

CONSUMER TRIBALISM: A NEW SEGMENTATION

Charan Manjunath^{1#}

Doctoral student, University of Mysore, Mysore, Karnataka, India

Dr Praveen Kumar²

Assoc. prof., Department of Management, J.S.S, Science and Technology University, Mysore, Karnataka, India

Dr Shivalinge Gowda³

Head, Department of Commerce, S.K.P College, Mysore, Karnataka, India

Abstract : Consumer tribe is a contemporary phenomenon in marketing theory and is conceptualized as emotionally connected individuals in informal groups that are based on shared ideas, interests, and passion. Therefore, tribalism can constitute a segmentation based on common attributes and values of individuals who engage in many interpersonal activities daily. However, these groups have not received much attention in marketing theory and practices. Hence, this systematic literature review introduces and explains consumer tribes, features, and examples that justify considering them as a consumer segment.

KEYWORDS: Consumer tribes, Tribalism, Segmentation, Closely related informal groups.

1. Introduction

Postmodern studies in marketing brought to light many consumption communities present in contemporary society. These studies comprehended how individuals come together using products, services, brands, and consumption practices to build communities, engage in interpersonal activities and communicate identities (Brown, 2006; Canniford, 2011; Cova, 1997). Moreover, these studies progressed the understanding of how such communities create new consumer culture in the marketplace. Although more than 100 consumption communities have been studied and explored in the last 25 years, brand communities and subcultures of consumption and consumer tribes have received much limelight.

Consumer tribes, which is the focus of this study, is understood as a community of emotionally connected individuals based on shared interests, passion, and identities. Such tribes communicated continuously and actively engaged in many interpersonal activities envisioning new social cultures (Cova, 1999; Cova & Cova, 2001a; Goulding et al., 2013). Thus, tribalism became a new segment of heterogeneous groups of individuals based on meaningful and shared characteristics. Vinyl record collectors for collecting and listening to music in vinyl format (Mitchell & Imrie, 2011), inline skaters for their passion for skating (Cova & Cova, 2001), surfers around their passion for surfing (Moutinho et al., 2007) are a few examples of consumer tribal phenomenon.

Consumption communities offered new avenues to conduct marketing and understand many behaviours in social contexts based on emotional and hedonistic natures (Holt, 1995). This also became a new stream of studies focused on consumers' communal nature, otherwise dominated by individuals' traits, cognitions, and rational abilities of consumers (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Tribalism is crucial as society fragments and provides endless options to consume, making it difficult to segment and position market offerings based on common attributes such as demographic, social class, or niches variables (Cova, 1997; Fuat Firat & Shultz, 1997). Hence, this study systematically introduces the concept of consumer tribes, their features, and examples that can broaden the concept of consumer tribes and consider them as strategic importance for marketers and researchers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Understanding consumer tribes

In marketing, the use of tribal context took impetus from Maffesoli's book, "The Times of Tribes" (1996). He concurs that modernism resulting from the industrial revolution, new trade practices, and advancing technology has individualized human beings of everything previously considered social. He observes that these liberated but isolated individuals are now embarking on a reverse journey to recompose their social universe in small ephemeral groups to seek social belonging and affiliation. He concludes that such communities started to shape themselves voluntarily and beyond geographical boundaries into a mosaic of small social grouping based on interests, affiliation, and avocations. Such communities became quasi-religious, not in a traditional religious sense but a religare form (Maffesoli M, 1996).

Cova and Cova (1997) used Maffesoli (1996) neo-tribal trends present in contemporary society to identify groups of individuals organized around products, services, brands, experiences, consumption, or anything that would provide 'linking value' for individuals to connect, share and create community. Cova uses tribes as a metaphor to explain individuals returning to the pre-industrial value of religiousness, group narcissism, and sense of community. He uses tribes to depict contemporary socialities' dynamics and stresses their relationship to the pre-modern era to identify similarities and differences between traditional tribes and neo-tribal systems to explore new and interesting parallels in contemporary society.

The typical dictionary definition of a tribe defines it as a group of persons or clans believed to have a common ancestry. The adjective for the word 'tribe' is 'tribal,' which refers to many people.

The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Sociology defines tribe and tribalism as terms denoting a social group bound together by kin and duty associated with a particular territory (Marshall, G., ed., 1996). It might also be a group of people bound together by the same occupation or idea/s or even a brand.

