Refining 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 Harley Owners’ Group 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.

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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
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). Personifying 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; Wattanasuwon, 2005) with the brand demonstrating who the users are (Elliott and Wattanasuwon, 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 Tatum (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 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 Arnold (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.
Unlike the stereotypical biker with long hair and bushy beard, new bikers are just as likely to be clean-shaven professionals (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), or even female (Joans, 2001; Martin et al., 2006). While the traditional Harley (boys’) club continues to exclude females other than as sexual objects (Hopper and Moore, 1990; Joans, 2001), mainstream clubs willingly encourage women to take control of the throttle (Martin et al., 2006). Hypermasculinity is therefore part of the socialization for women in this context, where apart from riding as a pillion passenger, girls also ride their own bikes, or in competition with boys (no boy wants to be beaten by a girl!), and for boys, as in fulfilling their fantasies (Martin et al., 2006). Taking on these non-traditional roles transcends biker and gender stereotypes, reminding marketers and brand managers that consumers complicate and resist dominant brand narratives.

More than a functional product, the dominant narrative of Harley-Davidson is loaded with mystique, given the foundation of this legendary brand in a rebellious history. In line with Woodside et al.’s (2008) consumer storytelling theory therefore, consumption of the brand enacts the outlaw archetype. Historically, this symbolic representation of Harley-Davidson was confirmed on the big screen in the 1950s and 1960s with Hollywood films, such as The Wild One and Easy Rider; movies which remain popular today. These films and others cemented the assumption that violent and dangerous gang members are easily recognized by their Harley-Davidson and black leather garb (McDonald-Walker, 2000), whether this is an accurate portrayal or not. The Wild One, for example, loosely reflected a three-day rally that (reportedly) turned ugly in 1947, Hollister, California. Many of the 4000 rally participants suffered injuries (some serious) and/or arrest, with authorities imposing martial law to regain control (Dourghty, 1947). Attempts to ban the film failed and instead it stirred the consciousness of a disaffected generation (Quiones, 1994), thus defining a deviant image. Local (Australian) movies such as Stone; a story of a motorbike gang seeking retribution for the murder of a fellow member also reinforced the beginning of the outlaw genre and Harley-Davidson’s leading role.

In contrast to the outlaws, the HOG movement (established by Harley-Davidson in the United States in 1983) consists of predominantly law-abiding, mainstream members, better described as biker enthusiasts. Globally, the HOGs uphold family values within a strong community orientation (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), as is the case within the Australian HOGs. Confusingly, however, while the HOGs have a different cultural orientation from outlaws, the black leather and denim uniform is largely consistent across the various factions of Harley riders and owners, rendering them relatively indistinguishable (to outsiders); much to the disdain of the outlaws.

Regardless of this symbolism of Harley-Davidson transcending social and national boundaries, however, few attend to what this iconic brand means for consumers outside of its native America (McDonald-Walker, 2000; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). From the fundamental assumption of context dependency and with the goal of describing the Harley-Davidson experience in Australia, this work reports on more than three years of ethnographic research. Given this research platform, the context of inquiry and methodological details follows.

2. Context of inquiry

Owners and riders throughout the world understand the meaning of Harley-Davidson through their experience of the brand, with many observing and admiring from a distance. To understand the brand therefore, the research focus is the people who experience Harley-Davidson (see Fig. 1). As a social organization, the Harley-Davidson Owners Group (HOG) are structured world-wide as district chapters, with a formally elected committee running each one in conjunction with the local Harley dealership. Membership comes through ownership of a Harley-Davidson and buyers of new bikes receive a complementary one-year membership (valued at A$80, US$61). With
more than one million global members, Australia has around 7000 HOG members. And while the HOG context is only one aspect of the Harley world, HOG is a window on this mainstream movement. Sociologists study the deviant culture of outlaw motorcycle gangs (Hopper and Moore, 1990; Wolf, 1991), whereas consumer researchers (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Martin et al., 2006) focus on the (American) Harley–Davidson subculture of consumption. Yet, the question of what this brand constitutes outside the USA, in Australia for example, receives scant attention. This work therefore seeks to address this gap for the purposes of further understanding a legendary brand and effective brand management.

