

Belonging, camaraderie, and friendship on two wheels - Ethnographic experience in Rio Harley Owner's Group

Pertencimento, camaradagem e amizade em duas rodas - Uma experiência etnográfica na Rio Harley Owner's Group

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ABSTRACT

Harley Owner's Group (H.O.G.) has been singled out in academic studies as a reference regarding the power and influence of groups over the decisions and actions of its members. Using the ethnographic style technique, the present qualitative research explores to what extent the Rio H.O.G. brand community can influence its members, concerning the connection of the latter with the brand and with the product itself, exceeding the condition of a single group interested in a certain object. The importance given to friendship and to life sharing among members, as well as the protection between peers and social inclusion, have been stressed, having been concluded that this overrun can indeed exist, underpinned by the strong emotional significance of this brand community over its members. The theoretical contribution is the improved knowledge about how consumers organize their lives and their identities, with their uniform consumption pattern being governed by a set of values common - that is, by a common ethos. The practical contributions include partnerships with Rio H.O.G. by business consultancies and by tourism, gastronomy and real estate companies.

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KEYWORDS: Ethnography; Brand communities; Harley Davidson; Brand; Social inclusion

RESUMO

A Harley Owner's Group (H.O.G.) tem sido apontada, em estudos acadêmicos, como referência ao poder e à influência de grupos sobre as decisões e ações de seus membros. Utilizando a técnica de estilo etnográfico, a presente pesquisa qualitativa buscou saber até que ponto é possível chegar à influência que uma comunidade de marca pode exercer sobre seus membros, no que diz respeito à ligação destes com a marca e com o próprio produto, a ponto de ultrapassar a fronteira tradicional de ser apenas um agrupamento com interesses em determinado objeto. Foi focado o exemplo da comunidade de marca dos usuários da Rio H.O.G. Tendo sido percebida a importância dada à amizade e ao compartilhamento da vida entre os membros, assim como à proteção entre os pares e à inclusão social, concluiu-se que esta ultrapassagem pode existir, sustentada pelo forte significado emocional desta comunidade de marca sobre seus membros. A contribuição teórica - obtida de forma original por utilizar a técnica de estilo etnográfico - é a de ampliar e melhorar o conhecimento sobre a forma como os consumidores organizam suas vidas e suas identidades, com seu padrão de consumo uniforme sendo governado por um conjunto de valores comuns - ou seja, por um *ethos* comum. Já as contribuições práticas configuram-se no estabelecimento de parcerias com a Rio H.O.G. por parte de consultorias empresariais e empresas ligadas às indústrias de turismo, de entretenimento, de gastronomia e de lançamentos imobiliários.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Etnografia; Comunidades de marca; Harley-Davidson; Marca; Inclusão social.

1 INTRODUCTION

Communities “are aggregates of people who share beliefs and are primarily bound by relationships of affection, loyalty, common values and/or personal interests, that is, interest in one another’s personality and life events” (Brint, 2001, p. 8). Thus, by means of a reciprocal feeling, these subjects are kept connected as a group, even having heterogeneous characteristics; they forge and extend their individual identities, as well as they seek support from other members of the group for the construction of identity (Bauman, 2007).

Under the sociological aspect, the brand community construct refers to primitive communities, where groups of socially connected individuals lived in the same geographical area and shared interests and activities (Freitas & Almeida, 2017). With the advancement of technology, this concept has been changed, as the interaction between group members is no longer related to geography, time, or space, but there are still interests and activities in common (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014).

Brand communities have seen an enlargement in visibility and an increase in brand loyalty, as well as a closer proximity between companies and consumers (Habibi et al., 2014). This has resulted in an increase in companies’ knowledge of consumer behavior (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), as well as facilitated the identification of business opportunities through interaction with the participants (Algesheimer & Dholakia, 2008) and monitoring discussions (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008).

For example, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners’ official brand community – Harley Owner’s Group (HOG) – was created in the 1980s by the American manufacturer of these vehicles, with a dual purpose: to develop relationships with proprietary customers and to stimulate commercial practices between them (Álvaro, 2014), and propagate the concept of the brand of personal freedom (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) and the expression of a fearless and adventurous way of life (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006).

With more than three million members worldwide by the end of 2016, H.O.G. is considered by the organization much more than just a customer relationship club: it is a benchmark in terms of power and influence of groups on the decisions and actions of their members (Schembri, 2009).

This research is part of a larger investigation about several elements that compose the behavior of members of the Rio Harley-Davidson (Rio H.O.G.), as consumers of the brand. Its specific objective is to know to what extent it is possible to arrive at the influence that H.O.G. can exert on its members as regards their linkage with the brand and with the product itself, even going beyond the traditional border of being just a group with interests in Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

The results of this research will add value, in an original way, to the theory of brand communities (Hickman & Ward, 2007; Habibi et al., 2014, Algesheimer and Dholakia, 2008; Carlson et al., 2008) by exploring specificities of these groups from the application of an unusual method in the area of Administration in this Country: the technique of ethnographic style (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003).

To do so, this paper is divided into five parts. The first brings the theoretical reference on brand communities. The second shows the summary of the characteristics of H.O.G. The third informs the method used in the research. The fourth presents the research results and, finally, the fifth concludes with the final considerations of the research.

2 THEORETICAL REFERENCES: BRAND COMMUNITIES

Communities are a compound of emotional pluralities and concepts, in which mutual solidarity among their members is exercised in a specific environment (Maffesoli, 1996). This idea is corroborated by Bauman (2007): communities are a place of warmth, comfort and mutual trust, the latter being pointed out as a social duty of their members, who share constant help and care with one another.

Such involvement confirms the existence of a shared understanding between community members, whether by low levels of inequality or fraternal relationships and mutual support (Brint, 2001). Thus, through a reciprocal feeling, these subjects are kept connected as a group, even having heterogeneous

characteristics; they forge and extend their individual identities, as well as seek support in the other members of the group for the construction of identity (Bauman, 2001).

