PART 1

Understanding Actors in Social Media Marketing

In the following three chapters, the book looks at the actors who engage in social media in different ways: who is acting, and why are they participating in and acting out a given scenario?; what are the participants creating and why?; which roles do other objects, tools and accessories play in enabling the participants to act and create? Consequently, these chapters focus on these three topics and which role they play as a means to help marketers understand consumer behaviour in social media environments, and to successfully engage with consumers.

The first chapter examines the social environment in which first digital and later social media emerged as a viable marketing tool. In the first part, the chapter examines the perquisite of ‘usefulness’ to explain the rise of ubiquitous new communication tools for consumers. It conceptualises the rise of social media both in terms of the technological acceptance as well as uses and gratifications derived from the ‘new’ media. Clearly, a pervasive presence of new media cannot arise without a strong perception of usefulness. A wider discussion follows to show how improved communications has influenced consumer
behaviour. This latter part examines how the emergence of consumer tribes has synergistically facilitated and been enabled by new communication methods, expedited by the flexibility and adaptability of Internet-based tools and widespread Internet adoption.

Chapter 2 examines the interface between organisations and consumers by focusing on the value consumers perceive when engaging in collaborative activities using social media, and what value they are creating by collaboratively working. Based on the notion that value is ‘the consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given’ (Zeithaml, 1988: 14), the chapter shows that consumers as co-creators are taking over active control in creating their consumption experiences, especially if consumption experiences enable consumers to associate themselves to tribes as discussed in Chapter 1. As co-creation is integral to the brand experience, understanding the roles and processes in co-creation is essential for marketers curating brands. Much has been written about the rising consumer power in the context of social media, and many marketers have come to fear, loath and love social media tools. This chapter will enable future marketers to understand and engage with co-creating consumers and engage positively with the ‘working consumer’.

Finally, Chapter 3 scrutinises the changing role of brands, messages and social media tools themselves as the essential constituents of social media marketing. The chapter is based on the observation that consumers treat computers and technology as independent social actors (c.f. Wang et al., 2007), and consequently that in order to be successful, brands have to assume a role of independent social actors, alongside human actors (such as other tribe members). Aided by the ubiquitous virtual communication environment, the chapter examines how communication messages need to adapt, by focusing more on relationship and brand personality creation and less on overtly selling products. Using the notion of anthropomorphic marketing, the chapter shows, given the characteristics of the social media environments, brands have to assume an increasingly humanoid appearance in their communication – effectively anthropomorphising commercial communication.

REFERENCES


1 Consumer Tribes and Communities

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter puts the rise of the Internet and social media in particular into the wider societal context, which occurred concurrently with the advancement in and popular adoption of information technology. The chapter shows that emerging tribal and symbolical consumption patterns and subcultures of consumption were substantial driving forces of technological adoption, with subcultures adopting online technology as a means to network, before a more widespread adoption and adaptation in mainstream culture.
LEARNING OUTCOMES

On completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Understand how marketing and consumer behaviour has moved from an exchange based emphasis to emphasising the experience
- Appreciate the importance of subcultures and subcultures of consumption on consumer behaviour
- Be able to distinguish between tribes and brand communities, and critically evaluate the influence of symbolic consumption on everyday purchase decisions
- Understand the basics of researching brand communities online, through the use of netnography

TOWARDS TRIBAL CONSUMPTION

To understand the rise of the Internet and the emergence and influence of social media as a particular evolution of the widespread adaptation of information technology, it is essential that we put these two phenomena into a broader context of culture shifts occurring at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Although it is tempting to think of the emergence of social media as the game-changing event that swept away any of the previous models and theories, when the phenomenon is looked at from a more holistic, cultural perspective, the development and subsequent popularity of social media is more a lucky combination of technological advancement combined with post-modern consumption behaviour.