3. Method

While a positivist approach aims to measure objective reality, an interpretive approach aims to interpret the socially constructed reality. As Sidney Levy describes, “We [consumer researchers] are people thinking about people giving a lot of emphasis to how they [consumers] perceive themselves and their relations to the outside world and the products they consume” (Levy, 2003, p. 345). From this perspective, Levy is a strong advocate for interpretive research, which is the paradigm adopted here, as have other researchers (e.g., Borghini et al., 2006; Lowrie, 2007) in their interpretations of the complexities of human action.

Recognizing the experiential nature of the Harley–Davidson phenomenon, this work begins with the consumer’s experience of Harley-Davidson as the point of departure. The researcher generated ethnographic knowledge from more than three years of fieldwork within the Australian HOGs. Throughout these years and like Schouten and McAlexander (1995), fieldwork included participant observation together with informal and unstructured field interviews, all recorded on a hand-held camcorder. Seeking to gain an initial overview of the subculture, interviews began with marginal members and then systematically moved to the key players to gather more detailed information, thus ensuring the validity of the findings. Further cultural understanding also came from various printed sources, such as the monthly chapter magazine, which in this case was an impressive 30-page glossy print production, professionally edited by one of the members. However, unlike Schouten and McAlexander (1995) operating as a pair of male researchers, as a sole female researcher, acceptance from outsider to insider within this subculture necessarily took a different path.

To assist acculturation as a new and marginal member, the HOG Chapter Director assigned a core member to act as guide and chaperone (see Fig. 2). As a strategy for an unattached female asking many questions, this form of socialization worked well. The chaperone was a complete gentleman and an active collaborator throughout the project. However, not all members are extra large and hairy males, as many girls choose this world too and take control of the throttle (Joans, 2001; Martin et al., 2006), as did this author. To further facilitate the study, the author invested in a 1200 cc Sportster, and later upgraded to a 1450 cc Dyna. Shifting roles from riding bitch to owner and rider, the author became more intimately aware of what Harley–Davidson means. Cultural immersion also occurred through participation in the monthly rides, annual rallies, social nights, and various other activities/events. Active participation as a full member developed credibility and showed the members’ wives and girlfriends that there was no threat to their men. Slowly but surely, the members and particularly the core members, began to relate to the author as a fellow member and rider. At that point, the mystique and seduction of the Harley world began to disclose its secrets.

In essence, active participation and total immersion in the Australian HOG culture generated and developed the author’s understanding of what Harley–Davidson means to Australian owners and riders. The members engaged with the author to ensure the documentation was accurate, often going out of their way to facilitate the research process. As Belk and Kozinets (2005) advocate, the members and author collaboratively negotiated the reality of Harley–Davidson as this phenomenon occurs within the Australian HOGs. Importantly, this collaboration served to reduce the distance between researcher, informant, and the phenomenon of interest, thus reflexively enhancing validity (Pink, 2001) and revealing the socially constructed world of an unfamiliar culture (Sayre, 2001). With this underlying philosophy, the research aim was to come as close as possible to the experiential meaning of Harley–Davidson from within the context of the Australian HOGs.

4. HOGs down under

During this ethnographic study, the researcher spent many hours riding pillion and many more hours unveiled the exhilaration of riding. Most rides meant riding in large groups and being acutely aware of other riders and drivers, which demonstrated the notion of
brotherhood in action. As Big Pete explained, brotherhood is about looking out for each other on and off the road which translates to a powerful connection and social code where members abide by “an unspoken creed.” Although traditionally this creed might be primarily evident between male riders, the author experienced this connection regardless of gender and being pillion or rider. While the male domination in this subculture continues, many Aussie girls find the courage to ride a Harley and gain independent HOG membership (see Figs. 3 and 4). Talking in a group of female riders, Helena, a flamboyant personality who physically relabelled her Road King to a Road Queen, highlighted that for girls, Harley ownership and rider skill is about confidence. She stated, “gaining the confidence to ride is a serious achievement for lots of girls. Once you’ve got the confidence you need to throw a leg over, you can do anything.” More than that, the notion of brotherhood translates just as well to sisterhood and indeed to all in the community despite their gender identity. Getting to know many HOG characters, showed this as a space that looks after its own, where members are free to be as wayward as they choose. The organization welcomes all to membership with unconditional acceptance on the assumption that members willingly accept the priority values of respecting the bike, time on the road, as well as respect for others, including authorities. This is the freedom to ride with the Australian HOGs. Yet, this experience of freedom occurs through regulation and organization, with safety as a priority.