A better understanding of the concept of a community first passes through its understanding as a “consumer community,” when the individual develops a sense of belonging by sharing the same consumer behaviors and values with other individuals in their social context (Hickman & Ward, 2007). Such a concept encompasses much more than just a sense of belonging, but of comradeship and brotherhood, as if the individual were part of a large family. For this reason, the individual submits to the group’s recommendations and judgments voluntarily and willingly, since he or she aims at the friendship and protection of the members as a reward for his or her affiliation to the group.

Brand communities, in turn, are “specialized, not geographically determined, communities based on a set of social relationships structured among brand admirers” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Its emergence refers to some individuals having a high level of involvement with brands, using them as mechanisms of representation or construction of their self-concept. In this self-connection with the brand, consumers can express their individuality, differentiate themselves from others, strengthen their self-esteem and, above all, facilitate social interaction (Escalas & Bettman, 2009).

Brand communities can be created and managed by both consumers and companies owning a brand. In the first case, they have a more differentiated profile, bringing together consumers who are interested in or strongly admire a brand, which often results in common interests, lifestyles, and hobbies (Muniz, & Schau, 2005).

In the second case, in which H.O.G. falls, what companies are looking for is both a closer proximity to their customers and an increase in the brand’s visibility (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). That is, through the community, they aim at marketing objectives such as, for instance, increasing loyalty to the brand and quantity purchased, or even monitoring the discussions and/or the interaction with the participants in order to identify business opportunities (Algesheimer & Dholakia, 2008).

Perhaps the greatest benefit brought about by this type of arrangement to the companies involved in it is the fact that consumers are more likely and more willing to engage in emotional involvement than they would be, for example, from traditional Relationship Marketing strategies (Habibi et al., 2014). This is because, according to Algesheimer and Dholakia (2008), functioning as a self-expression channel, social support site and information center, a brand community can exert strong influence on its members and establish long-term consumer-business relationships (Carlson et al., 2008).

The greater the individual’s sense of belonging to the brand community of which he or she is a part, the greater the propensity to promote the brand through word of mouth communication, the greater the interest in attending brand-related events, the greater the loyalty to the brand in the face of competitors and the greater interest in the brand’s history (Carlson et al., 2008). Their identification process has feedback (Dholakia, Blazevic, & Wiertz, 2009), with self-categorization leading to the strengthening of relationships and affective bonds (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Nambisan and Baron, 2007) and consequently to the influence of the members of the group on this individual (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). It is not an individual identity, but a shared and collective one, based on the consciousness of belonging to the group (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005).

On the other hand, the consumer attraction to the symbolic universe of the brand (Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005) and the consequent strengthening of an emotional behavior with the community in which he or she is inserted imply that, being the identification proportional to the intensity of interactions of the individual with his/her group or with his/her community, the influence of the group members on this individual is guaranteed, mainly due to established relationships and closer ties of affection (Brocato, Voorhees, & Baker, 2012).

In this way, the tendency to consume more and more products related to the brand, or even to reproduce behaviors originated and learned from the communities or groups, will become larger as the individual’s desire is to remain connected to the group and continue to be accepted by its members. And, in the wake of this identification, brand communities end up exerting strong influence and high impact on their members, often affecting and changing their behaviors, actions, and thoughts (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

It is possible that one of the most relevant characteristics of these communities to become a more effective tool for Marketing actions than the classic ones of Relationship Marketing is the homogeneity among the elements that form them. With a strong base in theories of social identity and with an approach sustained in theories related to group similarity, there are few identified inter-member differences and many similarities in terms of values, interests and hobbies, in a typical case of perceived similarity (Gonçalves, 2009).

If belonging to a brand community is a choice on the part of the consumers who understand that brand positioning and segmentation are convergent with their views and opinions (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Borle, 2010), it is natural that their desire to share the interests and experiences of the brand with the other participants is directly proportional to the degree of similarity and homogeneity that they feel towards the latter (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006).

It is not surprising, then, that a more affective concept of tribe (Goulding, Avi, & Canniford, 2013) is created there than of an organizational structure: formal hierarchies do not subsist with occasional leaderships being only temporary (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). More important than leading is to be framed in three fundamental elements of characterization, which guarantee the subsistence of this environment: 1) rituals and traditions, which serve to preserve and reproduce its culture, its history and its meaning; 2) the awareness of belonging that gives members of a community a sense of connection with others in the group, as well as the brand itself; and 3) a sense of moral responsibility regarding the responsibility of individuals as a group to other members, always seeking collective and non-individual interest and benefit (Carlson et al., 2008).

This short bibliographical survey on brand communities aimed to show that the social interaction approach, taken by the research, has to do with the social relationship between individuals and a brand, which can be defined by the degree of intensity with which the consumer recognizes, in the brand, a partnership for a reliable relationship. This recognition, in turn, increases the knowledge of the companies regarding the behavior of the consumer, provided by the social interaction.

The natural consequence of this movement is the signaling and transmission to companies, more genuinely, of information about the consumers belonging to those communities, as well as their habits, attitudes and consumption practices. This phenomenon is facilitated by the fact that Marketing aimed specifically at brand communities does not face the same problems of traditional Marketing, such as consumer resistance due to excessive mass advertising campaigns or media fragmentation. In addition, companies benefit from the environment of these communities – where strong emotional connections are present among their members – as well as the high degree of loyalty to a particular brand. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) stressed that this phenomenon generates a sharing with more credibility and persuasion among its members.

It has become evident that the effects of brand communities on consumers facilitate the spread of the so-called empowerment movement of the latter, leading to a partnership relationship between them and the brands. This is because the purchasers of a brand, as participants of communities of the same brand, become partners that help in the success and development of it, especially in what concerns the information gathering, also co-participating in the elaboration of Marketing strategies – in an interesting point of convergence with the co-production principle explored by Lusch and Vargo (2006).

