Lifestyle, Identity and Social Impacts of Branding a Group

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Abstract

The focus of this research was the impact of branding on individuals who ride Harley Davidson motorcycles, a group of very loyal consumers. The postmodern theories of Jean Baudrilliard and Frederic Jameson were used as a lens to understand why the brand of Harley Davidson has developed and sustained a lifestyle of loyal followers. The work of these theorists suggest that in our current society there are no new ideas, consumers look to the past to define their present and happiness for the average person is based on consumerism and the need to always need more. The finding of the qualitative interviews and the literature confirm the postmodern theories studied and how they apply to the Harley Davidson riders studied.
We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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Chapter One
Introduction

The current culture in the United States and other western countries has become exceedingly reliant on consuming things to define who they are to their peers and where they fit in society. The culture of branding has become a huge part of how corporations sell everything from shoes to cars. The status of an individual is no longer created by education, career or how big of home a person has. The ability of an individual to consume luxury vehicles designer clothes, shoes and handbags, has become the new status symbol, has created how an individual wants others to define them and how they fit into society.

In today’s world corporations have become exceedingly aggressive in marketing a lifestyle to consumers. This could be considered a problem if society’s information is limited to the branding of a product, which an individual is using to make choices on what they are going to consume, how large of impact their choices will have on their daily lives and if their identity is shaped by an object, as compared to a spiritual sense of self that does not come from consumption.

This study considers how a corporation can manipulate a group of people into becoming a sub-culture, which is based on consumption in a postmodern society. The underlying issue is the manipulation of people who think they are freely making their own decisions, but in a society that is based on consumption the process of branding a group for example HD riders seems to be purely for the financial benefit of the corporation. The study will look at HD riders who are heavily invested in their lifestyle, social group and identity to understand if current communication theories of postmodernism and the implications of branding, to analyze the impact in their
consumption choices. The focus of this study used qualitative interviews with random HD riders to analyze how the consumption of this brand has affected their lifestyles and identities as individuals and as a group. The lifestyle HD corporation has marketed to loyal consumers is a model for other companies looking to increase brand loyalty. If consumers can understand how their identity is being manipulated by corporations, it is possible that individuals can find other ways of expressing who they are and what they can contribute to society as a whole, besides being a good consumer.

Definitions of Terms Used

**Branding** is a method used by corporations to market their goods, develop a relationship with the consumer, thereby ensuring the brand will become a part of a person’s everyday life and they will continue to consume that product.

**Pastiche** is the idea that in postmodern society there is no original thought. There are no new ideas just a re-make of the past.

**Postmodernism** is the stage following modernism, which is the erosion of high culture in favor of mass popular culture. It is the emergence of a new social life and reaction of late capitalism.

**Propaganda** has had two meanings in the 20\(^{th}\) century according to Edward Bernays, who wanted to change the derogatory connotation the word acquired during WWI, to a return of the original meaning, which simply was propaganda was the information the public had to make public and private decisions.

**Sealing** was a practice used by prehistory Egyptians to mark and object of value and uniqueness found in ancient tombs. The sealing of objects was found again and in wider use by the English in the 19\(^{th}\) century.
**Signified** is the term used by Baudrilliard to describe greater society, who are influenced by the signifier or mass media and culture to accept meaning from the sign, which is in large part sense of style, luxury items, prestige, and social value to the consumer,

**Signifier** according to Baudrilliard gives meaning or signs to the signified that places value on an abstract image or commodities in and economy based on consumption. It becomes a system of communication and places and exchange value or social value.

**Soft goods** are considered shoes and clothing or any other consumer goods, which need to be replaced consistently, as compared to hard goods, which are more expensive and last for longer periods of time, for example a car or a house.

**Schizophrenia** is a reaction of a postmodern society. It is the idea that people have too much information, live in the present and have lost their past traditions.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This thesis contains five chapters beginning with chapter one to introduce the topic, goals, importance of the study, the problem and goals to be achieved and definitions of terms. The second chapter is a literature review examining the history of branding and its current practices, an ethnographic study of HD consumers, and communication theories. This chapter provides the basis of the study and research questions to be asked and understood through the literature and qualitative interviews.

Chapter three describes the methodology used, the scope of the study and how the data was collected and used to come to a conclusion. Chapter Four describes what was found in the study and how it relates to the communication theories outlined in the thesis, the literature review and new findings. Chapter five discusses the limitations, further study and recommendations and the conclusion of the study.
Chapter 2
Introduction

The branding of products and concepts sold has become a part of everyday life, from what a consumer picks up at the supermarket, to the marketing team in charge of selling the public on the best brand of athletic shoes or Universities. The United States has transitioned from a manufacturing based economy to an economy dependant on consumption. How products are sold to society has changed dramatically over the past 100 years and is constantly evolving with new technologies available to the groups of people, who sell us products to enhance or create a coveted lifestyle. This transition to a consumer based economy is described in the literature reviewed as a feature of late capitalism or the new economy; the question of where society is going has yet to be answered, except in fictionalized science fiction novels. To better understand the implications of branding and its affects on a consumer’s identity, it is necessary to take a historical look at how this concept developed and what has evolved from the modernism to the current postmodernism period.

Historical Content

The practice of branding is the process of building a relationship of a product with consumers, to ensure continued use and consumption. Branding is the result of a corporation’s ability to develop an emotional relationship with a consumer, thereby ensuring the brand will become a part of a person’s everyday life and they will continue to consume that product. The practice is generally considered to have been developed in the 20th century. Anthropologist, David Wengrow disagrees; he believes the practice of branding originated with the ancient Egyptian pre-history practice of sealing an object, which were found in tombs. The seal was a guarantee of uniqueness and value of an
object to the Egyptians. In Wengrow’s *Prehistories of Commodity Branding* a bottle of olive oil buried in a pre-history Egyptian tomb had a seal on it, which he compared to a modern day label on a bottle of olive oil. The seal, much like the label, communicates to the consumer a valued object. This practice became even more evident to Wengrow when he investigated objects from the 19th century. Loose tea from China was considered unhygienic in 1826. A tea company came up with the idea to package it into pre-measured and sealed packets. The idea was a success, the tea became very popular and the company was able to combine an old world product with new world sophistication, which appealed to the English. During this same time period in the Caribbean, the British were eating canned lobster shipped from England, even though fresh lobster was readily available. The practice of packaged products for consumption became very popular and a measure of social status to individuals in English society in that time period (Wengrow, 2008).