Owning a Harley-Davidson is ultimately about riding the bike with the freedom to go where and when you choose. Whether riding with 50–100 HOGs in a monthly chapter ride or with 1000+ bikes in an annual Thunder Run, the rider’s riding position on the road reflects the chapter hierarchy. The elected Director and Road Captain take the lead, along with other committee members and established members holding informal status. New members ride further back with the Safety Officer and nominated Tail-end Charlie (last bike in the pack)
coming up the rear. Before each ride, the Director addresses the group, the Ride Captain announces the route, and the Safety Officer reinforces the need to ride safely in staggered formation. Staggered formation entails a two-file formation where each rider follows the next, one bike length apart and positioned in alternate files; never riders side by side, as this increases the risk that more than one rider will be taken out, should any one rider go down. The safety aspects associated with this riding formation are also evident in other ways. If a rider drops out for any reason, the rider behind pulls over to assist, as does the Tail-end Charlie, and the riders behind move up to fill the gaps rather than any rider changing files. Ride rules are explicitly stated in the chapter magazine published monthly as well as regularly reinforced by the Safety Officer for example. In the role of (Gold Coast Chapter) Safety Officer, John Boy (who went on to be elected Gold Coast Chapter Director), organized several rider-training days in conjunction with the local transport authority. With regard to the risk of riding a Harley he stated, “well there's no two ways about it, this is a dangerous occupation! So we have to do what we can to protect the members.” This comment indicates that improved rider skill is not just for the benefit of individual riders, but the group as a whole.

In line with this same philosophy and as a form of self-regulation, any breach of ride rules or inconvenience to others receives a gentle but public reprimand by way of ridicule and humiliation. This happens in an Australian fun-loving tongue-in-cheek manner that works best when one of the (trusted) chapter larrikins carries it out. As the self-appointed police in the Gold Coast Chapter, Lethal and his wife are the nominated Welfare Officers (see Fig. 5), who care enough to pull members into line for the safety sake of other members. This is just one way you know your fellow HOGs are watching your back, again reinforcing the notion of brotherhood (sic). Effectively, the Harley-Davidson brand presents as an organizing symbol and maybe ironically, as a community stronghold, and a safe place to be.

A pack of bikes out on a HOG ride is an impressive sight and sound and generates a serious road presence. People stop in their tracks as the powerfully loud bikes and leather clad collective approach. This spectacle is not a common sight and maybe even frightening to some, given the legacy of the legend. Notably part of the coordinated black leather and denim uniform is a (matte black) open-face helmet. Helmets are compulsory throughout all states in Australia, but members consider open-face helmets less restrictive than full-face helmets and more typical in the HOG context. Replacing the standard Harley pipes with (louder) Screaming Eagle pipes (exhaust system) is also common practice within the Australian HOGs. Riders justify these non-compliant pipes as safer, given the higher decibels. There is evidence to this effect in the popular patch (leather vest adornment) that reads “Loud pipes saves lives.” Harley riders argue that it is easy to take out rice burners (i.e. Sports bikes, Japanese bikes e.g. Yamaha or Honda), because they are too quiet and drivers cannot hear them approaching. Whereas, the loud and distinct Harley rumble assists other road users to be aware of a Harley in their presence.

While an approaching HOG chapter may be intimidating to outsiders, the HOGs are seriously harmless, as is the spectacle. Those who stop, stare, and cheer are those who gain inspiration from the free-spirited bikers. As a mainstream movement, the HOG spectacle says to those on the sidelines, “you too can be in this scene.” The distinct rumble of many Harley-Davidson engines powering down the road, is a statement that attracts much attention. Combine this with vibration of the engine and riding a Harley is an experience that somehow seduces you to a place of peacefulness. The echo of the engines through the quiet of the Australian rainforest, together with the vibration and power of the machine and the intense focus riders need to take the corners and stay with the pack, is the embodiment of heart and soul of a community in action. Riding a 1942 Knucklehead, Big Al emphasized, “The history of the Harley is built into the bike.” Acquisition of a Harley therefore includes more than 100 years of glory and legend and as such can fulfill a dream for many. Consequently, investment in a Harley is more than financial and the role of the bike is more than functional.

