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Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers

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This article introduces the subculture of consumption as an analytic category through which to better understand consumers and the manner in which they organize their lives and identities. Recognizing that consumption activities, product categories, or even brands may serve as the basis for interaction and social cohesion, the concept of the subculture of consumption solves many problems inherent in the use of ascribed social categories as devices for understanding consumer behavior. This article is based on three years of ethnographic fieldwork with Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners. A key feature of the fieldwork was a process of progressive contextualization of the researchers from outsiders to insiders situated within the subculture. Analysis of the social structure, dominant values, and revealing symbolic behaviors of this distinct, consumption-oriented subculture have led to the advancement of a theoretical framework that situates subcultures of consumption in the context of modern consumer culture and discusses, among other implications, a symbiosis between such subcultures and marketing institutions. Transferability of the principal findings of this research to other subcultures of consumption is established through comparisons with ethnographies of other self-selecting, consumption-oriented subcultures.

The most powerful organizing forces in modern life are the activities and associated interpersonal relationships that people undertake to give their lives meaning. In choosing how to spend their money and their time, people do not conform always or neatly to the ascribed analytic categories currently proffered by academia (e.g., ethnicity, gender, age, VALS group, or social class). They take part in the creation of their own categories. As consumer researchers we are uniquely positioned to identify and understand the organizing forces that people bring to their own lives through their consumption choices. In so doing we discover subcultures of consumption.

For the purpose of our discussion, we define a subculture of consumption as a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity. Other characteristics of a subculture

of consumption include an identifiable, hierarchical social structure; a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values; and unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression.

Prior ethnographies of self-selecting or achieved (vs. ascribed) subcultures reveal glimpses of characteristics that make such groups especially intriguing to consumer researchers and marketers. Such a subculture typically encounters in certain products or activities cultural meanings that ultimately become articulated as unique, homologous styles or ideologies of consumption (Hebdige 1979; Kinsey 1982; Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1985). Hard-core or high-status members of achieved subcultures function as opinion leaders (Fox 1987). Subculturally created styles may be shared or imitated by a much larger audience or market peripheral to the core subculture (Fox 1987; Klein 1985) and may even become imitated and commercialized for mass consumption (Blair and Hatala 1991; Fox 1987; Gottdiener 1985; McCracken 1986; Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1985). Finally, certain achieved subcultures have been observed to transcend national and cultural boundaries (Stratton 1985), demographic cohorts (Pearson 1987), racial or ethnic differences (Klein 1985), and class differences (Harris 1985) in their scope and influence.

This article has three objectives. The first is to present an ethnographic analysis of one subculture of consumption, specifically the "new bikers," operationalized

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as owners of Harley-Davidson motorcycles who do not belong to known outlaw organizations. We do not exclude outlaw bikers from the Harley-Davidson-oriented subculture of consumption (hereafter abbreviated HDSC); however, because ample ethnography exists of such groups, we have chosen to focus instead on the yet unchronicled motorcycle enthusiasts that, with the outlaws, form the HDSC. The second objective is to address certain methodological considerations important in studying subcultures of consumption. The third is to argue in favor of the subculture of consumption as a very useful and yet overlooked analytic category for understanding the objects and consumption patterns with which people (and markets) define themselves in our culture.

We begin with a methodological description of the project. We then discuss our findings in terms of four major concerns: (1) the overall structure of the subculture, (2) its ethos (i.e., its underlying values and their expression and maintenance), (3) its impact on the lives and identities of individual consumers, and (4) its articulation with marketing institutions. Throughout the text we compare the results of our research with extant ethnographies of other achieved subcultures such that the resulting discussion achieves a broader theoretical foundation for understanding subcultures of consumption.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD

This description of the HDSC is based on three years of fieldwork that evolved from site-specific, part-time ethnography into sustained, full-time ethnographic immersion in the HDSC. The evolving nature of our ethnographic involvement allowed us to experience and interact with different elements of the subculture as insiders. In a process of progressive contextualization, we began as outsiders and gradually became accepted members of various groups within the HDSC. Along the road (literally and figuratively) toward the core of the subculture we gained insights and perspectives that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to achieve through less sustained involvement. For example, as neophyte members of the subculture we recorded certain experiences and observations; later, with increased time and stature within the subculture, we were privileged to understand those same neophyte experiences from a new vantage point as more seasoned insiders. Furthermore, as we deepened our ethnographic involvement our access to informants near the core of the subculture improved greatly. It was as though we were made to demonstrate our own commitment to the subculture before we could be taken into the full confidence of its adherents.

Background

The project began to take shape in our minds as a way to address serious conceptual problems in the con-

sumer behavior treatment of subcultures. By attempting to create consumption profiles of groups predefined on the basis of ethnicity or other ascribed characteristics, marketers and consumer researchers have run afoul of several problems, not the least of which is stereotyping. What was needed, we reasoned, was to look at the phenomenon of subculture from a consumer behavior perspective rather than vice versa, as traditionally has been done.

Our research interest in Harley-Davidson owners arose not from any personal desire to ride motorcycles, nor from any real desire to associate with bikers. Neither of us was a motorcyclist prior to beginning this project, and neither had any knowledge of biker culture beyond what is universally accessible from media representations. What caught our interest was the possible existence of a distinctive, homogeneous, and enduring subculture that defined itself not only by a particular activity or lifestyle, but also by a single brand of product!

Evolution of Ethnographic Involvement

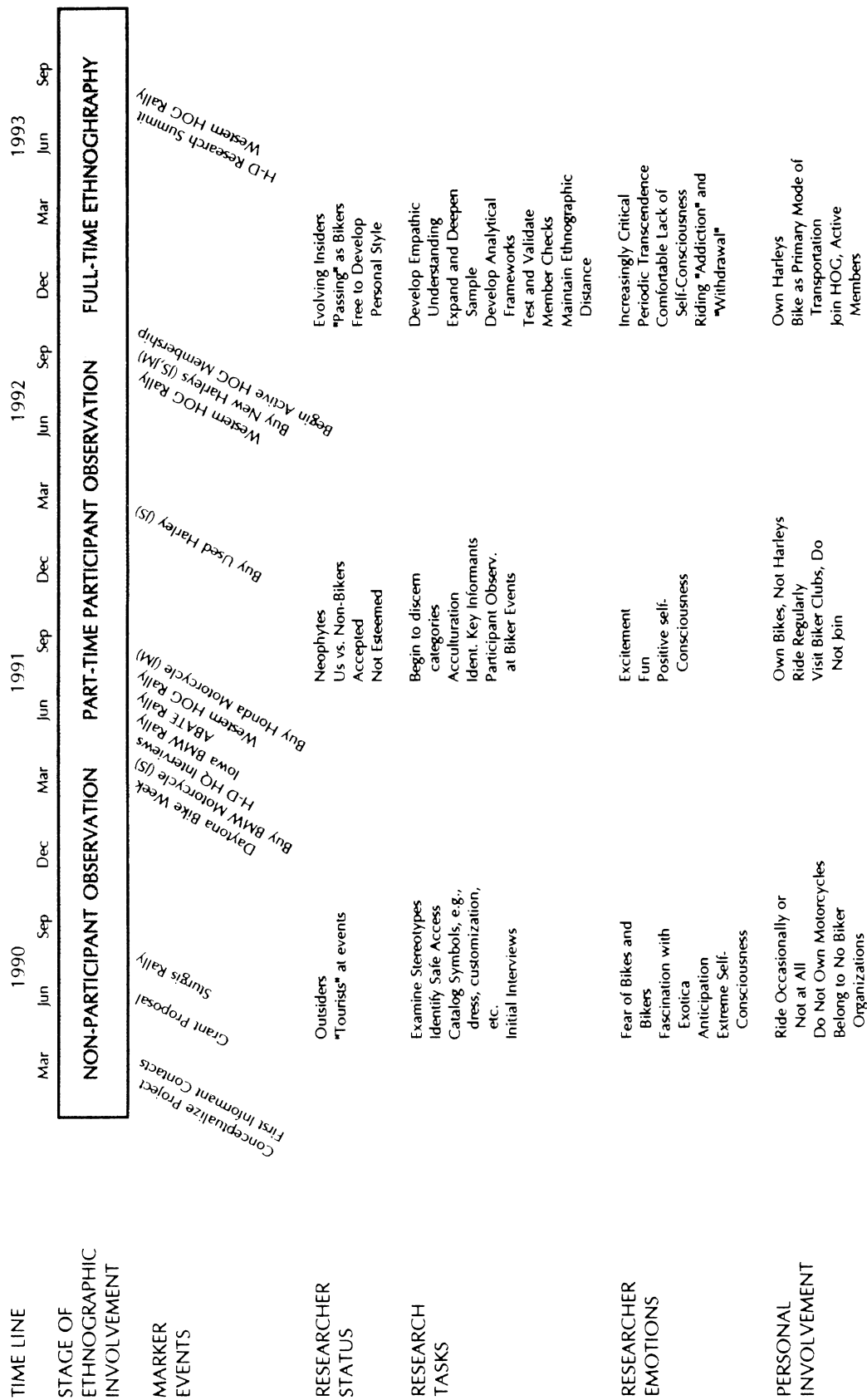
Over three years ago, with the excitement and trepidation of neophytes, we tiptoed into our fieldwork as naive nonparticipant observers. At the time of this writing, we have spent the last year deeply immersed in the lifestyle of the HDSC, "passing" as bikers and making a conscious effort to maintain scholarly distance from the phenomena we are constantly experiencing and observing. Figure 1 overlays on a time line the evolution of our ethnographic involvement, which includes certain marker events and corresponding statuses, tasks, emotions, and levels of personal involvement with the HDSC.