Empowered, brand community participants are more satisfied with the brand as they realize the benefits of both functionality and experience and symbology as they share ideas and information with their peers, socially interact, and satisfy their needs related to the feeling of belonging and social self-expression (Muniz & Schau, 2005).

In view of these benefits, consumer loyalty to the brand and the community is strengthened at a later moment, reinforced by two other aspects: the intensity of exposure of the individual to the brand, and the endorsement of the other individuals that make up the community. On the whole, these elements guarantee to the consumer the creation of an atmosphere of acceptance and the notion of a family affective relationship (Oliver, 1999).

3 CHARACTERISTICS OF H.O.G.

With more than 30 years of existence, H.O.G. has become, throughout the world, a strong marketing tool. Currently there are six boards of H.O.G. spread throughout the world: 1) the United States and Latin America; 2) Brazil; 3) Canada; 4) Australia; 5) Japan, and 6) Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Together, they manage all H.O.G. global units, aiming to maintain the same Harley-Davidson brand identity and lifestyle anywhere in the planet (Harley-Davidson, 2017).

In Brazil, H.O.G. was created in 1993, with only representatives in the state of São Paulo. Currently it has representatives also in the states of Rio de Janeiro, Goiás, Federal District, Mato Grosso do Sul, Minas Gerais, Paraná, Bahia, Santa Catarina, Rio Grande do Sul, Ceará, and Pernambuco. The Brazilian board of directors has high significance, with Brazil being the leader in Harley-Davidson brand sales in Latin America, behind only the United States, Canada, Germany and Japan in the world market respectively (Harley-Davidson, 2017).

Being associated with H.O.G. and a heavy user of Harley-Davidson are mixed elements. Not surprisingly, in Brazil, the associate's title accompanies every first-hand motorcycle, as well as exemption from the first annuity payment in the amount of \$ 80. Upon joining H.O.G., the member receives numerous benefits that include, for example, discounts on Harley-Davidson products, participation in events and rallies with special conditions of lodging, access to VIP areas in meetings (regional, national and international), subscription of H.O.G. magazine, embroidered badge and bronze emblem of H.O.G., member card, benefits in Harley-Davidson motorcycle rentals, membership service, membership recognition after 10 and 25 years of service, and mileage recognition program (Harley-Davidson, 2017).

H.O.G. also has several partnerships around the world, such as the Best Western hotel chain, where the member receives a 10% discount on online bookings, room upgrades, early check-in, and late check-out. Another advantage of joining this relationship club is the ease of the international motorcycle dispatch, as well as discounts at the Harley-Davidson Museum in Milwaukee (Harley-Davidson, 2017).

Through the stimulation of social interactions, which generate a greater sense of belonging to the group due to emotional ties, the development of social identity and the possibility of expression of the personality of its members, H.O.G. has strengthened, more and more, the affective ties between its members. This has facilitated, among the latter, increasing the power of interpersonal influence over their values (Scharf, 2011).

4 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative article brings the result of field research adapted from ethnography to the context of Marketing. This means that it is an ethnographic research - a technique for gathering evidence that, like traditional ethnography, can use in-depth interviews, semi-structured scripts or even informal conversations - but without intense participation of the researcher in the daily life of the studied group (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003).

In this research the ethnographic approach was used with specific characteristics of the non-participant observation, plus interviews with members of the board of Rio H.O.G. and informal conversations with members of the brand community. The option for non-participation was due to the fact that the researcher, albeit a lover of Harley motorcycles, does not have one or even a license to ride motorcycles. In addition, until the beginning of the research he was completely foreign to the environment of H.O.G. For these two reasons, he understood that an observation that did not involve engagement in activities would give him greater exemption in this first study of the group.

It is noteworthy that the use of ethnography in this study had two purposes. The first was to add originality to the research, since it is an unusual method in the area of Administration in Brazil of the two research techniques classified by Markoni and Lakatos (2017) as intensive direct observation: observation itself (which includes ethnography) and the interview. This can be proven by means of a survey carried out in Administration articles for the period from January 2000 to November 2017 at

the Spell base, which aggregates the scientific production made available electronically, among other vehicles, by Brazilian journals classified as Qualis among strata A1 and B5, from the areas of Public Administration and Business, Accounting and Tourism. In the case of the words 'ethnography' or 'ethnographic' in the abstract and in the keywords, this research returned the existence, respectively, of 142 and 75 results, with the latter being contained in the first. Therefore, an average of less than 8 articles/year. By way of comparison, the same search for the word 'interview' returned 659 results, averaging 36.7 articles/year.

The second reason was the very particular contribution that ethnography can bring to Marketing studies, mainly aiming to assist in the understanding of the needs and desires of consumers, based on the decoding of their observed behavior (Mariampolski, 1999, 2006). The technique also seeks to study consumer behavior, not as an independent individual in the sociocultural context, objective and rational presented by other methodological methods (Ikeda, Pereira, & Gil, 2006), but as someone who relates to other individuals that make up their social context (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003). It is far adequate to the "revelation of unknown elements of little-known subcultures of our own societies" (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 107), facilitating the solution of problems that cannot be resolved by other methods from the fields of Sociology, Psychology or even Economics, because of their limitations in understanding the real influence on the consumption behavior of individuals by the culture shared by the group (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994).

This research in the field was made through the attendance of the researcher at the Rio Harley-Davidson dealership, in Recreio dos Bandeirantes neighborhood, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, to participate in the meetings on Saturdays, of Rio H.O.G. These visits occurred during the months of March to November 2014, on an approximate basis of twice each month.

On these occasions, the physical environment of the establishment, its material aspects, such as the decoration of the store, the exposed products and the appearance of the employees were observed; and the sensory aspects of the environment, such as sounds, temperature and odors (Wolcott, 2008).