Above and beyond the assumed rebel image, every bike is a signature of its owner. Through after-market additions, customizations, and elaborate paintwork for example, the bike comes to personify the individual symbolically. Some members describe their HOG (bike) as “artwork on wheels!” gearing customization efforts towards achieving a bike that is distinct amongst the pack, where the result is an authentic statement of self. Beyond the customization effort, members give meticulous care and attention to maintaining the bike and polishing the chrome (often using Mr. Sheen, a brand of furniture polish, as a quick fix). Prior to any public display for example, riders ritualistically wash and polish the bikes, reflecting self-pride in

Fig. 5. Lethal officiating at the 2006 rally at Arlie Beach, Queensland, Australia.
the highly polished chrome. However, this machine remains an iconic American brand, symbolizing the American way regardless of how much Australian Harley owners and riders' polish and shine their pride and joy.

Many participants readily admitted their regret of Harley's American roots, but members also highlighted “Australia doesn’t make motorbikes.” Other informants suggested the American origin of their treasured Harley–Davidson did not bother them, with some even flying the American stars and stripes or a Confederate flag mounted on the back of their bike. Many more Australians proudly fly the Australian flag (see Fig. 6), while others counteract and balance this aspect by flying both US and Australian flags, or their own creolized version of flag bearing patriotism and loyalty. For some Australian Harley owners and riders however, the American brand of their bike is
a serious concern. A distinct example of action taken to counter this concern is Oscar’s forearm tattoo. Oscar (the other half of Felix; an odd, but not gay couple) deliberately replaced the American flag in his Harley–Davidson tattoo with an Australian flag explaining he simply did not want the American flag on his arm. However, despite any resistance expressions to Americana or Americanism, bikers in Australia overwhelmingly embrace Harley–Davidson, regardless of its American origin and symbolism. More specifically, the Australian distinction and patriotic orientation of this subculture, occurs in quite subtle ways. Beyond the flag flying noted above, the rally organization reflects the Australian flavor of this subculture. The Aussie HOGs who have attended the large American rallies describe the Australian version as a “bush bash in a paddock”.

Travelling to an annual rally in Australia, for example, could mean travelling more than 600 km (approximately 370+ miles) per day for five days straight, where the good times are as much about time on the road as the destination. After the adventure of the journey and on arrival at the rally, members park their bikes, set up camp, and party together (see Fig. 7). Then there is the journey home again with some even deliberately choosing the longer, more scenic route. In 2005, the national rally destination was held in central Australia at Uluru (Ayres Rock) in the Northern Territory (see Fig. 8). Getting to this rally entitled a round trip of around 7000 km (or 4350 miles) for those members travelling from the populated East Coast. Three days into the rally, the entire rally population (about 1100 bikes and 1800 members) took a short ride up the road (500 km or 310 miles) to Alice Springs for another three days of rally. Importantly, fuel stations are few and far between in the Australian outback with just one fuel stop along the way in this instance. During this spectacular ride, the Illawarra Chapter avoided the long queues (up to a three hour wait!) with a trailer full of jerry cans (fuel containers) purchased and filled before setting out for the trek to Uluru (some 4000 km earlier).

Every year and from every direction, HOGs converge on the rally destination, with many riders travelling with their families in tow. A chapter in transit might include several back-up vehicles loaded with wives and kids, for example. Or just as likely, the woman rides with her partner following in the truck behind. As Jenny from the (now disbanded) Shepparton Chapter, explained with reference to her husband driving the back-up vehicle, “I ride with the boys and he drinks with them — you’ve got to have someone to bring the esky [cooler box] and carry the handbag.” Other riders will ride with their kids as pillions or maybe in a sidecar. The HOGs promote a kid-friendly environment, with many families adopting the annual rallies as the annual family holiday. The Richards family proudly proclaim, “...the family that rides together stays together!” Being an active member of the Australian HOG community involves a hetic social life and a strong element of camaraderie. While some members choose to participate as a family unit, there is a mechanism of escape for those who prefer not to include their families.

