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A subcultural study of freestyle BMX : the effects of commodification and rationalization on edgework.

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A SUBCULTURAL STUDY OF FREESTYLE BMX: THE EFFECTS OF

COMMODIFICATION AND RATIONALIZATION ON EDGEWORK

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ABSTRACT

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Edgework is the practice of voluntarily placing oneself in a high-risk situation as means

to escape the increasingly constraining and mundane conditions of everyday living (Lyng

1990). Commodification (Adorno 2001) and rationalization (Ritzer 2004) are two of the

capitalist most effective tools when exploiting an activity in order create a large profit.

Freestyle BMX (bicycle motocross) and 'extreme sports' in general are considered

edgework (Milovanovic 2005). Freestyle BMX is experiencing the consequences of

rationalization and commodification. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews with

fifteen male BMX riders, this study explores the motivations of BMX riders, along with

how they react to and deal with the increasing commodification and rationalization of

freestyle BMX. The results suggest that BMX riders continue to ride BMX in their own

way, as a form of resistance, even as the processes commodification and rationalization

alter their sport.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The X games, the premier action sports competition venue (ESPN 2012), is
approaching its twentieth anniversary. These supposed "extreme sports" are quickly
becoming a part of popular culture in the United States. However, the very notion of
"extreme" usually means that it is *not* mainstream or normative – it is *extreme*. Yet, the
popularity of these activities, dubbed 'extreme,' are quickly making the once rebellious
activities part of mainstream society (Rinehart 2003). In fact, more kids skateboard than
play baseball (American Sports Data 2004). In this age of neoliberal capitalism nothing is
immune from the capitalist manipulation of thoughts, ideas, and activities, in an attempt
to make money (Braverman 1974). BMX, also known as bicycle motocross (Stewart
2011), is no exception: the activity that was once frowned upon by mothers, fathers, and
most of mainstream society, due to the participants unruly behavior and destruction of
private property, is now the same activity that is used to by corporations to mass market
products. This is a dramatic change in attitude towards an activity and subculture that
was considered illegitimate less than two decades ago. It is obvious that popular culture
now embraces (a certain form of) BMX, but what is not obvious is how the long-term,
hardcore BMX rider feels about this drastic change in attitude about *his* activity, which is
quickly losing its exclusivity and thus, potentially losing its authenticity too. This study

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explores freestyle BMX riders, their motivations, and their reaction to the new found popularity of BMX.

How does the subculture of freestyle BMX, one that was considered non-traditional, and for hoodlums and degenerates, react to the mainstreaming of their subculture? This basic question is the main concern of my endeavor. Using the theoretical concepts of edgework, rationalization, and commodification among others, the answer to this question begins to reveal itself. Edgework is the sociology of risk taking (Lyng 1990). Edgeworkers attempt to break or escape the constraints of society by voluntarily partaking in risky activities (Laurendeau 2006). Edgework posits that, by partaking in intentionally risky activity, the participant has the opportunity to solely determine the well-being of his/her life (Lyng 1990), a phenomenon that is increasingly rare in the progressively rationalized world (Ritzer 2004). This opportunity allows the individual to break the constraints of society because he/she is only concerned about his/her well-being, not what society tells him/her to do, and not what work makes him/her create – a situation that is highly prized by the edgeworker (Ferrell, Milovanovic et al. 2001, Lyng 2005).

Rationalization refers to the notion of using science, empirical evidence, calculability, efficiency, and reason in order understand and explain all aspects of life with the intent to turn a profit (Weber 1958, Ritzer 2004). As Weber (1958) predicted, the increasing rationalization of the world leads to a mundane existence where each aspect of life can be explained, predicted, and readjusted for the sake of reason and profit. The disenchantment (Weber 1958) of life is what many undergraduate sociology theory textbooks refer to as the 'iron cage' of rationality (Edles and Appelrouth 2010, Allan

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2011). The rationalization of freestyle BMX is clearly observable in the form of international competitions, corporate sponsors, and super-star status of a select few elite BMX riders.

In this study, rationalization and commodification go hand in hand when exploring the mainstreaming of BMX. Commodification is the process by which an authentic intangible concept, or tangible entity is turned into a commodity, which is then mass produced and sold en mass (Adorno 2001). Much like rationalization, commodification primarily takes place with the intent to turn a profit (Austin, Gagne et al. 2010). However, during the process of commodification the original concept is distorted in order to make it more easily mass produced and in order to make it more profitable, hence manipulating the original form (Adorno 2001). In the past, the difference between the commodified form and the authentic form was obvious, but now that difference is becoming increasingly difficult to determine (Goodman 2001).

Analyzing the reactions and attitudes of freestyle BMX riders as they pertain to the mainstreaming of their activity allows for a clear understanding of the consequences of rationalization and commodification in modern times. Considering that BMX is a relatively new activity, and its acceptance into the mainstream is even more recent, BMX provides the ideal context for the study to explore the processes of modern capitalism.

The present study examines the experiences of freestyle BMX riders who participate in edgework, while also being subjected to the influence of commodification and rationalization in the form of mainstream marketing. The aim of this exploratory research is to contribute to the existing literature in two ways: First, to understand the

consequences of commodification and rationalization in the subculture of freestyle BMX and second, to add to the general literature of freestyle BMX (which is nearly nonexistent).

The study found that hardcore freestyle BMX riders participate in BMX because of the non-rational fun it allows, meaning that there is no ultimate or rational goal in mind when they hop on their BMX bikes; rather, they do it for the pure enjoyment of the activity itself, a feat that is increasingly rare in modern western society. Furthermore, the study found that in this sample of freestyle BMX riders, the participants were ambivalent about the commodification of freestyle BMX; they were able to see both the positives and negatives of their sport becoming so popular. The study also found that, while identifying as a BMX rider was important, it was important to identify as a BMX rider only to other BMX riders. Finally, the study adds to the literature on edgework by questioning what actually constitutes edgework.

The thesis begins by examining the literature on edgework (Lyng 1990), risk (Beck 1992), commodification (Adorno 2001), and consumption (Featherstone 1991), showing how each theory above is interrelated and relevant to the study. Next, a brief history of BMX is explored in order to add context to the study. The methodology section follows, detailing the sample and the reasoning for a qualitative research approach in the study. Following the methodology section, is the results section which showcases the data gathered from the semi-structured in-depth interviews. Lastly, the discussion section explores and analyzes the results in order to give a clear understanding of what the study found.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Until recently, risky behavior and risk-taking in general have been concepts that psychology addressed and attempted to understand (Lyng and Snow 1986). It was thought that risk taking was a highly individualistic act (Jung 1964). Thus, little structural or *sociological* research was conducted on the topic. In 1990 Stephen Lyng took a structural approach to voluntary risk-taking. Meaning that he looked to society to understand why individuals partake in risk-taking activities. Edgework was the term that Lyng (1990) used to refer to the sociology of risk taking. In doing so, he was able to identify societal forces that influenced risk-taking behavior.

The Concept of Edgework

Edgework occurs when the individual voluntarily places him/herself in a high-risk situation, or partakes in a high-risk activity, in which the individual could potentially cause serious, or even life-threatening physical or mental harm if the situation or activity in which the individual participates is not navigated with a high level of skill (Lyng 1990). All activities that are considered edgework involve an obvious threat to one's mental or physical well-being or "one's sense of ordered self (Lyng 1990, p. 857).

"The 'edge', or boundary line, confronted by the edgeworker can be defined in many different ways: life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, an ordered sense of self and environment versus a disordered self and environment" (Lyng 1990, p.857)

The edge is the line between chaos and control. It is the goal of the edgeworker to approach that line or "edge" as closely as possible without crossing the line or falling off the edge (Mahaffy 2007). As Lyng (1990) put it, "In abstract terms, edgework is best understood as an approach to the boundary between order and disorder, form and formless" (p. 858). The main point is that serious injury, or even death, are "ever-present" in such activities (Lyng 1990).

During edgework activities, the participant puts his/her bodily well-being at risk, or puts the well-being of his/her mind at risk, and in some cases both (Lyng 2005). Such activities that put the individuals' bodily well-being at risk include skydiving, BASE jumping, and freestyle BMX (though there are far more edgework activities then the ones just mentioned).

Skydiving is the act of jumping out of an airplane, free falling for a minute or less, and then releasing one's parachute to slowly descend to the ground. The participants of skydiving place their physical well-being at risk every time they exit the airplane and attempt to make a successful landing (Laurendeau 2006). BASE jumping is another edgework activity that places the individual's physical well-being in danger. The acronym BASE stands for Buildings, Antennas, Spans (bridges), and Earth (cliffs) (Ferrell, Milovanovic et al. 2001). During BASE jumping the individual jumps off a high obstacle with a parachute attached to his or her back. After several seconds of the free

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fall, the individual releases the parachute to glide skillfully to the ground (Ferrell, Milovanovic et al. 2001). 'Extreme sports' (skateboarding, freestyle BMX, snowboarding etc.) are also considered an edgework activity (Milovanovic 2005). For example, freestyle BMX riders ride their bikes on all sorts of obstacles from massive ramps, to dirt trails, to handrails. By doing so, the BMX rider places his/her bodily well-being at risk if he/she does not navigate the obstacles skillfully.

Other forms of edgework focus less on the physical risk, and more on the mental risk of the activity. Mental risk can arise when the individual puts one's sanity or sense of ordered self on the line (Lyng 1990). For example, financial trading, in which millions of dollars can be made or lost in matter of moments is edgework (Smith 2005). If the wrong decision was made, and millions of dollars lost, the financial trader could experience a sense of disorder and could begin to doubt his or her ability as a trader, hence placing his or her mental well-being at risk (Smith 2005). Some forms of academic risk-taking are also considered edgework (Sjoberg 2005). Another form of mental edgework is spiritual edgework (Bromley 2007) in the form of rituals (i.e. fire walking or serpent handling). While there is obvious physical risk involved if the rituals go awry, the mental risk comes in form is placing one's religious faith at risk (Bromley 2007). If the participant falters in the ritual endeavor, his/her faith may be reconsidered because it is thought that his/her faith was not strong enough to successfully navigate the ritual, hence the mental well-being of the individual could potentially be in disarray.

Some edgework activities place both physical and mental well-being at risk. Drug users provide a good example of the physical and mental risk associated with this form of edgework (Reith 2005). When individuals consume large quantities of drugs or

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dangerous drugs like crack-cocaine, the users are placing their sanity and cognitive well-being at risk (McGovern and McGovern 2011). Even in activities such as skydiving, mental risk is ever present. There is a great deal of physical risk in the potential consequences of skydiving (i.e. death, debilitating injury) itself, however, the mind is responsible for guiding the body to safety, and so the mind is placed in a high-risk situation in attempting to handle the physical well-being of the participant.

Dimensions of Edgework

Edgework is a multi-faceted theory that contains many dimensions. Though not touched on in every piece of research in this area, these dimensions include serious leisure, identity, performance limits, skills, sensations, and escaping the mundane.

Edgework as serious leisure and identity

Edgework for the most part is a leisure time activity (Lyng 1990). Most people who participate in edgework do so in the free time they have when not at work or tending to other social obligations (Anderson 2011). However, for many people who participate in an edgework activity, it is far more than just leisure, it is *serious leisure* (Stebbins 1992, Stebbins 2001). Stebbins (1992) describes serious leisure as:

> "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience." (p. 3)

Many edgework activities and hence edgeworkers fit the serious leisure definition. For many skydivers, skydiving is more than just a weekend activity. It is the activity that their lives revolve around (Laurendeau and Van Brunschot 2006). Whenever skydivers have free time they are most likely dedicating it to skydiving in some form, whether it be packing their parachutes, or partying with friends who are most likely also skydivers (Laurendeau and Van Brunschot 2006). Those who participate in a serious leisure activity usually identify with that activity, have friends who are involved in that activity, and form ideologies that are consistent with that activity (Jones 2000).

Closely related to serious leisure is the idea of lifestyle sports (Wheaton 2004). Lifestyle sports indicate a sport, usually an 'extreme' or 'action' sport, in which the participant's life revolves around and is consumed by that particular sport (Wheaton 2004). For example, freestyle BMX is considered a lifestyle sport (Kusz 2003) because those who participate in freestyle BMX base their lives around riding BMX, from the clothes they wear, to the people they hang out with, to the ideology they form, and it all stems from their passion for BMX.

Lifestyle sports and identity go hand in hand because the participants of the these activities usually find their identity in the lifestyle sport in which they participate (Beal and Wilson 2004). For example, skateboarding is a lifestyle sport and skateboarders find their identity as a 'skateboarder' through the lifestyle they live. The lifestyle of skateboarding forms a community in which skaters take clues as to what to wear, who to hang out with, and even what to think to some extent (Beal and Weidman 2003).

The edge varies from person to person and across time

The "edge" or boundary line is not static in two distinct ways: 1) what constitutes the "edge" for a given activity differs from person to person and 2) what constitutes the "edge" changes over time. Laurendeau (2006) explicitly notes that edgeworkers "explore the boundary where order ends and chaos begins, [but] they do so in different ways and to different degrees" (p. 584). Edgework operates on a continuum between in control and out of control. Within skydiving, the entire spectrum of the continuum is apparent – from complete control, "garden variety edgework" (Holyfield, Jonas et al. 2005), to completely out of control.

In skydiving, as Laurendeau (2006) notes, all skydivers engage in edgework simply by jumping out of an airplane. But the techniques and equipment used after the initial exit from the airplane create derivatives of the same activity and thus create derivatives of the edge. For example, some skydivers choose the safer, larger canopies and approach the landing in a safer way (Laurendeau 2006). Other skydivers chose more dangerous, smaller canopies and practice the technique of a "hook turn" which is a much more dangerous landing technique (Laurendeau 2006). The edge varies from person to person in this setting.

Milovanovic (2005) added some complexity to the concept of edgework, noting that there are different types of edgework. In fact, he created a typology scale of edgework that ranged from in in-control to out-of-control (Milovanovic 2005). On the far left of the scale, squarely situated as "in-control" is packaged edgework i.e. white water rafting 'adventures'; on the far right of the scale, squarely situated as "out-of-control" is a transcendental experience – crossing the edge. A few typologies that fall in between the two extremes of the scale are workplace edgework, extreme sports, and righteous

slaughter. While Milovanovic (2005) makes the case for different types of edgework, the case can also be made that within each of those typologies the edge differs from person to person. 'Extreme sports' are a typology in the edgework scale; however, the edge within an 'extreme sport' will differ for each individual. For example, some freestyle BMX riders are capable of doing a 720 rotation (two complete rotations) in the air, while other riders are only capable of doing a 360 rotation in the air. In each case, the rider is approaching the edge for his/her ability, thus making the case that the edge differs depending on the participant.