Wengrow contends the act of sealing and branding are a part of a shift to a commodity based economy, which is the opposite of what he describes as a bazaar based economy. In a bazaar economy, traders sell small amounts of goods, the quality is not guaranteed, the relationship the trader has with the consumer is based on trust and large scale trading is not easily accomplished. In pre-history, the practice of sealing was a sign of quality, desirability and social status as products with seals were found in Egyptian tombs. Wengrow believes that as communities and societies grew, there was a shift in the economy to branding of products, producing large amounts of goods, and packaging them to accommodate a shift to large-scale trading. Wengrow suggests branding of a
product was used to inform the consumer of the quality of a product, thereby making it desirable to purchase and consume (2008).

A new way of marketing products and ideas was developed by Edward Bernays, who is considered the father of public relations in America. In 1928, he published Propaganda, a book describing new strategies of marketing. He had strong beliefs that the public needed to be guided by community leaders to make good decisions politically and as consumers. Bernays believed that propaganda was the information the public needed to make private and public decisions about who to vote for, or what suit a man might purchase. He was very unhappy about the change that occurred during WWI, to the newly acquired derogatory meaning the word propaganda and in his book he felt that if he could explain the meaning and its usefulness to help the public make choices in a world with vast amounts of information, he could change the perception of the public. “It might be better to have, instead of propaganda and special pleading, committees of wise men who would choose our rulers, dictate our conduct, private and public, and decide upon the best types of clothes for us to wear and the best kinds of food for us to eat” (Bernays, 2005, p.39). His view was that the use of propaganda was a tool to help the consumer navigate his or her way through the thousands of products on the market, because in a democracy it would be impossible to have one group making our decisions for everyone; as a result of his beliefs on society he developed his propaganda model (Bernays, 2005).

Bernays believed propaganda should be a good experience of the public to help form opinions and to make the best consumer choices. He wanted to bring integrity back into the word propaganda, which began to be attached to wild stories about World War I,
to influence the American public to gain support to join the war in Europe. He felt propaganda should be used as a tool to help the public make good decisions in a world with too much information. The current usage of the word propaganda had changed from the original meaning in 1622, where it was originated by the Vatican to refer to the missionaries and their work spreading the teachings of Christ in the New World (Bernays, 2005).

Previously through the 19th century, products were sold on their perceived quality (Wengrow, 2008). Bernays changed the way products and ideas were sold in the 20th century. Instead of products being sold for their attributes, he felt that it would be easier if leaders in the community endorsed a product. He used the example of a physician recommending that his patients eat bacon because it is good for you, or a famous actress dressing a certain way so women would imitate and buy the new style. It was a radical change from historical selling strategies (Bernays, 2005). Bernays’s selling practices became a proven and popular method, which is used today. Popular leaders and celebrity endorsements are one of the most common ways to advertise products, promote political agendas and non-profit organizations. A good example of celebrity selling-power is Oprah Winfrey’s “favorite things” episode on her world-wide syndicated talk show, in this episode she highlights products she likes, and after the show sales escalate dramatically. Oprah also uses her celebrity power to bring attention to social issues and endorses the charity work of many people and groups.

Diffusion of Ideas

John Dearing (2006) looks at communication as diffusion of information and ideas that have a “…high personal and social relevance” (p. 175). It is a social process
by which an innovation, product or idea is communicated over time among the members of a network or a social group. Innovators or what we can call “opinion leaders” introduce new ideas over social networks, and influence others’ opinions of a new innovation, signaling them to consider it or buy it, whatever it may be. Essentially, when opinion leaders are involved, the innovation has reached a critical mass of adopters (Dearing, 2006).

Dearing has termed the time it takes people to accept a new idea or thing ‘the threshold’. According to Dearing, the threshold varies between people and their reference groups. Over time if the innovators or opinion leaders are talking about or using an innovation it will be continually communicated to gain acceptance and to cross the threshold or resistance a group may have and to gain acceptance. This is the process of diffusion (Dearing, 2006).

Dearing’s theory on diffusion is very similar to Bernays’s ideas on how propaganda works and the value of leaders in the community endorsing a product or idea to the masses. Both men feel that leaders in the community can influence the public to accept innovation within their social group. Dearing takes Bernays’s ideas a step further by looking at the threshold individuals have towards new innovations. Corporations, government and the branding industry are all trying to understand and to overcome the publics’ threshold towards selling products and ideas.

Branding Practices in the 21st Century

The field of branding products and objects has grown into a huge industry and is a part of daily life in society because it has the power to shape what people feel is
important. Liz Moor (2008) believes branding consultants are the equivalent of cultural intermediaries:

…their work involves them in drawing upon ‘legitimate’ culture and embedding it in goods circulated to a mass audience; because such culture is used to imbue goods and services with meanings and values; and because the outcome of these efforts involves the creation of new genres of cultural and commercial ‘content’. Including branded leisure spaces, ‘designer’ goods, ‘lifestyle’ brands and so on (p.412).

