

## CONSUMPTION COMMUNITIES THROUGH A MARKETING LENS

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This paper focuses on the role of consumption communities in marketing and aims at describing various consumption communities, relying upon the existing literature. Through a review of selected studies, the paper explores and reviews the literature. Consumption communities offer different paths to understand and theorize what is happening among socialized consumers. Besides some common characteristics, brand communities, subcultures of consumption and consumer tribes are different in some aspects. These differences are summarized in a typology of consumption communities.

**Keywords:** Consumption communities, Subcultures of consumption, Brand communities, Consumer tribes.

### Introduction

Humans have a basic need to connect with others, share experiences and develop social relationships. Social relationships and self-identity are focusing more on consumption than production and consumption focuses on community relationships with the rise of postmodernism. In this context, emergence of consumption communities is a result of postmodernism. Involvement in these communities is an expression of self identity for the consumers. Therefore these communities are vital in marketing and consumer behavior.

When communities are discussed in the context of marketing and consumption, leading scholars used terms such as tribe or brand tribes to name consumption communities. In different researchers different terms for example, *subcultures of consumption* (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) or *brand tribes* (Otnes and Maclaran, 2007) are used. Previous researches in consumer research about consumption communities are separated into five groups: subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Kozinets,1997), cultures of consumption (Kozinets,2001) consumption micro-cultures (Thompson and Torester, 2002), brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn,2001; McAlexander; Schoten; Koenig, 2002) and consumer tribes (Cova and Cova 2002).

### Consumption Communities Get on the Stage

In simplest terms, consumption communities are the communities that consist of people who consume the same kind of objects with a feeling of shared well-being, shared risks, common interests, and common concerns (Boorstin, 1973, 147).

In marketing and communications, consumption communities generally have some common traits and importance. But, it has a strategic importance for marketers to learn how these communities create

different impacts. Despite the continuous interest of consumer researchers, deficiency in common descriptive and theoretical concepts is still going on. Therefore, a more careful distinction in socialization categories of consumption communities is necessary. In this sense, subcultures of consumption, brand communities and consumer tribes attract attention in literature. So, in this paper these three communities will be clarified.

### *Subcultures of Consumption*

Subculture of consumption describes the degree of sharing a common identity in consumption of the same objects (Holt, 1997, 346). Schouten ve McAlexander (1995,43) describe the subculture of consumption as “shared commitment to a product or product class, brand or consumption activity”. In other words, specific subgroups of society that have a common commitment to a particular product, brand or consumption activity are called subcultures of consumption. (Goulding; Shankar; Canniford, 2013, 816).

A subculture of consumption exists when people identify themselves with a specific product or consumption activity or when they identify themselves with other people via communal consumption (Schouten and MacAlexander, 1995, 48). Becoming a member of a subculture of consumption is generally a socialization process starting with participation in a group at the bottom of the status hierarchy. This socialization which is seen as an impact of the subculture on individual identity, causes a transformation which requires an evolution of the necessary motivations for internalization of individual’s engagement for the subculture and its belief and values (Schouten and MacAlexander, 1995, 56). Like subcultures, subcultures of consumption have persistent social orders, strong interpersonal relationships, ritualized expression modes (Canniford, 2011a, 59).

### *Brand Communities*

There are different descriptions for brand communities in literature. Brand communities are as “active loyals” defined by Gruen and Ferguson “often committed, conscientious and almost passionate” (1994, 3) groups. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001,412) describe the brand community as “a specialized non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” According to Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006a, 45), a brand community is a community of customers who “come together to achieve a collective goal and share a common enthusiasm for a specific brand”

Brand communities show the characteristics of traditional communities. But they have specific market logics and expression and consciousness of kind informed by a commercial and competitive market environment (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, 419).

Brand communities are imaginary communities and they are different from homogenous segments and consumer clusters in market research; community unifies around a product or service. They are not accidental relationships, but commercial social communities focused on a brand. There are at least three advantages of a brand community for consumers (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, 426):

- By virtue of their collective nature, and being enhanced by new forms of computer-mediated communication, consumers simply have a greater voice.
- Brand communities provide an important information resource for consumers. Community members can gain information more easily in an established collective for the brand.
- Brand communities provide social benefits for its members, often affectual like traditional communities.

### *Consumer Tribes*

Despite the theoretical usefulness of brand communities, recent researches show that many of the consumption communities do not exist just around a brand. Consumer tribes exist when the members identify with each other, have shared experiences and emotions, and engage in collective social action all of which can be facilitated through a variety of brands, products, activities and services (Goulding; Shankar; Canniford, 2013, 4). Consumer tribes are groups of people emotionally connected by similar

consumption values who use the social “linking value” of products and services to create a community and express identity.