Performance limits

Edgeworkers seek to explore the limits of performance for a particular object or form (Lyng 1990). In some cases, the edgework test the technological limits of his/her tools. For example, freestyle BMX riders are concerned with testing the strength of their bike and its components without crossing the edge. In other cases, the edgeworker attempts to reach the limits of their body and/or mind. Some weight lifters for example, who attempt to be the strongest person they can be, test the limit of their body.

> "In many cases, edgeworkers explore the limits of both themselves and a
> material form; with the increasingly sophisticated nature of modern
> technology, individuals must sometimes push themselves to the outer
> limits of human performance in order to reach the performance limits of
> the technology under their control" (Lyng, p. 858, 1990).

This can easily be seen in Laurendea's (2006) study on skydivers. In recent years skydiving safety equipment has improved greatly with larger parachutes and automatic deployment devices. However, some skydivers choose smaller parachutes, and perform

more dangerous landing techniques (Laurendeau 2006), pushing the outer limits human performance to reach the performance limits of their technology.

However, performance limits are not always the concern of the edgeworker. For example, the crack-cocaine user is not concerned with performance limits (McGovern and McGovern 2011). The crack-cocaine user is only concerned with catching a high and escaping the mundane world. When edgework is used to explain or explore crime, performance limits are of no concern consciously (Bengtsson 2013). It is important to note that performance limits are not *conscious* concerns for the individual who commits a crime; however, there are still performance limits on individuals' ability to successfully commit the crime.

Skills

One common aspect to all activities that are edgework is the development of certain skills (Kidder 2006). As stated above, edgeworkers often push the limits of their technology, and in doing so, develop a highly specialized set of skills for their particular objects of technology (Lyng 1990). For example, the BMX rider has developed the skill to balance as long as he or she wants on his or her back wheel while in motion (referred to as a "manual"). The specific skills required are nothing unique to edgework. In fact, all activities require activity-specific skills i.e., ping pong requires a specific set of skills – excellent paddle control – in order to play ping pong effectively.

> "But edgeworkers claim to possess a special ability, one that transcends activity-specific skills such as those needed for driving a car, riding a motorcycle or flying an airplane or one's body in free fall. This unique skill, which applies to all types of edgework, is the ability to maintain

control over a situation that verges on complete chaos, a situation most people would regard as entirely uncontrollable" (Lyng 1990, 859).

The ability to avoid being paralyzed by fear and the capacity to focus one's attention and action on what is necessary for survival is what many edgeworkers refer to as a "special survival instinct" (Laurendeau 2006), which they believe is an innate quality. Edgeworkers find support in the instinct-like character of edgework actions because participants feel as if they respond automatically without thinking (Lyng 1990).

Yet, there are edgework activities that are not particularly concerned with skills, particularly those of crime (Bengtsson 2012). Bengtsson (2012) argues that the youth in his study participated in criminal edgework to form a coherent self; skill was of no concern. Furthermore, Laurendeau (2006) adds that faith or being faithful was an aspect that Lyng failed to acknowledge in his description of edgework. Laurendeau (2006), like Lyng (1990) preformed his research on skydivers and concluded that many of the participants were faithful, in the sense that they acknowledged that some of success (or failure) in skydiving is arbitrary. If one made a successful jump, some of the success was attributed to the individual's skill, but some was attributed to luck or fate (Laurendeau and Van Brunschot 2006). Conversely, for those who died, their death was not solely attributed to their lack of skill, but to the fact that "it was their time" – meaning their time to die (Laurendeau 2006).

The edgeworker is always concerned with control and ability to navigate the edge using a high level of skill. These types of risk-takers shy away from gambling and other activities which rely exclusively on luck or fate (Lyng 1990). Activities that are out of the risk-takers' control are of no interest to the edgeworker.

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Sensations and escaping the mundane

Lyng (1990) notes that not all edgework activities produce the same intensity of sensations, they do, however, produce similar sensations. Edgeworkers claim the experience produces a sense of "self-realization", "self-actualization" or "self-determination" (Lyng 1990, Kidder 2006). The instinctual acting of the edgeworkers leaves them feeling alive and "more real" (Ferrell, Milovanovic et al. 2001).

Fear is also another sensation that many edgeworkers experience (Milovanovic 2005). Regardless of how many times a BMX rider has done a rail (grinding a hand rail with pegs on their bikes); the initial run-ups provoke fear. But this fear gives way, and even allows for an incredible focus on the feat that is about to be attempted (Lyng 1990).

All the extraneous factors fade away as the edgeworker approaches the edge. In this state of mind, the edgeworker's perception of time becomes distorted (Laurendeau 2006). Time may pass much slower or much faster than usual, i.e., skydivers say those 30 seconds of free fall feels like an eternity (Lyng and Snow 1986), while rock climbers (Robinson 2004) say that hours pass like minutes.

The sensations described above lead to a type of "hyperreality" (Ferrell, Milovanovic et al. 2001). Many edgeworkers describe the experience as more real than everyday situations (Ferrell, Milovanovic et al. 2001). And finally, many participants of edgework describe the experience as ineffable (Buckley 2012). They maintain that language cannot capture the essence of edgework.

Risk, Commodification, and Consumption

The edgeworker uses risk and risk-taking activities to escape the drudgeries of everyday living. However, risk and risk-taking have been increasingly commodified (Rinehart 2003, Beal and Wilson 2004), so individuals can more easily consume risk and advertisers can more easily utilize risk as a marketing tool. The commodification of risk creates the hazard of creating "packaged edgework" (Milovanovic 2005) in which no real risk exists. Nonetheless, risk is considered a high priority in Western capitalist societies (Beck 1992). And this status allows for risk to be turned into a commodity.

When turning on the T.V. or surfing the Internet, the individual is bombarded with risk and risk-taking behavior. For example, on the Discovery Channel, the program "Deadliest Catch" documents the trials and tribulations of king crab fisherman during the crabbing season. The show emphasizes the risk of the workers and, in at least one season a crew member died, reinforcing the *risks* of the job. Other T.V. programs such as *Cops* valorize the risk police deal with on a daily basis.

Other forms of "risk" now come neatly packaged. For example, adventure activities are increasingly popular in capitalist society (Holyfield, Jonas et al. 2005). Activities like white water rafting are packaged edgework , meaning that the activity has been turned into a commodity that emphasizes risk but produces no true risk – because that would be too risky for the corporation (Palmer 2004). Nonetheless, it provides supposedly 'risky adventure' for the consumer.

The pervasiveness of risk in society is clear. But how does the commodification of risk –turning risk into a commodity- affect risk-taking or edgework?

Turning risk into a commodity – commodification of risk – is nothing new. The commodification of risk can first be seen in Victorian England (Simon 2005). The creation of life insurance as a response to the dangers of industrial work in Victorian England is one example of this (Trenerry 1926). The risk faced by society in nineteenth-century England was largely caused by the industrial revolution and how the governing body of England dealt with the consequences (Simon 2005). Specifically, increased numbers of factories, machinery, and railroads led to a more dangerous society. During this era, society was more risky than any other time period preceding it. Industrialization made living in this society during this era incredibly dangerous or *risky*. The way in which England dealt with the management of risk led the society of Victorian England to be a risk society, meaning that society placed the sole responsibility of dealing with risks on its citizens (Simon 2005).

Motivated by the liberal tendencies of the era the government of England decided that the increased risk placed on its citizens would become the responsibility of its citizens, not the corporations (i.e. factories) (Simon 2005). During this time England was primarily concerned with economic growth. Regulating risk in all forms from worker's safety to pollution control would restrict economic growth (Trenerry 1926). The risks created from factories, machinery and railroads meant that the individual must take on the responsibility of dealing with risk. For example, if a worker was wounded or maimed in a factory, the owners of the factory were not concerned or responsible for the workers wound or his recovery. "The Victorian paradigm of risk emphasized individual responsibility for controlling and living with risk even while it forged some of the first mechanisms for spreading risk" (Simon 2005, p. 209).

The risk of the Victorian era was getting out of control. In fact, the railroads were so risky that the Queen of England made a public statement complaining about how dangerous it was to ride a train (Simon 2005). It was now the case that risk transcended class in the sense that workers were no longer the only ones affected by risk – the upper class was too (Beck 1992).Risk became a part of the public consciousness and thus something needed to be done about it. It is at this point that risk turns into a commodity: risk distribution and management becomes an important and *profitable* industry as it attempts to deal with consequences of industrialization (increasingly hazardous living conditions). Put another way, the control of risk becomes a commodity that is brought and sold.

Commodification

Commodification is the process by which a tangible object or intangible quality or idea is transformed into a commodity (Adorno 2001).

> "The process of commodification (Adorno; Horkheim and Adorno) begins when a practice develops in mass culture that is subsequently co-opted by media and capitalists, repackaged, and sold back to the consumer in an altered form. The public, then – believing they are embracing something genuine – purchase the commodity as an expression of desired identity, lifestyle or membership in a certain community" (Austin, Gagne et al. 2010) 945).

Applying this mentality to risk, it is clear that risk and risk-taking behavior have been turned into a commodity: something that mass culture embraced which was then co-opted and turned into something different then sold back to the consumer. Adorno (2001)

explains in more detail about the distortion that derives from the commodification

process:

> "The more inexorably the principle of exchange value destroys use values
> for human beings, the more deeply does exchange value disguise itself as
> the object of enjoyment. It has been asked what the cement is which still
> holds the world of commodities together. The answer is that this transfer
> of the use value of consumptions goods to their exchange value
> contributes to a general order in which eventually every pleasure which
> emancipates itself from exchange values takes on a subversive features"
> (p. 39).

Adorno (2001) states that commodification begins to occurs when there is a

transfer from use-value to exchange value. Meaning that goods are valued/desired, and

thus consumed for the product's use-value (its functional use i.e. a chair is purchased to

be sat on, and utilized for its functionality as a piece of furniture.). During the process of

commodification, goods/commodities are valued/desired and consumed because of their

exchange value (how much the good is worth in terms of currency). Meaning that people

are not so much concerned with the function of their product (use-value) but are more

concerned about its cost (exchange-value). To use Adorno's (2001) example, when

serious music or "classical music" is turned into a commodity it loses its distinction with

light music (popular music – "pop"). Both types of music are still only manipulated for

reason of marketability (Adorno 2001).

> "When "real music" is delivered over to consumption for the price of its
> wages. It succumbs to a commodity experience. The differences in
> perception of official music and fake music no longer have any real

significance. Each form of music is still manipulated only for marketability" (p. 35).

The same principle used above for the manipulation music can also be applied to risk.

When risk and risk-taking are turned into a commodity – commodified – it becomes controlled; constrained. Risk is controlled in the sense that however a certain risk is operationalized it then places limits or constraints on that activity simply by measuring it and attempting to reproduce it. The constraint comes in the form of measurement, language, and reproduction because in essence measurement, language and reproduction are determining the risk. This constraint and measurement of risk is clearly observable in white water rafting adventures where risk is advertised but highly superficial (Mounet and Chifflet 2003). The workers of the rafting adventure have calculated every minute detail of the trip, from the water level, to the wind speed, to water temperature, to ensure the 'safest risk' possible (Holyfield, Jonas et al. 2005). This quote about mountain climbing further explains the point of the distortion and constraints of risk by commercialization:

> "the commercialization of Everest is well documented by a range of sources, who all agree that the selfless ethics that once characterized mountaineering have been eroded or displaced by the kind of corporate colonization of Everest"(Palmer 2004) p.65

The transformation of an activity for its money value destroys the activity (Simmel 1978). What Simmel (1978) argues is that money attempts to place an objective value on a subjective experience. In doing so, the subjective values are lost or replaced by supposed objective values, measured by or with money. The notion of rationality, which is supposedly objective, replaces all the subjective value in an activity. This replacement

of subjective values with rationalized objective values destroys activity because it misses the point of the activity. For example, snowboarding originally was an activity that Jake Burton did in his free time because it was fun (Burton 2003). As the sport grew, it became less about the subjective experience of fun, and more about the objective experience of using it to make money – completely missing the subjective experience that created snowboarding in the first place (Humphreys 2003).

Ironically, the whole point of risk-taking is to break that constraint – to get away from the constraints of society in the form of measurements and mundane experiences (Landry 2013). Paradoxically, in the very act of commodification, the industry reproducing risk (i.e. mountain climbing excursions or white water rafter adventures etc.) is constraining the very activity that is being participated in to escape constraint. And thus, a dialectical relationship can be seen between the "edge" and commodification: as the risk-taking activities become commodified they become constrained; in an attempt to escape the constraints of commodification, the risk-takers move or change the edge to exercise freedom from constraint. Therefore, commodification changes the edge, while the edge changes commodification and this process reproduces itself potentially forming a more dangerous or risky derivative of the initial risk-taking activity.

Consumption

Western capitalist society has moved from a society based around production to a society based around consumption (Featherstone 1991). In the United States, consumption is far more complicated than simply consuming a tangible product; it is possible to consume ideas and signifiers (Baudrillard 1994). Consumption is tied to class

(Pugh 2009), ideology (Micheletti 2003), and identity (Wheaton 2004). In fact, consumption has become so pervasive that Ritzer (1999) argues that consumption can be a new means for re-enchantment in the increasingly rationalized world. This can especially be noticed in the commodification and consumption of risk. However, revisiting Lyng (2005) will be helpful in exploring the ties between risk, commodification, and consumption.

Using Weber's (1958) notion of rationality, Lyng (2005) explains how the process of rationalization creates an iron cage in which control and constraint are ever present. Seeking refuge from the iron cage, the edgeworker participates in high-risk activities to break the constraining and monotonous mundane living conditions of everyday life. Lyng (2005) then draws on the idea of consumption as a means to re-enchanting the world (Ritzer 1999), taking it a step further by adding the consumption of risk as another venue for re-enchanting society.

Ritzer (2004) essentially took Weber's (1958) idea of rationality and repackaged it for the modern times. According to Weber (1958) and Ritzer (1999), rationality is concerned with using calculation, efficiency, positivist science, and reason to make the most profit possible. The process of rationalization dis-enchants the world (Weber 1958), meaning calculation, science and reason, have not only explained all of the mysteries of the world (supposedly), but seek to turn all activities and interactions into a purposeful action with the sole aim to make money (Marcuse 1964). The rationalization that leads to a dis-enchanted world leads to a mundane and meaningless existence. However, Ritzer (1999) makes the case that consumption can re-enchant the world in 'cathedrals of consumption' where rationalization is rejected by refusing to use calculation, efficiency

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and reason when consuming. Lyng (2005) takes this notion one step further by suggesting that the consumption of risk can further re-enchant the world.