Moor’s use of branders as cultural intermediaries builds on Bernays’s ideas of a group of wise men leading us, but differs from Wengrow in her belief that the branding industry was developed in the mid 20th century, rather than his pre-history theory. Moor asserts branding was developed by the design industry in the latter part of the 20th century, by providing corporations a complete communications package to gain recognition and a following of not only the product, but the brand itself, which has become its own entity of value. The experience of brand recognition is to purposely develop an emotional attachment with a consumer or group and to give the brand its own personality, which translates into customer loyalty. Moor’s view is that a brand becomes its own entity; it stands on its own when it is able to form an emotional attachment with the consumer, which is one step further in the process of leaders and innovators influencing consumer choices. Once a brand is established it no longer needs leaders and innovators to diffuse information, it becomes valuable or a commodity in itself (Moor, 2008).
De Waal Malefyt is in agreement with Moor that the brand takes on its own identity, becomes an entity and the consumer takes on an emotional attachment to it. The method on how to get there changes from Moor’s cultural intermediaries to ethnographers who study data to work on new ways to develop emotional attachments to a brand. De Waal Malefyt believes that as the large numbers of products consumers have to choose from has become overwhelming, branding helps the consumer narrow down their choices to a manageable number. Brands have become a huge part of a consumer’s emotional identity. He argues that it encourages consumers to enter a virtual world of brands and form an emotional relationship with the product. The rapid growth of instant communication in the 21st century has allowed brands to reach a highly connected global audience. The new audience now is able to re-make themselves according to the brands they form an emotional attachment within a world that is dependant on consumption and production (De Waal Malefyt, 2009).

Ethnographers are now in high demand to further understand the attitudes and behaviors of consumers, according to Timothy De Waal Malefyt (2009). They are the new tool that corporations are using to gain insight to an individual’s lifestyle and choices. The ‘new ethnographer’ has replaced face-to-face contact with his or her subjects by gathering information through the use of technology. The subject or informant reports to the ethnographer by using cell phones, uploading video, instant messaging, and texting to collect immediate data to analyze. The newest method of collecting information is a part of what De Waal Malefyt calls the New Economy. The collection of information, branding and social change is a part of maintaining the relationship between consumption and production (De Waal Malefyt, 2009). The HD
Corporation has recently been relying on ethnographers and technology as a new way to market to younger consumers, women and Latinos. The average age of an HD consumer is 47, without new consumers buying into their brand it will lose its strong customer base and loyalty to the American dream it has so skillfully created (Quinton, 2009).

Postmodernism a Society Based on Consumption

Aldous Huxley published *Brave New World* in 1932, just a few years after Bernays wrote *Propaganda*. *Brave New World* was written in response to the changing economy of mass production and the influence of large corporations on the daily lives of Americans. The novel tells the story of mass-produced humans bred for specific tasks and jobs in society, set in the future. The society created in the novel is highly stratified, based on consumption of products and drugs, which are available to everyone, in order to maintain an artificially happy community (Huxley, 2006).

Huxley’s ideas of the future have similarities of a society based on consumption that the previous scholars have suggested in the literature reviewed. Society is bombarded by technology and images of the perfect lifestyle, which is available only through consumption. Huxley describes a small elite group that makes decisions for society, which could be considered branders or cultural intermediaries in the novel *Brave New World*, who have a direct control over what is made available to the public, or considered necessary to maintain order in the world of the future.

The cost is high for a society where no one goes without; their every physical need is taken care, and drugs are provided to keep everyone happy, although society has no free will to make their own decisions on any aspect of life. In Western society today the individual has free will, as Dearing points out there is resistance to new things or
what he calls a person’s threshold, which producers of products use their marketing machines to remove barriers to resistance of a product or new idea (Dearing, 2006). In response to a consumer’s threshold ethnographers, branders, cultural intermediaries, innovators and leaders are all working to manipulate consumers on how to spend their cash, what lifestyle to create and where to place their values.

Frederic Jameson believes that society is currently in the period of postmodernism. He refers to the period before postmodernism as modernism, which was characterized by high culture’s innovations of new forms of art, literature and architecture that had never been done before. It was not necessarily understood by the masses, but filtered down by the process of imitating or rejecting it, until it became completely accepted by the 1960s. One way in which Jameson expresses the transition from modernization to post modernism is the examination of two pieces of art. The Van Gough painting *A Pair of Boots* of a peasant’s shoes tells the onlooker something about the history of the owner, the relationship to work, and the earth. The second picture is a creation by pop artist Andy Warhol *Diamond Dust Shoes*. The photo is of several pairs of unworn mass-produced women’s shoes, with no other function other than style. The art piece tells the viewer nothing of the people who will wear the shoes, or the relationship the owners have with the world around them. The shoes are seen as commodity in this picture for consumption (Jameson, 1991).

Postmodernism explained by Jameson was in reaction to rejecting high modernism and the erosion of high culture in favor of mass popular culture, or as he describes “that whole landscaping of advertising and motels, of the Las Vegas strip, of the late show and Grade-B Hollywood film, of so called paraliterature with its airport
paperback categories of Gothic and romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and the science fiction or fantasy novel” (1982, p.2). As an academic Jameson worried that people will not have the skills to understand complex situations because society is surrounded by communication that means nothing (Jameson, 1982).

Jameson found postmodernism is the emergence of a new social life and economic reaction of late capitalism. There are two significant features of postmodernism, which he refers to as pastiche and schizophrenia. Pastiche is what happens when there is no original thought. “The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increase in unavailability of the personal style, engender with well-high universal practice today what may be called pastiche” (Jameson, 1991, p.16). One example Jameson refers to is the genre of nostalgia films like *Grease*, which takes the viewer back to era of Eisenhower when everyone felt good or *Star Trek*, its reference point comes from 1940s and 50s sci-fi comic books. The film *Star Trek* and the comic books have a story of good and evil, a hero and a heroine. Jameson argues that nostalgia films have no original thought, it has already been done, and they are a remake of an older time and of how popular culture wants to remember the past. Jameson contends the lack of innovative or original thought and fragmented information is the process of pastiche (1985).

The second feature Jameson finds in postmodernism is what he calls schizophrenia. The idea is that the experience and thoughts one has stay based in the present. A postmodern society consists of organizations that have a culture of functioning in the present for example; multi-national capitalism, consumerism and the media. Jameson believes schizophrenia is a part of the current contemporary social
system, which has begun to lose its capacity to remember the past and stay focused in the present, always in flux to the point of losing past traditions with nothing in place to preserve social history, or for that matter all history (1985).

