

Fill your boots: A pilot study of Texas custom boot makers

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Introduction. Texas cowboy boots are an integral part of American culture (Beard, 1999, 2005; Gibson, 2016, 2018) and have been immortalized in popular media via film and music (Beard, 1999, 2005). However, extant academic research on cowboy boot makers is surprisingly limited considering this type of footwear's cultural significance in the United States. At present there are only two peer-reviewed academic studies (Gibson, 2016; Gibson, 2018), two master's theses (Geitz, 2011; Barrett, 2010), and several editorial-reviewed books on this subject that are historical in nature (Beard, 1999, 2005). Academic studies on the topic are limited to the economic geography of the cowboy boot industry (Gibson, 2016; Gibson, 2018), historic background and overview of selling cowboy boots (Geitz, 2011), and a case study on the Beck Boot Company (Barrett, 2010). Therefore, the current pilot study will involve interviews (Moustakas, 2007) with boot firm owners and makers in Texas in order to understand their lived experiences. It is our aim that this pilot research will produce an initial overview of Texas boot making in order to inform a larger study that will develop a deeper understanding of this important material culture tradition (Gibson, 2016; Gibson, 2018).

Methodological Framework. This research project is grounded in: (a) Scaffolding theory (Tehrani and Riede, 2008), (b) Social Capital theory (Coleman, 1988), and, (c) Cultural Transmission Theory (Eerkens & Lipo, 2007) (Loranger, 2016, p. 55) in order to build a "cultural inventory through diffusion" (Eerkens & Lipo, 2007, p. 241). Loranger's (2016) study was also used as a guide for the study of cultural apparel product industries, learning, practice, and significance. Qualitative phenomenological pilot study comprised of three (3) boot makers was conducted using Moustakas' (2007) guidelines. A purposeful snowballing method was used to obtain participation from respondents according to Creswell's (2007, 2013) suggestions. Interviews were aimed at gaining a baseline understanding participant experiences with learning and practicing boot making as well as the general status of the Texas boot making industry, and lasted 60-90 minutes. Participants were asked open-ended questions regarding boot makers' demographics, practice, and community. The Principle Investigators (PI) initially coded two of the transcripts and codes were compared and negotiated in an iterative manner. Inter-rater reliability of 71% was reached and found to be a sufficient baseline, as codes will be further negotiated and developed in the Phase II study (Creswell, 2013). Frequencies were calculated to ascertain dominant themes.

Results. Four (4) major themes of *Customer* (23%), *Education* (12%), *Quality* (10%) and *Intercultural* (4%) emerged with the highest frequencies, with *Quality* sub-themes of *Fit* and *Materials*. Zeph said boot *customers* are inspired by the cowboy spirit:

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You can go out today on a working ranch and find a guy and a pair of cowboy boots. It costs as much as a month's wage, which and you can go into the courthouse and find the same guy, same spirit. It's the spirit that's uniform. And that fellow may never owned a ranch in his life, but he just is connected to the spirit of...honesty, decency, hard work, a connection to the land, the connection to the sense of freedom, which is what the cowboy really brought to the table.

Mike seemed perplexed by the fact that *customers* “won’t spend money on their feet, but they’ll spend money on a real nice car, and you’re not you’re not walking in that car all day long.”

Now a successful maker, Zeph recalled the beginning of his *education*. His interest began as a hobby he learned from an experienced boot maker, but grew into something much more:

“I ended up driving that 70 mile drive, and I drove it every morning and every evening. I bought a machine from him...I didn't want to waste any time. I go home and I began stitching those tops in the evening and working...watching him do other repairs until I got my boots to the next necessary step to last and to build the last and all those other things. That started...a fire in my heart, which originally was a souped up hobby. So I came home, told my wife, ‘Trust me, it's a hobby.’ And I jokingly said, ‘the neighbor builds birdhouses, I'm going to build boots.’ She said, ‘OK, don't quit your day job.’”

When asked “What determines *quality* in a boot?,” all three participants immediately noted *materials* and *fit*. The shoe last, or form that the leather is stretched over to take shape, determines the *fit* of the boot, as Bob described, “...that's what the sole is going to be. So that's just exactly like the foundation of the house. You don't do a good job and that the house is going to fall down.” Still, boot makers agreed that *materials* are paramount to *quality*. Zeph commented that “the quality is always determined by the material you start with. And I don't care if you build a papier mâché Porsche body and stick it on a Porsche, it's not a Porsche.” Bob stated that he uses various materials based on their characteristics. When he first used ostrich, he found it to be “so strong and yet it would stretch and it was just terrific,” while kangaroo is “the strongest. It’s lightweight. It’s very flexible, very strong. It had a few bad characteristics. If you were around anything sharp, it [would] catch and peel.” Mike said his *materials* preference is alligator because “...it’s a very nice durable leather, but it’s I mean, in my opinion, there’s nothing classier than a bare black alligator boots.” The *intercultural* theme emerged as participants discussed the origins of boot making as a combination of makers from Mexico and Europe. European immigrants were some of the originators of boot making in Texas, as Zeph said: “...the Justin Boot Company, being a family of German immigrants, the Luchese boot company being a family of Italian descent. And both of those families came to the US, starting with one or two men and began boot making for some need that they felt existed in some region of Texas,” while Bob recounted, “the Mexican cowboys used, which came from Spain. But then also a lot of German families moved into Texas and made a different type of boot.”

Future Research. These initial findings will inform a Phase II study, with the goal of interviewing a total of (n=15) Texas boot makers.

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