The consumer vicariously experiences the risk through the consumption of risk, in the form of T.V. or the internet, hence escaping the mundane world of the iron cage and all the while being re-enchanted. This may explain the emphasis that is placed on risk in this society (Beck 1992). It may also explain why events like the X-games and other action sports competitions have gained so much popularity in recent years. For example, 37 hours of television coverage was given to the X games between ABC, ESPN, and ESPN 2 in 1997, reaching over 100 million houses in the United States alone (Rinehart 2003). Moreover, in 1998, ABC network's showing of the X games garnered a 2.3 audience rating, with more than 200,000 people attending the actual event (Rinehart 2003). Presently, the X games' has an official website, giving consumers updates 24 hours a day.

Risk-taking behavior and edgework is also used as a marketing tool to sell all sorts of mainstream products, from sunglasses to alcoholic beverages (Palmer 2004). For example, Mountain Dew uses action sports athletes like skateboarders or BMX riders to advertise its product (soda). The consumer is once again subject to consuming risk, but in the form of a tangible product that is associated with risk.

The edgeworker seeks out intentionally risky activities or situations as way to escape the progressively more rationalized world in which he/she lives. However, capitalists in an attempt to make money have turned to risk and risk-taking as a new venue to get products across to consumers. In the following section, the reader will see

explanations for partaking in edgework along with reactions of the co-optation of

freestyle BMX in popular culture.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORY OF BMX

History of BMX

Most people have at some point or another seen a BMX bike; often referred to as a "kid's" bike because it is smaller than most typical adult bikes. The BMX bike is based around a 20-21.5 inch frame that has all the regular components of a typical bike: two 20" wheels, forks, handlebars, cranks, pedals, and a single speed drive train (the chain, sprocket and cassette). BMX bikes differ slightly in their accessories, from the number of pegs, the brakes, to the height of the seat, depending on the type of riding that is being performed (i.e., dirt, park, street, vert, or flatland).

The history of BMX that I will provide will start with BMX racing because that is where all other forms of BMX derive from. But as soon as freestyle BMX begins to show up in the history I will begin to focus less on BMX racing and more on BMX freestyle because that is the form of BMX that I am concerned with.

In 1963 Schwinn Bicycles released the Schwinn stingray (Eaton and Swarr 2005). The bike was built around 20" wheels and a unique frame geometry which allowed the bike to be extremely maneuverable (i.e., wheelies, jumps etc.) – "kids would never ride their bikes the same" (Eaton and Swarr 2005). The bike was wildly popular; in fact 70%

of all bikes sold in the U.S. in 1969 were Schwinn Stingrays or replicas of it

(Rothenbusch 2013). It is uncertain exactly when BMX – bicycle motocross – started,

but it is known that kids would often imitate their motocross heroes on their Stingrays in

the late 1960's (Eaton and Swarr 2005).

BMX pundits agree that the 1971 motocross and motorcycle film "On any

Sunday" is highly influential in the formation of something officially called "BMX"

(Eaton and Swarr 2005, Rothenbusch 2013). In the opening scene of the film, the film

shows a handful of 10-12 year old boys riding their stingrays on a dirt track as fast as the

can, all while doing wheelies, jumps, and even tricks – this is credited with being the first

time that "BMX" was actually documented. Many young kids saw this video, and it is

thought that this tid-bit of "BMX" was enough to spark an entire generations of young

boys to start riding "BMX" (Eaton and Swarr 2005).

Several months prior to "On any Sunday" a young MX (motocross) factory rider,

Scot Breithaupt had noticed kids on their Schwinn's imitating him on the motocross track

(Eaton and Swarr 2005). Being the entrepreneur type, he thought he could organize races

for these kids on their bike. And so in November of 1970 Breithaupt held the first "pedal

cross" races in Long Beach California (Eaton and Swarr 2005). Around this same time,

Ron Mackler founded one of the first BMX tracks in Palm Park, California (Eaton and

Swarr 2005). Breithaupt started the first sanctioning body of BMX call B.U.M.S –

Bicycle United Motocross Society at the 7th street track in Long Beach, CA. The tracks

during the early 1970's were exclusively flat tracks; meaning that tracks were all on flat

ground, there were no hills so the BMX riders would have to pedal through the entire

track but of course there were jumps and berms.

The first BMX races (its anachronistic call it that) were incredibly primitive –

there were no starting gates, no rules, and tons of fun. The word spread quickly around

Southern California and soon, "all the kids in the area starting doing it" (BMX racing)

(Eaton and Swarr 2005). According to Breighaupt one week 35 kids showed up, the next

150. The rapid increase in participants may be explained by the film "On Any Sunday."

It is interesting to note that during the formational years of BMX there was no

technology specifically made for BMX. BMX racers would simply ride stock Schwinn

Stingrays or bikes like it until the wheels fell off – literally (see old BMX footage of guys

destroying their bikes and themselves). This lack of technology left the market wide open

for BMX to be a hot commodity as will be seen later. From 1970 until 1973 BMX was

steadily, if not rapidly gaining popularity across the country (Rothenbusch 2013).

In 1973, Erny Alexander founded the first official sanctioning body of BMX:

National Bicycle Association (NBA) (Eaton and Swarr 2005). Alexander saw huge

potential in the sport because "everyone had a bike" (Eaton and Swarr 2005), at least all

the kids did. According to legendary BMX racer, Perry Krammer (PK), the NBA "made

it real" because it had a points system, a national championship, and money could be

made (Eaton and Swarr 2005). During this period of BMX racing it was physically

rough, there were few rules, so elbowing, kicking, and flat out fighting on the track was a

common occurrence. But the promoters did not care, it meant for a better show.

Around this same time, BMX racing teams were becoming a popular way for bike

shops to advertise (Rothenbusch 2013). For example, Rick's Bikes Shop BMX team was

one of the most infamous teams of the day (Eaton and Swarr 2005). They were a rag-tag

group of kids from the Santa Monica – Dogtown area that were feared because of their unruly demeanor. The teams during this time were also the test pilots of newly emerging BMX technology. During this time Yamaha, Kawasaki and other motocross brands were big in the BMX scene because after all, BMX was formed by imitating motocross.

In 1974, the first public BMX media was created in the form of a magazine called Bicycle Motocross News, created by Elain Holt (Stewart 2011). The magazine is credited with officially naming kids racing their bikes on dirt tracks, 'BMX' (Eaton and Swarr 2005, Stewart 2011). The magazine featured riders, bikes, and general BMX culture. During this same year, the beginnings of BMX commodification can be seen.

The 1974 Yamaha Gold Cup was the first "really organized" BMX event (Eaton and Swarr 2005). The Cup had a $100,000 budget in which a portable track was taken all over the country for people all over the U.S. to witness BMX (Eaton and Swarr 2005). The final was held at the L.A. Coliseum with over 16,000 spectators – "it was a big deal" (Eaton and Swarr 2005). During this same year, there was an average of 1,100 riders per racing event (Eaton and Swarr 2005). It was also realized that BMX could be an industry. If BMX can be an industry, then BMX can make BMX riders money. When money got involved in BMX the competition got much tougher. Many BMX riders, in attempt to get a leg up on the competition began to modify their bikes. Do-it-yourself BMX dads began modifying their son's bikes to make them faster, stronger, and better than the competition (Eaton and Swarr 2005). For example, Skip Hess, a drag car welder began modifying his son's BMX frame. Shortly after, he formed the BMX bike company Mongoose – a company still around today (albeit an incredibly corporate BMX company). GT Bikes was also formed this year and the National Bike League was

founded by George Esser (Rothenbusch 2013). Also in 1974, the first BMX tours set off across the country as a way to advertise their products and get their riders exposure (Eaton and Swarr 2005).

During the years of 1976-78 Scot Breithaupt took his team, SE (Scot Enterprise) on several cross country tours. His team was the best in the country during this time; they finished first in every race and dominated the competition (Eaton and Swarr 2005). The SE team was "revered" and gained a ton of publicity (Eaton and Swarr 2005). There were "some adventures to be told" from those tours according to Breighaupt. For example, a former team member claims, "I lost my virginity on that trip" (Eaton and Swarr 2005) – possibly an indication that BMX was beginning to buck the corporate control or that a certain type of kid was attracted to the rebelliousness of BMX.

From 1979-1985 the Jag BMX World Championships were held. It was an international competition where anyone could compete. BMX had jettisoned into popular culture during this era. The block buster film E.T. (1982) featured BMX bikes and in 1986 RAD – a movie about BMX – was released. BMX was so popular the SE team even made an appearance on the popular television program CHIPS (Eaton and Swarr 2005). During this time, the top BMX racing professionals were making six figures a year (Marshall 2012). BMX racing at this point had been turned into a hot commodity. But this over commodification led to its eventual down fall (Downs 2003) as we will see later.

Freestyle BMX

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"In the mid-seventies riders kept looking for ways to expand their sport" (Eaton and Swarr 2005). Around this same time, skateboarding was also peaking in popularity and was highly influential in BMX outside of the racetrack. At the time, many BMX riders also skateboarded because it was the cool thing to do and because it was counterculture. Skateboarders began skating drained swimming pools in the mid 1970's (Borden 2001) and it said that one day that group of skaters took Thom Lund and John Palferman to the Key Hole pool in Beverly Hills. In 1975 Lund is featured in Skateboarder Magazine riding a pool in his BMX bike (Rothenbusch 2013)– this is the unofficial beginning of freestyle BMX.

One year later in 1976, Bob Haro began riding skateparks and learning kick-turns, roll outs and other basic tricks that would become the foundation of freestyle BMX (Rothenbusch 2013). By 1980 freestyle BMX was beginning to attract more attention and more riders, however, it was still dwarfed by BMX racing. Nonetheless Bob Haro and R.L. Osborne formed the first freestyle BMX team called "BMX Action Trick Team" (Rothenbusch 2013). They performed their first show in Chandler, Arizona on a half-pipe during a national race meeting (Rothenbusch 2013).

When BMX Action Magazine started covering freestyle BMX in 1980, it began to grow rapidly (Eaton and Swarr 2005). In fact, freestyle gained enough popularity that Bob Morales founded the Amateur Skatepark Association (ASPA) and claimed that it was "what riders needed to take BMX into uncharted territory" (Eaton and Swarr 2005). To add to its popularity, in 1982 there was BMX trick show in the Houston Astrodome as a half time show for a super-cross (dirt bike/motorcycle racing on pavement and dirt) race

– 17,000 people were in attendance (Eaton and Swarr 2005). In 1983, Bob Haro designed and came out with the first freestyle BMX bike (Rothenbusch 2013).

In 1984 there was mounting tension in the BMX industry. Freestyle BMX was gaining massive popularity while BMX racing was dropping off (Stewart 2011). Freestyle was gaining lots of new members, new freestyle technology was emerging, and the BMX companies wanted to capitalize on this new trend (Downs 2003). The new freestyle bikes provided a brand new product that could be sold en mass. In fact, freestyle BMX was so big by 1984 that it needed its own publication (Eaton and Swarr 2005). Freestylin' Magazine was formed and was a spin-off of BMX Action Magazine which was exclusively a racing magazine at this point (Rothenbusch 2013). Also in 1984, Bob Morales formed the American Freestyle Association (AFA) which had freestyle competitions around the country (Eaton and Swarr 2005). This also starts the beginning of freestyle BMX tours, where freestylers would tour the country with ramps and put on shows in mall parking lots (Eaton and Swarr 2005).

In 1985, freestyle BMX was peaking in popularity. There had never been more freestyle teams, bikes, and tours (Downs 2003). The popularity also brought serious corporate sponsorship. For example, top freestyle BMX pros Ron Wilkerson, Eddie Fiola, and R.L. Osborn were all featured in a Mountain Dew Commercial (Rothenbusch 2013). This is considered the first legitimate year of freestyle BMX because there are big corporate sponsorships and it became highly popular.

In 1986 there are a lot of sponsorships in freestyle BMX, from Mountain Dew to Levi jeans. The top pros are able to make a living being freestylers (Stewart 2011).The

AFA had a nationwide competition that garnered much national attention. The skyrocketing popularity fell as quickly as it rose. In 1987, Dennis McCoy (DMC) won the AFA tour and received a cash prize, clothes and a pick-up truck (Eaton and Swarr 2005). In 1988, DMC won the tour again and only received a packet of stickers (Eaton and Swarr 2005). Freestyle BMX was starting to die.

> "In the eighties' BMX boom the sports were controlled by corporations that either manufactured bikes and products, were sanctioning bodies for competitions, or were part of the print media. These companies generally excluded the actual rider from the direction in which the sport would progress and what was available to ride. Eventually the sport all but died out. Due to over marketing there wasn't anyone left to buy new bikes. Too much structure from big money corporations imposing their will on the riders prompted many to quit..." (Downs 2003, p.147)

Also during 1988, MTV co-opted BMX and skateboarding and put it with bands to make an MTV tour (Rothenbusch 2013). BMX freestyle was so popular in 1988 that Disneyland had five shows a day (Rothenbusch 2013) but that was not enough to stop the end of the popularity of BMX freestyle. By 1992 BMX was declared "dead" in the United States (Eaton and Swarr 2005). During this year, BMX bikes sales are at an all-time low, BMX magazines are a thing of the past, and nationwide corporate sponsored competitions no longer exist.

But the death of freestyle BMX may be one of the best things that ever happened to freestyle BMX: it placed freestyle BMX back into the hands of (Downs 2003). Those who did not care about making money from BMX started their own companies that produced quality bikes and parts. Those who continued to ride BMX also began pushing the sport in a new direction that shied away corporate contest riding (Downs 2003). The

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form of riding was called street riding and it was a revolt against the corporate influence in BMX (Benson 2012). Dave Volker, BMX legend, put it succinctly; I was "fed up with the fake image, street riding was a whole different way to express yourself"(Eaton and Swarr 2005). He is referring to the fake image that corporate sponsors demanded of the riders.

For the general public, freestyle BMX remained dormant until 1995 when the first X-games were held (ESPN 2012). But for those core riders, freestyle BMX was still their life and was still progressing. Mat Hoffman held the Bicycle Stunt Series from 1992-1995 (Tremaine 2010) and the competition was all in the name of fun: "If you left with a story and a concussion that was a successful contest" (Eaton and Swarr 2005). According to Dennis McCoy the Hoffman BSS were "some of the best years of BMX" (Tremaine 2010). And his sentiment here explains why: "It's usually the eras where the money is not there which are the ones people hold most dearly" (Eaton and Swarr 2005). During these dormant years, freestyle BMX bikes' quality increased greatly and the riding followed.

In 1995 the X games launched freestyle BMX back into the scope of mainstream society (Downs 2003). ESPN covered the event, which was held in Rhode Island where 198,000 people attended (statista.com 2012). This marks the beginning of the second era of commodification in BMX. This era of commodification starts in1995 and is still continuing presently (2013). But this time, the BMX community – the authentic riders – are incredibly aware and hesitant to the let the money and major corporations back into their sport. In fact, before the first X games, Dave Mirra (who would rise to be one of the top BMX pros, not to mention one of the most commodified riders) stated: "I figured they

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were just trying to make a quick buck off us" (Eaton and Swarr 2005) – referring to the X games.

