Female Consumers’ Symbolic Expression of Identity through Harley-Davidson Apparel

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Key Words: Symbolic interaction, Gender, Harley-Davidson, Subculture of consumption

Introduction: Harley-Davidson (Harley) is the U.S. industry leader in sales of heavy weight motorcycles (Motorcycle Industry Council, 2015). However, Harley, along with the U.S. motorcycling industry, in general, has seen a dramatic decline in sales between 2007 to 2019 (Harley-Davidson, Inc., 2019). Over the past 13 years, Harley apparel sales have declined as well, by 20% (Harley-Davidson, Inc., 2019). Motorcycling in the US is a male-dominated activity. To counteract the decline, Harley has focused its efforts over the past 12 years on recruiting new rider demographics, such as women. The number of women riding motorcycles has increased (Motorcycle Industry Council, 2018) and represents a potential growth market for Harley. Previous research has shown that male members of the Harley community were deeply committed to the Harley brand and the motorcycling community (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). It is important to understand women’s perspectives regarding the Harley brand and community because building a sense of connection and identification with the brand could lead to enhanced brand loyalty (Lindquist & Sirgy, 2009).

Appearance plays an important role in the Harley community. In a study of male riders, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) concluded that Harley apparel aided in identity formation and facilitated symbolic identification with and connection to the motorcycling community. Despite the increasing size of the female motorcycling market, there appears to be no comparable research addressing the role of Harley apparel in defining the identity of female participants within the Harley community. To ensure that Harley product offerings meet riders’ needs and expectations, there is a need to understand the motivations and meanings influencing women’s apparel consumption. Therefore, the purpose of this study was (1) to understand the potential role of Harley branded apparel in defining and expressing the self-identity of female participants within the Harley community and (2) to explore the potential role of the Harley community in shaping the identity of these women.

Literature Review: A subculture of consumption (SOC) is a brand-related subculture in which consumers establish social bonds with each other (Kates, 2006), as well as build an emotional connection to the brand (Schmitt, 2012). In contrast to a typical brand community, members of SOC’s are deeply committed to and invest more time in brand-related activities (Kates, 2006). Schouten and McAlexander (1993) identified the Harley community as a SOC in which consumers, typically male, organized their lives and identities around motorcycles. The most recent research suggested that male riders’ identities were not tied to motorcycling as it had been for riders in the past (Thompson, 2012a). Among women riders, Thompson (2012a, 2012b) found that their strongest sense of identity was derived from their age, race, sex, family roles, and occupation and was not tied to being a motorcyclist.
Harley actively engages in relationship marketing and experiential marketing through sponsorship of motorcycle-related events. Participating in motorcycle-related events facilitates riders’ experiences and interactions with the Harley brand and promotes social interactions with other Harley consumers. Social interactions among male members of the Harley SOC have been found to play an important role in identity formation and behavior; Harley apparel played an important role because it provided the riders with a sense of identity and belonging (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). We examined what significance Harley apparel held for female riders.

Method: A qualitative, grounded theory method was used. Participants \( n=23 \) were contacted through snowball and convenience sampling if they were involved in motorcycle riding and had purchased Harley apparel (Creswell, 2013). Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, consisting of open-ended questions. Photo elicitation (Collier & Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002) was also employed; 25 images of women’s apparel retrieved from Harley-Davidson’s ecommerce website were shown to participants at one point in the interview to facilitate discussion of product features. Data analysis involved open-coding, axial coding, and interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Spiggle, 1994; Strauss, 1987; Warren, 2002). Two coders identified themes in the data and coded distribution of themes, reaching an intercoder agreement of 99 percent.

Findings: Symbolic interaction theory was useful for interpreting findings through inductive analysis. Identity theories, symbolic consumption, and self-image congruency stemming from symbolic interaction facilitated understanding of the data. Two key themes emerged from the analysis: (1) social and relational aspects of Harley apparel consumption and (2) personal identity.

Social and relational aspects of consumption, interacting with like-minded individuals, and feeling connected to a community were the most frequently mentioned and sought-after benefit from owning a Harley motorcycle and wearing Harley apparel. Participating in motorcycle-related activities and interacting with other members of the Harley community also provided the women with a sense of community, similar to the findings of Schouten and McAlexander (1995). The brand/company’s image, consumption experiences, and social relationships that the women built as members of the Harley community strengthened their brand loyalty and formed a barrier to leaving or switching brands (Lindquist & Sirgy, 2009). The women wore Harley apparel as a way of showing their loyalty to Harley and affiliation to the community and to motorcycling. Participant identity was closely tied to perceptions of connectedness to other members of the Harley community. Purchase motivation and brand-related behavior was, in part, identity based.

Harley apparel did play a role in shaping female SOC members’ identity, which is similar to Schouten and McAlexander’s (1995) findings for male members. For participants in this study, both the activity of riding and wearing of Harley apparel provided individuals with an enhanced sense of self. Contrary to previous research that suggested that women riders’ identity was not strongly tied to being a motorcyclist (Thompson, 2012a, Thompson, 2012b), the women in this study identified as Harley enthusiasts and members of the Harley community. For them, riding is a part of their identity; it is part of who they are and a part of their self-definition.
Harley apparel played an important role in the female Harley community, because it provided the women with a means to express and actualize their identity as a motorcycle rider and as a member of the Harley/motorcycling community.

Conclusions and Implications: Findings indicated that appearance plays an important role among the participants. This study provides valuable information about building identity through a community based on consumption. These findings contribute to the body of knowledge about the role of Harley apparel and the Harley community in defining and expressing the self-identity of female members within the Harley subculture of consumption. Understanding the motivations and meanings influencing women’s consumption of Harley apparel has practical benefits for Harley, other brands, and subcultures of consumption. Knowledge gained from this study may be used to better design and market the apparel and may benefit Harley in strengthening market share and company viability.
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