Social media ‘gurus’ love to amaze by showing impressive numbers about the explosive growth of websites like Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites. A favourite comparison is comparing the time it took for radio and television to reach a similar audience, for example, it is claimed that it took 13 years for television to reach 50 million viewers, yet only 3.5 years for Facebook to accumulate the same amount of users (Annan, 2012). However, these comparisons are problematic, as fundamentally such comparisons imply that it is the appearance of Facebook, or similar social media platform being talked about, that has sparked a revolution in consumer behaviour, which could not have happened without the appearance of the particular platform being talked about. An alternative view is that social media emerged to fulﬁl a need online that was already evident offline. In other words, social media did not actually change existing consumer behaviour, but rather it brought it online and made it more visible.

To clarify these issues, the remainder of this chapter examines if social media was the spark that lit the fire, or if it simply added fuel to an existing fire. In other words, was social media accelerating a change in society and with it in consumption behaviour, or was it the initiator?

The ‘Usefulness’ of Social Media

If regarded from a purely theoretical and practical perspective, any technology, including social media, the Internet, the video recorder, the telephone or any other innovation, needs to achieve widespread adoption to become ‘significant’. The Technology Acceptance
Model (TAM), amongst other models described in more detail in Chapter 4, highlights the importance of ‘usefulness’ as a key component.

Technology Acceptance Model

To achieve adoption on a large scale, technology needs to be perceived as ‘useful’ by the adoptees, a variable well recognised in technology adoption, for example, ‘perceived usefulness’, alongside perceived ease of use, is the starting variable influencing directly the intention to use new technology in the well-established technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989).

Thus, new technology must be considered useful by many, if not a majority, of consumers to be successful. It does not become successful because it is simply easy to use, as social media tools in comparison to traditional online media doubtlessly are, nor does it become successful because it is a new technology per se. The important questions to ask are therefore: Why was social media considered so useful that it did spread rapidly? Which underlying needs did social media fulfil? And which social trends and consumer behaviours were affected by the widespread adoption of social media?

To investigate these questions, we briefly look at the conceptualisation of consumption behaviour by the individual, before we look at the wider, social context of consumption.

Consumption in Context: From Exchange to Experience

Traditionally, marketers focused rather narrowly on the concept of exchange, for example the exchange of money for goods or services (Bagozzi, 1975). In a very traditional view, therefore, consumption is seen as a matter of pre-purchase activities, such as identification of need, search for information, evaluation of alternatives, followed by an exchange (purchase) succeeded by a series of post-purchase activities, such as assessing if the product met the desired objectives. In essence, consumption is seen as an essentially utilitarian concept, which enables both parties in the process (consumer and producer) to achieve their means through exchange, i.e. the producer earns money from the consumer, and the consumer gains satisfaction through the use of a product or service.

However, since the 1960s and 70s, this utilitarian view of consumption, based on a strictly rational view of the consumer, has been replaced by more interpretative methodologies.
seeking to go beyond one-dimensional approaches to market exchange and consumption. Consumer behaviour research and marketing has broadened its research focus to include non-utilitarian attributes, such as experiences and meanings in the consumption process as well as going beyond a simple purchase-focused approach. This extension enabled a much broader view of consumption. Consumption is no longer seen as restricted towards the sequential processes involved in purchasing a new product, for example a new computer. With a broader perspective, using the purchased computer, and even disposing of the computer once it has outlived its usefulness, are included in the concept of consumption, studied and explained.

Of particular note within this broader theoretical framework are two lines of enquiry – Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and Experiential Consumption – both of which merit a brief review here, as they will help to frame the discussion of marketplace and consumer behaviour, especially in a social context, including when using social media.

**Consumer Culture Theory**

CCT as a research tradition emerged around the middle of the 1980s. CCT refers to a ‘family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings’ (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 868). In other words, CCT focuses on the contextual aspects of consumption, such as the symbolic nature of consumed products and services, and experiential aspects of consumption activity.