In addition, the researcher had the opportunity to interact in spontaneous conversations or to only observe, in the events to which he appeared, the behavior of more than 30 male subjects, without restriction as to age, members of Rio H.O.G. or frequenters of the group's weekly meetings. There were also interviews with 14 members of the community, among them the president of Rio H.O.G., a member of the board and 12 members without positions in the structure of Rio H.O.G. That is, the selection of research subjects obeyed intentional sampling (Yin, 2016), when the researcher "selects individuals and places for study because they can intentionally inform an understanding of the research problem and the central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell, 2014, pp. 129-130).

The results of the observations and the conversations were noted by the researcher. Soon after each meeting – in order to avoid losing important elements due to forgetting – he spent as much time as needed to write them in the form of a diary, using the first person singular. His main concern at this stage of the work was to emphasize especially what seemed extraordinary or unusual.

In terms of the technique used for the analysis of the evidence, the content analysis was performed (Bauer, 2000), reconstructing the representations in the syntactic and semantic dimensions from the writings obtained in the field, based on open grid: the emerging categories of analysis were rearranged until reaching the final categories, using the interpretative process. Once the research objective was rescued, the results were confronted with the theory, and the research was concluded (Lee & Lings, 2013).

It is important to emphasize that we sought to understand the facts from the point of view of the subjects analyzed, identifying patterns and ideas that would help in the characterization of the cultural and social patterns of the group (Goulding, 2005). That is, the analysis of primary evidence involved the interpretation of meaning of human actions, in a descriptive-interpretive way, in a typical social and cultural understanding necessary both for the purpose of comparing cultures and for understanding the set of institutionalizations of a culture (Sanday, 1979).

The following ethnographic research report summarizes the ethnographic observations in the way they were originally written, that is, in the first person singular, since it will help the reader to better understand the extent of the experimenter's experience.

5 RESEARCH RESULTS

5.1 Ethnographic research report

My interaction with the members of Rio H.O.G. was started when I first made a telephone contact with the company's relationship manager, Mr. Paulo Sérgio Álvaro, and I expressed my interest in researching H.O.G.

I was promptly invited to a breakfast in Rio H.O.G. on Saturday of that same week, so that not only could I explain my work better, but also so that I could meet the members of the community.

These meetings are held at the Rio Harley-Davidson dealership, located at Avenida das Américas, Recreio dos Bandeirantes neighborhood, always starting at 9:00 am on Saturday, in which the members of the Rio community of this brand participate. The objectives of these meetings are various, such as fraternizing with other members of the group, attending workshops and lectures, and participating in courses related to the motorcycle universe. It is also there that the members gather to start the "trains" at 10:00 a.m.

"Trains" are the pre-programmed trips to nearby cities or even within the city of Rio de Janeiro, which gather some of the elements that are participating in the breakfast – those who do not join the "train" of the day often remain in the store until its closing, at 4:00 pm. These trains have their structure set up from the strong concern for safety and the protection of everyone during the course. For this reason, the mandatory presence of some of the characters is observed: the Road Captains (pilots responsible for driving the trains and traveling ahead of the groups), the "Ferrolhos" (pilots traveling at the end of the groupings, giving back in cases of breakdown or accidents with members of the group) and the "Volantes" (pilots responsible for the harmony in the structure of the "trains", closely following the other members).

In this composition, the Road Captains and the "Ferrolhos" usually communicate during the trip, so as to guarantee the safety of the group. To do so, they are obliged to train in the areas of Defensive Driving, Driving Groupings and First Aid on the Road, courses offered by the Harley-Davidson dealerships in partnership with H.O.G. In the "trains" there is a ritual of positioning derived from the atmospheres not only of comradeship but also of respect for the experience accumulated by the older members, nevertheless without obeying a hierarchical format or privileges. In practice, the "assembly" of the "train" takes place with the strategic positioning of the members of H.O.G. who are responsible for conducting the group, followed by an orderly placement of the others in order to compose the grouping in rows and columns, but always without any marked places or selection by motorcycle models, for example. All are treated as equal and valued as members of the group. That is, the formation, the internal positioning, the unity of the group and the mutual attention are affirmed all the time, with pinches of respectful attitude of the younger elements towards the most experienced.

Concerning Wolcott's (2008) orientation that the work field – understood as the environment or context in which the observed group works or lives – should be the subject of ethnographic observation, as soon as I arrived at the Harley-Davidson dealership my first impression attached to physical evidence of the establishment. Rio Harley-Davidson is a building that externally mixes rustic architecture of apparent brick with a modern structure of white irons and mirrored glass in its façade. Internally, it is divided into four major environments:

- 1) Show Room: this is the largest room of the dealership. Its decor is eclectic, blending luxury and stripping: dark granite floors and the motorcycles themselves – exposed for sale in a scattered manner – give the sophisticated tone, while black iron structures interspersed with apparent bricks give a more aggressive tone. On the left is the exhibition area for motorcycle accessories and the clothing store. In the background, there is a large rustic brick counter in square format, where the sales and management staff are positioned, as well as customer service desks, located on the left side of the hall. Just behind the service desks one can find the dealership cashier, as well as some meeting rooms. Above, it is possible to view the mezzanine, composed of some meeting rooms and the room of the board of directors of the dealership;