Jean Baudrillard (1981) looked at the relationship between the signifier and the signified in a political economy based on commodities and consumption. The sign used by the signifier to the signified becomes an abstract image that places value on a commodity; it becomes a system of communication and places an exchange value or social value. Baudrillard defines consumption as “the stage where the commodity is immediately produced as a sign, as sign value, and where signs (culture) are produced as commodities” (Baudrillard, 1981, p.147). In other words, Baudrillard is saying Western culture is made up of signs to draw meaning from, which is based on the political economy of consumption. The commodities of consumption are not based on needs, but on what they represent in the communication of signs or sign value in society. The sign value is communicated through mass media and culture. The meaning appeals to sense of style, luxury items, prestige, and social value to the consumer. Objects are consumed not only for their usefulness, but even more so for their sign-value status (Baudrillard, 1981).

Postmodern Consumption

Buckley and Ott in It's not TV: watching HBO in the post-television era believe that society has seen many changes due to the transformation of industrial capitalism to informational capitalism, which is measured based on performance of consumption. In a postmodern society they believe that consumption has been linked to seeking identity, through personal style by purchasing products, to define themselves by what is presented
to them by the media. They found the stories in our culture, which we see on television, are used as ‘equipment for living’ a Burkean idea. The popular HBO television show *Sex in the City* is looked at, which centers around four women living in New York, who have large discretionary incomes, great careers and live on the edge of high society. Buckley and Ott believe that the show symbolizes the needs of society in contemporary America. They have concentrated on one character, Carrie, to look at her life and reactions to post-modernity, consumption and identity (Buckley & Ott, 2008). The main character, Carrie is known for her consumption of fashion, love of high-end designer shoes and the continuous search for meaningful love.

Buckley and Ott propose that in the past, modernity was tied to mass production and more durable goods were purchased, which kept the social classes separated. In a post-modern society the consumption of soft-goods has become very profitable for the fashion and culture industries (Buckley & Ott, 2008). This shift to soft goods is a huge part of the women’s lives in *Sex in the City*. The women do not own cars, their apartments are basic, but they have an abundance of wonderful designer shoes, handbags and clothes. They are not in the inner circle of high society in New York, but they do circle in and around the people who Dearing calls the innovators (2006). The women in the show have access to all the ‘right’ restaurants, nightclubs, fashion week, and hip social functions in New York. “As society has transitioned from industrialism to informationalism, identity has become increasingly intertwined with the culture industries” (Buckley & Ott, p.212).

Schouten and McAlexander are ethnographers who chose to look at a consumer sub-culture of Harley Davidson (HD) motorcycle riders. Much like the characters in *Sex
in the City, who represent a sub-culture of fashions divas living in New York City, HD riders are a “...subculture of consumption as a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of shared commitment to a particular product of class, brand, or consumption activity” (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p.43). An HD motorcycle is considered a durable good, but it functions much like a soft-good does as far as being available not just to the elite, but it is obtainable to all social classes, as Schouten and McAlexander report in their study (1995). The lifestyle and identity of the HD motorcycle is a big draw to ownership and it is marketed by the HD Corporation to draw on these emotional feelings of its consumers. The HD brand has created a subculture where an individual can move quickly from an outsider to an insider by their consumption practices and activities (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

The ethnographers of this project started as outsiders and were slowly drawn into the lifestyle of a HD rider and became insiders of the subculture they were studying. Their study is a clear example of how the marketing of a product can create a social group, a coveted lifestyle (which even the ethnographers could not resist), all based on the consumption of products produced by a corporation. “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” (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p.50).

The brand of HD has been successfully marketed as a biker culture to a large group of consumers, some of whom by a t-shirt, others buy a lifestyle. HD has a strong and loyal following that is valued by its followers and envied by onlookers. The biker subculture of HD consumption appeals to all bikers of every social stratus under one
brand, whether you are a multimillionaire or the guy working as a mechanic at the local garage, the social classes are flattened once a person enters the HD world. In a postmodern culture, the brand brings all groups together (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The bikes may not be shoes or fashion, but they function the same way as soft-goods do to flatten out the classes in society and make everyone consumers of culture.

Conclusion

The history of branding according to Wengrow can be traced back to pre-history Egyptian practices of sealing; he contends this practice was rejuvenated when the English began to package and label imported tea from China. Bernays in his book Propaganda took the process of branding a step closer to modern day practices of manipulating consumer’s choices by having a respected person in the community recommend a product.

Jameson’s focus on how postmodernism has taken away a sense of history and put society in a perpetual state of the present, and as a society we are faced with large amounts of information, which are not connected in a cohesive manor. Baudrillard takes this a step further and believes that most of the information we receive is what he calls sign-value that is designed to sell objects and create cultural meaning. Jameson and Baudrillard make an argument the economy has changed Western culture into a society where an individual’s identity has become based on consumption.

Jameson describes a postmodern society in which modern day practices of branding and selling products are able to function in the stage of late capitalism. Consuming is understood by fulfilling a need, want or image in the present. Waal Malefyt (2009) studied modern ethnographers, who concentrate on collecting current data
as quickly as possible to better understand their subject’s emotional responses to products and things in their environment, in order to market products. In the sub-culture of HD riders a consumer’s identity has become a part of how they see themselves as a person and what they represent to greater society. There is pressure on all commercial branders to understand how to overcome the threshold of a consumer to sell products and new innovations.

Buckley and Ott (2008) look at a popular TV series to understand the current consumer culture. The series explores the lives of four women who surround themselves with what Buckley and Ott call soft goods. They see the results of this lifestyle as a way for the individual to seek out their identity through consumption. The change of the economy has lead to a culture that has flattened society through the shift of consumption to soft goods.

This study will ask questions of a specific consumer group to find out how they feel about a product in relationship to their lifestyle and identity in order to understand the impact branding has on an individual’s identity. The question of how branding is changing Western culture and the identity of a person through consumption has not been fully understood by the literature. The findings do not address the moral issues of how this major shift in society is affecting the Spirit of western culture and where it may lead society in the future. In all cases the literature does not explain from a consumers point of view what impact branding has had on their lives, are they happy having their decisions manipulated by the branding industry and do they want to live in society that places the values on consumption over everything else. The current study seeks to remedy this gap.
Chapter 3
Qualitative Interview Process

The method used in this study was the process of collecting data through qualitative interviews. The interviews are crucial to understanding the emotional ties the subjects have to a brand which defines their identity. The interviews revealed how large of an impact an object can have on a consumer's lifestyle and how they see themselves. The subjects include anyone who owns and rides a Harley Davidson (HD) motorcycle. The interviews were analyzed to understand the affects of a brand on the subculture of HD, to find out what draws the subject to the brand, and how they identify themselves and their lifestyle to the HD brand.

