Product Relationships, Brand Meanings, and Symbolism For Mainstream Brands: the Case of the Sports Bike Community

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ABSTRACT
Previous research on brand relationships has emphasized intense relationships between consumers and celebrated or even worshipped brands, for example in the form of brand communities or brand-related subcultures of consumption. This research focuses on the relationships consumers build with mainstream brands. Netnography was used to explore product relationships, brand meanings, and symbolism of the sport bike rider subculture. The results suggest high levels of personification and product involvement, but low levels of brand commitment and loyalty. The findings are embedded into a framework for theory building, and implications for marketing practice are discussed.

INTRODUCTION
Previous research on online and offline brand communities or subcultures of consumption have described the intense relationships that evolve between consumers and their brands. For example, Muñiz and Schau (2005, Schau and Muñiz 2006) explored religious-like relationships consumers had with the Apple Newton, Leigh, Peters, and Shelton (2006) investigated brand authenticity in the MG subculture of consumption, and Schouten and McAlexander (1995) delved into structures and core values of Harley Davidson motorcycle riders and their relationship with the Harley Davidson brand. The brands depicted in these studies have in common a clear and unique positioning which is strong enough to make consumers identify heavily with the brand. For these consumers, brands from competitors do not form part of their consideration set, and brands are clearly classified into “our brands” and “other brands” by the community or subculture of consumption.

Typically, as in the case of the Apple Newton, MG, and Harley Davidson, these brands are not produced for the masses, and they are usually not market leaders in their category. However, many other brands have not been able to reach such a unique (and indisputably desirable) position in consumers’ minds and hearts, and most of them probably never will. Do the same rules for these mainstream brands apply as for the brands celebrated and worshiped in brand communities and subcultures of consumption? How is the own brand perceived, in comparison with competing brands? Are there more open, liberal relationships instead of the devotional, quasi-religious, and highly loyal bonds between consumers and brands described in previous research?

Motorbikes were selected as the product category and a Japanese sport bike model chosen as the specific research context of this study. Netnography was used to explore product relationships, brand meanings, and symbolism of the sport bike rider subculture. Netnography has been defined as “ethnography adapted to the study of online communities” (Kozinets 2002, 61) and has been in consumption contexts such as the X-Files (Kozinets 1997), Star Trek (Kozinets 2001, 2006), wedding messages (Nelson and Otnes 2005), or consumer gift systems (Giesler 2006). Similar to traditional ethnography, netnography is open-ended, interpretative, flexible, metaphorical, and grounded in the knowledge of the specific and particularistic (Kozinets 2002, Jupp 2006). However, netnography is usually faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography (Kozinets 2002, 2006). As with traditional ethnography, the netnographic researcher may determine the degree of active participation and interaction with informants within her research. However, whereas the traditional ethnographer typically accompanies informants and thus has to reveal her presence, the netnographic researcher may choose to collect data from online communities (e.g., postings from a bulletin board) in a completely unobtrusive way, if desired. Although established rules of research ethics apply to netnography as well (e.g., asking informants for permission to use direct quotations obtained from bulletin boards), the researcher is able to obtain data that have been generated previously and for a different purpose, and are thus free of contamination from the researchers’ presence or participation.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection
Several Internet forums were investigated for this research, and the Yamaha R1 forum (www.r1-forum.com) was chosen as primary data source. Although its name suggests a limitation to Yamaha’s top-of-the-range sport bike, the Yamaha R1, there are also members subscribed to the forum who either have motorbikes from different brands, such as Honda, Suzuki, Kawasaki, or Ducati, or who are aspirational (i.e., who currently do not have a sport motorbike but would like to have one in the future). The main reason for choosing the R1 forum was its size, with 72,721 subscribed members as of June 29, 2007, and more than 2,800,000 postings in approximately 191,000 threads. Threads in the R1 forum are grouped into five different sections: Community, R1-related discussion, technique, racing & stunt discussion, marketplace, and misc. In the period between August, 2006, and July, 2007, several thousand postings were read and a total of 108 were downloaded for a more detailed examination. Many postings were not downloaded because they treated, e.g., technical issues (how to fix a specific problem with the bike or where to get the best price for accessories and parts) and thus were not relevant to the research topic of interest.