Though there is no universally accepted definition of consumer tribes or neo tribes or postmodern tribes in marketing, we can infer from the works of Cova (1997, 1999), Shankar (2013), and Kozinets (1999) that consumer tribes is a social network of the heterogeneous set of individuals in terms of age, sex, income or social status but instead linked by a shared passion, values, and ethos. These groups shared similar ideas and interests. They concurred that consumer tribes are grouped around something emotional than rational. Aesthetics, material culture, products, brands, places, products, consumption, sports, and many such factors acted as a linking value that affirmed and supported their union (Canniford, 2011b; Holt, 1995; Maffesoli M, 1996).

These tribal communities shared non-Monterey interests, and their association was more based on displaying style, experiences, and emotional concerns by voluntarily forming a community with like-minded others. For this, Cova (1997) suggests that tribes come together just because it feels good and what binds them are the shared experiences, passion for performing things together. In addition, such tribal communities were conscious of themselves, shared moral responsibility, and identified differently from others.

Tribes shared strong bonds, common understandings, upheld goals and values, and accomplished objectives by interacting continuously face-to-face or using modern technology (Diaz Ruiz et al., 2020; Kozinets, 1999). Such communities ranged from local, regional and global, formed for minor to intense social contexts, and varied across durations. Tribe's engagement in their social setting has also resulted in many consumption preferences necessary to marketing (Mitchell & Imrie, 2011).

Kozinets (1999) asserts that, although tribal trends existed for many years, new forms of communication such as the internet, web 2.0, and mobile technology and social media platforms have allowed the interaction and development of consumer grouping dominant form of expression of commonality. He also found evidence that E-tribes or virtual tribes, as he calls them, are aggregate communities of like-minded people, overcoming traditional geo-demographic segmentation barriers and assembled to share their passion for a product or activity. These groups centred upon consumption-related interests.

Thirty years since the first seminal article on the communal aspect of consumption was published. And it has found grounding in marketing theories and practice today. Postmodern marketing studies have become the paradigm that captured the essence of new social aspects of collaborative consumption, which is studied currently.

2.2 FEATURES OF CONSUMER TRIBES

Tribes operate at the primary level of sociality, which is made of everyday interactions that are different from secondary sociality that deals with official belonging such as the occupational one (Cova & Cova, 2001b; Desjeux, 1996). This face-to-face and online interaction have resulted in creating a culture that is unique to such consumer grouping. Some of the essential features which can make them a new segment are mentioned below.

- One of the essential elements of tribes is their ability to engage in rituals, traditions, and customs. These also manifest as members' commitment towards their tribes (Pekkanen et al., 2017; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). Tribe's engagement constituted in events, ceremonies, culture, clothing, words, or anything that served as an expression of shared beliefs and social belonging of tribes (Cova & Dalli, 2006).
- Tribes have limited hierarchy, their membership was voluntary, and there existed no strict code of conduct. This was found in contrast with brand communities and subculture of consumption who organized around brands and consumption that had strict norms for members (Canniford, 2011a).
- Tribes can also encompass Bordieus's (Claussen & Osborne, 2013) cultural capital of field theory that can explain rules, hierarchy, and knowledge in the tribe that is formed by members coming and dwelling together in close vicinity. Cultural capital can consist of socially constructed specific skills, knowledge, tastes, and practices unique to the group that helps the group to perpetuate for a long time.
- Cova and Shankar (2006; 2013) found tribes were loosely connected groups in an informal setup. They were not limited to their geographical location. They gathered and dispersed at will hence devoid of long-term moral responsibility. Membership in their tribe's dint precludes them from participating in other forms of socialities. They existed parallel with the leading society and did not dominate everyday life (Mitchell & Imrie, 2011).
- Cova (1999) and kozinets (Mitchell & Imrie, 2011) identified roles adopted by members of the tribe ranged from a devotee who has long-standing passion, knowledge, and involvement with the tribe to a sympathizer who had a quasi association with the tribe. Eventually, the role of chief/influencer was also found by Mitchel and Imrie (2011). These leaders actively took part in the group. He was an important resourceful person who moderated the group.
- Consumer tribes have also been active and entrepreneurial and come with an open-minded attitude to the market. They collaborate with companies and have often created their products and services as knowledgeable entities in their domains. Examples of successful collaboration of snowboarders with Solomon (Cova, 1999), Prius PT car community (Silva & Mariana Santos, 2012) proved their entrepreneurial ability.