- 2) Convenience area: located behind the Show Room, to which access is through portals of apparent brick, is the space where H.O.G meetings take place. It is made up of a large granite-brick countertop, two black leather sofas, some typical pub-style tables with Harley-Davidson upholstery stools, armchairs, racks with clothes and accessories on sale, and two stylized booths that serve as fitting rooms. For the entertainment of children attending with their parents, there is a foosball table and children's area decorated with orange tables and chairs containing the Harley-Davidson logo and a small motorcycle-shaped wooden swing with the name Harley-Davidson engraved on it;
- 3) Reception and service area for mechanical services to motorcycles, such as revisions and referral to the workshop in case of repairs: located to the left of the dealership's building, it has independent external entrance and presents architecture with the same elements used inside Rio Harley-Davidson. Its furniture consists of tables and chairs positioned on the left side of the reception area, a small counter on the right side to receive customers, a large iron structure containing an elevator that transports the motorcycles to the underground workshop, a background space for washing motorcycles and a shelf with accessories for sale on the right wall of the environment.
- 4) Workshop: it is positioned in the basement of the dealership and is where the repairs of the motorcycles take place. Access to it is made by a ramp in front of the parking lot, which is outside the dealership, between the sidewalk and the store. Its architecture is simpler than the other environments of Rio Harley-Davidson: all worked in shades of gray, orange and white, it is composed of an area without partitions whose space is, in its entirety, taken by the motorcycles to be revised or repaired. At the entrance one can see the stock of pieces, having at its side five boxes where the motorcycles are arranged or the revisions are made. At the back of the workshop there is also a kind of small office with parlors that act as a work area for the workshop staff.

As I entered the building, the first thing I noticed was the motorcycles for sale, positioned in various places in the Show Room, some of which were even exposed in a sort of suspended display case, right in the center of the room.

The game of lights, strategically positioned, coupled with the infinity of models of motorcycles, with their varied colors, composed a set design clearly dedicated to the exaltation and the extolling of the Harley-Davidson machines. Acoustically, I noticed the soundtrack of rock music, interrupted by the constant snorting of the engines coming from the motorcycles that arrive for the event or of those that are in the reception of the workshop, in the hall just next to the main hall.

This atmosphere, coupled with my particular admiration for motorcycles and especially for Harley-Davidsons, engulfed me deeply and I felt a strong impact with the beauty and exuberance of those machines exposed there. But I was awakened from my fascinated consumer "trance" by the sound of voices and laughter from the convenience area where members of H.O.G. were in fraternization that morning. I headed there.

When I arrived there, everywhere I could see people talking, laughing, eating, interacting, and apparently having a lot of fun. Accommodated on the sofas, serving on the counter, seated on the high tables that referred to American pubs, the small groups, composed of men, women, or both, scattered about the room. Circulating or sitting there, some took pictures, others bought some accessory of the brand. Not infrequently I also observed children, brought by their parents, who enjoyed themselves, for example, playing foosball or even climbing the motorcycles with the help and care of the person in charge.

I looked for Paulo Sérgio, the Rio Harley-Davidson relationship manager, who got me taken to the board of H.O.G. It was from that moment that my impressions began to be full of striking surprises.

The first sentiment echoed the way I was received by the management team: even though I was not a motorcycle rider or a Harley-Davidson owner, I was welcomed as if we had been known for a long time. I was immediately introduced to the other members of the group, in an atmosphere whose intensity and sincerity at first stunned me.

This surprise, however, slowly began to dissipate as I observed the prevailing environment there, and came to the conclusion that it was the natural way of doing things. Even being inside a dealership, the environment of friendship and cordiality was notorious, dictating an atmosphere of warmth and sharing. It made me feel more and more at home, although this was a totally new environment for me, since I had never been there.

Intrigued by the origin of this atmosphere of comradeship and willing to seek its origin – after all, this was my ethnographic goal –, I decided to move away from the crowd there, to observe in a non-intrusive way, but in greater detail, that context in which the group of ‘Harleyros’ (name given to their peers by those who own Harley-Davidson motorcycles, something like ‘Harleyers’) was inserted. And I repeated this procedure in the other visits.

With each new occasion, realizing the conversations, gestures, looks, and moods of these people, I felt a sense that the Harleyros breakfast on Saturday on Rio Harley-Davidson transcends a simple meeting of motorcycle owners of a certain brand.

Rather, it seemed to me to be a true ingratiation of equals, friends, brothers who, each week, close and strengthen their bonds of affection. To be present at that breakfast is to be among peers genuinely interested in the healthy exchange of experiences and friendship. It is to receive an injection of encouragement and support. It is to know that there are friends that one can count on. It is to enjoy the ambience of total comradeship, without major material interests. It is entering a world where the human being selects his best to exchange with his neighbor.

And these ties transcend the borders of the dealership, strengthening outside. Over the course of the days, I discovered that many who were there on those Saturdays also met during the week in other settings – bars, restaurants, clubs, nightclubs. In these other encounters the Harleyros often gather without the usual bustle of breakfast at the dealership, when the numbers are large, and they share their lives, talk, relax, deal with routine matters, or even discuss problems that any of the members may be facing.

I also noticed that the groups accustomed to these meetings outside the dealership practiced a certain selection, with the criterion of inclusion being age, profession or marital status, although all had in common the affinity as the main selective criterion. That is, these selective criteria in these “subgroups” naturally characterized a certain common identity, much more evident than at a time when all the members met in the meetings on Saturdays.

As a consequence of these social developments, as I got to know the members of the community, it became clear that some had developed very strong bonds of friendship with other members, confusing a simple friendship with a legitimate feeling of belonging to the same family. In addition to often attending each other’s homes, they often told me that they considered the families of H.O.G.’s friends as an extension of their own.

Even more interesting was to discover that this sense of family belonging can even transcend the friendship with the members only of the local H.O.G. For example, I heard countless accounts of Harleyros who, while traveling to other states and even to other countries, stayed in the home of members of the H.O.G. of those localities although without previously knowing them; that is, they were invited to stay only because they were members of the community. In one of these reports, I was textually told that it would be inconceivable to have a “brother” of H.O.G. coming from another state and not harboring him.