Certain tasks such as cultivating informants, collecting and interpreting data, and testing and triangulating findings were iterative and persisted throughout the ethnographic process (cf. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Other tasks, however, were germane to specific stages of ethnographic evolution. For example, the transition from outsider to insider required (1) access to Harley-Davidson motorcycles, the single most important prerequisite for entering the HDSC, and (2) a process of acculturation. Motorcycles were provided twice by Harley-Davidson, Inc., through short-term loans from the company's test fleet in San Dimas, California. The loaners as well as the necessary phone calls from corporate headquarters allowed us to attend our first and second rallies of the Harley Owners Group (HOG).¹ Company bikes and official sanction did not, however, ensure that we would be able to pass unobtrusively as Harley owners. On the contrary, in the early stages of research we made our academic researcher status clear in order to avoid giving the impression of being official Harley-Davidson representatives.

¹The Harley Owners Group (HOG) is an international, Harley-Davidson-sponsored organization exclusively for Harley owners.

FIGURE 1

TIME LINE OF RESEARCH



Acculturation to the HDSC came gradually through attention to behavioral norms, through studies of scholarly and popular literature, and through information learned in the ongoing process of data collection. We also experienced periods of accelerated tutoring. When we first met the HOG chapter² that we accompanied to two successive annual rallies, we were known as researchers working under the aegis of Harley-Davidson. We were treated politely by some, standoffishly by others, and overly gregariously by others, but no one treated us as if we really belonged there. Our whole relationship with the HOG chapter changed dramatically less than 30 miles into our ride from Los Angeles to the Santa Maria rally site. One chapter member riding near the end of the procession of about two dozen bikes developed a mechanical problem and pulled off the road. One of the us noticed and pulled over to render assistance. That act of consideration created an instant bond between us and two chapter members, who took us into their circle of riders and served for the remainder of the rally as our guides and tutors in the ways of HOG.

The transition from part-time participant observation to full-time ethnography required the acquisition of our own Harley-Davidson motorcycles. As nonowners we were able to conduct episodic participant observation at such venues as rallies, biker swap meets, and certain club meetings. We also were unhindered in conducting prearranged depth interviews. What was missing methodologically, however, was an empathic sense of a biker's identity, psyche, and social interactions in the context of everyday life. To fill this gap we each bought Harleys and made them our primary means of transportation. Furthermore, we purchased appropriate riding clothing and wore it whenever we rode (which meant living out significant portions of our work and leisure lives in jeans, black boots, and black leather jackets). One benefit of this deepened personal involvement was more frequent and prolonged contact with bikers. Equally important, however, was sustained contact *as bikers* with the nonbiking world. Data collection in both cases became more continuous and spontaneous as chance street encounters often turned into data collection opportunities.

As full-time ethnographers it was possible (and valuable) to learn firsthand how nonbikers respond to Harley riders on and off the road; likewise it was valuable to experience the way in which Harley riders respond to the responses of nonbikers. Two important insights, for example, that came only from extensive ridership were (1) the extent to which riding a Harley can be regarded as performing for an audience, and (2) the extent to which Harley riders seek, monitor, and respond to audience response in this performance mode.

²A chapter is the local unit of organization in HOG. This is analogous to the terminology of outlaw motorcycle clubs that also are organized into local chapters.

As a direct result of purchasing bikes we gained additional insights into processes and emotions involved in buying, selling, and owning objects of deep personal attachment. For example, we knew that for many bikers the sound of the Harley engine is an important aspect of the Harley experience, but its real importance was never fully appreciated until the day one of us went to purchase a used Harley Sportster³ from a working-class biker looking to trade up to a larger model. Consider the following field notes excerpt:

Billy answered the door looking like he had just woken up. He ushered the massive rottweiler in from the porch (much to my relief) making flagrantly racist remarks about the dog's preferred lunch menu. . . . He invited me to sit at the dinette where the motorcycle title already lay among trash from a not too recent trip to Taco Bell. Then, rather than sit down, he excused himself momentarily and walked out the door. . . . Suddenly I heard the roar of the bike with its straight drag pipes. Billy gunned the engine a couple of times, fiddled with the choke, and came back in while the bike continued to lope and idle in the front yard. I looked at him questioningly and he explained, "I just had to hear it one more time before you take it away." He let the engine run the whole time we spent completing the transaction, going back outside once to readjust the choke.

The more we integrated motorcycling and related activities into our daily consumption patterns the better we understood the nuances of the biker's lifestyle and identity. An unanticipated outcome of our increased ethnographic involvement was that we became motorcycle enthusiasts. Two or three days without riding a motorcycle brings on a yearning to ride. Such admissions bring to mind the question of overinvolvement, or "going native," in which the researcher gets so close to the phenomenon under study that it becomes impossible to maintain a balanced, scholarly perspective. The main safeguards we have employed against overinvolvement are (1) critical self-examination and (2) continual vigilance for signs that the other researcher is slipping into a particular, narrow point of view.

Fieldwork

Our data collection consisted mostly of formal and informal interviews, nonparticipant and participant observation, and photography. Certain formal interviews we audiotaped and transcribed. When taping was not practical we jotted down skeletal notes during the interview and fleshed them out as soon afterward as possible. Observations or data gathered through informal interviews were reported into a microcassette recorder periodically during the course of a day's research

³The Sportster is currently the smallest motorcycle produced by Harley-Davidson. It can be purchased with an engine displacement ranging from 883 to 1,200 cubic centimeters and is the entry-level Harley for many riders.

activities; we then played back those recorded notes as prompts for creating more detailed field notes at the end of the day.

We used photographs in the manner described by Hill (1991) to assist in “reliving the lived experience,” and also as visual records of symbolism encountered in modes of dress, grooming, motorcycle customization, and other behaviors in the HDSC. Sample photographs are included in the text to illustrate various themes. We interpreted the meanings of symbols in the context of their use both within and outside the subculture. We triangulated the meanings that we attributed to various symbols with interview data, member checks, and close readings of the biker literature. Although most symbols allow for multiple interpretations, certain meanings made more sense than others when viewed in the context of a holistic pattern or system of symbols.

Immersion in the HDSC also led to familiarity with publications targeted to various subgroups of bikers. Close reading of such magazines as *Biker*, *Easyriders*, *American Iron*, *Supercycle*, *Independent Biker*, *Enthusiast*, and *HOG Tales*, as well as rally publications (e.g., Urseth 1990) and club newsletters, all assisted us in the interpretation and triangulation of interview and observational data.

We selected field sites and informants in the course of an emergent design in order to capture the breadth of the HDSC. Our original proposal for sampling (which reflected a superficial understanding of biker culture) recognized three a priori groups to be interviewed: riders, dealers, and corporate marketing decision makers. As soon as we began collecting data, we realized that the consumer side of the HDSC was much more complex than we had imagined. We broadened our sample of sites and informants each time a new category of bikers emerged.

Research sites included the annual rallies at Sturgis, South Dakota, and Daytona Beach, Florida, the Mecca and Medina of biker culture. Other rallies, including regional HOG rallies, an ABATE⁴ rally, and a mostly BMW owners' rally in Iowa, were chosen for their appeal to quite different subgroups of the HDSC. Other sites included informants' homes (or, more commonly, garages), motorcycle swap meets, dealerships, club meetings, runs (road trips), bars, and restaurants. Taken together they provided both front stage and backstage views of biker life across a wide spectrum of members of the HDSC.

We selected informants purposefully according to the different types of Harley owners that we identified in the course of the study. They differed along the lines of such characteristics as age, social class, and lifestyle preferences. We interviewed members of various clubs

as well as riders who chose to remain unaffiliated with any organized groups. The diversity of the informants allowed us to challenge the validity and scope of emerging interpretations through triangulation of data across informants and through the search for limiting exceptions. We formed lasting relationships with several key informants, and they have contributed valuable longitudinal perspectives of Harley ownership as well as access to various formal and informal settings with other motorcyclists. With respect to the goals of this project, we can state with confidence that we have passed the point of data saturation or redundancy, the point in an emergent design at which one normally ceases aggressive data collection (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

In order to gain a marketer's perspective of the HDSC, we conducted interviews at Harley-Davidson's corporate offices in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with key members of the marketing 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 six Harley-Davidson dealers in Iowa and Oregon and with dozens of vendors of biker accessories, clothing, and paraphernalia at swap meets and rallies. Our relationship with Harley-Davidson, Inc., has deepened to the extent that recently we have been given access to extensive marketing research conducted for the company, both internally and externally by various research firms, public relations firms, and advertising agencies. The proprietary research and the personnel behind it have provided unique opportunities to triangulate our own conclusions.

