycles, we wanted to study this particular subset of culture because we are fascinated with how powerful and impactful this brand is at creating and maintaining such an enormous following based around a single product. We began to notice that within this subculture, a lot of people's entire lives could be easily defined by this brand, and the mentality that it promotes. This is incredibly powerful, intriguing, and profitable and it forms the basis of the study altogether. The primary questions to be answered are as follows:

- What exactly are the social norms associated with owning a Harley Davidson?
- What changes can be observed, and exactly how impactful is this way of life on individuals? To whom exactly does this particular lifestyle appeal?

Initial survey phase

This ethnographic study took pace in a number of locations, and started at Powersports of Lafayette IN where we began my initial survey. This was an excellent venue in which we were able to illicit 50 survey responses primarily by those relatively new to the Harley Davidson consumer market. Because of the nature of this motorcycle shop, (being a lower cost used dealer) it was a perfect place for me to meet these individuals who were either just starting or just started their Harley Davidson experience. Participants were asked questions based on a variety of topics including how often they planned to ride alone vs in a group, reasons for buying a Harley Davidson, reasons for choosing this brand over the others, and additional brand related purchases that they planned to buy. The framework of our later observations and interviews were laid very quickly when we began to see the correlations through the initial survey that suggested exactly how strong a sense of "community" is to HD riders. These tactical questions were primarily quantitative in nature, and would help establish credibility to the rest of the study. 98 percent of the riders we poled suggested that they would:

- much rather ride with a group of people or at least with a passenger than to ride alone;
- would ride almost twice as often within a group setting;
- 66 percent chose a Harley Davidson for the brand's image and social implications (suggesting much less importance on the actual product in question); and
- 88 percent of buyers planned on making additional HD brand specific purchases on clothing, apparel, and accessories.

Truth be told, we were blown away with the implications that this initial survey suggested. One of the biggest surprises was the fact that people do not purchase a Harley Davidson because they believe it to be of better quality, or built better than its competitors. We did some research on quality in the marketplace, and too our amazement, studies actually show that other motorcycles made by Harley's competitors offer a lot of superior features (water cooled engines, ceramic composite cylinders, longer warranties, etc.) and yet Harley continues to gain market share, and has established one of the most loyal/repeat customer bases of all time (Carraher *et al.*, 2006).

The normal trend if graphed would show a direct correlation between the amount of money one is thinking about spending, and the subsequent amount of time spent researching (ex: spend more time researching on a house than you would buying a hat, etc.).

Harley Davidson goes against this curve as evidenced by its competitors failing to gain any market ground on Harley despite offering bigger motors, better warranties, cheaper motorcycles, less cost of maintenance, and other superior features. This means that it is not so much about the product [...] but rather the brand and the culture in which the product represents. This is about the only instance in any automotive or transportation sector of the market where build quality and craftsmanship take a backseat to things such as appeal, a sense of community, and brand loyalty/recognition (Carraher *et al.*, 2009; Carraher and Welsh, 2009).

Observation/data collection phase

The next phase of my research methodology was to begin observing from a distance the daily interactions in a variety of places where HD riders frequent. At this time we only wanted to observe these individuals in the environment that they chose to best represent and foster their enthusiasm with the HD brand. At no time did we make aware our intentions or the study to which we were conducting. We were nothing more than a “fly on the wall” so to speak. Wanted to preserve the “natural behavior” of those we were studying. We visited four Harley Davidson shops (Lafayette Indiana, Kokomo Indiana, Marion Indiana, and Fort Worth, Texas), as well as a few restaurants/bars in the state known to market and appeal to bikers. Implications and observational conclusions from afar:

- Rarely seen in any of these locations were riders every “alone” always accompanied by fellow riders and/or significant other.
- Very important to note Harley Davidson’s immersion into a community or a culture that promotes riding in groups [...] equates to a very profitable business model as seen by point “C”.
- Nearly, every rider/passenger we observed was covered from head to toe in Harley Davidson attire (boots, leathers, pants, shirts, vests, jackets, glasses, hats, etc.).
- HD customers identify with the brand, identify with the product, and begin to relate to it [...] establishes belonging.
- Harley Davidson has created something much more than simply a desirable product, or a successful marketing campaign. They have created an incredibly profitable subculture made up of primarily middle aged and middle class rebels without a cause that are extremely brand loyal.
- Primarily seen were white middle aged males (age 30-55).
- Many Harley shops were simply used as “hang out” spots so to speak, with many individuals sticking around to talk with others for hours at a time. I would equate this to a “rest stop” for truck drivers. These bikers stop at these stores as a way to get off of the rode for a bit, and to socialize with those in which they feel instantly comfortable with, and in a setting they feel equally as comfortable with regardless if they had been there before or not.
- Harley riders attribute so much of their personal identities with these motorcycles, and we routinely heard stories about the “best times” of these peoples’ lives often followed up with a story about a group of friends riding across country.
- In perhaps one of the greatest brand recognition achievements in recent memory, Harley customers are extremely loyal and very profitable. They routinely buy brand specific clothing and spend thousands on Harley Davidson accessories for their bike.

In addition, many also use Harley Financial services to finance their bike in a lot of cases we observed (Carragher and Van Auken, 2013; Van Auken and Carragher, 2012).

- All about the appeal to freedom and the open road. People are able to express themselves in ways to which the routines of their jobs and lives simply do not let them do.
- Many Harley Davidson tattoos were easily visible.

The more we researched and observed, the more we became impressed and enamored at the brand Harley Davidson had created. An article in the Wall Street Journal stated that:

In the US, someone in that core group of males age 35 to 74 is nearly 10 times as likely to buy a Harley when looking for a heavyweight motorcycle as one from its next-closest competitor. That is about as dominate as one can get.

Harley has created a culture and a security blanket that establishes a sense of belonging to those like minded individuals seeking freedom. All About community/belonging (one look at Harley's web site: www.harley-davidson.com/en_US/Content/Pages/home.html) simply reinforces the company's commitment to establishing so much more than just another motorcycle purchase.

Interview/interaction/ride phase

Next we decided to visit these same places again, and we now began to socialize, and interview individuals about their Harley Davidson experience, and attempted to get a feel as to the impact this brand has had on their lives, and what made them decide to commit so much of their time, energy, and money into this way of life. We were also curious as to how the media's portrayal of motorcycle riders stacked up to what we would actually observe and witness firsthand. The media has long since saturated the public perception of motorcycle riders as being "outlaws" or "troublemakers" who belong to a motorcycle club. Very successful TV shows have been made based on this assumption, and we wanted to delve deeper into the root causes of what drives these individuals to ride.

We found that among the bikers we observed and interviewed, they could be readily categorized or grouped as either having a "rebel" or an "enthusiast" perspective. Naturally the media perpetuates certain stereotypes that seem to dramatically lean towards the "outlaw" orientation as previously stated.

Of more interesting note, those that would self classify themselves as rebels, simply implied that all other bikers were simply pretenders. This is not as drastic a difference from the "enthusiast" orientation, who simply share the same sentiments to other motorcycle riders that are not riding a Harley. Nothing seems to open bikers up more than a round of beer and an individual willing to listen to them share biker stories with their friends or "brothers" in motorcycle lingo. Things that we learned from these group interviews remained very holistic and personal in nature:

- Owning a Harley is a sort of "rite of passage" to a lot of motorcycle clubs, and huge events across the USA.
- The ideology of belonging to an exclusive club is instilled in every new Harley owner across the country [. . .] Harley Davidson enrolls each new buyer into what is simply referred to as the HOG club (Harley Owners Club). This gives them

access to events, local rides, and discounts [...] but it also reaffirms the brands commitment to make the Harley Davidson experience a lasting, culturally bound, and exclusive event that will undoubtedly translate into repeat businesses and referrals.