I was very surprised to learn that no strong cultural differences are capable of preventing the full integration of H.O.G. members. In this case, a member of Rio H.O.G. reported to me that, being with his wife in the Emirate of Dubai for the so-called Harley Day¹, when identifying themselves like members of H.O.G. in Brazil they were very well received, and won from the members of that community not only T-shirts from Harley-Davidson Dubai, but also a borrowed motorcycle of that

¹ Annual meeting of Harley-Davidson owners, which takes place in several cities around the world and generally lasts from two to three days, with: presentations of bands; presence of the H.O.G. space, where exclusive services are provided to community members; exhibition of new Harley-Davidson models; Test Ride, where the event participants and members of H.O.G. can ride exposed motorcycles; and Jumpstar, a motorcycle simulator for those who do not yet have a rider’s license or even never drove a Harley-Davidson motorcycle.

brand, so that they could participate in the traditional motorcycle parade, which is a milestone in the event. In addition, during the period in which they were in that city, the couple was invited to various events and even for dinners at the home of members of the Dubai H.O.G.

And even more distant occasions from the ingratiations directly linked to the brand do not prove to be obstacles for the H.O.G. community to let their principles of union prevail. A member of Rio H.O.G. went to the Swiss city of Bern to spend New Year's Eve, when he contacted the local Harley-Davidson dealer to ask for some suggestions for the new year as a family, he was referred to one of the members of H.O.G. of that locality, who promptly invited him to his house, together with other members of the H.O.G. of that city. He told me that, after that trip, he returned to Switzerland twice more, and in all of them he stayed at the house of friends of H.O.G. which he made that night.

With so many examples, I was not surprised to learn that many members consider these links so deep that these friends also share their personal lives, such as births of children and grandchildren, sponsorship of marriages and supports both emotional and professional, as in cases of divorces and deaths in the family.

Throughout my living with them, I could also verify that, outside the social environments of ingratiation, the members of H.O.G. develop a series of procedures and rituals for the times when they are on their bikes. These procedures take different forms depending on the occasion and purpose.

An example occurred when I was in the restaurant Beco do Alemão to interview the member of the presidency. At one point, five members of the group were arriving on the spot on their Harley-Davidson motorcycles. In a kind of rehearsed choreography, they came in Indian file, as if they were real "medieval knights," and positioned their "horses" neatly side by side. With the roar of Harley-Davidson engines and this orderly parade of motorcycles, everyone in the restaurant, Harleyros or not, paused to enjoy that "presentation." At that moment, I noticed the look of joy mixed with pride of the other members of the group, who were already in the restaurant, noticing the arrival of the others, as if the "other brothers of the family" had just arrived.

As the weeks passed, all this friendly context, as well as the family environment, made me understand the real meaning of many expressions commonly uttered by group members during the Saturday morning meetings, some very emotional ("I don't exchange a meeting of H.O.G. for nothing", "There may be the brightest sun out there, on Saturday mornings you'll never see me on the beach... my beach is here", "This is my weekend", "If you find me outside from here, I'll probably be with my H.O.G. friends"), others very strong ("H.O.G. is my life").

But what struck me most was the blending of devotion to some of the emotion-filled expressions, which showed that the community crossed the frontiers of a simple union of equals, achieving semi-religious status: "This is our temple", "We are indeed a brotherhood", "I won't leave this brotherhood for nothing in this world".

This way of thinking is very strong among the members of H.O.G. (and it could not be different, after all, "H.O.G. is my life") and is reinforced by a very particular symbology, as in the case of the bell. As an iconic species reminiscent of a "religious conversion", the bell, strategically located in the sales lounge, was played whenever someone bought a Harley-Davidson motorcycle during the H.O.G. meetings. When this happened, everyone present applauded the new member, cheering him on the new acquisition, but mainly because, from that moment on, a new "brother" became part of the fellowship.

This thought took on more interesting contours in my research when it was joined by the confidences of some members who at first glance seem paradoxical but which, in a more careful judgment, stress even more the strength of the sense of belonging, union of equals, brotherhood.

One of these confidences came from some members who confessed that if they were to rely on a critical and technical analysis of the machine itself, they would never choose a Harley-Davidson motorcycle: they are heavy (an average of half a ton), not good "sidewalk climbers", they are not economical, and the proximity of the motor is not friendly with the biker's legs because it warms them up.

However, they do not trade their Harley-Davidson motorcycles for any other. When I then questioned what led them to acquire such machines, the response was almost unanimous: "The

Harley-Davidson motorcycle is our passport to be part of this familiar and friendly context that only H.O.G. has". That is, it is the "price" that is paid to have access to this very special world of human coexistence guaranteed by H.O.G. – and it is worth it.

If, at the beginning of my study, I found this admiration – and in some cases, even devotion – to the group too exaggerated, with the coexistence I could see that the meaning was even greater for some of them. I remember one of my conversations in which I was introduced to a member of the group, a Rio citizen a few years ago transferred, to work, to the city of Campinas-São Paulo. Since then, every Friday he religiously rides his Harley-Davidson to Rio de Janeiro (distance of approximately 510 km), to participate in the meetings of Rio H.O.G. on Saturday mornings, returning to Campinas on Sundays. He was proud to say that he never missed a meeting of H.O.G. and spends the week counting down the days to be back in Rio, "among my friends".

As all this atmosphere and this way of thinking were very new to me, from the height of my lack of experience with the H.O.G. world I have come to imagine that the characteristics of this strong atmosphere of comradeship and fellowship would be identical to those of Rio anywhere in the world – even by the examples of hospitality reported in the cases of Dubai and Bern.

However, it is not so. If comradeship exists, in fact, as a universal phenomenon in the H.O.G. community, on the other hand it is modulated by local specificities.

In the American case, for example, an account I heard of a Texan Harleyro present at a breakfast, was that the celebrations of H.O.G. in the U.S.A. differ from the Brazilian ones because there Harley-Davidson motorcycles are more affordable than in Brazil. The consequent very large diversity of members in the American H.O.G. makes the celebrations, for the most part, happen outside the dealerships, in more stratified groups, and even with differentiations from state to state.