2.3 EXAMPLES OF CONSUMER TRIBES

Many researchers have used tribal frameworks to identify and present groups in contemporary societies. However, few field studies which have used tribal phenomenon are mentioned below.

- Cova and Cava's (2001) case of Inline roller skaters demonstrated a shared passion for skating, which led to a closely bonded community of skaters in France. Cova narrates how few individuals who added four wheels to their ice skates started rolling for fun in summer, which eventually gave rise to a massive tribal moment. Today inline skating is followed across the world. They also have festivals, events, dedicated skating lines, and parks in many cities. A collective passion for skating has grown into a global phenomenon today.
- Luiz Moutinho et al. (2007) investigated the surfing community in Portugal and identified the tribal behaviour present in the surfers. Surfers shared affiliation, social recognition, and symbolism. Surfers used beaches, cafes, and getaway places for their rituals and social union. This community also had rituals and traditions and common preference for products and brands. Surfing was considered a tribe based on their passion for surfing. Similar was also found among football club fans who strongly preferred their clubs, strongly identified with the club, and participated in everyday rituals of club sport (Rudi Meir, 2016).
- Paulo Miguel (2013) found all features of consumer tribe among the skateboarders. Skateboarders shared a strong linking value towards their passion for skateboarding. They were non-competitive and shared an emotional connection. They formed rituals like assembling at parks, sharing tricks with fellow skaters, and travelling for different events. They were also found to be playful, informal, and shared strong brotherly bonding. This tribal community developed common consumption preferences.
- The tribal phenomenon was not specific to sports and was present even among the consumer products such as cars. Santos and Silva (2012) conducted a qualitative study among Prius –PT (hybrid car from Toyota) community to understand the tribal phenomenon. The centre for the tribe was not the car itself, but it was like a linking value, a connecting phenomenon for members who shared common interests about the environment, ease of driving, and defensive ability of the car. Though there were more than 900 members, of which only 100 shared the tribal connection. This group had rituals such as pasting bumper stickers, waving, signalling, and informal gathering. The paper concluded that the group held common values such as pride, rituals, leaders, hierarchy, word of mouth, and strong emotional connection between members.
- In another field study, Cleo Mitchell and C. Imrie (2011) published their work about vinyl record collectors in New Zealand using the tribal framework. Vinyl collectors shared an emotional connection that was based on a passion for collecting, listening, and playing music in the vinyl record format. The vinyl records became the product of linking value between individuals. Tribal bonds were found based on affective rather than commercial. Record acquisition by members established different statuses known as symbolic capital among the collectors. Tribal membership of vinyl record collectors was found to influence music consumption and has transgressed to other preferences.
- In another interesting case of Lomo photography, Cova and Cova (1999) identify what started as a simple parlour trick photography grew as a big moment. Two friends who found an old Soviet (Russian) made Lomo camera started to click pictures that produced dull, abstract, distorted photography. When these pictures were displayed on walls, they started to grab attention, and soon many started to buy this camera, click, and share these pictures. Today Lomo camera is owned by more than 35,000 people and has fans all across the world. Lomo congress was held in 1999, with 108 meters long Lomo wall portraying 15,000 pictures in Vienna, and Lomomobil toured Europe displaying Lomo photography. Lomo Photography exhibitions are conducted where the moment is active on social media pages. What began as a fun free time activity became a moment of tribal formation around shared feelings and freedom of expression.

- Lastly, Hardy et al. (2013) investigated groups of recreational vehicle (RV) enthusiasts who build their lifestyle upon brief encounters with other travellers. The reputation of the RV club was the basis for the formation of the tribe. They had unique languages and signs and met friendly and like-minded others who shared a similar interest. The tribal experience was based on the RV owners' freedom, novelty, adventure, and excitement. A tribal gathering like potlucks, travelling spontaneously with new communities, reinforced the tribal connection. Driving their RV's became a linking value that connected everyone

All these serve as examples where tribal phenomena became a segmentation based on emotional connection and a strong sense of community where individuals identified themselves as groups based on shared interests and a common passion.