Whether the chapter rides down the coast, up through the hinterland, or over the plains, every kilometer distances the rider from daily demands and constraints. Commitment to the culture might begin with owning, riding, and socializing within the HOG subculture, but this consumption choice becomes a way of life documented on the members’ leather. From each event or activity, riders collect buttons, pins, and patches, which they typically wear on their leather vest. This HOG lifestyle involves regularly attending social nights and other fun-filled functions and activities as well as getting to know a wide range of people from everyday mums and dads who are taxi drivers and truck drivers to software designers and nurses, many who are affluent empty nesters but all who emphasize this as an ageless and classless culture. Regardless of age, wealth, and professional status, big burly boys happily greet each other with a bear hug and a biker handshake, while the girls get a friendly kiss and cuddle.

The strength of this family and community orientation is also reflected in their philanthropic efforts. Throughout the world, HOG chapters raise money for various charities. In Australia, charities supported include the Royal Flying Doctors, local Women’s Shelters, and the Make-a-Wish Foundation, as well as a range of others such as the Leukaemia Foundation and the Muscular Dystrophy Association. In a typical charity ride, HOG members donate their time and fuel and pillions pay for the seat. The Gold Coaster Chapter’s 2005 Leukaemia ride raised A$24,000 (approx. US$18,458) in just a few hours, thus demonstrating the depth of community experienced within the Australian HOGs.

5. Discussion

The ethnographic knowledge here supports the view that Harley owners and riders include mainstream mums and dads, clean-shaven professionals (even lawyers and police officers!), some women, and many colorful characters. For people to ride and socialize with other Harley owners and HOG members generates a connection with others of a similar mindset, congregating and engaging in a way of life that revolves around consumption of Harley–Davidson. In this most basic way, therefore, the Harley–Davidson brand experience comes from within a social context. This finding from this Australian study complements and extends the previous work focusing on the (American) Harley–Davidson subculture (Martin et al., 2006; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). More specifically, this work provides evidence of Holt’s (1995) fourth dimension of consumption, consumption as play and the sub-themes of communing and socializing (see Fig. 9).
As Holt (1995) theorizes, consuming as play involves more than direct consumption of objects. From Holt’s (1995) perspective, consuming as play means consumption objects become resources through which consumers interact. For active Australian HOG members, the social aspect is prominent and makes for a hectic lifestyle. The many activities, events, and rallies to attend can require extensive time and resources, hence the prevalence of cashed-up empty nesters in this crowd. Associated ritualistic processes incorporate Harley machinery and paraphernalia, such as black leather and denim. Interacting with the people, the brand, and associated objects of consumption, Harley owners come to know the bike, the brand, and the subculture more intimately. Fellow riders develop relationships with others who have similar values and perspectives, indicating the co-construction of the Harley–Davidson brand experience.

In line with Holt (1995), Cova (1997) argues that postmodern consumption involves a communal dimension of consumption, or linking value, evidenced here as a network with strong emotional links. In this work, several informal interviews provided specific evidence in this regard. One informant in particular, who learnt to ride on a Harley in 1968 explained, “Harley–Davidson is an emotion and intellectualizing that takes away from what that is.” More specifically, the experience of Harley–Davidson in the HOG context is a shared emotion, where repetitive symbolic rituals bring into being a shared way of life, and common values bind the members together. With the simple aim to ride and have fun, a strong community orientation has emerged within the Australian HOGs where experience and participation establish credibility. Within the context of these relationships, riders learn the bike’s capabilities and limitations. The bike in motion becomes part of the biker; the bike demands attention, the rider blends with the power of the machine and the bike responds (Wolf, 1991). The most intense form of this experience is transcendental (Pirsig, 1974). Riders experience a sensation of elation and enchantment that takes them somewhere other than the road.