The qualitative interview included a series of questions to determine why the subject chose to buy an HD motorcycle, how much of their social life revolves around the brand and to understand their loyalty to HD. A minimum of 20 interviews were conducted as time allowed. Questions to be asked are as follows:

1) What attracted you initially to buy a Harley Davidson motorcycle?
2) Who do you ride with, how often, and where do you like to go?
3) How do you feel about your motorcycle?
4) What does it mean to be a biker to you?

The subjects were also identified by sex, age and profession to determine where they fall in the social stratus of society in general.

Subjects were approached and asked to answer four questions. The interviews were conducted anywhere HD riders congregate. The expected average age of the subjects was over 40 and included both men and women, who were interviewed to obtain data. The questions asked explored the emotional ties to the HD brand, how the brand creates
self-identity, does the HD rider feel they live in the moment more than the rest of the population, and how much income plays a part in becoming an HD rider.

Methodology

The credibility of the data was established by the number of interviews conducted, findings and similarities that HD riders have in common. The dependability of the process was created by asking all subjects the same four questions through out the process of the interviews. The process to track the information obtained was confirmed by field notes and transcribing the interviews within a 24 hour period. Confirmability and conclusions were drawn based on the data collected, which was compared to the two communication theories of Jameson’s (1982) ideas of ‘pastiche’ and Baudrillard (1981) studies of the signifier and the signified. Transferability was accomplished by random selections of subjects to the interviewer. The only criterion of the subjects was that they own and ride a HD motorcycle and were willing to answer the interview questions.

The data collected was analyzed and coded to find themes that emerged to determine the characteristics of a subculture of the HD brand. The reliability of the data was face to face interviews of the subjects. It was up to the interviewer to determine if the information obtained was of a reliable source. There is no reason to believe that HD riders presented false information. Once all the data was collected from the interviews it was looked at to see what themes emerged and to compare the findings with the theories of Jameson and Baudrillard.
Chapter 4
Introduction

The qualitative interviews of 18 HD riders revealed five main themes that this group shares: 1) A sense of freedom is experienced while riding their HD motorcycle; 2) a strong emotional attachment to riding their motorcycles; 3) a difference between men and women in their view of motorcycle ownership; 4) social satisfaction in riding together in groups with their peers and feeling they are part of a special group of people who own an American icon and are different from the rest of society; and 5) a strong loyalty to the brand of HD. These five themes were consistently revealed in the interviews conducted with this group.

Interviewees

The HD riders interviewed were mostly over 40, middle-class and had both discretionary income and free-time, which enabled them to purchase an HD motorcycle. Interviews were conducted at a garage where one of the owners worked on cars and HD motorcycles, a few of the interviews were held at the local HD dealership and a local biker bar. The careers of the interviewees varied widely from a marketing manager, nurse, paralegal, teacher, fireman, mechanic, truck driver, a retired undercover policeman to a physical therapist. All of these people come together as HD riders hang out, share experiences and ride together. In the HD world it is not about who you are at work or at home. There are no judgments or preconceived ideas about the women and men in black leather; it is only about the camaraderie of being an HD rider.

Social Equality and Freedom

The use of the word freedom was used by almost every interviewee. Freedom is associated by the interviewees as the feeling they experience from their motorcycle,
while riding. The riders feel when they are on their bikes they are free from everyday life; they can live in the moment and forget all of the other stresses adults face on a daily basis. It is a feeling described by one rider that brings a person closer to the environment as he said “the good smells smell better and the bad ones are worse, when you ride a bike.” Several other interviewees conveyed similar ideas, that everyone else who rides in a car can’t get close to the freedom and emotions a rider experiences as expressed in the interviews. These feelings of freedom can be felt by all motorcycle riders, but HD riders expressed they would not choose to ride a different brand and would not feel the same way if it wasn’t an HD motorcycle. A clear theme throughout the interviews is riders associate their HD motorcycle with escaping everyday life and enjoy the freedom that they are missing in their daily lives, at work or at home. To enter their world all that is needed is to purchase an HD motorcycle.

The majority of HD riders interviewed are in their mid-career and professionals with responsibilities and expectations they have to perform in a work setting or at home. In the HD riding community you can be anyone, there are no expectations to fulfill other than owning an HD motorcycle, which puts everyone socially on the same level in this particular group. Social equality can clearly be observed by the clothing HD riders wear. It includes black leather jackets, chaps and typically HD logo wear such as t-shirts or hoodies. There is little differentiation of clothing between riders regardless of gender or social standing. As one rider said, “I know a judge who has major social responsibilities to her community, but when she is on her bike she is just like everyone else; she is approachable.” The interviewees expressed a clear sense of equality among HD riders, which is associated with the emotions of freedom that are prevalent in this group. As one
woman said “I just love to ride my HD motorcycle. Being a biker is a part of people who share the same experience together. It is camaraderie with other bikers.” On an HD motorcycle riders feel there are no expectations placed on them and they are truly free to be themselves, they have a strong camaraderie with other bikers, which is a part of social equality felt by HD riders, but it is now extended to other brands.

Gender Differences

The interviews uncovered a surprising difference between men and women on how they started riding and how they feel about their motorcycle. All of the women riders interviewed were influenced to learn to ride because they had been riding as passengers on their husband’s bikes and decided they wanted to ride their own bike. Most of the men had ridden when they were younger and took it back up after their children were raised. The reason women started to ride was much different than men. The women wanted their own independence from their husbands and this actually seems to make for happier couples because they are both enjoying sharing the HD experience together.