Our conclusions resulted from a constant, iterative process akin to puzzle building. In a variation of the processes described by McCracken (1988), Miles and Huberman (1984), and Glaser and Strauss (1967) we amassed, coded, compared, and collapsed specific data to form themes or categories. Then, treating each theme like a puzzle piece, we sought to devise a conceptual framework that would unite them all in a holistic fashion. For example, in the course of the study we explored several models for the structure of the HDSC and rejected all but one, because at some point they failed to accommodate certain data.

The involvement of two researchers added another useful dimension to the data analysis, that of “devil's advocacy” (cf. McAlexander, Schouten, and Roberts 1993). Individual interpretations of the data were advanced for discussion by either researcher, at which point the other developed counterarguments. This intentional skepticism forced scrutiny of the proposed themes and prevented premature closure. Themes that bore up under scrutiny remained open to further dialogue and development; those that did not were rejected or modified and advanced again. Our findings are grouped into four major categories: structure, ethos, transformation of self, and the role of marketing in the subculture of consumption.

⁴American Bikers Against Totalitarian Enactments (ABATE) is a national organization chartered originally with the political agenda of protecting bikers' rights, especially the right to choose whether or not to wear a helmet.

STRUCTURE

A subculture of consumption comes into existence as people identify with certain objects or consumption activities and, through those objects or activities, identify with other people. The unifying consumption patterns are governed by a unique ethos or set of common values. The structure of the subculture, which governs social interactions within it, and which we now address, is a direct reflection of the commitment of individuals to the ethos.

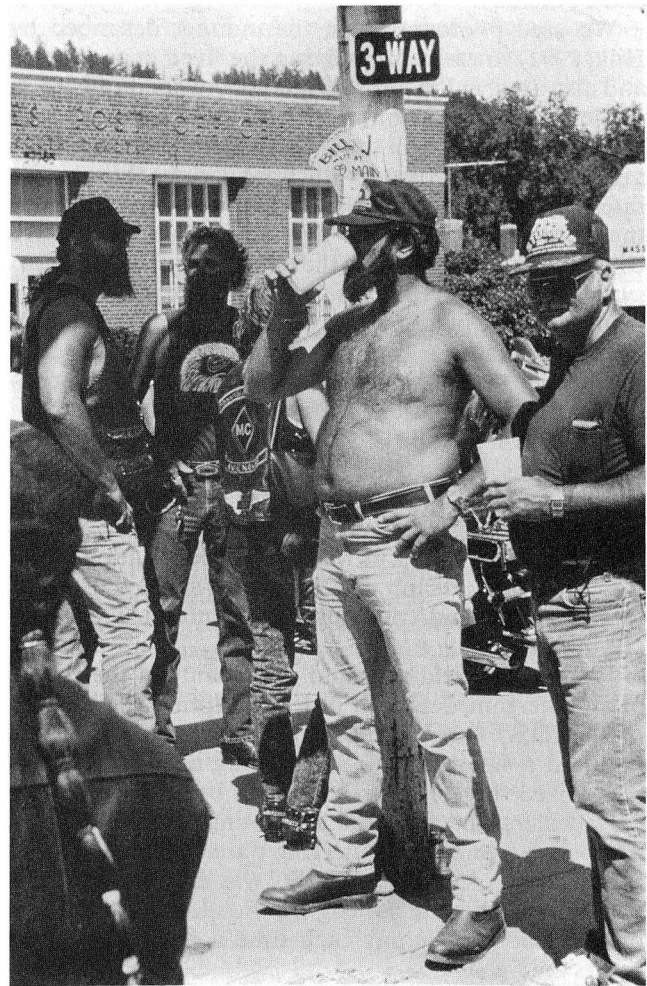
Ethnographies of subcultures of sport, leisure, youth, and deviance reveal hierarchical social structures based on the relative statuses of individual members. In her study of punk culture Fox (1987) describes a simple, concentric social structure. Members of the inner circle (hard core) demonstrate a commitment to punk style and ideology that is full-time and enduring. The soft core is formed by those whose commitment to punk styles and values is less complete and whose roles are subordinate to and dictated by the hard core. Peripheral to the hard and soft core is a group of punk pretenders (or "preppie punks") who are fascinated by punk and who delve superficially into the subculture, particularly on weekend nights. Although they are looked down upon by the core members of the subculture, their presence in punk bars serves the dual function of both audience and material support. Similar hierarchical structures have also been mapped out by Kinsey (1982) for the poly-drug-focused subculture called "Killum and Eatum" and by Klein (1986) for the bodybuilding subculture.

Outlaw biker clubs exhibit a structure similar to that of the punk subculture (cf. Quinn 1983; Wolf 1991). Outlaws with full club membership constitute a hard core that is absolutely committed to the club's ideology, bylaws, norms, and welfare (Thompson 1966). The soft core is composed of prospective and probationary members. Mimicry of outlaw styles by a wide range of peripheral, non-outlaw-affiliated motorcyclists also has been documented (Watson 1980).

Clearly, all Harley riders are not outlaws. From behind the general stereotype of bikers emerge several distinct subgroups. Our research indicates a complex social structure of multiple, coexisting subgroups that claim the biker designation and don the biker uniform (i.e., some combination of jeans, black boots, and T-shirts, a black leather jacket, and a vest that may carry insignias of club affiliation; see Fig. 2). Each subgroup has its own separate hierarchy. Moreover, although each subgroup is highly committed to the Harley-Davidson motorcycle and to a related set of consumption values, each subgroup also has its own unique interpretation of the biker ethos (cf. Fine [1979] on the idiocultures of Little League baseball teams), and each pursues its own charter or purpose. For example, one national organization called the Fifth Chapter exists expressly as a support group for recovering addicts and alcoholics

FIGURE 2

VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BIKER "UNIFORM"



and emphasizes participation in a twelve-step recovery program. Another group provides unity and support among Vietnam veterans. Dykes on Bikes serves the needs of lesbian motorcycle enthusiasts. Born-again Christian clubs such as the Trinity Road Riders conduct devotional services featuring guest evangelists, and at rallies on Sunday mornings they can be seen huddling around a motorcycle radio to catch a religious broadcast.

The subculture of Harley owners cuts across many social categories, yet within its various subgroups there is a propensity toward homogeneity. This pattern repeats itself in HOG. All purchasers of new Harleys are automatically granted one year of membership in HOG, making it the most diverse of the HDSC subgroups. However, each of the chapters we have investigated exhibits greater homogeneity than the organization as a whole. We visited one HOG chapter composed pre-

dominantly of “Mom-and-Pop” bikers, semiretired or retired couples with a preference for “dressers” (touring bikes with hard saddle bags, trunks, fairings, stereos, and other such amenities). In contrast, we have also ridden with a chapter of “RUBs” (rich urban bikers), richly costumed in leather and riding highly customized Harleys down the backroads of midlife crises. Yet another chapter was mostly working-class families, many who treated HOG events as mainstay family entertainment and for whom owning one or more Harleys constituted a major financial sacrifice.

To outsiders (including nonbikers and aspirants to the subculture) or to newcomers in the HDSC, the various biker subgroups may appear virtually indistinguishable, even stereotypical. However, as new bikers gain experience in the HDSC, they begin to discern among groups and to gravitate toward those that best fit their needs and their personal interpretations of the biker ethos. Two of our RUB informants shopped extensively in the Los Angeles area for a HOG chapter before choosing one. Not all riders join organized groups; many prefer to remain unaffiliated and to ride alone or in small, informal groups of friends. Even unaffiliated bikers tend to be attracted to “bike-cultural” events such as rallies and swap meets and may maintain loose relations with one or more organized groups.

Hierarchies of Commitment and Authenticity

Each subgroup within the HDSC maintains a formal hierarchy of officers that is subsumed by an informal hierarchy based on within-group status. Status is conferred on members according to their seniority, participation and leadership in group activities, riding expertise and experience, Harley-specific knowledge, and so forth—in short, the results of an individual’s commitment to the group’s consumption values.

Visible indicators of commitment include tattoos, motorcycle customization, club-specific clothing, and sew-on patches and pins proclaiming various honors, accomplishments, and participation in rallies and other rider events. The status hierarchy is also reflected in the group’s riding formation. The most venerated positions in any club are those of the president (or director) and the road captain, who ride together at the head of the group on runs. With the exception of one or two experienced riders (sometimes designated sergeant at arms and/or assistant road captain) who bring up the rear, riders with higher status ride closer to the front and newer riders or nonmembers ride at the rear.