By 1998, freestyle BMX was securely placed once again in mainstream culture, as BMX bikes account for 30% of all bike sales in the United States (Weibe 1998). Also by 1998 major sponsors were again beginning to join the sport. For example, 1-800-Collect was sponsoring the X games along with Slim-Jim and Taco Bell. Riders like Dave Mirra were doing commercials for 1-800-collect and making good money for it. Professional riders were once again making a living off riding their bikes but only a select few.

By the mid 2000's corporate sponsors like Slim Jim and Taco Bell had been replaced by Levi Jeans, DC Shoes, and energy drinks (i.e. Red Bull, Monster etc.). Also during this time BMX sees a new era of legends being made; from Dave Mirra – the winningest freestyle BMX rider in the history of the X games, to Ryan Nyquist, the undisputed king of dirt, and of course Jamie Bestwick – the world's greatest vert rider. The three guys just mentioned are arguably the initial models of the second round of commodification: they are extremely well paid, well known, and have a marketable image – this is what BMX is to the general public.

The progression of the freestyle BMX from around 2000 until present is unprecedented. Riders in the early X game performed stunts such as 360's, tailwhips, backflips, and barspin (see below for in-depth descriptions of tricks) but they were performed on moderately sized ramps. Go forward a few years, the ramps are bigger, the prize purse is bigger, and the tricks are bigger. Riders are 'going for broke'. Each year in the X-games tricks were getting more dangerous and jumps were getting larger, and it all

came to a head in 2007. Steve Murray, one of the top dirt BMX pros in the world attempted a double backflip...he crashed, horribly (Fat 2010). He is now paralyzed from the neck down.

Types of Freestyle BMX

Under the umbrella term, 'freestyle BMX', there are several distinct types of riding. (Interestingly each discipline is becoming increasingly distinct and separated as the sport continues. Ten years ago there was no classifying as to what type of rider one was, one was simply a BMX rider, meaning they rode street, park, trails, and even occasionally rode vert and/or flatland. But now, each discipline of the sport is incredibly distinct and separated, and the classifying prefix (i.e. street, park, vert, flatland) of type of riding one does it necessary. Moreover, it increasingly rare to see riders ride more than one style of riding). The following terms are the different types of freestyle BMX riding: 'park riding'; 'vert riding'; 'flatland'; 'street riding'' and now thanks to the X games, mega-ramp riding.

The two types of riding that are most important for this research study are street riding and park riding. However, I will briefly explain the other forms of riding. "Vert" is short for vertical. Vert riding is referring to riding a vert(ical) ramp or a 'half-pipe'. The riders air out of the half pipe and land back in the half pipe, pumping back and forth to get speed to air out of the other side of the half pipe. This is considered one of the most dangerous forms of riding because the vert ramp is a difficult obstacle to ride, with the potential to launch the riders 10's of feet into the air.

Flatland refers to riding BMX on the flat ground, using pegs and pedals to perform tricks of incredible balance. The riders often times spin on their rear tire or front tire while in contorted positions. This is considered the most difficult form of BMX because of the shear balance required. (This is a brief description and does not do this form of riding any justice; if the reader is interested in seeing what this looks like, search BMX flatland on any video-sharing site on the Internet).

Mega-ramp riding refers to riding BMX on a massive ramp. The riders drop in a huge runway (about 80 feet tall) and hit a giant jump that is 70 feet long. As soon as they land they hit a 22 ft. quarter pipe, launching them dozens of feet into the air. For most BMX riders this form of riding is a joke (See the Albion). So few people have access to a mega ramp that it is obvious this was created to be an attention grabber at the X games. In fact, BMX print has hounded the mega-ramp for its obvious tactic of making money off the non-rider (Bancroft 2012).

Park riding refers to riding BMX in a skatepark. Though each skatepark differs in its exact setup, most skateparks have the same obstacles. An obstacle that is universal to all skateparks is quarter pipes. Much like the name suggests it is shaped in the form of a quarter of a pipe which forms a transition that BMX bikes can use for jumping out of or stalling on top of with pegs.

The quarter-pipe can take on many sizes from about 3 feet tall to 12 or 13 feet tall. The bigger the quarter pipe the higher one can air out. The pyramid is also another obstacle that is universal to all skateparks. Again, much like the name suggests it is shaped like a pyramid with its sides being inclined so the rider can jump it. Ledges and

rails are also found at most skateparks. These obstacles are used for grinding. The skatepark is the only place where BMX riding is legally allowed.

The basic obstacles found in the skatepark are the same obstacles that are found in BMX contests. In fact, where the contests take place is more or less a mobile skatepark. The contest riders are the best of the best of the park riders; they are able to air quarter pipes higher than most and they are able to do death-defying tricks. It is park riding and vert riding that the general non-riding public associates with BMX most frequently (see results).

The park rider's bike stereotypically has brakes and gyro – a device that allows the brake cables not to get tangled when doing barspins or tailwhips. The bike usually does not have any pegs because rarely do park riders perform grinds; the bike usually has a slammed seat, meaning that it is as low as it can go. The park rider typically performs a variation of four tricks: spins, tailwhips, barspin, and flips. Spins include 360, 720, and any spin with a degree that is divisible by 180. A tailwhip is when the frame of the bike spins around the forks and handle bar and rider lands back on the bike. Top park riders can do as many as four tailwhips in one air. A barspin is where the rider throws the bars – or spins the bars – in a complete rotation and catches the bars. Park riders typically perform back flips and front flips, where the rider does a complete flip while on this bike.

Street riding refers riding BMX in the urban environment. This form of riding can be done however the rider wants. The best way to describe it is this: street riding is about riding urban obstacles that were not intended to be ridden. This can include but is not

limited to, handrails, or rails of all sort, stairs, ledges, walls, and curbs, and anything that can be ridden but was not built with the intention for someone to ride BMX on.

The street rider's bike usually does not have any brakes, and has four pegs and is focused primarily around grinding. Grinding involves using pegs, which are small metal cylinders placed on the axles of wheels in order to slide or *grind* along ledges and rails. However, many people that do ride street do not have this particular setup. Street riding is truly freestyle, the rider can do whatever tricks he wants, ride whatever setup he wants, and does whatever he wants while riding his BMX bike. And while there is standard of street, it is less strict and almost applauded when one deviates from the norm. And this only makes sense considering street riding was originally developed as a way to rebel against the corporate standards of contest riding (Downs 2003), and keep freestyle BMX truly free.

It is important to note not only the differences in bike setup, tricks performed, and environment ridden between the park rider and the street rider but also the differences in demeanor. For the most part the following is based on generalities: park riders are typically not associated with being hoodlums if only for the fact that they ride a skatepark – the place where they are supposed to ride. Therefore they are not destroying property, and in some ways conforming to society by riding in a place that is designated to do. Street riders, however, are typically associated with being hoodlums if only for the fact that they ride outside of the skatepark. Therefore they are riding obstacles that are not meant to be ridden, often times destroying private property and having run-ins with the law. Because they are constantly be hassled, or at least that how is it appears to the street rider, they tend to be more mouthy and are typically not afraid to use profanity to any one

that gives them a hard time. Hence, earning them the reputation of being a hoodlum. For many, street riding is (or was) the last untapped form of BMX and is/was a way to reject society by riding things they are not supposed to.

BMX Competitions

The X games were created by ESPN in 1995 (ESPN 2012). Originally known as the "Extreme Games" but renamed the following year to the X games (ESPN 2012). The event was the first to feature the world's best action sports athletes competing in a variety of summer based competitions (ESPN 2012). The X games have grown substantially since 1995, yet the competition formats have remained relatively static. In the BMX park competition in the X games, riders are given multiple 50 second runs in which they try to perform their best tricks. The riders are judged on the style, technicality, and completion of their tricks within their runs.

The Dew Action Sports Tour started 2005, ten years after the X games. The Dew Tour is sponsored by Mountain Dew among other large non-BMX related corporations. The competition format is similar to that of the X games in the fact that rider are given several timed runs to put together the best run they can manage. Since the Dew Tour is in fact a tour there are multiply stops around the country in which one rider can win the entire Dew Action Sports Tour

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To gain an in-depth understanding of freestyle BMX, qualitative research
methods were used in this study. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews often allows
for a better exploration of the complexities of an environment (Brenner, Brown et al.
1985), and were selected to allow participants to freely express their experiences within
freestyle BMX in their own words. In the present research, the main goals will be to
explore why BMX riders ride their bike, attitudes towards the mainstreaming of their
activity, and attitudes about corporate sponsors. In-depth interviews are considered a
valid path to understanding how the context in which activities are carried out influence
their meaning (Maxwell 2012). Moreover, since very little research revolves around
freestyle BMX, the responses from this research will largely be unknown. Qualitative
methods allow for the reinterpretation of data during the research (Maxwell 2012), and
this flexibility will be necessary in order to understand emerging ideas and the
correlations between established theories used in this research.

An initial semi-structured interview guide was created which was then tested
using a pilot interview. The pilot interview (Brenner, Brown et al. 1985) showed some of
the weaknesses of the initial semi-structured interview guide. For example, the

organization of the sections of the interview guide did not make sense. Also, some of the wording in the initial interview guide was cumbersome and confusing, leading to irrelevant responses. Using the information gathered from the pilot, a revised semi-structured interview guide was developed and later used for data collection (Charmaz 2006). The interview guide[1] was broken up into seven sections: (1) Demographic information; (2) Motivations for riding BMX; (3) Bike setup; (4) Riding; (5) Identity; (6) Non-riders perceptions of BMX; (7) Riders perception of BMX. The pilot interview was not used in the results of this research project.

Location

The study took place in Louisville, Kentucky. Louisville is considered a mid-western city, and has population of about one million people (all of Jefferson County is considered Louisville). In 2002 Louisville built a 40,000 square foot skatepark - The Louisville Extreme Park. The skatepark is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, making it any BMX riders dream. The skatepark acts as the hub for the BMX community; a place where riders can meet up, hangout, and meet other riders. The Louisville BMX scene garnered much attention in the early 2000's, with Metal Bikes, Jimmy Levan, and Shitluck among other high profile BMX personas located here. While the BMX scene may not be as high profile as it once was, it is still a thriving scene. In the last four years alone, the Louisville BMX scene has put out six full length videos, an indication that the BMX scene is strong.

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[1] The interview guide can be found in appendix A.

Louisville was chosen as the study location for several reasons. First, it is has a strong BMX community. Moreover, I have lived in Louisville for over six years and have become highly integrated in the BMX community here. Thus, making me an opportunistic complete participant (Adler and Adler 1987), allowing me to have near total access to the BMX community in which I have chosen to study. Furthermore, research has noted subcultures often guard against true feelings and thoughts to outsiders; therefore the only possible venue for an authentic understanding is for a researcher to participate (Mitchell 1993). Second, the Louisville BMX scene is indicative of other BMX scenes around the country.

The Sample

The sample was gathered through contacting members of the freestyle BMX community in Louisville, Kentucky. Due to my insider status as a BMX rider, I have access to an extensive network of BMX riders. My high level of involvement with the BMX community in Louisville allowed me to contact and interview the sample with relative ease. I generally contacted the participants about one week prior to the interview to ask if they would be willing to be interviewed. Everyone that was contacted agreed to be interviewed.

The sample was selected based on several criteria, including riding tenure, age, and the type of riding the participants most frequently participated in. As an opportunistic complete participant (Adler and Adler 1987) I already had previous knowledge of the participants riding tenure, age, and type of riding they participated in most frequently, so

no screening process was necessary. I intentionally selected a near homogenous group of

participants because it gives the researcher a more in-depth look into one typology of

rider, as opposed to a superficial look into several typologies of riders[2]. Moreover, the

interview guide was developed for this specific typology of rider. (When attempting to

interview riders outside of this typology I ended up with incomplete interviews).

A total of 15 BMX riders were recruited, until the point of saturation was reached

(Babbie 2001), for the interviews. All of the interviewees at the time of the interview

resided in Louisville. All of the interviews conducted were done in person at a variety of

locations. The interviews varied greatly in there length with shortest lasting only 24

minutes, and the longest lasting one hour and 37 minutes. The average interview lasted

around one hour (57 minutes). All of the interviews were recorded and later transcribed

in order to find common themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Of the 15 BMX riders interviewed, two self-identified as mix of Pilipino and

white, one self-identified as Pacific Islander, and one self-identified at half Inuit and half

white. The remainder of the sample self-identified as white. The respondents were around

the same age. The average age of the sample was around 25 years old (24.8 to be exact),

the mode was 26 years old (5 respondents), and the age range was 19 to 31. The average

number of years riding a bike was around 11 years (10.8 years to be exact), with the

range being 3.5 to 15. Of the 15 respondent, only one had completed a Bachelor's

degree, the remainder of the sample had either completed high school or had some

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[2] There are obvious limitations of the sample selected in this study. However, for the purposes of this
research the sample will be sufficient for the present study. See limitations subsection in the discussion
section for a more detailed account of the limitations of the sample and methodology in general.

college with one person being a high school dropout. All of the participants in the study are male.

Bike Setup

Due to the nature of BMX bike riding it was important to document the current setup of the bikes of the participants. The BMX bikes in this sample, and in general, have the usual components of the average bike (frame, forks, handlebars, wheels, cranks, and drive train). I was concerned with the finer details of the bike (pegs, brakes, tire size, and handlebar size) because these are all components that are subject to change due to trends. Of the 15 BMX riders interviewed 14 did not have brakes on their bikes. 14 out of 15 riders had pegs on their bikes; six people had 4 pegs; six people had 2 pegs; 2 people had 3 pegs, and one person with no pegs. Of the 15 BMX riders interviewed all of them had "big bars"[3] along with "fat tires"[4]. The handlebars had the following measurements: at least 8" tall (highest was 9" tall) and at least 28" wide (the widest was 30"); the tires were at least 2" wide to about 2.3" wide.

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[3] Handlebar size in BMX has seen dramatic change in recent years. In the early to mid-2000's a standard or normative size handlebar measurement for a BMX bike would be somewhere around 6"-7.5" tall with a width of around 24"-26". In mid to late-2000's "big bars" were introduced to the BMX bike. These handle bars generally measure around 8"-9" tall (though there are 10" bars out there), with a width around 28"-30". Because the trend is so new, BMX riders often refer to the measurement of their handlebars as "big bars" because they are considerable bigger then handlebars of several years ago.