When women were asked about their HD bikes they commonly answered “I can handle my bike and it’s comfortable for me.” Not one man used the word handle in his answers to any of the interview questions. Women are more focused on the use of the word handle when referring to their bike and their riding capabilities, which can be interpreted to infer a limitation to the size of the bike, which they feel comfortable to ride. The word choices imply there is a risk in riding and they are very concerned that they can handle the bike they are riding and emotionally it is comfortable to them to ride. When men used the word comfortable they were only referring to physical comfort while riding.
Emotional Attachment

The emotional attachment HD riders have to their motorcycles is expressed by the word choices to describe their motorcycle and what it means to them personally. The most common answer to how a rider feels about riding and their motorcycle began with either “I love…” or “I like…” The majority of riders are very emotional and overtly engaged in a relationship with their motorcycle this can be seen by the tone of voice they use while talking about their HD motorcycle, the level of engagement with the interviewer and facial expressions. One woman says about her bike, “I adore it, the sound of the pipes, the color of the bike, the style is classic.” This is a part of their lives that this group of people like to talk about, they are open about their feelings about their motorcycle and it openly gives them pleasure. As one woman explained why she likes her bike “The mystique of the HD brand and my husband had one. When people ask you if you ride a bike the next question is do you ride a Harley? I like the bike it sets you a part from the rest.” The riders expressed these feelings throughout the interviews as a part of the emotional status of owning and HD motorcycle.

Social Life

The entire group of HD riders interviewed all has a social life revolving around their HD motorcycle. Many are a part of an organized group, such as the Harley Owners Group (HOG) where the only requirement for entry is an HD motorcycle. Other riders are very involved with a more exclusive type of club for example Combat Vets (US combat veterans), access to this group requires serving the U.S. in combat. The Axmen is a club that exclusively gives entry to firemen. Club members typically form close ties to one another and refer to other members a brothers and sisters. As one club member
interviewed says “A large part of my life is the club. It’s a really big part, like my teaching job or my household obligations.”

The HD riders interviewed like riding in groups with other HD riders and sharing the experience of the open road with others in informal and organized groups such as HOG. They share an exclusive camaraderie towards other HD riders as one man said proudly of his entrance to the HD world “It takes a while for other HD guys to trust you. When you have a good name it means a lot to the other guys.” One woman described how she feels about riding and the people she rides with “As a biker, I think the experience and the feeling is something you don’t understand, if you don’t ride an HD motorcycle. The people who do ride get it.”

Brand Loyalty

The HD brand for all of the riders interviewed played a large part of why they chose to purchase an HD motorcycle. Several of the interviewees mentioned a problem that HD had with their motorcycles being associated with gang members in the past, but now it has turned around and has become a part of the mystique and attraction of HD to consumers of it as one woman explained “There is the mystique of it all. When I see a biker I think sex, drugs and rock and roll it’s the bad boy image, the freedom.”

The “bad boy” image of HD is a part of the mystique people feel about the brand as seen in the movies The Wild Ones or Easy Rider, in which the characters are free to live on the edge of the law. The most current depiction of bikers is a FOX television series about outlaw bikers called the Sons of Anarchy. In this show, these outlaws buy guns from the IRA, to sell to gang members, who kill only other gang members, but they are also the protectors of the town, and keep drug dealers out of their community. They
are allowed to operate in the town because in a strange twist they have a good guy image and operate by a code behavior not to hurt civilians. In a similar way as mentioned in the interviews, as one rider said, “Being a biker is a part of a bigger picture or a part of a group. It is fun to hang out with the bad boys. HD has a little bit of bad boy reputation; it is a part of the motorcycle spectrum.” The movie *Wild Hogs* is a comedy, which tells the story of group of professional men who get together and ride their HD motorcycles on Sundays. They decide to go on a trip where they encounter bad boy riders or gang members, they save the people of small town from them, become heroes, there is no law enforcement involved and they too become above the law. The movie depicts a fantasy that interviewees suggested by the attraction of the bad boy image. HD riders equate their motorcycles with freedom, they are different from the rest of society and very loyal to other HD riders on the road, which is a part of the biker mystique as seen in film and TV, which is the attraction many HD riders have to being a part of the HD sub-culture.

The interviews confirmed a strong emotional attachment to riding and also to a particular attraction to what the brand of HD means. Several riders commented that the bike reflected their personality via all of the options provided by HD to customize their motorcycle. One man summarized his identity wrapped around his HD motorcycle with the following comment: “I like my motorcycle. It’s mine and it has my personality. When you look at my bike you know that it belongs to me. It’s representative of my personality.” Riders whether they choose to customize their motorcycle to draw more attention to themselves or keep if stock they want the society to see them as proud HD owners and the heritage that comes with owning an American icon.
Discussion of Branding

HD has a reputation for the ability to customize their motorcycles with chrome, leather and paint, which is a huge attraction to the brand for many riders, they are able to take their Harley and personalize it, but still keeping the brand and all of what it represents as one rider described “You can make Harley your own, you can do anything to it, and there are so many accessories. HD did a fantastic job. It’s the only brand people tattoo on their body.” This statement is a description of what Moor (2008) has suggested in the later part of the 20th century, when brands begin to take on own personality and consumers develop an emotional attachment to a brand.

The interviews expressed an emotional attachment to the HD brand, which consumers see themselves as a part of the brand, they consider their bike an outgrowth of their personality, and the HD brand has become part of their identity. As one HD rider said, “Being a biker is a big part of my identity.” Moor (2008) points out that this emotional attachment translates into customer loyalty, and the brand itself becomes a commodity. It could concluded that the HD rider has become a commodity of the HD Corporation by dressing in logo wear both on and off their motorcycle, their image to others who see and envy them on the open road, and their classic biker look, which is seen as the domain of HD by the rest of society. As one woman said when she tells people she rides a motorcycle “the first question they ask; is it a HD motorcycle?”