A separate and somewhat looser status hierarchy exists across subgroups within the HDSC. This status differential is evident in the interaction among motorcyclists on the road. It is common for bikers to salute each other in passing; however, it is also quite common for a saluted biker who perceives his own status to be higher than that of the saluter to snub the latter by re-

fusing to return the wave. True outlaws do not wave to anybody but their brother outlaws; anyone else is denigrated as a “citizen” (Hopper and Moore 1983; Quinn 1983). Hard-core bikers who consider themselves “defenders of the faith” often will not acknowledge Moms-and-Pops and RUBs, whom they regard as unauthentic pretenders or “weekend warriors.” Likewise, weekend Harley enthusiasts may feel quite free to snub non-Harley riders, but not any of the former groups.

The logic of this across-group hierarchy is based on judgments of authenticity; however, there exists some disagreement as to what constitutes a real or authentic biker. Illustrative of this argument is a collection of derisive appellations by certain subgroups for others whom they regard as less authentic. The following was taken from a Harley-oriented computer bulletin board on Internet and is attributed to “*The Independent Biker*, a Bay Area-based free biker paper.”

To get down to task, there are several new classes of riders [*sic*] fouling the wind with the misapprehension that merely owning a Harley will transform them into a biker. This is the same type of dangerous ignorance that suggests that giving a dog an artichoke turns him into a gourmet. Through exhaustive research, undertaken at our own not-inconsiderable expense, the Cycle Lords of the High Truth M.C. have identified several classes of these offenders:

RUBies:	Rich Urban Bikers
SEWERS:	Suburban Weekend Riders
RIOTS:	Retired Idiots On Tour
MUGWUMPS:	My Ugly Goldwing Was Upsetting My Peers
AHABS:	Aspiring HArdass Bikers
BASTARDS:	Bought A Sportster, Therefore A Radical Dude
IGLOOS:	I Got the Look, Own One Soon
HOOTS:	Have One Ordered, True Story
ASSHOLES:	assholes

Authenticity among bikers is a matter of perspective based on one’s identification with an outlaw versus an enthusiast perspective. Newcomers, responding to media-perpetuated stereotypes, generally equate authenticity with the outlaw orientation. To the outlaw biker, though, all others are pretenders. However, enthusiasts (e.g., HOG members) view themselves as authentic bikers who simply have a different orientation toward motorcycling than outlaws, whom they may treat with deference grounded in fear.

Aspirants and Barriers to Entry

The structural integrity or exclusivity of the HDSC and its subgroups is protected by barriers to entry. New members rarely, if ever, are recruited aggressively. The club does not approach you; you must approach the club as a supplicant. Many organizations (all outlaw and some other clubs) require that new members pass through “prospect” status before they can be accepted

by the club as full members. The Harley Owners Group is a notable exception to this requirement; the only official barrier to HOG membership is payment of dues and proof of Harley ownership. However, individual HOG chapters do appear to exercise a de facto probationary period. As visitors to different HOG meetings and as eventual joiners of one particular chapter, we have experienced a definite "feeling out" process wherein the encouragement we received to proceed with joining appeared linked to an assessment of our overall fit with the group.

It is not surprising that the HDSC has its aspirants or "wanna-bes." These nonowners of Harley-Davidsons demonstrate their admiration by donning Harley apparel and displaying other branded merchandise such as decals and posters. Such manifest commitment to the concept of Harley ownership may predate actual ownership by many years; indeed, ownership may never occur or may occur only briefly or periodically as circumstances allow.

The most common barrier to Harley ownership among true aspirants is the expense.⁵ Barriers to motorcycle ownership in general also play a part; they include social pressure from family members (especially wives and parents) and a general feeling of family responsibility that leads to avoidance of the perceived physical risk of riding. Many aspirants ride, as an interim measure, more affordable Japanese motorcycles; others would rather not ride at all than ride anything but a Harley. Harley owners seem to derive satisfaction from the admiration of wanna-bes; however, they may go out of their way to distinguish themselves as actual owners rather than aspirants. One rather popular T-shirt makes the statement, "I own a Harley, not just the shirt!" Likewise, an oft heard slogan states with extreme brand centrism that "There are two kinds of people in the world: those who own Harleys and those who wish they did."

Summary

Subcultures of consumption display complex, hierarchical social structures that reflect the status differences of individual members. Within-group status is a function of an individual's commitment to the group's ideology of consumption. Across-group status is based on each group's judgments of the other group's authenticity as representatives of the subculture. The most committed (i.e., hard-core) members of a subculture function as arbiters of meaning and opinion leaders. Less committed members are important for their ma-

terial support and their adulation of more committed members. Aspirants serve the function of audience and are important for the expressions of envy that vindicate the actions and investments of members of the subculture.

ETHOS

Part of the reason for the existence of the HDSC is that certain people have found embodied in the Harley-Davidson motorcycle cultural principles and categories that resonate with their own needs and values. Each subgroup within the HDSC is committed to the same set of core values, but each group interprets them in a manner that is contextually consistent with the prevailing life structures (i.e., ages, occupations, family structures) of its members. The values that make up the biker ethos touch on virtually all aspects of members' lives, including the social, the political, and the spiritual. So strong is the Harley-Davidson motorcycle as an organizing symbol for the biker ethos that it has become, in effect, a religious icon around which an entire ideology of consumption is articulated.

Religious Aspects of the Subculture

The world of the HDSC is a sacred domain within the everyday life of the Harley owner. The biker motto, "Live to ride, ride to live," suggests that motorcycling is a total lifestyle for the enthusiast; however, for all but the most hard-core members of the subculture, it is more of a sanctuary in which to experience temporary self-transformation.

The Harley consumption experience has a spirituality derived in part from a sense of riding as a transcendental departure from the mundane. One senior executive who frequently commutes on his Harley spoke of his typical ride home as an experience that, unlike driving home in his car, cleanses him from all aspects of his work day and prepares him to arrive home psychologically unburdened. His family notices the change: "When my kids hear the Harley in the driveway they run out to meet me because they know I'll be in a good mood." Several elements contribute to spirituality of the riding experience: the increased closeness to nature, the heightened sensory awareness, the mantric throbbing of the engine, the constant awareness of risk and the concomitant mental focus, and, in group riding, the consciousness of oneself as an integral part of a larger group or purpose. Lanquist (1987) considers riding a Harley to be a modern equivalent of the shamanic experience of magical flight. Under certain conditions (e.g., in fog, snow, or heavy rain; on deserted streets at night; pursuing mirages on a desert highway; or at the leading edge of a storm front) the whole experience of riding can seem particularly magical or otherworldly, somewhat akin to the extraordinary experience of river rafting as described by Arnould and Price (1993).

⁵A basic Sportster, the smallest and least expensive Harley, costs just under \$5,000 (1993 M.S.R.P. [manufacturer's suggested retail price]). The more popular "big twins" range in price from \$10,000 to \$16,000. Buyers typically face a delay of four to six months between ordering a bike and taking delivery, and they often pay hundreds of dollars above the manufacturer's suggested retail price.

Another religious aspect of the HDSC is the reverence or awe with which bikers and other devotees treat Harley-Davidson motorcycles. It is strictly taboo to touch another person's Harley without permission; in the outlaw subculture to do so invites violent reprisals (Hopper and Moore 1983). The sacredness of the bike is observed in elaborate rituals for motorcycle cleaning and maintenance. For instance, when one informant checks into a hotel for the night he routinely asks for two extra hand towels; these he uses (one wet, one dry) to clean and polish his bike first thing the following morning. No spot of dirt is overlooked, and no spot of chrome goes unshined before the day's ride.

Bikers' adoration of their machines is also manifest in the creation of shrines for housing and administering to them. One Oregon school teacher, upon purchasing his first Harley and lacking a garage in which to store it (a covered carport was deemed insufficient protection), wheeled it into the living room of his home instead. His wife lacked sympathy for such behavior, and he soon built a special shed for the bike. The shed, bedecked with Harley posters, calendars, and memorabilia, has become a temple open only to fellow bikers for the purpose of sharing sacramental beer along with Harley-related goals, lore, and experiences. Many such shrines were described by informants and/or visited by us.

The principle of brotherhood among bikers also carries religious connotations. The appellation of "brother" or "bro" commonly bestowed on one biker by another signifies membership in a community of shared belief, purpose, and experience. Playing on that theme, Bros Club is the name of a cooperative roadside assistance organization for bikers. Among outlaws brotherhood means fierce, unconditional loyalty to all members in good standing with the club (Hopper and Moore 1983; Reynolds 1967). The sense of brotherhood is strengthened for all bikers, whether enthusiast or outlaw, by a feeling of marginality that goes hand in hand with the biker persona. Perhaps the most sublime manifestation of brotherhood lies in the shared experience of riding in formation with a large group of other bikers; the formation moves like a single organism, the sound of a single motorcycle is caught up in a symphony of pipes, and individual identity is subsumed by the group (cf. Celsi, Rose, and Leigh's [1993] description of "communitas," or shared flow, among skydivers).

There is also a darker, cultic side of the biker religion. Outlaw club names like Hells Angels, Satan's Slaves, and Pagans play off of religious metaphor in such a way as to suggest the Antichrist. Outlaw clubs conduct their own religious ceremonies, including major rites of passage such as weddings and funerals (Saxon 1972). The club president or another high-ranking member acts as the ecclesiastical authority, and a Harley owner's manual is customarily used as scripture (Hopper and Moore 1983; Thompson 1966). Motifs of death, such as the skulls and grim reapers pervasive in biker jewelry, tat-

toos, adornments, and paint jobs, are also suggestive of occult fascination and a greater credence in fate than in faith (cf. Watson 1980).