Downloaded postings followed an iterative approach, in the sense that postings were downloaded as long as analysis of these postings generated new insights instead of leading to redundancy (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). This approach may also be described as theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967) or purposive sampling (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Lohr 1999, Wallendorf and Belk 1989). Because data analysis and interpretation are iterative, a possible danger for researchers is to generate preliminary patterns or explanations and then fall victim to selective information processing by giving (unintentionally or unconsciously) more weight to postings that confirm these patterns or explanations (confirmation bias). The existence of a confirmation bias has been shown by several authors in the context of hypothesis testing (compare for an overview Zuckerman et al. 1995), and it may be argued that the confirmation bias may also occur in ethnographic research contexts. In order to avoid this pitfall, disconfirmative data was sought actively via the forum’s internal search engine, and conclusions were only drawn when no disconfirmative data could be found. Besides forum postings as the primary data source, other information sources included information from motorbike related web pages, articles in magazines, participant observation at a local sport bike motorcycle club, and personal contact with the product category. These additional information sources also served for data triangulation in the subsequent steps of the research.
Organization and Analysis

The 108 downloaded postings were pre-classified into different categories and examined for recurrences in the data. Recurrences were organized using codes, where one statement could be assigned one or several codes. Because sampling of the postings did follow a purposeful or theoretical, as opposed to a statistical, sampling approach, it was not the absolute number of occurrences that qualified a specific aspect of a statement for coding, but the researcher’s judgment that the occurrence was typical, meaningful, or relevant for the consumption community. Comparisons (called troping) were then made among codes and between codes and currently uncoded statements, in order to “thicken” codes into more meaningful constructs and finally into interpretive layers of themes. It is this process of coding and troping that allows researchers to develop “layers of meaning comprising an interpretation” and to obtain outcomes that “ethnographers refer to as a richly textured interpretation” (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, 498, 499).

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

Language

As in Kozinet’s (2002) netnography of the <alt.coffee> newsgroup, members of the R1 forum speak their own language that may be bemusing or simply incomprehensible for the unfamiliar. Product related language includes knowledge about different motorbike models, accessories, and their main characteristics, and reflects important aspects of individuality, status, or risk-taking behaviors. For example, a list of accessories at the end of a posting including items such as “Akrapovic carbon fiber full race exhaust, PCIII USB, Öhlins steering damper, fender eliminator with LEDs” may suggest a proneness for individuality, but it also may signal expertise to other riders and enhance acceptance and status of a forum’s member. A second group of language is related to riding the motorcycle in general. For example, an expression such as “highsider” (a motorcycle accident caused by the rear wheel gaining traction after it has lost traction, frequently resulting in the rider to be thrown off the bike) provokes associations and feelings that only the “initiated” may fully comprehend.

Personification and Conflict

Many contributors in the R1 forum emphasize that the R1 needs a lot of respect, in order to avoid accidents. Riding a sport bike is like being in a dangerous environment, it “deserves a lot of respect. Like the ocean, if you don’t respect it you could end up crushed!” Forum members also warn that the inexperienced rider may get “punished by the bike,” and that the bike “is not forgiving in any manner.” Accidents or close accidents may come in a sudden, unexpected way. The rider may feel comfortable on the bike, and the very next moment, the “beast will hit you.” The motorcycle thus is frequently described not as a material thing, but rather as a wild animal that has its own will and behavior. Like the animal tamer in the circus has to show respect to the predator and avoid the temptation of feeling safe, the sport bike rider has to do the same with the bike. As in the circus, overconfidence or moments of inadvertency may lead to fatal accidents. However, the beast can be tamed, and whereas a profound knowledge about the lion or tiger in the circus may protect the animal tamer from aggressive behavior of the animal, it is self-control and, more specifically, throttle control that may protect the R1 rider from unwanted reactions of the bike. It is this tension between the emotional, the fear, and the unpredictable, versus the rational and control, which are finally integrated and lead to the domination of the beast. As with other important activities, riding a motorcycle can interfere significantly with the maintenance of social relationships.