These tribes take the name of “emotion or passion community” but can’t be named as community. In defining postmodern social dynamics, “common interest” which is included by “community” term is not enough, the term should include some archaic values. Therefore, tribe is used instead of the term “community” (Firat and Dholakia, 1998, 155).

Tribes are described as temporary and intensive constellation of different people by Maffesoli who is the creator of the term. According to Cova (1997), postmodern tribes are ephemeral and small micro-groups which are not fixed by any of the established parameters of modern society; instead they can be held together through common strong emotional links, common life styles, new moral beliefs and consumption practices. Postmodern tribes are not closed objects, but open systems. They exist in no other forms but in the symbolically and ritually manifested commitment of their members.

A tribe is defined as a network of heterogeneous set of people -in terms of age, sex, income, etc. who come together with a shared passion or emotion. Tribes are shifting gathering of emotionally bonded people, open systems to which a person belongs and yet does not quite belong (Cova and Cova, 2001, 69).

### **Distinguishing the Consumption Communities**

Besides some common characteristics, consumption communities differ in some aspects. Canniford argues that subcultures of consumption, brand communities and consumer tribes offer different paths to understand what is happening amongst socialized consumers (Canniford, 2011, 69).

Brand communities are “consumer groups that are created around a brand” in simplest terms (Cova and Pace, 2006), but some scholars term it as subculture of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 2005). Difference between these two terms is not clear enough. Indeed a brand community is a consumer community in which participants communicate with each other based on a brand. When the community members turn their interest from a product to a brand, the community becomes a brand community.

Brand communities have some similar characteristics with subcultures of consumption. These characteristics are “identified, hierarchical social structure; unique world view or common belief and value system; and unique jargons, rituals and symbolic expression modes” (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, 43). But brand communities are not same with the subcultures of consumption. Meanings created by subcultures of consumption resist with the mainstream culture, but brand communities generally don’t reject it (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, 414). Difference of brand community from subcultures of consumption is seen in the reason they come together or their focus. Brand communities focus on a specific brand while subcultures of consumption focus on a specific product or product categories.

Brand communities show the devotion characteristics of a subculture of consumption, but communal consumption of a brand is at the centre of the community membership. Socialization in brand communities seldom displays the political resistance or strong social ties distinctive for subcultures. Brand communities differ from subcultures of consumption with relatively centralized and conservative power structures located around the products and core values of a brand (Canniford 2011, 594).

Some researchers see brand community as a kind of tribe. Luedicke and Giesler argue that brand community is a postmodern tribe which unifies consumers around a commercial brand (Luedicke and Giesler, 2007, 275). Contrary to this view, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, 415) argue that brand communities are long-lasting and their members are more loyal to the community than the tribe of Cova (1997) and Maffesoli (1996). In addition, they argue that these communities don’t have to be marginal and resist the mainstream culture like subcultures.

Thompson and Torester argue that studies on brand communities focus on the socially shared meanings created by individuals from the relation they have with the brand, while studies on tribes and subcultures focus on social rituals, interpersonal dynamics and collectively shared experiences (2002, 553).

Indeed a brand community is similar with the tribe. But Cova and Cova (2002, 603) argue that a tribe doesn't need to be a brand community. While brand communities are obviously commercial, tribes are not. Tribes exist around a shared pleasure, action or experience, while brand communities exist around a brand. But when a tribe organizes with passion around a brand like Harley Davidson, it is able to show similar characteristics with brand communities.

Canniford (2011) suggests that care must be taken in observing subcultures of consumption, brand communities and tribes as distinct categories at the emic level, hence developed a typology of consumption communities

### A Typology of Consumption Communities

Feature	Subculture of Consumption	Brand Communities	Tribes
Locus	Activity	Brand	Emotion
Power structure	Hierarchy of core members	Hierarchy of core members+Brand managers	Diffuse, democratic, hybrid network
Purpose	Sociality, response to alienation	Brand use, sociality	Sociality, passion
Marketing potential	Unpredictable, unmanageable	Brand equity, co-creative dialogue	Linking value, entrepreneurialism
Time span	Long term	Long term	Transient
Structure	Slow to change, resistant	Slow to change, conservative	Fluid, fast moving
Social position	Marginal	Mainstream	Ambivalent

(Canniford, 2011, 70)

Canniford argues that tribes carry out similar functions with subcultures of brand communities, but differ in four important points:

1. Tribes are multiple. Unlike subcultures of consumption and brand communities tribes rarely dominate the everyday life of the consumer (Goulding et. al. 2009, 263). Membership of one tribe does not pretend to be a member of another tribe. On the contrary, in different situations transitions between different identities are possible (Bennett, 1999, 606).
2. Tribes are playful. Tied to this multiplicity of membership and fluidity of identity, tribal consumption is often deprived of the long term moral responsibility and the sacred enthusiasm of brand community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, 424) or the reverence afforded to social hierarchies and core product felt in subcultures of consumption
3. Tribes are transient. Tribes emerge, transform and disappear as the combinations of people and resources alter. This generates a consumption process that may be critical and liberatory at one moment, but at the next moment mean less emotional intensity and pleasure (Goulding et al. 2009, 17-18). Acceptance of these contradictory rapidly changing meanings enables a power balance between consumers and the producers between manipulation and emancipation (Cova and Pace, 2006, 1090).
4. Tribes are entrepreneurial. Powerful and liberatory attitudes of tribes against the market are the new ways of entrepreneurial approaches. Tribe members are willing to be a part of the brand value creation process, instead of being only a customer (Cova; Kozinets; Shankar, 2007, 16).

In short, tribes are different from subcultures of consumption and brand communities in defining the consumption experiences. Contrary to subcultures, they don't rely on destroying of prevalent institutes

and contrary to brand communities; they don't look for an icon brand for consumption experiences. Conversely, in tribes, social links between consumers or consumers and linking value are more important than what is consumed (Canniford, 2011, 70).

### Marketing Implications

Postmodern tribes offer marketers some opportunities to contact with the complicated postmodern consumers. These tribes do not constitute homogenous segments of arbitrary specialties, but they are spontaneously groups which convey meaning and interest for their members. Consumer tribes share not only moral values or ideas, but also consumption values and preferences. This provides an opportunity for marketers to reach a group that share consumption preferences by really connecting to each other. To understand specific cultural capital and symbolic content of a tribe provide important opportunities for marketers to contact with tribe members and create a collective and strong loyalty with them (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011, 42-43).

To understand the structure, belief and values of a subculture for a marketer is possible by developing a long-lasting and symbiotic relationship. The marketer is able to play an active role in socializing new members and developing loyalty of existing members by understanding the self-transformation of individuals in the subculture. The marketers who understand the structure, belief and values of subculture of consumption will gain profit by responding their needs. In addition to provide required objects for the function of the subculture, marketers help socialization of the new members, provide opportunity to contact with the subculture and sponsor for the events of subculture. In turn, the marketer gains benefits such as increasing customer loyalty, promotion and consumer feedback (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, 58-59).

There are so many reasons of marketers' interest in brand communities, such as the ability to effect perceptions and activities of members, providing the rapid spread of information, learning the consumers' evaluation of new products and connection with loyalist customers (Algesheimer, Dholakia, Herrmann 2005,19). In addition, businesses invest on brand communities with the belief that they will affect the adoption behavior in two ways. First, membership and participation of brand communities generates a loyalty amongst the members. This loyalty is expected to enhance the consumers' future purchase behavior. Second, membership and participation in a brand community creates an oppositional brand loyalty. This oppositional brand loyalty makes community members opposite to the rival brands and decreases the possible purchase of these rival brands (Thompson and Sinha, 2008, 65).

Marketers are advised to provide and develop context (participation to activities, places and meetings) to integrate the consumers with a community. Thus, they will gain possible benefits of being supported by the community by turning consumer into a brand evangelist, a conveyer of the marketing message, a loyal brand fan, a feedback supplier, an opposite to rival brands and generally a supporter of achievements of the company (McAlexander et. al. 2002, 51).

Marketers, who understand the community's or tribe's subcultural structure and value systems by using ethnographic methods, can make profit by serving their needs. In the same time, they can help socialization of the new members, make the communication easier and sponsor activities of the community (Cova, 1996, 22).

Marketers should integrate themselves with the members of the tribe about shared feelings and rituals, instead of limiting themselves as a non-participant observer. In this context, there are some points to pay attention for marketers (Cova and Cova, 2002, 600):

- Marketers should realize that postmodern consumers are looking not only for products and services which enable them to be freer, but also products and services which can link them to others, to a tribe.
- Beside personalizing the products they should create an emotional link which leads to communal behavior

- Communal link must be considered in business-customer relationship and customers' dialogue between themselves should be supported.

In addition, marketers can play an active role in building meanings and traditions which feeds shared consciousness in the community. Brand community characteristics such as shared consciousness, rituals and traditions and moral responsibility leads to the creation of value by customers and company together (Goulding; Shankar; Canniford, 2013, 4).

Consumers who are the members of a tribe don't want to be led by marketers, but they want to lead the market as activists and contributors. This means that tribes cannot be managed with traditional methods. Therefore, marketers should establish a fruitful and symbiotic dialogue with consumers by nurturing their roles in creating linking value which links them to each other (Canniford, 2011, 603).

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