Proselytism and missionary work, especially common in Christian religions, also have a limited place in the HDSC despite a general ethic of separation and non-recruitment. Members of groups such as HOG chapters or Christian clubs sometimes proselyte within the HDSC. For example, after one conversation with a member of a Christian club one of us began receiving regular newsletters and other club mailings. Somewhat like "secular missionaries," proud and enthusiastic Harley owners advertise their "faith" with T-shirts, other apparel, collectibles, and the bikes themselves, all of which may serve as stimuli for conversations in which to spread Harley ideology. Our experiences on the receiving end of such missionary work indicate that recruitment is more likely to be done by relative newcomers to the group rather than by higher-status members of the group's hard core. This may be explained as a strategy for status enhancement. Newcomers tend to have less status within the group than veterans; by bringing yet newer riders into the fold the "missionaries" may elevate their own relative status.

Core Values

The "gospel" or ideology of the HDSC is built upon a set of core values reflected in the meanings attributed to the Harley-Davidson motorcycle and its usage. In studying the Harley ethos we discovered several dominant values. It is interesting to note that with respect to some of the values, we discovered discrepancies between the myth and the reality of Harley ownership.

Personal Freedom. The dominant value in the ethos of the HDSC is personal freedom. Two kinds of personal freedom are particularly important: liberation (i.e., freedom from) and license (i.e., freedom to). Virtually every biker identifies strongly with the motorcycle as a symbol of freedom that contrasts starkly with the automobile ("cage" or "coffin" in biker vernacular) as a symbol of confinement. Two systems of symbols embody the value of personal freedom; they are the spread-winged Harley eagle and the Harley-as-horse metaphor.

The spread-winged eagle, broadly representative of flight and American political freedom (as well as predation and power, which are relevant to a different core value, i.e., machismo), pervades Harley-Davidson branding as a symbol of liberation. Variations on the eagle are incorporated into several trademarks and brands (including Eagle Iron accessories and Screamin' Eagle performance parts). The eagle motif also appears regularly in biker body art (tattoos) and bike body art (custom paint). For at least one informant (a 39-year-old hospital administrator with a strong antiestablishment bent) the eagle is a personal totem. In one of several interviews he stated, "I don't know if I believe in reincarnation, but if its true, I'd like to come back as

FIGURE 3

EXPRESSIONS OF "FREEDOM OF THE ROAD": HELMETS OFF, SADDLE BAGS, BED ROLLS, AND CANTEEN—2,000 MILES FROM HOME



an eagle." When asked why he responded, "For the freedom. It would be great to be able to take off any time I wanted and just soar above the earth anywhere I pleased."

The Harley-as-horse metaphor, common in biker art, poetry, and fiction, is central to various personae created in the minds and public performances of Harley owners. Two such personae that exemplify personal freedom in the American consciousness are the wild west drifter (i.e., a frontiersman whose freedom is based on a lack of attachments) and the western folk hero (whose freedom derives from his prowess with a six-gun). These symbols of frontier liberty and license are supported further by biker clothing and accessories with western motifs, including leather chaps, boots, vests, and saddlebags, often adorned with fringe or conches (see Fig. 3). Like the western folk hero (and its medieval and postapocalyptic versions, the "black knight" and the "road warrior"), the biker may operate on either side of the law.

Taking the position that liberation is a core value of the HDSC naturally leads to the question, Liberation from what? The Harley-Davidson motorcycle/eagle/steed stands for liberation from confinement. For bikers the Harley is the antithesis of all the sources of con-

finement (including cars, offices, schedules, authority, and relationships) that may characterize their various working and family situations. Similarly, symbols such as the tattoos, long hair, and bushy beards of many bikers, especially working-class members of the baby-boom cohort, signify liberation from mainstream values and social structures. The myth of the Harley and its supporting symbolism is one of total freedom. The reality of daily life is usually one of multiple sources of confinement. For the biker it is the reality of confinement that makes the myth of liberation so seductive and the temporary experience of flight so valuable. It is ironic that members of the HDSC commonly choose, in joining formal organizations, to accept rigid new structures, new codes of conduct, new pressures to conform, and new sources of authority.

Given the importance of the Harley-Davidson as a symbol of personal freedom, it should not be surprising that bikers rankle at legislation that hampers their motorcycling experience. For example, mandatory helmet laws are anathema to most Harley owners, who claim that it is their natural right to feel the wind in their hair as they ride. The disdain for restrictive legislation has led to a substantial market for products that allow bikers to skirt certain laws with impunity. Helmet laws have

led to the development of light, thinly padded “skull-cap” helmets that, although they do not meet Department of Transportation (DOT) standards, carry counterfeit DOT approval emblems and are widely available at motorcycle rallies and swap meets. Likewise, in many states it is illegal to alter the stock exhaust systems of street cycles; yet stock mufflers do not achieve the loud, throaty, rumbling sound that Harley owners prefer. The marketing response from Harley-Davidson and aftermarket accessory manufacturers is a full line of lightly baffled mufflers and/or unmuffled pipes that bear the designation, “For Off-Road Use Only.” This is more than a little ironic given the highly limited off-road applications of a 700-pound Harley.

Riding a Harley-Davidson, especially in the context of a group function such as a rally, grants license to behave in ways that would be socially awkward or unacceptable outside the HDSC. One important form of license is the freedom to create for oneself a persona or temporary alter ego. Jim Paterson, then president of the Harley-Davidson Motor Company, compared the Harley to a blank canvas that allows its owner to paint himself (or herself) in any fashion desired. For many riders the chosen personae borrow heavily from the outlaw stereotype, which allows them to dress, act, and feel rougher, tougher, freer, and wilder than they normally would.

The HDSC also grants a degree of sexual license, especially at rallies (cf. Young [1988] on license within a rugby subculture). Public displays of both male and female nudity abound at many rallies; yet the nudity is often meant more for shock or humor than for titillation. At an ABATE rally in Iowa, for example, a group of men held up a hand-lettered “Show your tits” sign inside the entrance to the rally grounds; although many women declined, a significant number obliged as they walked or rode by. Somewhat later in the afternoon a group of women retaliated with their own sign that said, “Show yer pee-pee-doodle,” prompting a motorcade, amid howls of laughter, of bikers dressed in their boots only. The specific types of license taken by bikers vary along the lines of class, religion, and other social demarcations, but the general tendency is toward greater social risk-taking and more hedonic indulgence.

Patriotism and American Heritage. To the extent that the Harley-Davidson motorcycle represents personal freedom, as the sole survivor of the American motorcycle industry it also represents America. Americanism is an important value throughout the HDSC, although it is expressed differently across subgroups. Americanism for some (e.g., midwestern Mom-and-Pop bikers) means mainstream patriotism along the lines of Independence Day parades, apple pie, and John Deere tractors. For others (especially working-class bikers) patriotism rings with xenophobia, complete with Japan bashing and perhaps other forms of bigotry. We should note that in the mindset of the HDSC “patriotic” and

“law-abiding” are not necessarily synonymous. For bikers who read “America” as “personal freedom” and “the pursuit of happiness,” riding a Harley may be considered a more patriotic act than obeying laws that they see as infringements of their personal rights. That even non-U.S. bikers value Harley’s Americanism is evidenced by this quote from a British motorcycle magazine, “I don’t think it’s too cynical to suggest that Harley marketing abroad relies on the rest of the world’s fetish for old Americana” (Leonard 1993).

In addition to the Harley-Davidson motorcycle itself, other symbols of patriotism are ubiquitous in the HDSC. American flags abound at rallies. They can be seen as decals, paint jobs, and actual flags on bikes; patches, pins, or screen prints on clothing; or even huge flags unfurled as backdrops for campsites (see Fig. 4). Personalized license plates and frames, custom paint jobs, and clothing often carry pro-USA messages ranging from the benign (e.g., “USA RIDE” on a license plate) to the bellicose (e.g., “Remember Pearl Harbor” on a license plate frame). Heeding and perhaps feeding such patriotic expressions, Harley-Davidson, Inc., has incorporated USA symbolism into various of its logos and paint designs; images such as the Statue of Liberty and the words “Made in USA” have recently been incorporated into stock paint jobs. During the Desert Storm operation in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, we observed banners, flags, and posters supporting American troops displayed prominently in Harley dealerships as well as throughout the Harley engine and transmission plant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Indicative of the extent to which the Harley-Davidson motorcycle has become an American icon is a recent Harley ad that depicts a Harley Electra-Glide against a southwestern desert background accompanied with the caption: “Is this a great country, or what?”