By taking a holistic view of marketplace behaviour, CCT challenges the traditional focus on studying marketplace behaviour merely at the purchasing stage. Arnould (2004) contends further that the experiential aspects of consumption, i.e. consumer experiences during the wider stages of consumption preceding and proceeding the purchase, have become an important, if not the most important, aspect for contemporary consumers. Fundamentally, Arnould and CCT theorists in general, describe consumption as experiences encountered during four stages of consumption:

1. **Preconsumption stage**
   - Searching for, planning and imagining the actual consumption experience, for example, looking at fashion magazines, imagining what it would feel like to wear a certain coat, etc.

2. **Purchasing stage**
   - The definite purchase experience involving choosing, paying and service experience linked to the actual purchase, such as the experiences encountered when choosing the coat, trying it on, paying and leaving the shop.

3. **Core consumption stage**
   - The actual sensation and experiences during and immediately after the consumption of the product, including satisfaction or dissatisfaction. For example, occasions where the coat is worn, such as a special occasion or the occasion where the coat was worn for the first time.

4. **Remembered consumption stage**
   - The nostalgic stage following the consumption experiences, in which the experience is relived, for example through looking at photos of one wearing the coat, and remembering certain events and sensations or feelings related to this occasion.
Extending the focus allowed researchers to explore how for contemporary consumers, the consumption-associated experiences, for example feelings and sensations, rather than the product’s utilitarian function, are the main aspect of consumption. These experiences, encountered during the extended consumption process, can be more important (or valuable) for the consumer than the product itself.

Many of these stages require an active involvement on behalf of the consumer: This challenges the traditional view of the passive consumer, considering instead the ‘productive aspect of consumption’. Rather, consumers are seen as active participants in the consumption process, in fact, the consumers co-produce, together with vendors or producers, their experiences and the meanings attributed to the consumption process during each of the stages of consumption. For example, in the context of social media, this wider focus can elucidate the practice of ‘unboxing’, where consumers share videos or pictures of themselves opening a package of a new, often coveted item (Jenkins, 2011), such as a mobile phone. They are extending the core consumption experience, and sharing the emotions with their wider social network, a practice that can be observed in some 370,000 videos on YouTube showing individuals ritually ‘unboxing’ goods.

An extensive body of research, much of which in the CCT tradition and beyond, has looked further at how consumers rework and reinterpret meanings they encounter throughout the consumption process, for example, when exposed to advertisements, the brands themselves, or through the consuming of goods. The overwhelming consensus is that consumers consume as a way to express their individual personal and social circumstances – or to assert their identity or advance personal lifestyle goals. While we will revisit the notion of the active, i.e. co-producing, consumer in-depth in the next chapter, it is important to recognise that the focus of consumption for contemporary consumers has shifted significantly from a utilitarian consumption motive to become a largely symbolic act through which consumers aim to express themselves.

Early works highlighting the symbolic nature of consumption can be found in the 1960s and 1970s (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1980), and it is therefore reasonable to assume that current technology has played little role in instigating this type of consumption. Modern technology has, nevertheless, been useful for symbolic consumption, for example, social media enables people to rapidly share consumption with friends, such as in the example of unboxing above, therefore extending the experience beyond people present during the consumption process.

**ThinkBox: Symbolic Consumption**

Clothes are probably the most symbolic item many people are consuming (or wearing), because they signal a lot about the wearer. Thinking about the clothes that you are wearing now, try to answer the following questions: Why are you wearing these? What do they say about you? Are there brands that you particularly like to wear? Why? Are there certain brands that you would never wear? Why?
The Social Context: Subcultures and Tribes

Wider society has been in a state of flux and change well before the widespread adoption of social media in the mid 2000s – or in fact even the widespread adoption of the Internet in the 1990s. In the late twentieth century, individuals around the world progressively sought to liberate themselves from social restrictions and established social norms. This liberation resulted in a fragmentation of society, a severe social dissolution and, what some researchers have called, ‘extreme individualism’ (Cova and Cova, 2002). Following significant cultural shifts, often attributed to the aftermaths of two world wars, individuals were no longer adhering to the constraints of previous generations, and following collective ideals. Rather, people increasingly sought to personalise their existence (and with it their personal consumption), based on relatively few constraints and on individual choice maximisation.