Although one might think that riding a motorcycle is an expression of masculinity and thus may make the rider more attractive for women, the opposite is often the truth. Consider, e.g., Ron who describes how he gave up riding, but then started again:

If you look under my avatar, you’ll see that I sold my R6. My mom hated the idea of me riding. My girlfriend would call when she knew I had planned to go riding and if I didn’t call back in a short amount of time, she’d be crying. (Passed her on one wheel one day and kind of freaked her out. One car on the whole damn stretch of road and it was her...WTF?) Anyways, I sold my R6 in august of ’05. By March of this year, I almost lost my mind so I bought an R1. Mom still doesn’t like it, girlfriend still HATES it, I still love it. They’ll either get over it or they won’t, either way, riding is one of the few things that make me happy and there’s no way in hell I would ever give that up again.

In the case of Ron, it was the fear of a serious accident that made his mother and girlfriend disapprove his activity. The addictive aspect of riding a motorcycle is also expressed in this posting, as Ron explains that he “almost lost his mind” after he had sold his bike. Turning points such as quitting motorcycle riding have been described by Haigh and Crowther (2005) and also include, e.g., the first time a rider participates in a track day, the first accident, or the first time a rider does a wheelie. Ron’s craving for riding a motorcycle was so strong that eventually he bought a new (and even more powerful) motorbike. For Ron, the activity is so important that he even accepts the (fear-based) disapproval of his mother and his girlfriend. However, the fear of an accident is only one of at least two possible explanations why the girlfriend or spouse doesn’t like the idea of riding a motorcycle. In some cases, the bike may create conflict by absorbing important resources, such as time or devotion, and there are in fact motorcyclists who refer to their bike as “her” instead of “it,” as in the following postings by James and Robert:

Well I finally went down. Firstly I’m healthy. I was wearing full gear and I only have some bumps and bruises so it’s all good. Smacked my head on the ground so I was dazed for about a half hour or so but my Shoei definitely protected my nugget! Now on to my girl…she’s banged up but repairable. Broke the upper and stay but didn’t break the headlights…that’s a money saver! My right clip-on bit the dust as well as my new Pazzo brake lever. Right side rearset is busted but that’s easily fixed. The frame and clutch sliders did there job to a T. I’ve got some rash on my mids and on my rear tail section but nothing completely destroyed other than my upper and stay. No fluids leaking or anything so I’m good. The forks and frame look great, all things considered. [James]

Ok me and the wife split up and one of the first things that I did was park my other women in my house and I bought a pool table! She came over today and flipped out!!!! lol. [Robert]

Both James and Robert do not only attribute personality to their bikes, but explicitly refer to their bikes as females. The competing role between partner and motorcycle is especially salient in Robert’s posting, who refers to his motorcycle as his “other women” when deciding to park it in the living room. In order to signal his regained freedom to the forum members, Robert uploads pictures of his newly decorated living room, showing the pool table in the middle of the room and the motorbike on a rear stand on one side, next to his leather suit which is carefully attached to a coat.
hook on the wall. Thus, Robert’s wife is not running against some abstract activity or thing, but rather against another female competitor, which may explain her strong reaction when visiting Robert in his newly decorated home. However, James and Robert’s postings also exemplify the decision conflict many forum members express when sharing their thoughts and experiences about riding a motorcycle. For many members, there is a continuing conflict between the bike on one hand and the girlfriend or family on the other hand, between fun and risk, and between the emotional and the rational. Almost as in Freud’s structure of the personality, the id is represented by the motorbike which is moving the person to obtain positive feelings and emotions, whereas the ego, represented by girlfriend, family, the police, and the social environment in general, pressures the motorbike owner to be practical, reasonable, and responsible.