Drawn from the same well of conservatism that feeds their patriotism is another related concern of Harley owners: tradition or heritage. One reason Japanese bikes (dubbed “rice grinders” or “rice rockets”) are scorned by the HDSC is the perceived disdain of Japanese manufacturers for tradition, as demonstrated by the frequent introduction of new models and the extinction of others after only a few years. Harley-Davidson, in contrast, emphasizes a continuity that connects its newest motorcycle in a direct line of ancestry to its earliest prototype. Model names such as Heritage, Classic, Nostalgia, and Evolution underscore this obeisance to the past. To us, the importance of this tradition to the Harley owner appears to lie partly in a symbolic linkage to the golden years of American heavy industry—a time when American manufacturing was the pride of the nation and the backbone of its economy.

Biker patriotism is expressed directly through buyer behavior; however, the behaviors differ among the major subgroups of the HDSC. The most vociferously pro-American are the working-class bikers, adamant about buying American-made products, in part, because they

FIGURE 4
GROUP CAMP SITE AT AN IOWA ABATE "FREEDOM RALLY"



feel their livelihoods are directly threatened by imported goods. Their "buy-American" creed extends beyond their motorcycles to include the purchasing of clothing, automobiles, tools, and accessories, and they are resentful of people who do not share their loyalty. RUBs, in contrast, while proud of their American Harleys, often prefer Japanese or European automobiles and, in general, shop for quality and value before country of origin. Part of the appeal of Harley-Davidson across subgroups of the HDSC is their perception of the motor company as an American folk hero in an economic war with Japan.

Machismo. Members of the HDSC value manliness. Expressions of machismo abound. A popular T-shirt in Harleydom proclaims that "Real Men Wear Black." The concern for what real men do pervades virtually every aspect of the biker experience. Harleys are reputedly the biggest, heaviest, loudest (albeit not the fastest), and, therefore, manliest motorcycles on the road. In some ways these properties of the motorcycle mirror properties displayed by the bikers themselves; massive bellies (or biceps) and loud, aggressive behavior seem more natural on a Harley than on any other type of motorcycle. Bikers adorn their machines with massive quantities of chrome and leather, and they tend to adorn themselves in a similar fashion: leather clothing,

heavy boots, and gauntlets (all black) lend a road-warrior-like appearance that often is made even more pronounced with the addition of knives, wallet chains, conches, chrome studs, and other such hardware. A stroll through a biker swap meet will invariably lead one past displays of weaponry including knives of all types, blackjacks, and brass knuckles.

The aggressive biker stereotype featuring heavy beards, long hair, and tattoos is found most readily among the working class. However, RUBs tend toward somewhat campy interpretations of the stereotypical biker image, adding a designer flair to their expensive "dress-up" leathers; furthermore, their professional statuses preclude the adoption of indelible symbols of barbarism. Riders in the Mom-and-Pop segment are the least extreme; their appearance is less aggressive, and their bikes are more comfortably appointed. Donning the trappings of machismo is not merely dress-up; it occasions a transformation of attitude and experience. Several informants have reported, and we can corroborate, that the motorcycle and leather clothing seem to impart a sense of power, fearsomeness, and invulnerability to the rider.

In this patently masculine subculture the roles of women traditionally have been subordinate at best to men. In outlaw clubs women are considered literally to

be the property of one or more men and are completely subservient to the sexual and economic demands of the males to whom they belong (Hopper and Moore 1990). Our research among nonoutlaw groups indicates that the rest of the HDSC is almost equally, although not so brutally, male dominated. Women are treated largely as motorcycle accessories, that is, adornments who ride on the back of a man's bike, if at all. Dykes on Bikes would reject that characterization strenuously. Ladies of Harley (LOH), a women's auxiliary organization attached to HOG and sponsored by Harley-Davidson, might also take offense at being called adornments, but less rightfully so. A small but growing number of female riders are moving "up from the back seat" to ride their own Harleys, thereby elevating their status in the subculture. The LOH group attached to the San Francisco Fog Hogs chapter of HOG has changed its name unofficially from Ladies of Harley to Ladies on Harleys, rejecting the dependent status along with the possessive prepositional phrase. Women who ride also display the symbols of machismo (e.g., chrome, leathers, tattoos, loud pipes); however, the symbols often are softened with the addition of pastel colors, floral motifs, and other feminizing touches.

The motives behind the temporary or sustained assertions of masculinity that typify the biker image are open to speculation. Some informants give the impression that they are engaged in something akin to performance art for the mere fun of it. There is indeed a Halloweenish aspect of playing biker that is amusing and enjoyable. Others, however, take the machismo more seriously, as if they have something to prove by it. In either case, indulgence in an overtly masculine subculture may function (for men at least) to compensate for some self-doubt in an area of supposed male competency. For example, feelings of incompetency as a breadwinner, of alienation or emasculation in the work place, or of failure in a love relationship all conceivably could be assuaged or insulated by the reinforced masculinity of a biker persona.

Summary

Underlying the behaviors of a subculture of consumption is an identifiable ethos, that is, a set of core values that are accepted to varying degrees by all its adherents. Those values find expression in certain products or brands and their usages. Where multiple subgroups coexist within a subculture, expressions of the core values through symbolic consumption may reflect cultural or socioeconomic idiosyncrasies of the subgroups. Commitment to key brands and product usage behaviors may be held with religious intensity, even to the point of elevating certain brands to the status of icons. The popularity of such brands may be enhanced by missionary-like behaviors on the part of enthusiastic members of the subculture of consumption.

TRANSFORMATION OF SELF: BECOMING A BIKER

In a process similar to the reconstruction of identity described by Schouten (1991) for consumers of cosmetic surgery, aspirants to the HDSC experiment with the concept of "biker" as a possible self. Once the possible self is sufficiently elaborated and deemed to be both desirable and achievable, the aspirant is ready (in the absence of other barriers) to make the acquisition that initiates him or her into the ranks of Harley ownership. However, as the Cycle Lords of the High Truth are quick to point out, the mere acquisition of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle doth not a biker make.

The individual's movement into and through the commitment-based status hierarchy of the HDSC constitutes a gradual transformation of the self. Like members of other groups that rightly can be called subcultures of consumption, such as skydivers (see Celsi et al. 1993) and surfers (see Irwin 1973), bikers undergo an evolution of motives and a deepening of commitment as they become more involved in the subculture. Here we discuss the evolving identity of a member of the HDSC and the consumer behaviors that facilitate and signify the various stages of transformation. In general, the stages traversed are as follows: (1) experimentation with the biker identity, (2) identification and conformity, and (3) mastery and internalization.

People approach the HDSC for numerous reasons: their values may resonate with those of the subculture, they may experience peer influences, or they simply may be attracted to the style or mystique of the motorcycle. For aspirants to the HDSC, products such as Harley apparel, collectibles, and promotional items provide the means to display their commitment to the concept of Harley ownership and/or their sense of affiliation with the subculture. Perceived by Harley owners as signs of envy, the imitative display by nonowners of Harley-branded goods reinforces the HDSC members' feelings of status or superiority. The marketing of such goods serves the needs of both bikers and aspirants and expands the market for Harley-Davidson products beyond the realm of motorcycle owners.

Regardless of the motives that draw an individual to the HDSC, the price of membership remains the same—Harley ownership. Riding a Harley reinforces another motive for ridership, that is, a sense of being set apart from the masses. To the nonriding citizen the new owner appears to be a biker just like any other, and their responses run a gamut from hostility to fear, to deference, to admiration, or to indifference real or feigned. Aspirants, on the other hand, now grant the rider obeisance with responses ranging from admiring looks to gestures or shouts of approval. Whatever feelings of marginality and distinction the HDSC newcomer has to begin with are reinforced by such public responses, and the newcomer becomes acutely aware of another important aspect of Harley ownership, perfor-

mance for an audience. Much of what guides the newcomer's purchases of protective clothing, footwear, helmets, and accessories can be explained as tasks of impression management driven by perceptions of audience expectation.

Neophytes of the HDSC divide the social world rather simplistically into bikers and nonbikers. Their concept of a biker remains stereotypical (cf. Donnelly and Young 1988; Irwin 1973), and Harley ownership provides feelings of insider status. However, once they gain some experience as members of the subculture newcomers inevitably begin to recognize their lowly position in the overall status hierarchy. Feelings of uncertainty about correct behavior and dress are diminished in part by the acquisition and display of stereotypical biker costumery in acts of symbolic self-completion (see Schouten 1991; Solomon 1983). Models for appropriate consumption behavior come from a variety of sources including other bikers and the media. Because the newcomer is ignorant of many nuances of biker culture, his or her socialization may be facilitated opportunistically by marketing efforts. For example, purchasers of new Harley motorcycles automatically receive membership in HOG, and, as members, they receive promotional literature such as *HOG Tales* (the national HOG newsletter), *The Enthusiast* (a corporate magazine for owners), and catalogs of official clothing and accessories. These promotional efforts, reinforced by substantial role modeling and peer pressure from more experienced bikers, help to instruct new riders in "the look." This socialization process has the effects of molding the malleable perceptions of the new biker toward an acceptance of the corporate vision of bikerdom and of creating customers for official Harley-Davidson clothing and accessories.