3. DISCUSSION

The influence of technology and modern commerce is believed to fragment society and individual living becoming predominant (Brown, 2006). This has caused marketers two critical problems. First, it has become difficult to segment consumers based on demographics, psychographic variables and other traditional methods to position firms offering. Second, as individualism has become an ordinary course of life, the liberated consumer is not loyal to one way of living, and with endless options to consume, it is believed he/she are juxtaposed about their consumption preferences (Maffesoli M, 1996).

At this challenging junction, marketers can work with tribes that constitute a readymade segment of emotionally connected consumers based on common attributes and values. The benefit of working with such communities stems from the premise that social influence affects individual consuming decisions (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Schwer & Daneshvary, 2011). Studies even show that loyal and cohesive consumers would prefer brands and products usually sought in the group and would switch the same if the group did (Hewer & Hamilton, 2010).

Building and operating tribes like communities have also been shown to be profitable. For example, we can consider the case of 'Volcom,' a brand that made action force clothing and accessories, changed its business approach from selling products to endorse its brands as an important means to support athletes, artists who were formed around their shared passion. Here, Volcom placed their brands as a partner to support the passion and values through collaboration. This led Volcom to leap forward its sales and profits in the market dominated by famous brands such as quicksilver and billabong (Canniford, 2011b).

Understanding consumer tribes have generated knowledge that benefits companies by forming an association with like-minded individuals. This phenomenon of building communities around products and services has been an important marketing strategy of many multinational companies. For example; Redbull's energy tribe, Nike's running tribe, Lego's imaginative tribe, Crossfit WOD tribe, and Jeep community are some examples found in practice where the companies have leveraged product/consumption activity enthusiasts successfully as their tribe (Dan Pankraz, 2009)

Tribalism can be an essential strategy where consumers move from passive receivers of firms' products to active contributors, from predictable to migratory, from purely isolated to socially intertwined (Jenkins, H., 2006). Consumer tribes present opportunities to connect with these elusive consumer groups who cannot be either accessed or understood in any other way. Like many authors, we also believe tribal theory guarantees a network approach that offers avenues for theoretical investigation and marketing applications that are overlooked.

4. CONCLUSION

Thirty years when the first paper on the tribal phenomenon was presented, it received scepticism, but today, there is much evidence of tribes becoming a more traceable reality, and their efforts are visible in the way humans collaborate and produce social forces outside modern structures (Cova & Cova, 2001a). Tribalism can be lives and roles individuals play as part of sports fan, group of weekend trekkers, a part of motorbike riders group, member of a car club, group of fitness enthusiast and many such interest groups which is not part of family or occupational groups but ones based on interest and avocations (Maffesoli M, 1996). These communions are essential because this is where one invests emotionally and is part of his personal space, which is not the same as private life. Therefore, members' interactions in such social spaces composed of grassroots level human activities and belonging to such groups have become more important to individuals (Gead & Bullock, 2008).

The major limitation of this study is that it is a generalized one. Moreover, it provides limited examples to operationalize it to the Indian market condition. Nevertheless, this review provides an initial intellectual inquiry with a temper to look at the tribal phenomenon.

REFERENCES

- Baumhammer, P. M. P. (2013). FOUR WHEELS AND ONE BOARD: STUDYING THE SKATEBOARD TRIBE AND THEIR LOYALTY TOWARDS SKATEBOARDING BRANDS. *Thesis*, 89.
- Bearden, W. O., & Etzel, M. J. (1982). Reference Group Influence on Product and Brand Purchase Decisions. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9(2), 183–194. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2489127>
- Brown, S. (2006). Recycling Postmodern Marketing. *The Marketing Review*, 6(3), 211–230. <https://doi.org/10.1362/146934706778605322>
- Canniford, R. (2011a). A Typology of Consumption Communities. In R. W. Belk, K. Grayson, A. M. Muñiz, & H. Jensen Schau (Eds.), *Research in Consumer Behavior* (Vol. 13, pp. 57–75). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. [https://doi.org/10.1108/S0885-2111\(2011\)0000013007](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0885-2111(2011)0000013007)
- Canniford, R. (2011b). How to manage consumer tribes. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 19, 591–606. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2011.599496>
- Claussen, S., & Osborne, J. (2013). Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and its implications for the science curriculum. *Science Education*, 97(1), 58–79. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21040>
- Cova, B. (1997). Community and consumption: Towards a definition of the “linking value” of product or services. *European Journal of Marketing*, 31(3/4), 297–316. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090569710162380>
- Cova, B. (1999). *Tribal marketing: A Latin deconstruction of a Northern construction*.
- Cova, B., & Cova, V. (2001a). Tribal aspects of postmodern consumption research: The case of French inline roller skaters. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 1(1), 67–76. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.54>