**Brand Commitment and Brand Segregation**

Harley-Davidson riders, as described by Schouten and McAlexander (1995), as well as many virtual communities united by their affection for brands such as the Apple Newton (Muniz and Schau 2005, Schau and Muniz 2006), Hummer (Luedicke 2006), MG (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006), McIntosh (Belk and Tumbat 2005, Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), Nutella (Cova and Pace 2006), and Saab (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) define themselves by their commitment to one specific brand. High levels of brand identification often come along with almost unconditioned adoration and loyalty for the brand that may even turn into quasi-religious forms of worship. There is always a very clear demarcation between the “own” brand and the “other” brands, which leads to a voluntary brand segregation for community members. However, what sounds as good news for some brands is not necessarily a reality for other brands. In the example of the Yamaha R1 community, it becomes quickly apparent that brand identification and loyalty are on much lower levels than for many of the Harley-Davidson customers. For example, quite a number of Yamaha R1 owners, although often very satisfied with their bike, readily state that they would buy the bike that gives them the best performance or value, independently of the brand, as the following example shows:

“I’m really faithful to Yamaha, but when sitting on a new R1 and a new GSX-R1000 side by side, I have to say I like the Suzuki. The R1 just feels so much... bigger. I don’t know. Also, the magazines bitch about the suspension... yet how many serious track people leave suspension stock anyway? Regardless, I’m too poor to buy a new bike, so I’ll continue riding my 02 R1 on the track.

In the above statement, John emphasizes his loyalty to his current bike, a 2002 Yamaha R1, but this loyalty seems not to be unconditioned, as in many of the examples from brand communities. Rather, the decision to stay with his current bike is based on economic reasons (high switching costs), as opposed to arguments related to brand loyalty or the superiority of his current brand. Interestingly, he is not considering a more recent Yamaha model when reflecting about his own bike, but seems to prefer the new Suzuki 1000. The reason for this conditioned or limited brand loyalty may lie in the tight competition between the established brands sport bike producers, accompanied by little differentiated products and brands. Established brands in the sport bike category, such as Honda, Suzuki, or Kawasaki, seem to be almost perfect substitutes for the Yamaha brand. For example, when a relatively new forum member asked what brand he should buy, respondents stated that although they were very satisfied with their Yamaha’s, he should buy the bike he simply liked best, because “any of the new bikes are great” (Daniel). Or, as Joe puts it,

“I’ve spent some time on all the bikes and seriously there is no true winner, no matter what you get nowadays is a rocket out of the crate and you will be getting a good bike! Each has its ups and down but overall I could see myself on any of them really!”

Because no American brand currently offers a sport bike (the only remaining U.S. motorcycle manufacturer of importance, Harley-Davidson, does not offer motorcycles in the sport bike category), values such as patriotism or American heritage (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) do not appear in the R1 forum. Rather, the American heritage of Harley riders is frequently questioned by remarks such as David’s who observes “You know what I think is funny: They tell us we’re riding Jap bikes but you look in there driveway and you see a Honda, Toyota, or a Subaru parked there.” Although the forum members seem to be relatively open to any motorcycle rider, independently of brand, Harley-Davidson riders are seen differently by some members because they are perceived by these members as a mostly arrogant and closed community. Forum members, e.g., complain that Harley riders do not care for other motorists on the street, as suggested in the following posting:

After last week’s trip to the convention, I have a new-found hatred for Harley riders. It’s not so much that they can’t ride worth a shit, it’s also the fact that they could give a shit less about everyone else on the road, especially sportbikes. I give them a short opportunity to get the hell over, then if they don’t it’s a quick change to Pro-Racer mode. I’ve noticed that they tend to get over when you pass them like you mean business. No more waves from me after last week.