In addition to this type of feature, I was informed that not all places in the world have H.O.G. structure like Brazil. In Portugal, for example, American brands are not valued, and this helps H.O.G. not to exert so much influence on its members. In Germany, there are no weekly meetings or group tours, because the positioning of the product there is different, probably in line with the local culture: the Germans value the brand much more for the concept of freedom than for the collectiveness exalted by H.O.G.

Some other interesting elements caught my attention during my ethnographic research. One was the considerable number of women owning Harley-Davidson, also known as Ladies of Harley. In all meetings of H.O.G. in which I was present I observed their participation not only in these meetings – gathered at various points in the dealership, talking and sharing their lives with other women in exactly the same way as male Harleyros do – as in the "trains", either on the motorcycle rumps or even riding their own machines.

Another fact that interested me was the extreme appreciation that is given to the more experienced or older Harleyros. I witnessed at several moments the satisfaction of many when introducing me to such members of the group, treated with great respect and appreciation by others and seen as "members of honor" of the community. As is the case of the current president of Rio H.O.G. who in 2011 made a 53,000-km trip from Rio de Janeiro to Alaska, riding his Harley-Davidson.

On the other hand, even under a climate of friendship, I discovered that there is a group of Harleyros that is, in a way, a mockery of inner play and constant joking. These are the "coxinhas," a term used to identify those Harley-Davidson owners who only use their motorcycles on weekends or on special occasions such as H.O.G. events and meetings.

Another very interesting fact that emerged throughout my life was my discovery of the importance they give to identification as a member of the group. At each meeting, I noted that the members of H.O.G. were very keen to show their ties to the Harley-Davidson brand, transcending the mere possession of a motorcycle. This ostentation was manifested by the use of leather vests with the H.O.G. shield on the back, of Harley-Davidson T-shirts brought from other cities around the world (a kind of signaling to the other members that that Harleyro had already been in those cities), of jackets, social shirts, caps, boots, and other accessories. And, of course, everyone who has such identification is always best accepted by the group.

Even from the fact that I understood the importance of this signaling, on one occasion I was struck by the presence of participants who did not have such identification. That is, by my deduction, they were not Harleyros. Asking about it, I was informed that they were guests usually owning motorcycles of other brands or friends and relatives of Harleyros, all desirous of acquiring a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, but who still did not have it. This made me realize that the members of H.O.G. welcomed, without any trace of prejudice, anyone who showed interest in becoming part of the group.

This phenomenon led me to decide to take a test. Arriving at the store in an ordinary shirt, I bought an original T-shirt inside the store itself, but before I changed it in the dressing room, I walked around the room for around 20 minutes to see if I would be noticed or greeted by someone. No one manifested any special attitude of recognition to me.

So I changed my regular shirt over the shirt of the brand and, to my surprise, almost immediately upon leaving the booth I was greeted by one of the attendants in the hall. A few steps later, another person passed me by and, slapping me lightly on my shoulder, asked me: "Good morning... Is everything okay with you?" I confess that I was even doubtful if I had been introduced to him, but I later realized that I hadn't. Curious, I decided to circulate around the room where the breakfast buffet was served, and more often than not, other people greeted me as if we were old acquaintances.

I also noticed that this atmosphere of brotherhood, where those who were part of the group felt protected, loved and cared for by other members, was fed mainly by the group tours.

6 DISCUSSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

One of the great contributions that ethnography brought to this research was the empathy and affective bonds created between the researcher and the members of Rio H.O.G. on the occasion of the breakfasts: there the former was festively received and treated in a way to feel fully inserted into the group.

An example of this phenomenon was the frequency with which the researcher was introduced to other Harleyros as a member of the community, to the point of being asked, frequently, which model of Harley-Davidson motorcycle he had. At such times, the members' surprise was very great when they learned that he did not even have a rider's license. For them, being always present and integrated with the group was sufficient to guarantee their belonging – which justifies invitations received by the researcher to join the group in social gatherings outside the breakfast of Rio H.O.G., and to be part of the "trains" even without a Harley motorcycle or a specific rider's license, sitting on the back of one of the bikes.

Another relevant contribution brought by the ethnographic research style was a better understanding – albeit in a compact way – about the routine of the group members, both when they are together in the meetings and outside them, and about the emotional relationship of the group members with the brand and with H.O.G.

The primary evidence obtained in the field suggests that Rio H.O.G. transcends a mere brand community in the eyes of its members. More than that, it became their family, their temple, their protection, their safe harbor, their social environment. The "brothers" there help each other, cooperate, teach, direct, encourage one another. This suspicion would be reinforced by the fact that there are over half a million members of H.O.G. always involved in social gatherings, instructional meetings and group tours (Harley-Davidson, 2017), making it a brand community with great impact on its members. One of the examples of this climate strongly differentiated by comradeship emerges from the visible preoccupation among the members of the group with the well-being of others on the occasions when Harley-Davidson motorcycle groupings are formed for the so-called "trains".

The on-site observation showed that being in that environment guarantees several benefits for the members, starting in the social life in a broad way, and reaching the feelings of appreciation and self-realization. This translates into the understanding that being there may be indispensable to the existence of the member: he does not abandon this brotherhood for anything, because it is his life. Its rituals – the bell, the composition of the trains, the reverence for the most experienced, the jargon – are a very important way of feeding this tribal bond and of effecting its social function, reinforcing

the sense of self identity, almost religiousness, a strong sense of belonging, a passion, a true group narcissism (Cova, 1997; Cova, & Cova, 2002).