[4] Tire size in BMX has increased noticeable in recent years on the BMX bike. In the early to mid-2000 the normative tire size would measure around 1.5"-2.0" wide. Recently tire size has increased, with the smallest width being around 2.0" wide, to the largest being 2.3" wide. Also, about half the sample didn't know the exact width of their tires, but they were certain they had "fat tires" on their bikes.

Data Analysis

Rider Typology

A rider typology was created prior to the interviews being conducted. But after transcribing and coding the interviews a new typology was in order. The old typologies included the *trendy rider, ex-rider,* and the *rogue rider.* The new typology will be referred to as the *hardcore BMX rider.* My entire sample fit this typology (15/15). Having a sample of only one typology was much more useful.

The typology - *Hardcore BMX rider:* A rider that generally keeps his bike up to date with the more recent trends in BMX (i.e. big bars, fat tires, no brakes, 2-4 pegs). The trends are followed because they are trendy to an extent but also because they are highly functional (i.e., big bars lead to greater bike control, larger tires lead to easier manuals and smoother riding). Some of these riders do the trendy/latest tricks, while others have no concern about that; regardless each rider rides his bike for fun, for himself (which is based around subcultural ideas, as will be discuss later) and for the love of it. They are usually up to date on BMX culture (i.e., BMX videos, clothing, etc.) but it rarely directly influences them or their riding (again, this is based off subcultural ideas). While they love BMX, it is generally of little importance that non-riding public knows that they ride BMX bikes.

All of the interviews were digitally recorded. After reading the transcripts of the first several interviews, the data were reduced to focus on relevant trends. Using these initial trends, the remainder of the interviews were listened to in order to pick out consistent themes which were then transcribed. The present research utilized an

inductive approach to category generation. In this approach, the researcher generated

categories based on the literature and judgments about the variations that occurred in

responses (Patton 1980).

Four main themes emerged from the data: (1) riding BMX for fun; (2)

mainstreaming of BMX; (3) attitudes towards corporate sponsorship; (4) [not] identifying

as a BMX rider.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

Riding BMX for Fun: the Rejection of Rationalization

According to Lyng (2005) those who participate in voluntary risk taking are

escaping or breaking the constraints of an increasingly rationalized world.

Rationalization, as defined by Weber (1958), is the idea that all interactions and actions

are done so with calculability, efficiency, reason, and profit as the end goal. This idea

will be explored in much depth in the discussion section. However, the following results

and quotes will act as the precursor of necessary evidence in order to have an informed

analysis.

When the respondents of the study were asked why they ride BMX, or what does

BMX mean to them, nearly all of the respondents had a similar response: BMX is fun.

For example, Bill[5] a 22 year old, who has been riding BMX for about three and a half

years said, "I just think it's all about having fun...like to fullest. It's nothing more than

that." Similar, Todd, a 28 year old, who has been riding about ten years, responded:

> "Well, I've always loved to do it. I've always done it and its fun really. I
> mean its fun to get out, and you know the weathers nice - go out and meet

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[5] This is a pseudonym given to protect the confidentiality of the respondent. All names stated hereafter can
be assumed to be pseudonyms.

up with your friends. Its riding, it feels good I mean. If you don't ride BMX it's kind of hard to explain…. Why we do… cuz people see us wreck… 'why do you do that to yourself?!'. It's just fun. Like its just… its hard to explain. It's like doing a sport you know. Why do you do it? – It's fun!

Likewise, Ralph, a 22 year old who has been riding BMX for about 5 and half years said:

"It's so fun to. It's really just so fun to go ride like…riding like new spots. Then I feel like as you get better like once you're able to like more - not necessarily tricks - you feel more comfortable doing handrails, you're like, I don't know… I feel like it makes riding so much more fun to go to new cities and ride handrails and I don't know. Just riding with friends, as friends progress it makes riding a lot more fun too."

While other riders may have not used the word "fun", their responses elicit the idea of fun. For example, Tony, a 24 year old, who has been riding for 11 years said, "It's definitely not the same reason I started riding. The main reason I ride today is for fun but mostly to feel young probably. Yeah… for me it's what it is. It's the best thing I can do, maybe the closest things to like tie me back to childhood. It's the best thing I have to make me feel like I'm still a kid." For many people the idea of childhood or being a kid is usually associated with being fun. Similarly, Luke a 26 year old, with 12 years of riding experience noted, "There's nothing else that makes me happy", in reference to why he rides BMX.

While most of the sample agreed the reason why they ride BMX was for fun, several of the respondents seemed to imply that riding BMX for fun was in fact the "right" reason to ride BMX. As this quote from Matt, a 26 year old who been riding for 12 years, shows:

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"As long as you're having fun and pushing yourself you're doing everything right. It doesn't matter how good you are, I could see someone trying to learn a feeble and I'll be trying to learn something harder but I get just as stoked seeing them trying that as I do for myself trying whatever I'm doing."

Similarly, Todd states:

"Really it's just all about having fun. It doesn't mean too much I'm not trying to go pro I just do it for fun. **If you don't have fun with it then you know - it's not worth doing really.**" (My emphasis added)

The first statement is an interesting quote because Matt is making the case that one should only ride BMX for fun but one should also be pushing one's self. As anyone who has pushed themselves knows, it is not always fun; it can frustrating, hard-work, and certainly not fun. What also makes this statement interesting is how Matt does not take into consideration the skill level of someone who is having fun. The trick he mentioned, "feeble" – short for feeble grind - is one of the most basic tricks in BMX (i.e. 11 respondents from the sample claimed the feeble grind/stall as the first tricked they learned on their BMX bike). However, other respondents do take into consideration the skill of a rider when it comes to fun. But on the opposite end of the spectrum: where Matt finds the least skilled riders of BMX doing it for the "right" reason, others find, arguably the most skilled form of riding, contest/competitive riding, to be done for the "wrong" reason. As these quotes from John, a 31 year old, who has been riding for 15 years, shows:

"From what I grew up learning about...it just...all that stuff (competitive/contest riding) kind of takes away from what it originally was. Which I feel it should still be – go have fun. If you can do those

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tricks...and are having fun I mean awesome for you. But I just feel like they dedicate their life to trying to be like that (a contest rider), instead of more or less going out with friends and everything and having a good time."

When it comes to fun and BMX it appears that BMX can only be fun when it is *not* in contest or competitive form. Whenever competitive BMX was mentioned many of respondents could not imagine that form of BMX being fun. To clarify the following quotes, when the respondent says 'mainstream' they are referring to contest riding. Here Todd speaks about mainstream BMX and fun:

"...I think it's getting a lot more serious I would think. It's getting more competitive. Versus just going out and having fun. Well at least in the mainstream. I think it's the competition and the riding is just getting so crazy these days...I don't even try to keep up with them, I just do my own thing...the competition is pretty high versus kind of just having fun with it."

Bob, a 26 year old who has been riding for about 12 years, has similar sentiment:

"That's where you know when I started riding it was you know just something you do with your buddies to have fun and you know there wasn't really any really goals of getting you know blowing up and getting sponsored by Nike and you know starburst whatever...I don't know ...the culture... it seems like it's getting more mainstream."

From these quotes it is clear that my sample has a very distinct idea of fun as far as riding BMX is concerned: riding with no rational reasoning behind it; not riding with the intent to win the contest; not riding with the intent to be the best; not riding with the intent to get sponsored. Riding with only the intent to please yourself or subculture in

which one identifies, for no other reason than to have *fun* –as they define the term. However, this notion of fun does not simply mean it is light-hearted feel-good fun. These riders push themselves and sometimes take risks (edgework) all in the name of fun. Yet, when these riders push themselves, they do so for reasons that fall within their subcultural ideology of fun, which means they do it *not* for money, or status but to do it because it feels good and they love it.

It appears that contest riders are riding for reasons other than to please themselves: to win money, to win sponsorships, to be the best. And while some contest riders consider that fun, to my sample that form of riding cannot be fun. And while there is no objective idea of fun, I think is pretty obvious why my sample considers contest riders as doing it for the wrong reason: money can distort the reasons why people do things. BMX bike riding is no different; it can be distorted by the mainstream in order to make it about making money, not about having fun.

The Mainstreaming of BMX: the Process of Commodification

Commodification occurs when tangible concepts or intangible ideas, created by a subculture, is co-opted by capitalist, reproduced, and slightly modified and then sold back to consumers of mainstream society (Austin, Gagne et al. 2010). This process is clearly observable in the results below and full analysis will take place in the discussion section.

There is an explicit awareness about BMX going "mainstream". By this I mean BMX is getting increasingly popular. But only a certain type of BMX riding is getting mainstream/popular (or possibly has been for some time now). That type of riding is contest riding like the X-games and Dew Tour (officially called Dew Action Sports

Tour). This type of riding is exclusively competitive and riders are judged on the

technicality, style, and completion of the tricks they put together in 'runs' (see above).

Many of the tricks are more or less the same but with additional variations. For example,

flips, tailwhips, barspins, and spins are the four main components of this type of riding.

Some popular tricks in the 2012 contest circuit were 360 double tailwhip (spinning 360

degrees while doing 2 tailwhips in the air), double backflip, front flips, 1080 (spinning 3

complete rotations in the air) and all sorts of variations of these tricks with an increasing

number of tailwhips and/or barspins thrown in to increase the level of difficulty of the

tricks. This type of riding is considered "mainstream" by my sample. For example,

Patrick a 24 year old who has been riding 13 years describes mainstream riding:

> "Kids that are in you know wearing the gear that I was talking about…it
> would be like tight colorful pants, big high top shoes…lot of pads,
> helmets, no pegs, brakes going to skateparks and learning the big fancy X-
> games tricks and shit you know…"

Likewise Todd, in reference to mainstream riding, notes:

> "Somebody that just goes to the park and does you know…the popular
> tricks like …how many tailwhips can you do, how many barspins can you
> do, that's kind of what I feel like it's coming to…"

The riders of this sample are extremely aware of this type of riding. They most

likely see more of this type of riding through a mediated lens (T.V or Internet) than they

do in real life. While this may be no coincidence, they acknowledge the pervasiveness of

mainstream riding. Dave, a 24 year old, with about 12 and a half years riding experience,

is keenly aware of the mainstreaming of BMX:

"With the X-games, and the Dew Tour, and I mean you can watch a cell phone commercial now pretty much for no reason they'll just be somebody in the background doing a fly out tailwhip. So it's like that's pretty crazy I mean, they'll just get the new iPhone...they'll just be for no reason somebody doing a 6 ft. tailwhip out of quarter pipe in the background. It never says why, it's just there... Back in the day you would never see something like that, you almost had to it hunt down, you would have to find out when a contest was being broadcasted on ESPN and you would have to write it down or tape it on your VCR to try to capture it. And now a days you can just flip through the channels and in the middle of know you, Breaking Bad (TV program) you'll see like a Sprint(wireless telephone service) commercial with big daddy Pat Laughlin (pro BMX rider) doing a tailwhip in the background...it's definitely more commercialize and its way more accessible now a days than it was for me when I was growing up."

Similarly Ralph stated:

"I feel like it's advertised a lot more. I went into...I was at the mall like last week and went into a Journeys (Shoe store), and Rob Wise (pro BMX rider; interestingly though he is not a contest rider) was on the TV in there. He was like in a commercial for DC (shoe/clothing Company for "action sports") on the TVs inside of a Journey's at the mall. Feel like it's definitely getting advertised a lot more. Like Garrett Reynolds is riding for Redbull and stuff; I've seen ads, not even in a BMX magazine that had Garret Reynolds (a new breed of street-contest rider) in it."

While riders are cognizant of the mainstreaming of their beloved activity they are quick to point out that "...you wouldn't see me doing that and that's not at all how like riding really is..." (Todd's interview). Nearly the entire sample mentioned that people did not understand how they rode BMX. When the members in my sample told others

(non-riders) they rode, the people often got the wrong idea, as this quote from Clarence, a 26 year old, who has been riding for 15 years shows:

> "I think most of society really kind of …. Probably sees BMX as being pretty big and flashy… you have a lot of things on TV [that] are pretty… outlandish…people flying 10's and 10's of feet in the air and doing all this crazy whirly bird stunts. A lot times when people think that I ride BMX, people automatically think that I do that."

While Clarence did not explicitly say he did not ride like contest riders, others were quick to distinguish what BMX was to them. For example Dave states in in a roundabout way:

> "It's crazy like with Mountain Dew, you know it's like that…it's an idea that's being like…pushed… that being like you know put on to people just like "extreme sports" like you know you'll see dudes with lip rings you know and like tattoos and it's like your typical mall guy like your typical pac-sun guy and it's like they'll… do like a 360 tailwhip over like a phat (big/large) double and then they'll like pop open a Monster energy and it's like black and lime green it's like those colors it's all just one big thing that's being like pushed to these people that….**it's just not what BMX is to me at all**. It's just a completely different side of it." (My emphasis added.)

Other riders flat out said that contest riding is not the type of riding they do as Todd states:

> "I think they just kind of…when people don't know anything about BMX and they see…they say Dave Mirra, just someone they all know, they all know the popular people and that's all they do…a trick or something like what Dave Mirra would do. I think that's what people think…you do crazy stuff like him, go on a vert ramp an air out like 20 feet…'**no that's**

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not really what I do – I don't ride like that at all' that's what people think who don't know about it." (My emphasis added)

Though the BMX riders were aware of the mainstreaming of a certain form of BMX riding, there was a level of ambivalence towards mainstream or contest riding that seems unexpected based on the fact of why they ride BMX (for irrational fun). This can be seen clearly in a response given by Luke:

> "I don't know man, I think its kind like a necessary evil, if that makes any sense...like it somewhat legitimizes by making it an actual competitive sport but at the same time it gives people these huge misconceptions and they just you know, they think everybody's out doing what whoever's popular in contest right now is doing."

It appears that they acknowledge some of the benefits of the mainstreaming of their sport but if it crosses a certain line then it is negative. The fine line that mainstreaming teeters on causes ambivalence, which can clearly be seen in this quote from John:

> "Yes and no. Yes as far as keeping it...kind of keeping in the media eye, just making it aware that it's out there and no as in the level that they're taking it. It's not...I think a lot of kids think... that you can just go out there and learn that kind of shit. It takes a lot of time and dedication to it...those people going out there and learning those tricks, I'm not taking anything away from them. I'm sure they ate shit a lot and this and that...but it's not like that, I don't like...wouldn't want to see it going that direction. I like seeing the kids out there wanting to go ride street...just doing the simply things, just having fun on it. Not trying to turn it into a competition."