The consequence (which may be interpreted almost as a punishment for the Harley riders) is that Jack does not wave any more to them. Waving is an important form of greeting between motorcyclists, and for many bikers it is an important ritual that distinguishes them from car drivers and other motorists. However, waving also describes the relationships and hierarchies within the motorcycle community. First, members of relatively closed communities such as the Harley-Davidson subculture may not wave at everyone, and even may decide to only wave at other Harley-Davidson riders (or, in its extreme form, only at riders that appear to be “hardcore” riders). Second, it is commonly expected for riders of smaller motorbikes to wave first. In any case, riders of the larger sport bikes (namely, 600cc, 750cc or literbikes) do not necessarily wave back at smaller bikes. However, there are apparently no conventions or norms in the community for this behavior, and whereas some R1 owners do not wave at everyone, others state they do:

Myself, I will wave at anyone on 2 wheels, (except scooters, can’t stand them). If you wave back, cool, if you don’t... whatever. And I normally will not disrespect others on bikes until they do so. I may not own or ride a Harley or a chopper or an Indian, but I do still appreciate them for their looks and styling. (Andrew)

The existence of a complex social structure of the Harley-Davidson subculture with its multiple, coexisting subgroups, as described by Schouten and McAlexander (1995), is implicitly confirmed in this research by the very different approaches of sport bike riders on how to treat Harley riders.
Summary

The findings of this research suggest that for many forum members, their motorcycle is more than just a machine. Traits and qualities of living beings are assigned frequently to the bike, and the metaphors of “the beast” or “my other woman” are used. In contrast to the Harley-Davidson subculture of consumption described by Schouten and McAlexander (1995), the conflicts of driving a motorcycle become salient in the postings of the forum members. These conflicts can be internal, e.g., the conflict between the hedonistic search for emotions and fun versus the fear of having an accident, or external, e.g., the conflict between allocating time and devotion to the girlfriend or wife versus the bike (the other woman). Despite these high levels of personification, the sport bike community seems to be inherently open to other brands. For example, the sport bike community seems to be relatively open when it comes to waving at other riders, and the feeling of unity is, in contrast to brand communities, not expressed by the brand, but rather by the activity. This may explain why Harley-Davidson riders, who seem to be more brand oriented, are perceived as arrogant by some sport bike riders, with the consequence that these two groups frequently do not wave at each other. The openness of the sport bike community to other brands further becomes salient when R1 owners give advice about which motorcycle to buy. Although R1 owners frequently express very high levels of satisfaction with their bike, they do not discard other motorcycle brands, such as Honda, Suzuki, or Kawasaki, from their consideration set. Many of them feel committed and loyal to the Yamaha brand; however, this loyalty is not as unconditional as in the case of the Harley-Davidson owners described by Schouten and McAlexander (1995).

LINKING MARKET ANALYSIS WITH MARKETING STRATEGY

It is an objective of most, if not all, marketing managers to build strong brands and to generate loyal and committed customers who do not only repurchase the product, but highly identify themselves with the brand and recommend it to other potential users. Some manufacturers have been successful in obtaining these high levels of brand identification and creating brand communities who are enthusiastic about their brands. Other producers of consumer products are faced with customers who are, despite of being satisfied, less loyal and more readily willing to switch brands. This research suggests that the sport bike community belongs in large part to the latter group. For example, whereas it has been suggested that loyal customers are more likely to recommend a company or brand to a friend or colleague (Reichheld 2006), members in the R1 forum do not endorse the Yamaha brand enthusiastically, but rather recommend “newbies” to buy the bike that provides the best fit or the highest performance, independently of the brand. Further, sport bike riders generally do not discriminate between their own and other brands when waving at other bikers, whereas for a truly brand loyal motorcycle owner, one would expect a higher likelihood to wave at bikes from the same brand than to wave at bikes from a different manufacturer. Thus, the important distinction between “my brand” and “the other brands” seems to be weak in the sport bike community, and in contrast to the Harley Davidson subculture of consumption, true, symbiotic brand relationships between manufacturers and sport bike owners have not been developed yet.