This climate of relationship and the perceived benefits reinforce the position of loyalty to the brand, from the establishment of social bonds between the customers, and not between the latter and the company providing the service. That is, the service represented by Rio H.O.G. denies the classical view that, for service to be provided, there must be two players interacting simultaneously – the provider and the customer – being the former “an essential ingredient in the customer service experience” (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2014, p. 75) and migrates to the greater importance attached to social bonds between customers, when they interact with each other.

Thus, in the case of Rio H.O.G. the members are the service provided by Rio H.O.G., community built in the shadow of a true communion in this environment of comradeship, which brought social involvement and many other consequences, which, in turn, guarantee the achievement of values dear to its members.

In this investigation to know to what extent the influence that H.O.G. may exert on its members, regarding the connection of the latter with the brand and with the product itself, it may extend beyond the traditional boundary of only one grouping with interests in Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

The research showed that Rio H.O.G. has a much more special and emotional meaning for its members than just a group of people with interests in Harley-Davidson motorcycles. There, the importance given to friendship and the sharing of life, as well as protection and social inclusion, are reinforced. This veritable communion among supporters goes beyond the social hierarchies that exist outside the context of the breakfast meetings on Saturdays. Rather, it refers to the production of a spirit of *communitas* (Turner, 1995), a construct that helps to understand the power of group interaction around a central icon that serves as the basis for sacred experiences (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989).

In this regard, the brand community perfectly fulfills its role in building the Harley-Davidson brand relationship with its customers, as it renders these social bonds difficult to be emulated by the competition, encouraging customers to stay in the relationship (Zeithaml et al. al., 2014). Those interviewed in this ethnography, as well as the other individuals observed, demonstrated that they not only belong to Rio H.O.G., but Rio H.O.G. is part of them.

The brand community has become so important to these people that it has become part of their social identities. The interviewees' speeches “I don't live without my H.O.G. friends”, “There may be the brightest sunshine out there, but you won't meet me on a Saturday morning at the beach or at the pool... I'll always be here at H.O.G. meetings”, “I don't change the moments I spend here with my friends for nothing in this world”, reproduce Keller (2002) and Patterson and O'Malley (2006) when they suggest that the relationship between the identity of the members of brand communities and the identity of the H.O.G. was built in a symbiotic way, based on the interaction of community members.

These findings fit into the discussion emerging in postmodernity about the emphasis that assets have on the development of meanings for individuals. Apart from the discussion of the sacralization of these possessions and of some brands posited by authors such as Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989), the idea remains that more than its functional attributes, the image of the objects depends on its contribution to the self-image of the consumer and for their happiness – in the sense of feeling good proposed by Firat and Shultz (1997).

Thus the symbolic meanings of products externally construct the social world, and internally construct the identity of the individual – which, in a postmodern perspective, serves for individuals to become one of their multiple selves (Elliott, 1997). And finally, this consumption of signs and symbols gives meaning to life, as the consumer understands that he or she is part of a community and that values, more than a product or a service, the experience guaranteed by them (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995 Elliott, 1997).

In addition, a very relevant finding that came to the fore in the research, and that perhaps had not occurred had not been used ethnography: the materialization of integration to a brand community by factors unfamiliar to the possession of the worshiped asset. This could be identified when, as he

became known in that environment, even without being a motorcyclist and much less a Harley Davidson motorcycle owner, the researcher came to be seen by the members of Rio H.O.G. as integrated into the community. This phenomenon seems to reinforce the position that the strength of this brotherhood virtually surpasses the possession of the good so that a subject there integrates, referring to the concept of consciousness of the species. Named by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) as shared consciousness, it establishes an intrinsic connection between group members who share ideas, attitudes, and feelings of belonging, with rituals and traditions perpetuating the community's history through culture and consciousness.

Finally, the findings of this research touch the discussion about the points of contact between the Rio H.O.G. brand community, according to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), and the consumption subculture of Harley-Davidson motorcyclists, according to Schouten and McAlexander (1995). The latter, which happens to exist when some individuals identify with certain objects and, through them, identify with other people, would be an analytical concept consolidated in the existence of a somewhat marginal status and a true ideology of consumption.

Thus, it allows a better understanding of consumers and the way they organize their lives and their identities, with their uniform consumption pattern being governed by a set of common values – that is, by a common *ethos*. This is the theoretical contribution of this research, obtained in an original way because it is based on a relatively little used technique in Administration research.

It is worth noting the limitations that this research presented. Its validity may have been contaminated by both the lack of triangulation of research methods and the bias of the researcher, common in qualitative research. Moreover, in the case of ethnographic-style research, rather than an ethnography in the classical sense, the researcher's participation in the daily life of the studied group was moderate. This fact may have limited the primary evidence obtained, as well as their understanding: it is known that the longer the time spent in the field, the more the researcher can “grasp the culture from a wider perspective, correct false or biased interpretations and identify distortions presented by the subjects” (Alves-Mazzotti & Gewandsznajder, 1988, p 172).

Three are the managerial contributions that this research brings, considering the socioeconomic profile and the age group of the H.O.G. members, as well as some habits developed by them from this coexistence: 1) Partnerships with companies related to the tourism and entertainment industries, as well as with restaurants, in view of the usual group tours – the “trains” – that H.O.G. usually organizes; 2) Disclosure of real estate launches in places near the address of the dealership, by means of the distribution of folders during breakfast. Living in the Harley-Davidson community also extends to the Harley-family members, so that they could contemplate the idea of enjoying the ventures that might be on the way to their homes; and 3) Dissemination of the business consulting service, since many Harleyros belonging to the group are entrepreneurs or professionals who would see there an opportunity for their business.

Finally, future studies may focus on the group that emerged in this research and, to the best of our knowledge, has not yet become the subject of academic marketing research: the Ladies of Harley, the Harleyro women. Knowing their points of view about the community and comparing them to the men's can prove to be not only a very interesting experience to the researcher but also very useful to the better knowledge of the behavior of this niche of female consumption, with eventual externalities to other markets.

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