Once a part of the HDSC, the importance of maintaining the biker image for an outside audience yields somewhat to a desire to increase one's status within the subculture. Celsi et al. (1993) mark this shift clearly among skydivers. Within-group status increases as the rider gains experience, forms interpersonal relationships, customizes his motorcycle, and otherwise invests time, energy, and money into Harley ownership. The psychological outcome is a feeling of increased authenticity as a biker.

In a process described by Scammon (1987) in the context of horse training and ownership as making "side bets," the biker accumulates specialized possessions that both demonstrate and increase commitment to motorcycling and to the Harley-Davidson brand. Material side bets include branded leathers and other clothing, expensive accessories for the motorcycle, tattoos, and the virtual shrines erected by many bikers for the purpose of storing, maintaining, and displaying their bikes. Equally important as side bets are the social relationships that evolve around motorcycling. It is not uncommon for a biker to devote the majority of his or her leisure time to motorcycling activities with friends or

club members. Taken together, the side bets function as formidable barriers to leaving the subculture or switching to another brand of motorcycle. For example, to a member of the HDSC the notion of riding a Japanese bike is distasteful; but the idea of riding a "rice rocket" while wearing Harley leathers is nothing short of mortifying.

The ultimate conclusion of continued commitment to the HDSC is the development of a total biker lifestyle. At this stage, identification and conformity have given way to mastery and the internalization of the biker ethos. The biker no longer feels self-conscious in the public performance aspects of ridership. In fact, the importance of dramaturgical aspects of riding may give way to the importance of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) or similar psychospiritual experiences. Some riders feel at liberty to deviate from established or stereotypical costumery and create individual styles. This particular point was made clear when we crossed paths with a Hells Angel in Amsterdam who unabashedly rode his chopper⁶ in full colors (i.e., wearing his official club insignias) over a white T-shirt, flowered bermuda shorts, and red Converse sneakers, instead of the uniform black T-shirt, greasy blue jeans, and black boots of the outlaw biker. More commonly, however, those who have gained some standing in organized groups become "defenders of the faith," sacrificing the freedom of individual expression in order to perpetuate the look of the status quo from which they derive their prestige (cf. Irwin 1973).

Summary

Becoming a member of a subculture of consumption generally means entering at the bottom of a status hierarchy and undergoing a process of socialization. Socialization brings about a transformation of the individual that entails an evolution of motives for involvement and a deepening of commitment to the subculture and its ethos. The process begins with experimentation with a biker persona. The individual refines self-presentation through conformity and imitation, all the while gauging the effectiveness of his or her performance with respect to relevant (and changing) audiences. Commitment and concomitant status are increased by the establishment of material and social side bets. Individuals who invest sufficient energy into a subculture of consumption may eventually internalize its values and forms, becoming hard-core members.

⁶The chopper is the most recognizable symbol of the outlaw biker, although it did not originate strictly as an outlaw creation. A chopper is a customized Harley-Davidson formed first by the removal (hence "chopping") of unnecessary body metal, luggage, large gas tanks, windshields, shock absorbers, and other accoutrements. In their place are added extended forks, small "peanut" gas tanks, tall "ape hanger" handlebars, unmuffled custom exhausts, and custom paint. For a detailed "nuts and bolts" discussion of the chopping process, see Saxon (1972, pp. 144-153).

MARKETING AND THE SUBCULTURE OF CONSUMPTION

Subcultures of consumption, in their devotion to and ritualistic consumption of certain products, tend to patronize marketers who cater to their specialized needs. It is possible for a marketer who understands the structure and ethos of a subculture of consumption to cultivate a long-lasting, symbiotic relationship with it. Harley-Davidson has maintained such a relationship with the HDSC (see Fig. 5). Other examples of such symbioses include those between Deadheads and the Grateful Dead organization (Pearson 1987), between bodybuilders and the Weider brothers' empire (Klein 1985, 1986), and, to a lesser degree, between small proprietorships such as punk bars and their regular sub-cultural clientele (Fox 1987).

By understanding the process of self-transformation undergone by individuals within a subculture of consumption, a marketer can take an active role in socializing new members and cultivating the commitment of current ones. Harley-Davidson cultivates consumer commitment through means such as supplying a steady stream of information geared to the needs of newcomers and providing a full range of clothing, accessories, and services that function as involvement-enhancing side bets and exit barriers.

Harley-Davidson provides necessary goods and services for the functioning of the HDSC, and in return it receives such enviable benefits as fierce customer loyalty, voluminous publicity, and highly useful consumer feedback. Another remarkable benefit that accrues to marketers from subcultures of consumption is the phenomenon of "grassroots R and D" that occurs as highly involved consumers develop stylistic and technological advancements for existing consumer goods (see Schouten and McAlexander 1993). Such consumer-initiated innovation has generated many of the design ideas in Harley-Davidson clothing and accessories. The same phenomenon lies also at the heart of industries like equipment and clothing for skydivers and for surfers (Lyng and Snow 1986).

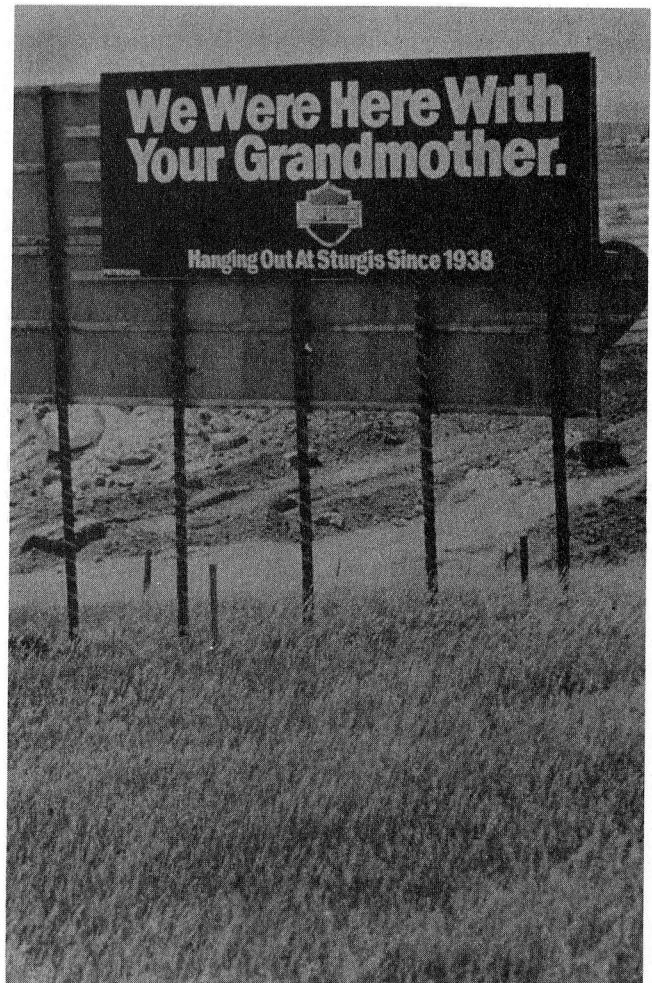
Marketing the Outlaw Mystique: The Transfer of Cultural Meaning

Since the 1960s Harley-Davidson, Inc., has been saddled with the strongly deviant meanings attached to bikers in the public mind. The image of the outlaw biker that dominates the stereotype of Harley owners is the cocreation of marginal social groups, a sensationalistic press, and the movie industry.⁷ For a marketer to mainstream America this countercultural position would pose real problems; however, for a marketer to a marginal subculture, especially in light of America's "pe-

⁷For an account of the historical development of the outlaw biker subculture, see Harris (1985).

FIGURE 5

I-90 NEAR STURGIS, SD: HARLEY-DAVIDSON, INC.,
RETROACTIVELY ASSERTS CORPORATE
INVOLVEMENT IN A 50-YEAR
BIKER TRADITION



cularly western tendency to tolerate dramatic violations of cultural norms" (McCracken 1986, p. 76), the outlaw image presents unique marketing opportunities. Harley-Davidson's response has been not to fight the outlaw image but, rather, to expropriate certain symbols of the outlaw subculture and employ the product design and advertising components of the fashion system (see McCracken 1986) in order to redefine their meanings just enough to make them palatable to a broader group of consumers. A case in point is the chopper. Once the exclusive product of the shade-tree mechanic or the club chopper shop, the chopper was considered an outlaw machine. Now, however, by incorporating such items as sissy bars, extended forks, and leather saddle bags into their product design, Harley-Davidson has made it possible to buy a factory chopper right from the

showroom floor; in fact, chopper-style bikes are among the most popular in Harley's line-up.

The commercialization of certain subcultural products is not uncommon (Gottdiener 1985). The American hot-rod subculture elicited a strong marketing response from Detroit during its "muscle car" era (Moorhouse 1986). Examples from the music industry include the popularization of blues standards by white artists such as Elvis Presley and the introduction of rap into the mainstream of popular music (Blair and Hatala 1991). Elements of hippie and punk style, respectively, became popular in hair, jewelry, and clothing styles. Surfer styles repeatedly have been copied into popular swimwear.