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Based on this quote, on the one hand, mainstreaming is good because it keeps it in the 'media eye', meaning that it keeps people aware and may actually do some good for the sport, as Matt states: "I feel like anything that makes the sport bigger is better just because it's going to allow for you know more skateparks, more acceptability maybe of like riding and stuff like that." But on the other hand, the mainstreaming leads to kids riding their bike for the "wrong" reasons or getting the wrong idea about BMX, which leads mainstreaming to be seen as negative thing: "It's a false image that is being pushed and I don't want to get like all like all political and go on a crazy rant. It completely….it infuriates me when I get really get down to it… I mean, it's like something I think is completely and totally lame…when BMX gets mentioned to the average person that's what they are going to think of… The first thing that is going to go through their mind is Ryan Guettler (professional BMX rider) doing a flip whip and chugging a Red Bull". (Dave interview)

The mainstreaming of BMX brings out several reactions in my sample. The first is a keen awareness of the fact their activity is increasingly being brought into the mainstream. This then leads to a desire to for the respondents in my sample to differentiate themselves from mainstream riding. While the sample acknowledges the difference between themselves and mainstream riding, they also acknowledge the benefits of mainstreaming their activity to an extent. However, if it gets 'too mainstream' the sample thinks it is a negative thing. This quote by Tony (24 years old, 11 years riding BMX) sums it up nicely:

> "It's cool, you really can make a living doing what you love because that's such a rare thing. I think it's such a rare thing in the world to really make a

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living doing what you love and in order to do that in BMX the industry
has to be ran like this...there's also a price you're paying... at what point
does it become a job that you get do what you love, to just job. It's a fine
line and it's harder to distinguish between the two."

Attitudes about Corporate Sponsors: the show casing of Ambivalence

Ambivalence is possessing both a negative and positive attitude towards the same
object or idea (Gainous 2008). Though not something expected in the data, the following
quotes show case high levels of ambivalence in this sample. Potential explanations for the
causes of the ambivalence in this study will be explored in the discussion section.

Corporate sponsors used to be synonymous with contest riding (i.e., X-games,
Dew Tour etc.). But now corporate sponsors are branching into non-contest riding (e.g.
Nigel Sylvester [professional BMX street rider], Rob Wise [professional BMX street
rider] etc.). It appears that my sample is reacting to everything that the corporate sponsors
bring: money, structure, and rationality (Weber 1958) . Nearly everyone had an opinion
on corporate sponsors, ranging from ambivalent to positive. Several of the respondents
had an extremely uncaring attitude towards corporate sponsors. For example Bill said:

"Nothing that I can do to prevent that stuff. So like, so I don't really give a
fuck about it. Like who cares. I'm not fucking drinking a bunch of
Mountain Dew or Red Bull so I'm fine. So I just don't really think about it
or care."

Along those same lines, Chris a 27 year old BMX rider, with 15 years of riding
experience said this in reference to corporate sponsors:

"Fuck it man, they're paying... a check is a check. Fuck it if you have to put a sticker on your bike, it works"

While these two participants seem not to care about corporate sponsors, it is important to note that they are not flat out against corporate sponsors in BMX. In fact, no one in my sample explicitly said, 'corporate sponsors suck – end of story'. However, there were several respondents that showed an awareness of the good and the bad of corporate sponsors within BMX. For example, a quote from Patrick shows ambivalence toward corporate sponsors: "It kind of sucks but then again every body's got to make their money somehow. Growing up watching those companies get big... it's like they put in enough work to where I think they deserve it... the companies and riders." Whereas other participants are more specific about their ambivalence:

> "Big mainstream corporate sponsors may bring more money into the sport which may allow for more opportunity like more skateparks or more, you know, anything else but overall I feel like if it's not something BMX, like clothing companies...one thing you know like Levi they had a pretty good program there for a while they were doing some really cool stuff for BMX. I wish they would have stuck with it. That was an okay direction for it, like they actually put in the work they made videos for it; they made specialized jeans, they took riders input and made like tougher whatever material and everything else. That's the direction it needs to go but now...We don't need Hyundai and like Mongoose, we don't need sponsors like that" (Matt's interview)

He (Matt) later remarked, "They are just profiting off the... you know, we have this guy, he's cool, this is him and his image and you drink Redbull and you can do this". Explaining why, in his opinion, 'we don't need sponsors like that' – corporate sponsors. It is interesting to note how conscious the BMX riders in my sample are about how

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corporate sponsors are using riders to make a profit. And while they acknowledge this, they also do not think that it is a completely bad situation. As this quote from Jeb, a 19 year old who has been riding for about five and a half years, shows:

> "...obviously they're doing it for the interest of their company to profit from that, from sponsoring a rider for Mountain Dew or Redbull...even though they're doing it for you know money I feel like it does...benefit BMX in the sense that you know provides riders with income or just like....I don't know if any other companies have jumped on board with this...I know a couple years back Levi's blue jeans - they are corporate company - emphasized the need for health insurance for BMX riders"

This quote too, from Bob, shows ambivalence towards corporate sponsors:

> I think it's cool, it's fun to watch that there that many dudes that can do it on lock like that. It's cool there're getting to get paid like you know they're making money off it but at the same time you know it's a little bit.... getting real like corporate you know. Cuz all these companies have so much money into it, it's getting really uniform and you know. But it's alright I don't mind it."

Other respondents actually embraced corporate sponsors in BMX. They did not necessarily embrace the product of the corporate sponsor (Mountain Dew, Red Bull, Nike etc.) or even the corporate sponsor itself. But what they did embrace was what the corporate sponsor could do for the rider in terms of his riding and his life. As this quote from Ralph shows, he embraces the consequences of corporate sponsors:

> "It's like awesome for the rider cause there obviously probably getting a ton of money. They're (the riders) getting to go on trips...like Garret Reynolds (professional BMX street rider) started Fiend (bike company) with money he probably got from like Nike or something. Have you heard

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how he like, everybody that's on the team he pays for them for an apartment to live in and stuff in California. So like I mean it's awesome that their getting that money...I don't have anything against. It's definitely making BMX more popular. Just more people are seeing it with like...like Mountain Dew puts out commercial and there's like people riding BMX in the commercial. I don't have anything against it, I think it's awesome for those people who are able to make like a ton of money of it...and not have to worry about it."

Todd has similar sentiment:

"I think it's awesome that... they want to sponsor BMX riders...I think it's awesome. Cause it...it kind of gets...makes people know more about BMX. When they sponsor people like Nigel Sylvester...[he's] sponsored by Gatorade and Nike and every single thing you can think; he's sponsored and it's awesome...he's getting well known because of it...nothing is really wrong with it. People use it to make money, and that's fine. Riding and make a living. If you can ride and make a living doing it then...hats off to you, that's awesome. I would if I could, I just don't care about getting sponsored so much – I never have."

There seems to be a strange contradiction here: my sample does not like mainstream riding because it is done for money, yet these quotes explicitly say it is a good thing that certain riders can make money off riding bikes. It appears that they are trying to come to terms with the mainstreaming of their activity without losing their authentic values of BMX. Luke was highly ambivalent about contest riding and corporate sponsors, calling them a "necessary evil", yet he later remarked, "...I'm not going to sit here and pretend like if I was real fucking good at bike riding and Nike just hit me with 'I'll give you six figures and free shoes for the rest of your life' I would be like fuck yes, I'm doing that for sure" - a statement that seems to fully embrace corporate sponsors, and

in a way also embrace the mainstreaming of BMX. Similarly, Dave who also responded ambivalently towards corporate sponsors said this:

> "Put it this way, if I was super good and Nike offered me a pay check and free shoes I would definitely take it"

A contradiction that may be explained by cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1962): as they see their sport becoming more mainstream they reject that notion. But the mainstreaming is too powerful and it co-opts their activity that was not-mainstream. They begin to embrace it without fully recognizing it in order to maintain peace of mind.

BMX Identity: a new form of rejection?

Little, if any literature deals with the silencing of identity as a form of resistance but as the results hint, the BMX subculture may be exploring new ways of stopping the long arms of capitalist exploitation. A full explanation of this notion is discussed in the following section.

With the exception of one participant, letting it be known to the non-riding public that they ride BMX was unimportant. However, nearly the entire sample had BMX paraphernalia in the form of t-shirts, shoes, and other articles of clothing that would clearly identify them as BMX riders, but only to other BMX riders. Here is a typical response to the question, 'is there anything you do to communicate to others, even those you don't know, that you ride? [for example] wear t-shirts; pictures on social media sites etc...':

> "Still wearing plenty of clothing - still wear... BMX shoes and shirts even when I'm not riding - I've got some on now (referring to his

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shoes)…social media, I still try to have pictures up and like… I like post up pictures or whatever or videos that I saw that I liked or 'like' somebody else video or… anything else that like that." (Clarence's Interview)

When asked, if it was important for others to know that you ride BMX, most responses were fairly similar to this: "I wouldn't say it's important you know. It's not going to affect them – I don't see like knowing whether I do or not…" (Jeb's interview). It should be noted that while the riders say it is not important, the question - not important to whom - should be asked. These responses are based on the question which states 'even those you don't know,'; thus, to people that they do not know, letting it be known they ride BMX is unimportant. But taking a closer look at several answers reveals something more. Take this quote from Ralph:

> "Yeah, I definitely wear like BMX shirts. I actually don't have like very many BMX shirts. I may have like… think I have like an Act Like You Know (a BMX crew out of Ohio) shirt, a couple Skavenger (BMX company) shirts. I wear like a lot of Word (the local BMX crew) stuff too…feel like if anybody sees that does ride and they know about Word 'well he probably rides or something like that'."

Likewise, Bob comments:

> "I mean yeah, I wear you know…like BMX company, you know, clothes and stuff like t-shirts…somebody could notice I guess if they were into BMX that you were running like some Etnies (BMX shoe company)…Aaron Ross shoes or something. But most people don't know that."

In both responses, the participants acknowledge that other BMX riders would recognize the symbols as something that represent BMX. In fact, seven out of the 15

riders stated they wore a particular brand that is associated with BMX. Meaning that if other BMX riders saw the brand or symbol, they would most likely think that they rode BMX too. The participants are unconcerned if non-rider know that they ride but the riders in my sample are making it known to other riders that they are BMX riders too. As this quote from John shows, "I wear Shitluck t-shirts, I think that's the only BMX ones I have... if they were a fellow rider then they would know that I'm a rider".

Summary

The participants of this study unanimously said that they rode freestyle BMX for fun. No one in the study explicitly defined fun, by analyzing the responses a rough definition can be created for fun. To BMX riders in this sample, to have fun riding one's bike means to do it because you love it; doing only because it makes you happy and for no other reason than that; not to get sponsored, not to win a contest, and certainly not to do it for money. To put it in terms of Weber (1958), they ride BMX because it is irrational. The participants showed an explicit awareness of the mainstreaming of their sport. Some of participants thought it was good, others thought it was bad, while most made it known that mainstream riding is *not* the type of riding they do. There were several different attitudes when it came to corporate sponsors. Most were ambivalent, some did not care about corporate sponsors, and some even applauded the consequences (money, traveling, etc.) of corporate sponsors. As far as identity is concerned, most of the respondents did not care if non-riders knew they rode BMX – they felt no need to identify to non-riders that they were a BMX rider. However, most of the sample wore brands or symbols associated with BMX, acknowledging that others who also rode BMX could pick up on the brands or symbols. Thus making it important that others within their

subculture knew they rode BMX while being unconcerned if the larger culture was

aware.

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CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

The focus of this exploratory study is freestyle BMX and freestyle BMX riders. Little, if any, research has made freestyle BMX its exclusive focus. Much of the literature on supposed 'action sports' or 'extreme sport' focuses on and around skateboarding, most likely because it is far more popular than freestyle BMX. This study adds to the literature on edgework by challenging what actually constitutes edgework. The study also adds to the commodification and rationality literature by reaffirming the process by which capitalism makes an activity into a highly profitable commodity. However, before the discussion begins, it is important to acknowledge several limitations of the study.

Limitations

The generalizability of this study should be handled with caution. The sample was a convenience sample, implying that those selected for the study were not randomly selected. The sample consisted of 15 BMX riders who voluntarily participated in the study. The sample is also highly homogenous, which should be taken into account when considering BMX. The activity of BMX ranges greatly in age, attitude, number of years riding, and type of riding done. My sample is relatively similar, thus making its generalizability to "BMX riders" nearly impossible. That is not a bad thing because to

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label someone a BMX rider tells one next to nothing about them other than they ride a BMX bike. However, the generalizability of this study becomes much more applicable when looking at BMX riders who have been riding for an extended period of time (10 years) in the United States and potentially a select few western European countries.

Finally, when asking the participants of this study, what would appear to be some fairly obvious and easy questions, they often struggled. "I don't know" and "ahhh" made for substantial responses in everyone's interview. This suggests the possibility that they really *do not know how* they feel, because they have never thought about it. All of the responses were given in a matter of moments, which may lead to unsure responses, considering that this was the first time ever thinking about such questions, let alone giving an oral response. However, due to the high frequency of "I don't know" and "ah" it can be certain that the responses given were honest, and how the respondent really felt.

Rationalization and Fun

According to Weber (1958), rationality is primarily concerned with using calculability, efficiency, and positivist scientific reason to understand all actions in an attempt to make them profitable – an objectively meaningful notion. Objective meaningful actions are actions that are done for the specific purpose of making money and/or increasing one's advantage in a situation (Weber 1958). Therefore, the subjective experiences or actions that lead to fun, joy, and love (among many other sensations) are deemed unnecessary and irrational because those actions do *not* lead to making money or increasing one's advantageous position (Marcuse 1964). The United States has put

special emphasis on making money, thus subtly pushing rationality to the forefront of values in the culture (Ritzer 2004).

All of the participants in this study stated in some response, whether it be why they ride or what riding means to them, that BMX is fun or about having fun. They aim to have no ultimate rational goal - only to have fun when they ride their BMX bike. Fun and having fun is a highly subjective experience, and in most cases having fun is not rational in the Weberian sense; meaning that having fun will not lead to making money or advancing one's position. Therefore, the participants of this study ride BMX for reasons other than it being objectively meaningful. They ride BMX because it produces subjective sensations of fun, love, and joy. Therefore, these riders value an activity subjectively or approach the decision to ride without an objective weighing of costs and benefits. More importantly, this implies that this sample values the subjective experiences riding BMX produces more than it values objective value in the form of money and rationality when it comes to riding BMX.

It is important, however, to clarify what the sample of BMX riders means by fun. By fun, this sample of BMX riders means, to do it (ride BMX) for no other reason than because it allows them to experience the subjective sensation of fun, because it makes them happy, and ultimately because there is no rational goal in mind. It should be noted that this form of fun does not mean it is completely light-hearted fun. These riders push themselves and ride with some intensity; however, this is still considered fun for the rider. When they set foot on pedal – their only goal is to have fun – in whatever form that may present itself: doing a gnarly hand rail or 'sessioning' a curb. While the two things

may seem as different as possible, they result in the same thing: fun (for no rational reason) and that is all these riders are after.