Although brand commitment in the sport bike community seems to be low, the findings of this research also suggest that product involvement or involvement for the activity is high. Figure 1 opens a two-dimensional space resulting in four quadrants, with involvement for the activity on the vertical axis, and brand commitment on the horizontal axis. Quadrant I consists of savvy loyal consumers who show not only a strong involvement for the activity, but also a strong brand commitment. Many brand communities, as well as the Harley-Davidson subculture of consumption as described by Schouten and McAlexander, belong to this segment. Quadrant II consists of educated switchers. These are consumers with high involvement for the activity, but low brand commitment. When repurchasing a product within the same category, e.g., a new motorbike, their decision making (i.e., information search, alternative evaluation, choice, and postpurchase evaluation) is extensive, and their choice set for a repurchase is typically larger than that of the savvy loyal. The convinced uninvolved segment in quadrant III is composed of consumers who have a strong brand commitment, but are not very involved with the product or the activity. It is probable that the high brand commitment expressed by these consumers is the result of influences from marketing activities or social groups such as friends or family. Examples in this consumer group are Harley-Davidson aspirants or “wanna-bes” as described by Schouten and McAlexander (1995), or “squids” in the R1 forum. Squids are mostly young, inexperienced riders with an emphasis on power and masculinity. According to several forum postings, they are ignorant about motorcycles but pretend to know a lot in discussions with experts and insist on their opinion, even when all evidence proves them wrong. Summarizing several comments on the topic by forum members, a typical squid buys the newest and most powerful motorcycle in the market just to show off, but then very quickly experiences a severe accident which is aggravated by the fact that squids typically drive in shorts and T-shirt, instead of using the recommended motorcycle gear. Finally, quadrant IV consists of persons with a relatively low involvement for the activity and low brand commitment. Although this segment is currently not very interested in motorcycles, marketers should not completely neglect it, because some of its members may be converted into convinced uninvolved (quadrant III), educated switchers (quadrant II), or even savvy loyal (quadrant I).

As in most other forums, the R1 forum allows visitors to read postings without being registered, and the forum statistics suggest that at any given time, there are more visitors on the forum’s page than registered members. It is probable that many of the forum members are opinion leaders for less experienced riders or aspirants. The opportunities for brand socialization are significant in this context, because similar to McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig’s (2002) research on Jeep owners, new motorcycle riders may benefit from the expertise and social approval of veterans, whereas veterans benefit from the status and respect received in the community. Thus, one of the foremost priorities for marketing managers should be to increase brand commitment within the registered members of the forum. However, how can forum members be converted from educated switchers to savvy loyal? Evidence from Galfer, a provider of motorcycle braking systems, suggests that the R1 community is very receptive to the presence of representatives from companies, as long as their postings are not directly aimed at selling their products. Sergio Garcia, a Galfer employee, invites R1 forum members to ask him brake related questions with the following posting:

I work for a brake manufacturer, but I am not here to sell you on what I have. I am here to educate on brakes in general. If you have any questions, problems or concerns, let me hear it. I will do my best to give you a non-bias answer and help out my fellow riders. So bring them on! I have already answered a ton of brake related posts throughout this forum, but I am here if you need more info.
By choosing an unobtrusive, non-selling approach in the R1 forum, the company manages to gain credibility in the community and to build customer relationships that are more consumer focused and authentic than many of the hard-selling approaches at the dealerships. The Galfer thread on brake questions has more than 600 postings, which is significantly above the forum’s average of around 15 postings per thread, and evidences the interest of the community in a direct contact with company representatives. The Galfer example also suggests that online or brand communities are not limited to relationships between consumers and the brand and between consumers and consumers. Rather, consumers develop complex relationships with several brands, products, marketing agents, and other consumers within the same community.

Communication in Internet forums are thus not outside the control of marketers, but rather provide marketers with the opportunity to monitor and understand customers’ problems and concerns, and potentially influence their beliefs, attitudes, and opinions. Marketers of parts, accessories, and services can opt to show presence where their customers are. For example, a braking system manufacturer like Galfer may decide to be in several forums about different Yamaha, Honda, Kawasaki, Suzuki, or Ducati models, as well as in more specialized forums about motorcycle brakes. However, the forum’s openness to other brands also provides opportunities for direct competitors. For example, company representatives from Honda or Kawasaki may try to not only monitor the activities on the R1 forum, but actively engage in discussions with R1 owners. On the other hand, marketers from Yamaha may try to not only show presence at forums related to Yamaha models, but also be in forums that focus on competing Honda, Kawasaki, Suzuki, or Ducati motorbikes. As such, many online forums are essentially consumer, not brand centered.

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