In addition to communiting, consumption as play often becomes a performance where consumers are entertaining each other (Holt, 1995). In this way, consumption is a socializing tool and the brand is a symbol of that socialization. Sharing the emotional experience of consuming Harley–Davidson embeds an individual in a communal fabric of relationships (Martin et al., 2006; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Riding with the HOGs and interacting with others who understand this, further incorporates members into the HOG subculture. The bike, specifically the brand of bike, as well as the people you ride with, become part of who you are. This community is a collective of those who understand this world connected by the Harley brand and the experience of that brand in the HOG context. In this way, the (Australian) HOG context constitutes a postmodern tribe (Cova, 1997; Maffesoli, 1996), where the symbolic and ritualistic roles of individuals contribute to their constructed identity and extended self (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). In turn, this finding demonstrates the collective values and beliefs of the Australian HOGs.

Harley–Davidson and the HOGs are independent brands. The HOGs are an owners’ group, just like any other vehicle owners’ group. As a social organization and well-established global subculture, the HOGs are effectively a (modern) augmentation of the core product, the bike, which has evolved into a (postmodern) neo-tribe. The tribal context is evident in the strict conformity demanded of the members, where the connection is primarily emotional and social. Unlike a modern mass market, the HOGs are an ageless and classless social organization driven by collective rituals, customs, lifestyles, and a common priority of their Harley–Davidson bike. Maffesoli (1996) describes similar neo-tribes in terms of postmodern sociality, where emergent forms of social organization are often radically different to modern collective behavior. More than that, the internal diversity of the micro (public) groupings that constitute a neo-tribe further differentiates postmodern tribes, such as the HOGs, from modern groups and clubs.

Unlike other owners’ groups, however, the Harley–Davidson product is a legendary brand replete with meaning extensions and rebellious image. The seductive leather and denim uniform, together with the powerfully loud bikes, generates a road presence that is easily confused with something other than a mainstream movement. Regardless of such assumptions, 50 plus HOGs travelling down the main street of a quiet Australian town on a Sunday afternoon creates a spectacle that demands attention. This public display of a predominantly leather clad (mainstream) collective riding a brand of bike with a rebellious reputation is recognizably a postmodern spectacle. The legend generates the mystique, the contemporary outlaws reinforce the deviant image, but everyday consumers experiencing Harley–Davidson en masse produce the spectacle. In effect, personal experience embedded in a collective social act produces and reproduces a modern symbol of freedom and a postmodern spectacular activity (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). The production of the spectacle via the consumption of Harley–Davidson socially constructs what each participant regards as the reality of that moment. In effect, the focus becomes the self as symbolically constructed through the Harley–Davidson experience and co-constructed within a community in action as a postmodern spectacle.

The consumer–object (in this case, rider and Harley) is symbolic of the meaning(s) that constitute that moment. While spectators might make certain assumptions as to what the bike, the collective, and the spectacle symbolize, this may differ from the reality of the Harley–Davidson experience riders and owners know. As Firat and Venkatesh (1995: 251) explain, this reality is the ontology of contemporary society, which implies “It is not to brands that consumers will be loyal but to images and symbols, especially to images and symbols that they produce while they consume.” Effectively, consumers in the collective act of consuming Harley–Davidson in the (Australian) HOG
context, become producers in the co-construction of the brand experience.

6. Theoretical contribution

Efforts to document the Harley–Davidson subculture come from both sociologists and consumer researchers. From sociology, knowledge of Daniel Wolf's (1991) ethnography of (Canadian) Rebels (i.e., outlaws) is widespread, while Barbara Joans' (2001) ethnography of women bikers within the Harley culture of California is a more recent female account. From consumer researchers, Schouten and MacAlexander (1995) focus on the (American) Harley–Davidson phenomenon as a sub-culture of consumption, recently revisited with Martin et al.'s (2006) feminist lens. Given the wide recognition of Harley–Davidson as an iconic symbol of the American way, research to date predominantly focuses on the American context. However, Harley–Davidson is a global phenomenon requiring attention beyond American shores (McDonald-Walker, 2000; Schouten and MacAlexander, 1995). Taking a step in that direction, this Australian study extends previous (American) findings.