However, nearly every action in the United States becomes, or can become about making money, whether it be the most obvious of actions like getting a job, or least likely of actions: riding a freestyle BMX bike. When actions become about making money it distorts and destroys the initial action (Simmel 1978). Simmel (1978) argues that money is used to put an objective value on a subjective experience by measuring it in terms of money. In the United States, rationality is an objective value (Ritzer 2004), therefore when a subjective experience is carried out with the intent to make it objectively meaningful, the action is thus transformed into something that has the intent to make money or advance one's position, not the subjective experiences that may include fun, joy, and love, which was what the initial action was performed for in the first place.

Mainstream BMX riding in the form of contest and competition has made freestyle BMX rational: it has made it about training (calculability), winning, being the best (efficiency), and making money (rationality). The sample in this study is hesitant to embrace this mainstream form of BMX riding because money then becomes seen as the standard by which BMX can be measured (Zelizer 1994), not the subjective experiences of fun and love. Zelizer (1994) argues individuals promote the money aspect of things only if the individuals have already decided those activities or items are not worth considering in other terms (i.e. subjective experiences). Money does not destroy things so much as serve as a symbol of things we wish to place no subjective value on, only monetary value, which is meaningless in subjective experiences or activities. This sample of BMX riders still highly values BMX and to use money to measure it degrades the

activity that is about so more than money. This quote from Tony explicitly shows this point:

>"...just the entire nature of the BMX world and the BMX market itself is too similar to any other job or any other market. It's all about money... [more] then it ever has been in recent years... and I think **that it degrades BMX to the core as what it even means to be a rider BMX**. To people who can remember the 'golden era' when BMX was less popular. .. You only really rode because you loved it; you had a passion for it. I think the way the entire industry is ran now degrades it to the core" (my emphasis added)

While not mentioned in the results, a rather common theme among reasons why they ride BMX was because it more or less helped them escape the troubles or stresses of everyday life. For example Jeb said: "BMX... gives me something to do to get away from school or work. It's an outlet for me. Anything that's hectic that's going on I can ride and kind of forget about it for a little bit..." The term 'outlet' and/or 'stress-reliever' were the two most frequently used terms when describing how they would escape unpleasant times of their life through riding their BMX bike. As a BMX rider, I could instantly relate to what they were saying about BMX as an outlet or stress relieve. Thus, allowing me to add a deeper understanding to the quote above by fully explaining the escape from stress that riding BMX provides the rider: When you step on to your bike everything else disappears, it is only you (and possibly your BMX riding friends), your bike, and whatever you decide to ride - it is almost like therapy as this quote points out, "If you don't ride for long time you can feel it emotionally, it sucks" (Tyrone's interview).

Considering the ideas presented in the above paragraphs (rationality and escape), a clear connection can be made to concept of edgework. Once again, edgework is voluntarily placing oneself in a high-risk situation or partaking in a high-risk activity, using a high degree of skill to carefully navigate the situation or activity to ensure one's well-being (Lyng 1990). One reason edgeworkers partake in risky behavior is because it allows them to escape the constraints of society (Lyng 2012). In more recent literature on edgework, the concept explains how the edgeworker turns to risk-taking activity to escape the increasing rationalization of the world (Lyng 2005). Lyng (2005) draws on Ritzer's (2004) notion of rationality, which is essentially a modern version of Weber's (1958) ideas of rationality (discussed above). Using the concept of edgework, an explanation of why BMX riders ride their bikes becomes clear: as their sport becomes increasingly rationalized in the form of contest, corporate sponsors, and becomes part of mainstream or popular culture, they turn to riding their BMX bikes in the street – a form that was not, until recently, so rational. The BMX rider turns to a risk-taking activity (a point that will debated later) in which he can escape the troubles of his life, which are largely intensified by the increasing rationalization of society.

But what is really interesting, is that the BMX rider attempts to reject rationality not only in tangible form (i.e. street riding) but they reject rationalization ideologically by making how and why they ride BMX all about fun. They aim to have no ultimate rational goal - only to have fun. And this very notion is in fact a rejection to the rationality they see in other forms of their sport, and society as whole. This also explains why many of the riders said people did not understand their form of riding. Or in one mentionable case:

"Yeah, I don't know, I think a lot of them don't really understand at all. So I definitely think it's inaccurate. Like a lot of the time, some times, most of the time, they have a negative view of it. So you don't even get a chance to explain it. But you know occasionally you run in to someone that is stoked. If you do get the chance to explain it, a lot of people are blown away by how simple it is. Like one time, we're riding the canal in Indy (Indianapolis), this lady came up to us, and she was like 'so y'all really drove all the up here to ride your bikes, to ride and like ride these rails because these are like good hand rails'. And we were like, 'that's exactly it'. And she was like she was blown away..." (Tyrone's interview)

Commodification

People in the United States increasingly struggle with the idea of doing activities 'just for fun' (Adorno 2001). Every action or activity must be participated in with the rational reasons of making money or improving one's life in some tangible form (i.e. material acquisition). The increasingly rational attitude toward most everything is strongly driven by the intense desire or cultural need to make money. Rationalization and commodification go hand in hand as can be seen in the PBS film, *Merchants of Cool*. The parallels of the film and my results are uncanny. In the fifth section of the film, 'the giant feedback loop' it outlines the creation of trends.

When a successful trend is created, the trend will be video recorded in a premeditated situation. The video recording attempts to make the situation in which the trend appears seem regular or *real*, as a way add authenticity. For example, if cut-off jean shorts become the trend a company wants to start, the company that created the trend will video record actors wearing cut-off jean shorts in a seemingly ordinary (real) situation

(i.e. walking down a busy metropolitan street). Then, the company that created the trend will use the video recording of (seemingly real) people wearing the trend in a television commercial in order to target a particular demographic. A video (TV) commercial of the trend (cut-off jean shorts) will target 18-24 year olds; therefore the video commercial will show seemingly real 18-24 year olds wearing cut-off jean shorts in a seemingly ordinary situation. Next, the targeted demographic, in this case 18-24 year olds, will begin to emulate what they saw on the video commercial: they begin wearing cut-off jean shorts. Lastly, the company that created the trend will video record actual ordinary or real people wearing the trend, in this case jean cut-off shorts. Using the video recording of actual ordinary (real) people, the company that created the trend will claim it is filming real life – adding an element of authenticity to the trend – because they can claim the trend is "real" because real people are wearing the trend in real life, not in some prefabricated situation like seen on the initial video (Goodman 2001).

So while it started somewhere, it becomes a self-reproducing cycle of filming trends, regular people emulating trendy people, then filming the emulation of real people and rebroadcasting it as authentic. "It's a giant feedback loop. The media watches kids and then sells them an image of themselves. The kids watch those images and aspire to be that muck or midriff in the TV set; and the media is there to watch them do that in order to craft a new image for them and so on" (Goodman 2001).

The process described above is clearly visible in street riding in BMX. Due to the fact that the PBS film, *The Merchants of Cool* was released in 2001, the documentary did not take into account the pervasiveness of the internet and the ability to share videos.

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While the internet is now the primary medium to watch BMX videos, the same concept of capturing trends on video and the playing them back for kids to emulate is still true.

Currently in the BMX industry, web edits are almost a mandatory form of advertisement if the BMX company hopes to survive. A web edit is a short video, usually between 2-4 minutes, that captures what the rider is capable of on his bike. The web edit video is usually edited to music and tries to capture the essence of the rider when he is off his bike to a small degree (i.e. shows him laughing or goofing off and things along those lines). Web edits were initially a way for companies to advertise their riders, their products and show the progression of bike riding. But through the process that was just described, kids of all skills are now creating their own web edits. Current BMX web sites have now become more or less a posting forum for web edits, either from kids trying to get sponsored, or fully sponsored professional riders advertising for their company. Web edits are quickly becoming the exclusive medium in which BMX riding is viewed.

Because these BMX websites, that are essentially web edit sharing forums, were initially small, they catered to the hardcore BMX rider, most of whom rejected contest riding and chose to take to the streets to ride their bikes. Therefore, these BMX websites began to show web edits of street riding because that is what their demographic craved and related to. Within several years, one website in particular, thecomeup.com grew extremely rapidly. This website was dedicated to hardcore BMX riders and most of the content depicted street riding. Now thecomeup.com has received noteworthy popularity, and gets upward of 30,000 visitors a day (can be found on vimeo.com – the video sharing website). Due to the popularity of the thecomeup.com and other websites like it, it can be argued that street riding's popularity also grew. What appears to be happening is kids are

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watching BMX web edits of professional riders on thecomeup.com. The kids then emulate the web edits; they then film themselves emulating the web edits. The kids then post them back on thecomeup.com for others to watch. The giant feedback loop in which is described in the *Merchants of Cool*, is arguable responsible for the rise and popularity of street riding currently in BMX. In fact, street riding has gotten so popular it is now a discipline in the X games.

BMX street riding, a once rebellious activity, has been repackaged in a commodified form. Starting from the last time BMX died in the late 80's: Once BMX was dead, meaning that it was no longer a part of mainstream or popular culture, it turned into a unique activity with an incredibly small number participants (Eaton and Swarr 2005). Only the people that truly enjoyed and loved BMX continued to ride BMX. In the early 1990's BMX created its own industry that was run exclusively by BMX riders, (i.e. rider owned companies that sold to other riders) that was extremely small and tight knit. BMX during this time was founded on the principals of having fun, hanging out with friends, and riding because one loved it. There were no national competitions, big sponsors, and certainly no money.

In 1995, freestyle BMX was once again being show-cased at the national level in the X games. The very notion of competition, sponsors, and contests seemed to be in opposition to values of BMX, especially considering that not even a decade prior BMX riders had witnessed what corporate sponsors and contests could do to their beloved activity (killed it with commodification) (Downs 2003). The sponsors and contests made BMX about something other than having fun and just loving to do it.

Today there are two distinct versions of BMX: (1) Contest riding and (2) hardcore BMX street riding. Contest riding entails riding in competitions like the X games and Dew Action Sports Tour in which corporate sponsors (Red Bull, Monster Energy drinks, Sprint etc.) and large sums of money are very much a part of BMX. Contest riding is also becoming part of popular culture, as top action sports athletes gain celebrity status and become house hold names (i.e. Tony Hawk). Not to mention the X games have been around for 18 years, with most people in the United States having at least heard of the event. Contest riding is easily digestible and reproducible, hence making it easy to commodify, because it has structural similarities to other aspects of popular culture, including making money and advancing one's status (note how rationality can easily be seen in the values of popular culture).

Hardcore BMX street riding is, or at least was, about having the type of fun discussed above (to ride BMX because there is no rational goal (money), rather to ride BMX for subjective experiences of fun, love and joy). Historically, this type of riding was less easily digestible by popular culture because BMX street riders were doing illegal things, namely, destroying private property by grinding ledges and rails or marking up walls by doing wall rides. This type of illicit activity was too extreme or non-normative to be sold to popular culture. This type of cultural self-defense from commodification is part of a broader pattern of commodification resistance.

> "These are the extremes to which teens are willing to go to insure the authenticity of their own scene. It's the front line of teen cultural defense: Become so crude, intolerable, and break so many rules that you become indigestible." (Goodman 2001)

Aspects of street riding may be chosen by BMX riders so popular culture cannot invade and exploit their activity through the process of commodification. There are signs, however, that the strategy of being "indigestible" (Goodman 2001) has not deterred the commodification process. For example, nearly every web edit is street riding oriented, every full length video features street riding, around 80% of BMX print media show cases street riding (source: The Albion, Ride US BMX magazine and DIG BMX magazine) and BMX street riding is used to advertise a variety of popular items (from soda to sunglasses). Furthermore, large BMX mail order companies like Dan's Comp, are increasingly stocking and advertising BMX street riding bikes and components. The point can also easily be seen in the sample of this study: 14 out of 15 riders have pegs and no brakes – the defining characteristics of a BMX street rider's bike. However, this may be the case of "Who is mirroring Whom?" (Goodman 2001), considering that the average riding tenure is nearly 11 years for the sample, meaning these riders could be the model on which the commodified form of BMX is based.

Moreover, just as of last year (2012) the X games created a competition dubbed 'real street' in which an actual city street is closed down, however, the riders compete against one another much like any other form of contest riding. The only 'real' part of the 'real street' competition is the fact that it is on a city street, the obstacles are prefabricated and rarely obstacles one would find, or actually be able to ride (i.e. tracker trailer and perfect handrails), while actually riding street. The X games have turned street riding into a competition, rationalizing it by making it about winning, and making money, and hence adding to the commodification the sport.

Ambivalence towards Commodification

The BMX riders in my sample expressed an awareness of the commodification processes discussed above, but their reactions were neither for nor against. In fact, many riders acknowledged both the positive and negative aspects of commodification for their sport. Previous research has begun to explore the "idea that people do not necessarily have a single 'true' attitude on issues but rather have a store of multiply and sometimes conflicting attitudes that they might draw on at any given time" (Gainous 2008).

As noted in the results section, several of the participants were able to identify the good and the bad of the mainstreaming of BMX. Take for example Luke's quote when asked about his thoughts on contests:

> "I don't know man, I think its kind like a necessary evil, if that makes any sense...like it somewhat legitimizes it by making it an actual competitive sport but at the same time it gives people these huge misconceptions and they just you know, they think everybody's out doing what whoever's popular in contest right now is doing."

In this response, Luke is able to "simultaneously possess positive and negative evaluations of a single attitude object" (Gainous 2008). The literature on ambivalence notes that his ability to have multiple and even conflicting attitudes towards one topic is a well-documented consequence of ambivalence (Gainous, Martinez et al. 2010). A partial explanation for having these multiple and conflicting attitudes, in the context of BMX, is the fact that the commodification of BMX is a relatively new phenomenon for the current BMX riders. Due to the fact that the commodification of BMX is a burgeoning situation, Luke, and others in the sample who had ambivalent attitudes toward commodification,

may be in the process of creating a definitive attitude about the commodification of BMX. Therefore, it is possible that these riders may have been in process of forming their attitudes, hence leading to ambivalent attitudes about commodification. BMX riders are always interested and excited to see their sport expand and progress, however they are also wary of the potentially negative consequences of expansion and progression.