- In addition to this club, riders have long since formed their own motorcycle clubs as a way to escape a lot of the realities of life, and to have the freedom and ability to explore the open road, and to feel apart of something bigger and more meaningful than just themselves. This was almost unanimous.
- Very interesting note – many Harley riders aspired to ride long before the legal age, and expressed such aspirations by wearing Harley attire, displaying the HD branded material and posters, etc. Others shared these same aspirations and demonstrated such admiration even when life could not afford them the privilege of owning a true Harley Davidson Motorcycle. We spoke with quite a few groups or riders that had one or two in the group that rode something other than a Harley. These were fascinating encounters in which these individuals were constantly nagged about not riding a “true bike” and that they themselves were almost unanimously “embarrassed” by riding anything other than a Harley Davidson.
- Harley culture is so densely populated with consumers who have made the switch from another motorcycle to a Harley simply because of the status and admiration it entitles. Again many were ridiculed by now fellow Harley riders until they made the switch. This reinforces previous discoveries as to the extent to which Harley has branded with its consumers into being all about appeal and attributing ones happiness to the belonging and exclusivity that the HD motorcycle provides.
- Fascinating as to the number of people we talked to who simply could not afford a Harley Davidson, and thus refuse to compromise by purchasing a competitor’s (Japanese made) motorcycle. Their loyalty to Harley remains so strong that they would rather not ride at all before buying a cheaper and perceived “inferior” motorcycle. They would still attend regular motorcycle get togethers at the local shops, and attempt to fit in and associate with a culture that they so desperately wanted to join.
- Riders came in all shapes and sizes as well as from a multitude of backgrounds. We talked with individuals from prison to preachers and teachers who were all brought together by their passion about Harleys.

Lastly we went on two local charity rides so that I may witness firsthand these Harley Davidson owners out on the rode in the natural environment to which this culture most readily is viewed. We were fascinated that even in a setting such as this, the Harley riders all grouped together on the rode and left the other riders on other manufactures bikes to ride amongst themselves. In order to fit in with these people, you simply had to ride a Harley. When these individuals saw me riding alongside them with my Harley Davidson, we instantly began being treated as one of them as oppose to the one interviewing them. We wanted to hold out the notion that we too ride a Harley Davidson for as long as possible, so that we could gain subjectivity and pure data without the biases and assumptions being made as to the things that we already understood. We wanted to eliminate as much of my personal perceived understandings and biases as possible.

The goal overall was to preserve objectivity and authenticity, and to validate as much of the research as possible under these circumstances.

Future research

While this study was conducted in the USA we believe that it has strong relevance for China and the emerging markets (Jain *et al.*, 2013). For instance, Singer and Millage (2013) compared American and Chinese nascent entrepreneurs and Ahmed *et al.* (2013) examined expatriate entrepreneurs operating around the world. Future research should examine whether these concepts and ideas are similar within Chinese cultures as they are within American cultures (Carraher *et al.*, 2010; Carraher and Buckley, 1996; Scarpello and Carraher, 2008; Sethi and Carraher, 1993; Sturman and Carraher, 2007).

As the Chinese economy continues to develop and individuals become strong consumers do Harley's have a similar following in China? Are there other products like Apple and Ipad that might have similar followings in China? What are the ways that organizations can influence customer expectations (Buckley *et al.*, 2002; Carraher, 2011). Might there also be differences based upon compensation levels (Carraher *et al.*, 2006; Williams *et al.*, 2008), language differences (Carraher *et al.*, 2009); or other important individual differences (Carraher, 2005; Smothers *et al.*, 2010)? We believe that organizations could garner marketing ideas from the areas of mentoring (Carraher *et al.*, 2008; Crocitto *et al.*, 2005) and negotiations (Mujtaba, 2013). We believe that there could also be differences in the social environment (Welsh and Krueger, 2012) that could be useful for identifying differences across and within cultures.

Conclusion/summary

In conclusion Harley Davidson represents one of the biggest and most successful "cult level" followings, and has created an outlet for individuals from all walks of life to escape the realities of life, and to fit into an exclusive club that represents the very essence of freedom. These "rebels without a cause" long to be apart of something bigger than themselves, and use the social status that owning a Harley Davidson awards them to do so. Harley has created a culture and a security blanket that establishes a sense of belonging to those like-minded individuals seeking this freedom, and it is this subculture of consumers that form clubs and organizations, go on cross country rides, and change so much about their way of life to simply fit this mold. All of the qualities associate with a biker (long hair, tattoos, wild and untamed appeal, leather adorned attire, etc.) are a reflection of the rebellion experienced by those who feel liberated from the mundane routines of life, and long for excitement and more of all community. These individuals long to belong to something they perceive to be "cool" and "attractive" and are willing to pay any told amount to achieve it.

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