The HD riders’ answers to the interview questions, verified the argument De Waal Malefy (2009) makes suggesting that brands have become a huge part of consumer’s emotional identities. He believes that brands encourage a consumer to enter a fantasy world. This is supported by the comment of one HD rider: “It’s a chance to put
on a different hat. When I’m at work I have to be professional. When I’m out on my bike I can let my hair down. I like riding, I’m in control and I feel sexy.”

Buckley and Ott (2008) argue that the U.S. economy is based on consuming soft goods, which has flattened out the distinctions between social classes. This assumption of social equality was a trend in the interviews conducted with the HD riders. As a rider described “Someone may be doctor or a judge you don’t know who they are, people are more approachable in the biker world.” The HD motorcycle may be considered a hard good, but it functions as a soft good, by bringing people together from all social classes, which is supported by the interviews of HD riders. The HD brand has become increasingly popular; consumers want to consume the lifestyle HD sells through the purchase of both hard and soft goods, which are available to anyone from any income bracket.

Postmodernism

Frederic Jameson (1991) proposes that a large part of postmodernism is the idea that society lives in the present and is faced with large amounts of information that are not connected in a cohesive manner. The HD riders expressed one of the main attractions to riding was the feeling of leaving all the responsibilities at home and living purely in the moment while riding their motorcycle.

Jameson (1991) uses the term pastiche to explain lack of original thought and a return to the past or like many people like to refer to as “the good old days”. The biker image was re-invented for the masses by HD in the late 1980s, when HD was in deep financial trouble and very close to closing their doors, which would have made the American made motorcycle extinct. The HD motorcycle became a remake of a past
lifestyle; the motorcycles have a clear retro look from the 1950s and the bad boy image created in popular culture, which Jameson refers to as a period of time that people associate with widespread happiness and success in America. The riders in the interviews associate their happiness in life to riding and also love the looks of their motorcycles. Many of the male HD riders interviewed rode when they were younger and unencumbered with family and children. Riding motorcycles is truly a return to their personal past of young adulthood.

The second condition of postmodernism Jameson calls schizophrenia, which is the process of living in the moment. HD riders look forward to what they truly consider living the moment while riding their motorcycle. A woman described how she feels while riding: “I like getting out of the house and riding my bike when I’m stressed. It’s therapy to me, I feel younger and the bike makes me feel younger, it just feels good.”

Jameson looks at consumerism as a function of living in the moment and having desires fulfilled immediately. Over time it takes more and more to fulfill these desires, which need immediate attention. The HD rider can get on their bike at any time to have their immediate emotional needs recharged as one rider explained “My sanity can’t wait for the first ride of the season and I'm disappointed the last ride of the season.” The consumption of HD products has grown and its consumers are left always wanting to spend more time on their motorcycles.

The two main traits of postmodernism, according to Jameson are pastiche and schizophrenia, which compliment each other in an economy that is measured by consumption. HD riders are attracted to their retro looking motorcycles and the bad boy image. This is typified by the comment one man made about why he liked his bike: “I
just like the way they look, their retro, their American and my friends had them.” The HD brand represents a time when America felt strong, there were lots of jobs and everyone seemed pretty happy. The HD Corporation has capitalized on the nostalgic feelings of its riders by being the last American-made motorcycle made in the US and by keeping true to the design of the past. The interviews confirmed Jameson’s theories on Postmodernism.

The HD riders also confirmed Baudrillard’s (1981) theories of the signifier and the signified placing value on an object or a commodity. Great value is placed on HD riders’ motorcycles. It not only works for the motorcycle itself, but any products that carry the logo. It may be a t-shirt or in some cases a Ford 150 SuperCab pickup with the HD logo embedded on the truck (Dyer, 2006). The HD brand clearly is a sign-value that is consumed by the signified or the HD consumer. HD riders would not sell their bikes to purchase another brand as one. As one woman rider said, “I would never ride anything else. Harley is top of the line. When I think of a motorcycle I think of Harley. I like the sound.”

The interviews confirm the communication of sign value has been accepted, and the consumer lifestyle HD has created has been adopted by its loyal followers, as confirmed in the interviews conducted. The sign value created has started a new intentional cultural meaning by the HD riders around a brand and the object; no other motorcycles brands have duplicated the lifestyle. The interviews demonstrate that the group of HD riders is dependant on consuming a product for their identity they do not see themselves riding any other motorcycle other than HD. The sub-culture of HD was mentioned by interviewees who consider themselves a part of biker culture.
The interviewees all believed they gain freedom and happiness from owning an HD motorcycle. They leave their normal lives for a short period of time and experience emotions they can not find at home or at work. It is an escape that this group feels only a rider of an HD motorcycle can understand. The brand of HD has been marketed to signify the American spirit of the present and the past. As one rider put it, “The pioneers were in the wind on their horses, now we do the same thing, but it is high-tech. It’s the same idea and the same kind of people ride bikes, they like to be in the wind.” The popularity of the brand has had great economic benefit to the HD Corporation and made thousands of its loyal followers experience great joy and happiness to own what they consider part of an American dream.

There seems to be nothing morally wrong with how HD has positioned itself in the marketplace and the creation of the sub-culture of HD. The interview participants consider themselves free to make their own choices, as one man said, “I choose to be in this lifestyle. You know we are actually a sub-culture.” The riders in this group feel they are making their own choices, but are they really? The research shows that branding is the highest form of cultural manipulation (Moor, 2008). In the HD group strong feelings have been developed by the consumption of a product as one man said “I can’t see myself owning anything but an HD motorcycle. It’s the American dream of freedom and the ability to go anywhere your bike will take you with likeminded people.” The conclusion that can be assumed is that it is created by marketing campaigns aimed at the consumer’s emotions of freedom, the nostalgic past and belonging to the biking community, which Jameson and Baudrilliard have explained in their postmodern theories.
Bernays (2005) described the masses as a herd willing to be lead, which will give up their freedom of making their own choices. He believed this was necessary because of the massive amounts of information and manufactured goods the average person has to choose from and the need for direction in making decisions. Bernays changed the way advertisers sold their products, from an appeal to the individual on the products qualities, to influencing the masses, by the necessity of a product to obtain the desired lifestyle and image found in propaganda. The HD brand has followed this model and has many loyal followers of the brand and the lifestyle created around an HD motorcycle. One man expressed this simply “I love the Harley brand and I’m a loyal supporter…I’m into the camaraderie, the freedom.”