In the creation of HOG, Harley-Davidson has done more than commercialize products of a counterculture; the company has created a vital parallel subculture within the greater HDSC. To achieve this Harley-Davidson has coopted important symbols and structural aspects of the outlaw subculture, sanitized or softened them, and given them more socially acceptable meanings. 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 resembles 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. The HOG stresses family participation and family values (a definite asset in the socialization of children to the subculture). The HOG-sponsored rallies exhibit little or none of the outrageous behavior (e.g., public nudity and sexual exhibitionism) found at events such as Sturgis and ABATE rallies. Instead, activities at HOG rallies include lectures on motorcycle safety and maintenance, children's activities, sock hops, and focus groups that discuss topics such as HOG merchandise. The HOG members appear to be able to partake symbolically in the outlaw mystique without ever venturing into the realm of the outlaw biker.

The benefits of supporting HOG to Harley-Davidson are numerous and substantial. By making the subculture more approachable the company has expanded the appeal of its products to a more socially mainstream consumer. Sponsored events such as state, regional, and national HOG rallies become intense marketing events featuring such popular agenda items as a "HOG mall" for the sale of exclusive HOG apparel and collectibles, test rides of new motorcycles, shows and competitions

for accessorized motorcycles, focus groups and "town meetings" with Harley-Davidson representatives for the purposes of information gathering and customer relations, and the presence of "corporate celebrities" such as Willie G. Davidson and Ms. Harley-Davidson for the generation of goodwill. Within the exclusive confines of HOG rallies and other corporate-sponsored events, Harley-Davidson is marketing to a loyal following; but the rallies also generate significant amounts of positive publicity for a more general audience. The HOG members proudly participate in parades through downtown areas. Local television coverage is common because of the size and visibility of regional events; national events such as Harley-Davidson's eighty-fifth and ninetieth anniversary celebrations in Milwaukee received national press and television coverage.

Efforts to capitalize on the marketability of a subculture of consumption also entail risks commensurate with the benefits. Attempts to exploit the subculture by broadening its appeal may have a deadly corrupting influence on the subculture itself. Part of the psychic benefit of being a biker is the distinction of being part of a marginal group. However, as membership in the subculture becomes more accessible and acceptable to mainstream consumers, and as more mainstream consumers begin to don the trappings of bikers, lines of marginality become blurred and some of the distinctiveness of the biker subculture is lost. We have encountered an almost palpable tension within the HDSC between bikers with outlaw sensibilities and the new, upscale bikers, whom they regard as poseurs. One blue-collar informant, formerly with outlaw leanings, expressed this tension in terms of his own concern for the biker image: "I've seen how the brothers react to these yuppie poseurs. I'm just afraid somebody's going to get hurt one of these days." The same tension is also felt from the side of upscale bikers, whose apocrypha include stories of menacing behavior from outlaws including personal assaults and motorcycle thefts.

A similar tension between traditional and yuppie bikers is rooted in socioeconomic factors. We encountered two informants, both blue-collar bikers with many years of Harley ownership, who had sold their Harleys and turned to riding dirt bikes because, in the words of one, Harley-Davidson had "sold out for the mighty dollar." They felt that Harley-Davidson had betrayed their loyalty by pricing them out of the Harley market. Their rationale is that prices are too high because Harley-Davidson is profiteering among the yuppies and selling a mystique that they and other "authentic" bikers had helped create.

A danger underlying the potential alienation of traditional bikers from the HDSC is that the subculture conceivably could lose the vitality it draws from the perceived outlaw connection. Without its renegade mystique the subculture risks becoming stale and unexciting. The marketing consequence of this danger is that brand management is faced with a veritable tightrope

walk between the conflicting needs of two disparate but equally important groups of consumers: those who give the product its mystique and those who give the company its profitability.

Summary

Subcultures of consumption provide opportunities for marketers to engage them in symbiotic relationships. Marketers who understand the structure and ethos of a subculture of consumption can profit from serving its needs. In addition to providing necessary objects for the functioning of the subculture, marketers may also assist in the socialization of new members, facilitate communications within the subculture, and sponsor events that provide havens for the activities of the subculture. In return marketers may accrue increased customer loyalty, publicity, and consumer feedback, among other benefits. Marketers may make a marginal subculture more accessible to mainstream consumers, thus increasing the size of their market; however, to do so indiscriminately runs the risk of alienating hard-core members, corrupting the subculture, and diluting its original appeal.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have developed a theoretical framework that situates achieved, consumption-oriented subcultures within the context of American consumer culture. Although we studied a subculture that by some reckonings would be considered exotic, subcultures of consumption are ubiquitous in our society and extend well into the realm of the mundane. Everyday activities such as gardening, woodworking, or fly-fishing may sufficiently guide people's consumption and social activities to form the bases of subcultures of consumption. For example, a devotion to gardening may directly influence product choices (e.g., tools, clothing, fertilizers, seeds), retail patronage (e.g., stores with good garden centers), social interaction (e.g., through formal organizations or informal conversation), media usage (e.g., magazines, public television programs), and so forth. The concept of the subculture of consumption is robust enough to encompass virtually any group of people united by common consumption values and behaviors.

As an analytic category the subculture of consumption solves nagging problems inherent in the use of other, a priori categorizations for the understanding of consumption patterns. McCracken (1986) points out several difficulties in attempting to understand consumers via ascribed groups such as age, class, gender, ethnicity, or lifestyle. Not the least of the problems is that people have the latitude in Western culture to redefine their own categories. They simply will not stay put in the boxes drawn up for them by sociologists, marketers, or demographers.

McCracken (1986) goes on to explain that social categories are merely conceptual tools having no substance

of their own until they are substantiated or given form through the use of agents such as material goods. This all goes to say that relevant categorizations cannot be known except as they are conveyed through consumption patterns. Why then, as scholars of consumer behavior, do we persist in the use of ascribed social categories when (1) people freely reject such categorizations in practice, and (2) people generally are quite willing to supply us with categories that do fit and that are substantiated by their own consumption behaviors?

Consider the case of one author's boyhood friend. Chuck's given name was Carlos. He was born to Mexican parents in Los Angeles. As a high school student, he lived in an ethnically mixed neighborhood. He understood (although he refused to speak) Spanish. All the traditional indicators would place Chuck in the category of "young Hispanic male." Traditional wisdom would further ascribe to Chuck values and consumption patterns consistent with that categorization—consistent, that is, to anyone who had never met Chuck. Chuck's most valued possession was his surfboard. He drove a compact pick-up with surfboard racks. His wardrobe was "surfer." His best friends, all surfers, never heard him speak or respond to a word of Spanish. When he married it was to a blonde "surfer chick." Chuck certainly belonged to a subculture, but not the one assigned to him by the U.S. census; he belonged to a subculture of consumption.

In our consumer culture people do not define themselves according to sociological constructs. They do so in terms of the activities, objects, and relationships that give their lives meaning. It is the objects, and consumer goods above all, that substantiate their place in the social world. It is through objects that they relate to other people and make judgments about shared values and interests. Through consumption activities they form relationships that allow them to share meaning and mutual support. Those relationships and activities are governed by ideologies of consumption. Around those ideologies of consumption consumers constitute their own categories, and those categories define subcultures of consumption.

Within this framework we discuss several key topics. We first explore and define the social structure of a subculture of consumption. Our study reveals a hierarchical structure based on status, the source of which is one's commitment to the subculture's ideology as manifested in patterns of consumption. Moving our focus to the ethos of the subculture we find that select consumer goods are the repositories of meaning within the group and that the rituals for their consumption facilitate the sharing and reinforcement of that meaning. We also find that as a member of the subculture an individual's identity, motives, and level of commitment evolve in patterns that, once again, are linked inextricably to goods and consumption activities. Finally, we discuss ways in which understanding subcultures of consump-

tion provides opportunities for marketers to cultivate symbiotic relationships with them.

Directions for Future Research

In his study of the surfing subculture, Irwin (1973) suggests that a subculture of consumption exhibits a life cycle composed of four stages: articulation, expansion, corruption, and decline. If his conclusions are transferable to the HDSC one might conclude that the biker subculture is currently in a stage of expansion verging on corruption and inevitable decline. However, the emergence of organized professional surfing since the time of Irwin's study suggests that the surfing subculture has experienced an evolution rather than a complete decline. Uncertainty about the life cycle and longevity of subcultures of consumption suggests the need for further exploration.

The full cross-cultural implications of a subculture of consumption are not yet known. The apparent tendency of subcultures of consumption to transcend boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, gender, and generation indicates the need for additional research. We have encountered direct evidence of the internationalization of the HDSC; however, many questions remain about the nature of the subculture in non-American cultures. For example, interaction with Harley owners in Europe and Malaysia has led us to suspect that the outward symbols of the subculture (e.g., modes of dress and motorcycle customization) are transferred fairly intact but that they are overlaid on a new system of referents more relevant to the host culture. It is important to learn how the basic symbols of subcultures of consumption are used, altered, or reinterpreted when embedded in a nonnative host culture with differing cultural categories and principles.

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