- Cova, B., & Cova, V. (2001b). Tribal aspects of postmodern consumption research: The case of French inline roller skaters. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 1(1), 67–76. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.54>
- Cova, B., & Dalli, D. (2006). *From communal resistance to tribal value creation*. 22.
- Dan Pankraz. (2009, June 7). Youth want tribal ideas – tips on how to create a movement around your brand. *Dan Pankraz Vs Youth*. <https://danpankraz.wordpress.com/2009/06/07/youth-are-tribal-tips-on-how-to-create-a-movement-around-your-brand/>
- Desjeux, D. (1996). Scales of observation A micro-sociological epistemology of social science practice*. *Visual Studies*, 11, 45–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725869608583765>
- Diaz Ruiz, C. A., Penaloza, L., & Holmqvist, J. (2020). Assembling tribes: An assemblage thinking approach to the dynamics of ephemerality within consumer tribes. *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(5), 999–1024. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-08-2018-0565>
- Fuat Firat, A., & Shultz, C. J. (1997). From segmentation to fragmentation: Markets and marketing strategy in the postmodern era. *European Journal of Marketing*, 31(3/4), 183–207. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EUM0000000004321>
- Geard, N., & Bullock, S. (2008). *Group formation and social evolution: A computational model*. 7.
- Goulding, C., Shankar, A., & Canniford, R. (2013). Learning to be tribal: Facilitating the formation of consumer tribes. *European Journal of Marketing*, 47(5/6), 813–832. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561311306886>
- Hardy, A., Gretzel, U., & Hanson, D. (2013). Travelling neo-tribes: Conceptualizing recreational vehicle users. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 11(1–2), 48–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2013.783584>
- Hewer, P., & Hamilton, K. (2010). On emotions and salsa: Some thoughts on dancing to rethink consumers. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 9(2), 113–125. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.308>
- Holt, D. B. (1995). How Consumers Consume: A Typology of Consumption Practices. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209431>
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press. 336 pp. \$29.95 (hardbound)—Andrew Ó Baoill, 2008. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0894439307306088>

- Kozinets, R. V. (1999). E-tribalized marketing?: The strategic implications of virtual communities of consumption. *European Management Journal*, 17(3), 252–264. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0263-2373\(99\)00004-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0263-2373(99)00004-3)
- Maffesoli M. (1996). *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marshall, G., ed. (1996). *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Sociology*. Oxford University Press.
- Mitchell, C., & Imrie, B. C. (2011). Consumer tribes: Membership, consumption and building loyalty. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 23(1), 39–56. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13555851111099989>
- Moutinho, L., Dionísio, P., & Leal, C. (2007). Surf tribal behaviour: A sports marketing application. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 25(7), 668–690. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02634500710834160>
- Muniz, A. M., & O’Guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(4), 412–432. <https://doi.org/10.1086/319618>
- Pekkanen, A., Närvänen, E., & Tuominen, P. (2017). Elements of rituality in consumer tribes: The case of crossfit. *Journal of Customer Behaviour*, 16(4), 353–370. <https://doi.org/10.1362/147539217X15144729108144>
- Rudi Meir. (2016). *Tribalism, team brand loyalty, team brand value and personal/group identity in professional Rugby football*. 438.
- Schwer, R., & Daneshvary, R. (2011). Symbolic Product Attributes And Emulatory Consumption: The Case Of Rodeo Fan Attendance And The Wearing Of Western Clothing. *Journal of Applied Business Research*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.19030/jabr.v11i3.5862>
- Silva & Mariana Santos. (2012). How to capitalize on a tribe. *The Marketing Review*, 12(4), 417–434. <https://doi.org/10.1362/146934712X13469451716718>
- Wallendorf, M., & Arnould, E. (1991). “We Gather Together”: Consumption Rituals of Thanksgiving Day. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18, 13–31. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209237>