The corporation of HD is financially benefiting from a sub-culture that has been created through a brand and the consumers consider themselves happy by their choices of consumption. They feel they have a great social life, which revolves around riding. The research indicates that this group of people is not really free to make their own choices, but through as the interviews demonstrate HD marketing and manipulation is not impacting this group negatively; rather it is adding to their quality of life, as evidenced by the biker motto, which states “Live to ride, ride to live.”

Looking at the lifestyle of consumption through the HD brand it initially seems to have a positive impact on its followers. HD riders feel they are making their own choices and have more feelings of freedom than the average person. The problem with this type of marketing is there are other areas in society being manipulated into consuming a product, which does not have a positive impact on an individual. The tobacco industry is
just one example of a product that has been marketed to groups as a lifestyle, which has been proven to cause life threatening-health problems.

Consumers need to be aware of how their choices of consumer goods and lifestyles are manipulated by corporations for profit. A society that places importance on consuming things loses its spirituality, which was described in the novel *Brave New World* (2006). The novel describes a society where a child is born from a test tube and their life is all about consuming and seeking happiness through goods. This story describes an extreme of a consumer society based on consumption, which may be closer to reality than society wants to admit. The interviews conducted in this study conclude that this group of consumers is dependent on an object for their feeling of happiness, camaraderie and freedom.
Chapter 5
Introduction

This section will elaborate on the findings of the study, limitations, conclusions and areas of further study. The information the riders provided through the interviews reveal an intimate relationship with their motorcycles and the HD Corporation, which has verified current and past ideas of brand development. The interviews were examined and compared to the research of brand development from the past to the present and the theories of postmodernism in a consumer society of Jameson and Baudrilliard.

Limitations

The results of the interviews need further research to substantiate the credibility of the study. The total number of interviewees used in the study was eighteen, although the information retrieved from the interviews supported the theories of Jameson and Baudrillard. The interviews were limited to a mid-sized city in the Inland Northwest and the group interviewed was limited to middle-class Americans.

If time and the season had allowed it the interviews of HD riders would have produced a larger number of people and a more in-depth study. The interviews were taken in early spring, which is not a good time to find lots of people on their motorcycles. In late spring or early summer there would have been more people available to interview and to attend HOG activities. The interviews were limited to a time schedule; it would have been beneficial to the study to do follow-up interviews to verify the information initially retrieved and to develop a relationship that would build trust in order to concentrate on the individual’s identity and how they see themselves.

An increased geographic area would have added to the findings. If time and the sample group would have allowed it, interviews would have been conducted on a national
level. The logistics of the interviews were limited to the specific geographic region. It is not known if this would have affected the study and the outcome.

Further Study Recommendations

The HD Corporation is well known for their branding practices, their loyal followers and the sub-culture that has been created around its motorcycle. It is not surprising that the theories and branding practices studied aligned with the interviews. The area that is lacking in research is how women view themselves and their motorcycles. The studies looked at were more aimed toward men, rather than women. The research in this paper found that women view themselves and their motorcycles differently than men. There is an opportunity of further research to find out why. The lack of information on women consumers who choose to ride needs to be studied in more depth. Women have been left out in this group, which is mistake of all motorcycle marketing, since women also have discretionary incomes.

The understanding of why and how the HD brand has been successful is beneficial to any company marketing a product. More research and studies could be conducted to see if the HD culture can be transferred to other manufacturers, or is this just an American phenomenon with one product?

The HD Corporation has created a very strong American-centered culture around its brand. HD motorcycles are popular world-wide to those who can afford them. How can branding and creating a sub-culture be used to market other American products in other countries? What is the impact of creating an individual or group identity through consumption on more traditional cultures, which are less dependent on consumerism of
the 21st century? The export of a culture based on consumption requires further studies to answer these questions.

Conclusion

The consistency of the interviewees’ references to living in the moment and nostalgic feelings of the past confirms Jameson’s theories on pastiche and schizophrenia; he is worried how this is going to affect society.

I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism. I believe also that is formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of that particular social system. I will only be able, however, to show this for one manor theme: namely the disappearance of sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve (Jameson, 1982, para. 41-).

In a postmodern society there are vast amounts of information available to the average person, so much so that it becomes too much to think about. The HD riders are one group that chooses to leave the stresses of their daily lives and forget about everything. In order to do this they consume a product that boosts their self esteem over the rest of society and gives them an emotional high while using and consuming the HD product line. They are attracted to the nostalgic connection HD has to the past and the feeling of living in the moment while they ride their HD motorcycle.
The HD brand has successfully developed emotional ties to their consumers to a time when they were younger and felt they were free of all the responsibilities before they reached adulthood. The brand is also tied to the past, to what society sees as a happy time in America during the 1950s as shown in TV show *Happy Days*. The HD brand also has the power to create immediate gratification and the feeling or identity of freedom and living in the moment, which is derived from consumption of a product.

The brand of HD is valued by its consumers, has become a part of their everyday life and gives them a sense of their identity. Whether Wengrow is right about sealing practices of pre-history Egypt or Moors’ ideas of brand creation in the mid-20th century the HD insignia on a product implies value of a coveted lifestyle through consumption not everyone can have.

The consumers of HD identify who they are from an object, which is what Baudrilliard described in the political meaning of the sign or the signifier and the signified. Objects are consumed for their sign value-status. There is great value of ownership of an HD motorcycle and it is coveted by owners and others, who want to own a HD motorcycle. Buckley and Ott describe it as a part of late stage capitalism and the intertwining of identity with culture industries, which HD represents. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) describe HD riders as a subculture where outsiders can quickly become insiders through consumption. The two are intertwined. A consumer can not have one without the other.

The HD brand has been extremely successful in building a culture around its product ensuring a loyal following few corporations have matched. The brand and the
consumer of HD have become a strong commodity that has become a part of American culture and a tie to the past.
References