This work confirms several themes Schouten and MacAlexander (1995) identify including structure, ethos, and transformation of self, as well as Martin et al.'s (2006) increasing emergence of female participation. However, Schouten and MacAlexander's (1995) research focus is on subcultures of consumption with the (American) Harley–Davidson subculture of consumption as a context of application and this focus continues with Martin et al.'s (2006) feminist re-inquiry. Contrastingly, this ethnography has deliberately set out to document and describe the experiential meaning of the Harley–Davidson brand from within the Australian HOG context. In so doing so, the article has applied as an analytical frame Holt's (1995) fourth dimension of consumption, consuming as play. As this work illustrates, Harley–Davidson is more than a bike. A bike is a functional vehicle, a consumption object, yet Harley–Davidson comes over here as a resource through which consumers socialize and interact. The idea and reality of the community in action, demonstrates the strength of the communal dimension within the Australian HOGs. The monthly chapter rides, the more frequent social occasions, and the annual rally ritual, enables members to emotionally connect and develop relationships with people of a similar mindset. In this way, consumption of Harley–Davidson is a socializing tool and the brand is symbolic of that socialization. Effectively, brand consumption embeds consumers into a fabric of relationships, thus co-constructing the brand experience. This study here reinforces the theory of consumption as play.

The notion of spectacle extends previous research. Specifically, the research describes public display of a predominantly leather clad collective riding a brand of bike with such a legendary reputation as a postmodern spectacle. The legend generates the mystique but the experience of riding and consuming Harley–Davidson produces the spectacle. Personal experience becomes an essential part of a collective social act, producing and reproducing a modern symbol of freedom and a postmodern spectacular activity (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). This spectacle, produced via the consumption of Harley–Davidson, socially constructs what each participant regards as the reality of that moment. In this way consumption provides the means of co-constructing the Harley–Davidson brand experience. Yet, what and how consumers' understand Harley–Davidson begins well before purchase. Advertising efforts deliberately position Harley–Davidson as a way to escape the everyday. Evidence to this effect comes in the most recent tag line of “So screw it, let’s ride.” The influence of advertising on brand experience, however, has not informed the current study and is therefore flagged as a limitation of this work. To uncover the influence of advertising on brand experience, further research could investigate how consumers experience a particular brand before making a purchase. This information would deliver an experiential view of market positioning and specific directions in terms of effective brand strategy. Yet, in making this recommendation for future research because few researchers understand ethnographic methodology well or hold the relevant skills, circles in both academy and industry routinely challenge ethnographic findings. Hence, the following discussion specifically addresses some limitations of ethnography and this work in particular.

7. Limitations

All and any research is subject to the question of validity and effectiveness and ethnography is no different. Typically involving participant observation and fieldwork, some observers view ethnographic methods as overly informal and therefore invalid. Skepticism may occur that ethnography provides nothing more than a casual conversation. Yet, while ethnographic methods may seem straightforward, this is not the case. This ethnography for example, includes effort to acculturate and move from being a marginal member who socialized with other marginal members to a full member who moved amongst the core members. Within the (Australian) HOG context, this process of acculturation entailed deriving credibility through active participation in the rides, rallies, and various other activities. Necessarily this occurred over a number of years. The author established, maintained, and nurtured relationships throughout this time and continues to protect them today. She documents interaction naturally occurring during this process and time with the description presented here as the findings of this work. Skilled ethnographers bring to the field the ability to read the context and look for patterns while simultaneously being hypersensitive to instances of cultural significance. Such vigilance is not an easy task by any stretch of the imagination. Ethnographic research requires a steep learning curve as well as some managing serious politics occurring while in the field.

Effective application of ethnographic methods therefore is intense and time consuming. Yet, a shorter time period or less intense, less expensive methodology (e.g. a questionnaire or focus group) could not have achieved the depth of the findings reported here. Through total immersion, this work has documented and described the experiential meaning of a high profile brand and this investigative approach is applicable regardless of the brand or the profile of that brand. Research in general is a time consuming and expensive exercise, so why go down the path of a suboptimal outcome? Given that the customer is central to the modern conception of marketing, any astute organization discouraging research that specifically aims to get close to the consumer and understand the brand/product from the consumer's perspective is taking an unreasonable stance. However, the fear of not being able to generalize ethnographic findings may override such strategic thinking.