Another potential explanation for the high levels of ambivalence in this sample can be found in the political science literature on ambivalence. "The basic idea is simple: People make decisions and form attitudes by using cognitive shortcuts such as party identification and media cues, among many others. These shortcuts permit individuals to make reasonable decisions with minimal effort" (Gainous, Martinez et al. 2010). However, these short cuts which are used to make decisions are sometimes contradictory, hence leading to ambivalence. By substituting 'party identification' with 'subcultural identification' in the previous quote, the idea becomes applicable in the context of BMX. Freestyle BMX is considered a lifestyle sport (Wheaton 2004), meaning BMX it is more than just a hobby; it is a lifestyle in the sense that it determines clothing style, music, and friends. Therefore, the decision made and attitudes formed are potentially done so using 'cognitive shortcuts' (Gainous, Martinez et al. 2010) such as their BMX identity and the BMX culture which allows them to make 'reasonable decision' (Gainous, Martinez et al. 2010) about commodification with 'minimal effort' (Gainous, Martinez et al. 2010). For example, hardcore BMX riders think that if someone rides BMX to get sponsored or make money, they are doing it for the wrong reason. This idea that BMX riders form is a cognitive shortcut based on their subcultural identity as a BMX rider. Thus, allowing

them to make the reasonable decision that people riding BMX in order to make money are doing it for the wrong reason.

Ambivalent attitudes are also found in rock climbing (Heywood 1994) and other adventure and action sports (Wheaton 2004). In the case of rock climbing, ambivalence was explained using the notion of 'pluralization of lifeworlds' (Giddens 1991). A lifeworld forms when individuals share and develop a specific set of behaviors and ideas based on experiencing the world in the same way (Giddens 1991). Serious leisure (Stebbins 2001) and lifestyle sports (Wheaton 2004) form a lifeworld in the fact that a group of individuals experience the world in the same way, through participating in an activity, and hence sharing and developing similar behaviors and ideas. Giddens (1991) makes the argument that in post-modernity people have the opportunities to experience numerous lifeworlds. For example, an individual can be a dedicated business person during the day, experiencing that lifeworld, while being an avid mountain biker outside of work, experiencing that lifeworld. Therefore, the 'plurization of lifeworlds' (Giddens 1991) can lead to conflicting and hence ambivalent attitudes because of the different ideas developed in each lifeworld.

Using Giddens' (1991) notions of plurization of lifeworld also helps explain the ambivalent attitudes observed in this study of BMX riders. The average age of the sample was 25 years old, and the average riding tenure was nearly 11 years. Therefore, this sample is old enough and has been riding long enough to experience and be a part of many different things. In fact, several of the participants had respectable careers, while others were full time students. Therefore, the participants had multiply lifeworlds, for example, a BMX lifeworld, and school/work lifeworld, which could lead to different

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ideas and views on the commodification of BMX, therefore potentially explaining the ambivalent attitudes observed in this study.

Individuals who participate in action sports or lifestyle sports develop a unique set of ideas, identities and attitudes that suit their needs (Beal and Weidman 2003). In one study on skateboarding, the research found that many skateboarders held the belief that if one skateboards in order to get sponsored or make money, they are *not* 'real skaters' (Beal and Weidman 2003). This attitude could be considered a cognitive shortcut (Gainous, Martinez et al. 2010) based on subcultural identity which quickly and easily allows them to make judgments in a particular situation. However, the unique set of ideas and attitudes that skateboarders developed is constantly being co-opted by popular cultural because of the popularity of skateboarding (Beal and Wilson 2004). Therefore, the skateboarders unique set of ideas and identities must once again be differentiated from popular culture, and in attempting to differentiate themselves, they develop high levels of ambivalence because their identities are constantly being reformatted, potentially leading to conflicting thoughts and ideas (Beal and Weidman 2003). The same principle can be applied to BMX riders, therefore, adding another possible explanation for the ambivalent attitudes observed in this study.

Inconsistencies in the desire to communicate a BMX Identity

As noted in the results section, 14 out of the 15 riders sampled said that it was unimportant if the non-rider knew that he rode BMX. However, a number of respondents said that other BMX riders would recognize the brands or symbols as associated with

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BMX; meaning that it is important to let others within their subculture know that they ride BMX. This is an interesting result for several reasons.

Most notable, an interesting dynamic arises: the riders are rejecting rationalization through street riding and making riding about fun. Moreover, many of the riders were ambivalent about the mainstreaming (commodification) of their sport. However, they appear to be unconcerned about making their rejection explicit by letting everyone know they ride BMX – an activity that appears (until rather recently) to reject mainstream ideas. What could cause the need for a quiet rejection – a rejection that only you, and your subculture are aware of – rather than a more public type of rejection?

A possible explanation is the average age of the rider and tenure of riding. The average age of this sample was 25 and the average number of years riding a bike was 11 years. On average, this is a dedicated group of BMX riders; most people who ride BMX *will not* do it until they are 25 and certainly not for over a decade. This being the case, it is most likely that this group of riders have been through a lot of experiences with and without their BMX bike and due to their BMX bike. They are older now and feel no need to make it known to the world that they ride or are rebellious; they have been there and done that – they feel no need to do as such, as this quote from Andrew shows:

> "Maybe back when I was younger that would have been a big, when it was more of an identity thing. Like 'I need you to understand me. I need you to know that this is my life man – this is the way I live'. But now it's just like, it's just one of those things you just do it and its fun…"

In fact, this was a common sentiment, several of the respondents mentioned that when they were younger making it known they ride BMX was more important.

Many people in the sample do many other things then just ride BMX; they play basketball, have respectable careers, and even go to school. To solely identify as a BMX rider would be selling themselves short because they are multi-dimensional. While they may lack formal education (14 out 15 had less than a Bachelor's degree) these are not unintelligent individuals. They are highly intelligent, only in form that is not credited in this society. They know what they love, and they see what is happening to the activity they love: it is being taken over by the mainstream and turned into a commodity. Now, it is difficult to distinguish between an "authentic" rider and the individual who does it for the image, because so many of the signals of authenticity have been made available to less-dedicated riders through the commodification process. Yet, the true test comes during interaction. Within a sentence the individuals in my sample could tell if an individual rides for the "right" reason, or if the individual is riding because it is the cool thing to do at the moment. They see what the mainstream does when individuals are loud about rebellion – capitalist turn into a commodity (Goodman 2001), completely ruin it by attempting to measure it in terms of money (Zelizer 1994), and selling it to the masses in a commodified form (Austin, Gagne et al. 2010) So what do that they do?

They keep quite. They do not make it known they ride BMX because the average non-riding person may turn around and try to act like him, or worse yet, try to sell his image. In an attempt to save their sport, and keep it how they want it, they remain inexplicit about their rejection except amongst themselves. It is a quiet rejection, and quite possibly the only type rejection that cannot be turned into "just another product" (Goodman 2001) because most cannot hear it; and if they cannot hear they cannot

replicate it, commodify it, and ultimately ruin it. This quiet rejection may serve to preserve BMX.

Edgework

'Extreme sports' are labeled as edgework (Milovanovic 2005). Yet, the findings from my study suggest BMX, for the most part, does not fit this label well. BMX can be edgework at times, such as when the rider attempts to grind a massive handrail, do three consecutive backflips in one air, or jump off a roof. In these cases the BMX rider is certainly navigating the 'edge', in which a high level of skill must be used to prevent physical and/or mental harm (Lyng 1990). However, when the rider attempts to manual a curb or jump a curb cut, he is not navigating the edge; there is practically no risk involved (besides maybe a sprained ankle). The participants of the study voiced that the general public has a serious misconception of freestyle BMX. The general public typically sees contest riders doing death defying tricks while going tens of feet in the air and that is how the general public imagines BMX. But for most who ride BMX this not the typical day or session on the bike. Sometimes the rider may go out of his way to do a massive handrail, or even jump off a roof but he does not do that every day.

Unlike skydiving, a popular edgework activity, in which every time they exit the plane they are navigating the line between chaos and control, BMX riders often step on their pedals and do not even come close to navigating the edge. In fact, navigating the edge for the BMX riders in my sample was a rare occurrence indeed. When respondents were asked about their typical session, the often said they would go to a known spot in the city and just "goof off" (Chris's interview). Most of the respondents said they just

loved being on their bike regardless if they were doing a gnarly handrail or riding a flat parking lot.

If most of their time is spent doing maneuvers that do not navigate the edge, how can this be edgework? As noted earlier, BMX does not fit the edgework concept well. In some cases, especially the mainstream version of BMX, it is in fact edgework because in each run (of competition) they are navigating the edge between life and death. While I have no evidence to back this statement, only experience, I am will to take an educated guess that even those contest riders do not ride like they do in contest every time they step on their bike – they probably 'goof off' when not in a competition.

My label, if it must have one, for BMX would be a lifestyle sport with tendencies of edgework. There is no doubt that BMX is a lifestyle, one in which most of my sample partakes. However, they only approach the edge in rare occasions, rather spending most of their time having fun, escaping the stresses of rationalized life, and doing tricks that have little to no risk for them personally.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

BMX rider interview guide

Gender:
Race:
Age:
Education:
What is your occupation?
Number of years riding a BMX bike:

Do you still ride BMX? If not, why did you stop? Have you ever stopped riding for a period of time?

Motivations

Tell me about when and why you started riding BMX.
>	*Prompts: friends or family that rode BMX, received a bike as gift, saw it on television or went to an event, always something you wanted to do*

Why do you ride presently?
>	*Prompts: meditation in a sense – it just clears your mind, gets rid of all stress in your life. Exercise? Or some other reason.*

What does riding mean to you?

>	*Prompt: a way of life; a way at looking at the world; something you just happen to do etc..*

What does it mean to be a BMX rider?

>	*Prompt: your primary identity; a way of living; be creative etc...*

What was the first trick you learned on BMX

Bike Setup

What is your current setup? (Frame, forks, bars, cranks, wheels, etc) Please be as specific as possible.

Why do you ride this particular setup? Who/what influenced you to do so?

Does your particular setup allow for doing certain tricks easier or better? If so, what tricks?

Is your current setup more about looks or function? Or both? Or neither? Explain.

Riding

How often do you ride presently?

Has the amount of time you dedicate to riding changed? If so, why?

How would you describe the riding that you do most frequently? (Street, park, dirt/trails, vert etc)

Why do you participate in this type of riding most frequently?

Do partake in other forms of riding if the opportunity presents itself? Why?

Are you opposed to other types of riding? Why?

Do you usually ride alone, with another person or a crew of people? Why?

Who do you ride with? Why?

Describe a typical riding session for you. Include the spots where you ride, the type of riding, who you are riding with, the tricks you do and the overall feel of the session.

Identity

Is there anything you do to communicate to others, even those you don't know, that you ride BMX? Why? *Prompts: T-shirts, shoes, hats, etc*

Is it important for your non-riding friends, family and co-workers to know that your ride? Or is important that they don't know? What do they say or think when you tell them you ride BMX?

Describe the current state of BMX culture in terms of clothes, riding, music, videos, ideas, and general trends. What is your opinion of the current state of BMX? Why?

Describe the stereotypical BMX rider in your mind?

Where does this stereotype stem from?

How closely can you identify with the current culture of BMX? Why?

Do you consider yourself a part of a BMX community? What does that mean to you? Describe the BMX community and your role within it.

Non-riders Perceptions of BMX

BMX is a fairly common activity these days. Would you say that most people have at least seen or heard of BMX?

How do you think the general non-riding public views BMX riders? Why?

Do you think that it is an accurate view?

Where do you think this perception of the general public stems from?

In your opinion, how is BMX portrayed in the general media? (i.e. ABC, NBC, ESPN newspapers etc)

Do the ways in which BMX is portrayed to the general public influence your riding? Why?

How do you feel about all general media coverage of BMX? Why?

What is your take contest like the X-games and Dew Tour? Why?

What is your take on corporate sponsors of BMX like Mountain Dew and Nike?

Riders' perceptions of BMX

Would you consider yourself current on BMX media? (i.e. read BMX magazines, watch BMX web edits and videos, websites and keep up with industry news)

Describe how BMX is portrayed in BMX media (BMX magazine, videos, websites etc).

How does the way BMX is portrayed within the subculture of BMX make you feel? Why?

Does this portrayal of BMX influence your riding? How? Why?

Several months ago, in August 2012, much of the BMX media, including BMX magazines and web videos, primarily showed riders doing grinds of all sorts. Has this influenced your riding style (in the past several months)? If so, how? (what kinds of grinds do you perform)

Based on the question above, has your riding style influenced your bike setup? If so, how? (how many pegs do you run? Do you run brakes? Why? etc) or the tricks you do? Or the riding style you do?

What fuels your progression as a BMX rider?

What is the biggest thing that influences your riding? Why?

What is the last trick that you learned? Why did you decide to learn that trick?

What is your favorite trick to watch? Why?

Has this been constant?

What is your favorite trick to do? Why?

Has this been constant?

Can you think of any tricks that were cool to for a short time? Did you learn those tricks? Why?

Several years ago in (January/February) 2008 much of the BMX media, including BMX mags and videos, primarily showed riders spending about half their time riding skateparks and ramps while the other half was spent in the streets. Did this influence your riding style? If so, how? Why?

Based on the question above, did that style of riding, influence your bike setup? If so, how?

As you've progressed over the years, do you think your riding is the most dangerous it has ever been? If so, why? If not, when do you think the most dangerous error of your ride was?

Have you had any serious injuries due to BMX? What were they? What were you doing?

Do you think the overall level of BMX is as dangerous as it has ever been? Or are there other eras where it was more dangerous?

CIRRUCULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

M.A.   Sociology, University of Louisville
                  Thesis: A Subcultural Study of Freestyle BMX: the Effects of
                  Commodification and Rationalization on Edgework
                  Advisors: Mark Austin & Dave Roelfs

B.A.   History, University of Louisville, 2010

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Fall 2012   Soc 201 - Introduction to Sociology (Recitation)
                       Graduate Teaching Assistant
                       Major Responsibilities:
                       • Writing and presenting lectures
                       • Constructing and grading assignments and exams

Fall 2012   Soc 201 – Introduction to Sociology (Online)
                       Graduate Teaching Assistant
                       Major Responsibilities
                       • Technical facilitation
                       • Constructing and grading assignments and exams

Fall 2011- Spring 2012   Soc 320 – Sociological Theory
                          Graduate Teaching Assistant

Major Responsibilities:
- Attending lecture and taking notes
- Teaching lectures on Critical Theory and theories of Race
- Tutoring students on class material in private sessions or office hours

PAPERS PRESENTED AT PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

Scott, S. "Effectively utilizing public space in Louisville for the adolescent population via 'spots'." Presented at the 2012 *North-Central Regional Meeting of the American Sociological Association*, Pittsburg, PA.

PAPERS IN PROGRESS

Scott, S. A subcultural study of freestyle BMX. To be submitted to *Journal of Leisure Studies*.

RESEARCH INTERESTS
- Critical theory with a concentration in commodification and consumption
- Serious leisure and edgework
- Knowledge formation and legitimation

COMMUNITY SERVICE

2010-2011   Volunteer, Jefferson Country Waterways Alliance, Louisville, KY.

HONORS

- Golden Key Honor Society
- Dean's List, University of Louisville