A basic assumption of ethnographic work, including the work presented here is that of context dependency. Accordingly, therefore, generalizability of the findings is not the goal. Rather, achieving an accurate understanding of the world of Harley–Davidson through the eyes of those who consume Harley–Davidson was the goal. Notably, while the HOGs are not the only consumers of Harley–Davidson, limiting this work to the HOG context did enable a window on the mainstream consumption of what otherwise is understood as an outlaw brand. The active collaboration of the HOG members throughout the research process, in part, generated the validity of this work. The synthesis and concurrence of a variety of perspectives from within the HOG context adds to the validity of the findings. In the Harley world, the documentation and description of the experiential meaning of Harley–Davidson makes sense. Where else should this experiential meaning make sense? Where else do the findings need to achieve generalization? If the answer is other brands, then this is a flag for further research. This ethnographic approach is applicable to other consumption contexts as a means to identify and describe the experiential meaning of any brand/product/organization.
8. Managerial implications

The legendary status of the Harley-Davidson brand suggests brand managers and marketers can learn much from this brand’s success. However, the legendary success of this brand is a global phenomenon, hence the need to investigate the experiential meaning of Harley-Davidson outside of the American context. Venturing beyond American shores for this study has highlighted aspects of the Americanism of Harley-Davidson that hold in the Australian context and other aspects that do not. This is highly informative for those organizations seeking to achieve or enhance their global presence.

As symbolic of the essence of freedom, Harley-Davidson includes unique design features such as the distinct Harley-Davidson (engine) rumble. Beyond the functional aspects of the bike and the brand, Harley-Davidson has more than 100 years of history in each bike and a rebellious image that can challenge marketers. As Holt (2004) highlights, the material markers of a brand take on meaning over time and in effect users consume the history of the product along with the product itself. As this Australian ethnography of the iconic American brand of Harley-Davidson shows, consumers engage with the image as much as they do with the bike, the brand, and brand community members. Effectively, consumers consuming co-construct the brand experience. From the brink of bankruptcy in the early 1980s, Harley-Davidson gave the few devoted followers still bravely riding a Harley what the consumers wanted with the formation of the HOGs—a means of simply riding and having fun. From there, the organization has strategically facilitated a global mainstream movement that acts at a locally relevant level. They have also not disregarded the rebellious history but rather sought to reinforce the freedom of riding, effectively drawing in an active base of mainstream members who not only buy bikes but also thousands of dollars worth of accessories (with high retail margins!). Harley-Davidson celebrates members’ experience by way of the annual rallies, for example. More than building a brand, therefore, Harley-Davidson has enabled the meaning of the Harley-Davidson brand to evolve and undergo construction by the community in action. Taking these lessons on board and understanding the co-construction of the brand experience in this way gives marketers and brand managers a strategic avenue by which to authentically strengthen the credibility of a brand. This avenue starts with the consumer’s experience of the brand and develops in the (contextually dependent) co-construction of the brand experience. Managing and marketing the brand from this fundamental level of experiential meaning in essence, begins with the consumer and continues to evolve and transform through the consumers’ brand experience. In terms of practical brand management, therefore, the implication is to facilitate brand experience through brand communities, but more importantly, the message to managers and marketers is to enable the negotiated space of the consumer’s brand experience.

Taking this point further, brand managers and marketers have the responsibility to allow consumers to complicate and resist dominant brand narratives. As this work shows, mainstream consumers have appropriated the outlaw mystique of Harley-Davidson to better match mainstream values. In reframing the brand experience, the rebellious history of Harley-Davidson is reconciled with the reality of the HOGs. While elements of the past play a role in what a brand means to consumers, history is just one aspect of the consumer’s brand experience. There is a process of interplay between the past and the present in contextualizing brand meaning, just as there is between managerial intent and consumer action. In choosing to consume a particular product or specific brand, consumers have the right to construct what a brand means. At this fundamental level, therefore, the co-construction of brand experience directs brand management and marketing strategy and confirms that the consumer is necessarily the central focus of marketing.

9. Conclusion

The role of brands in everyday consumption is pervasive, and contemporary marketing wisdom suggests branding is an effective differentiation strategy. While this view may have some validity, the way scholars understand the role of brands is evolving away from a functional focus and towards recognition of the relationships that consumers have with consumption objects and specific brands. The experiential meaning of brand consumption is emerging as an important and effective means towards better brand management and marketing. In recognizing the experiential meaning of brands, the co-construction of the brand experience and the direction that offers for effective brand management begins to emerge.

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