Paradoxically though, as Goulding and colleagues (2001) point out, mounting individualism did not result in everyone pursuing their life alone. Rather, individualism impelled individuals to seek alternative social arrangements, new ‘communities’ in which they could find a sense of belonging. Such communities were often away from what the individuals regarded as the mainstream, and free from traditional and established social structures. An analogy that is often used to describe this phenomenon is the idea of the mainstream breaking up into a ‘plethora of subcultures’. These ‘subcultures’ offered a community, or spiritual home, to post-modern consumers seeking a replacement for vanished conventional, social bonds. Many early researchers into consumer behaviour focused particularly on consumption behaviour in subcultures, as representative examples of consumers breaking away from the societal mainstream. We therefore briefly explore the research into subcultures – and related to this the emergence of the ‘plethora of subcultures’ in the next section.

The Emerging Importance of Subcultures

Long before the widespread adoption of the Internet, at the beginning of the 1970s, researchers became interested in the consumption practices of subcultures. Examples of such work include the work done at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Much of their work focused on the relationship between various subcultures and the perceived dominant (or mainstream) culture. What emerged, against the background of social upheaval in the 1970s, was an overabundance of ‘subcultures’, frequently young consumers rebellious against the alleged mainstream, usually adult, culture. Yet, the rebellious nature of these subcultures did not result in an unsparingly antagonistic relationship with mainstream culture. Rather, with time, mainstream culture incorporated aspects of many subcultural meanings or behaviours back into the mainstream and adopted these (Hebdige, 1979). An example is the originally 1960s London-based subculture of ‘mods’, with various revivals in different places in later years. While the original mods culture started to fade away in the second half of the 1960s, many of the brands and even places became adopted for mainstream consumption – brands such as Fred Perry, motor scooters such as Lambretta or Vespa, insignias such as the original Royal Air Force roundel all of which were originally associated with the mods – re-emerged in the mainstream. Carnaby Street, the original shopping street of many mods, became
the focal point of ‘Swinging London’ in the late 1960s. It continues to draw on this legacy today as an upmarket, youth-oriented shopping area, although there are no connections with the original mods’ subculture anymore.

Over time, researchers studied an increasing number of subcultures, which originally were largely based on readily identifiable groups, existing ‘away’ from the mainstream. For example, ethnic minorities, gays or ‘alternative lifestyle’ groups – ranging from punks to skinheads, from hippies to rockers – were researched, and behaviour first identified in subcultures increasingly became a prototype for subsequent, mainstream consumer behaviour (such as the mods example above).

Historically, subcultures existed away from the mainstream, drawing together individuals who felt neglected or outcast by the majority culture, creating their own social norms, behaviours and knowledge. Researchers realised that subculture members appropriated commercially available material taken from the mainstream culture, and interpreted these items according to a different set of values shared amongst subculture members. An example of this is Dr Martens’ shoes. The shoes were originally popular with people who walked a lot as part of their profession, for example police officers and postal workers. Within the skinhead subculture, the Dr Martens shoes were reinterpreted away from the functional aspect of being a product that provided the wearer with comfort to walk, to a sign of belonging to the subculture. Therefore, the shoes, within the context of the skinhead subculture, identified the wearer as a fellow skinhead, and the consumption of these shoes (i.e. wearing them) carried symbolic and potentially political meaning.

Increasingly though, researchers uncovered that the behaviour they observed in the subcultures was by no means restricted to subcultures: individuals of all walks of life used commercially available goods, reinterpreted these and used them as a symbol of their individual beliefs or persuasions. Referring to these groupings as subcultures of consumption, these subculture-like groups, largely comprising self-selected members, defined themselves based on a communal commitment to a particular brand, product or other consumption activity (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Similar to traditional subcultures, members of these subcultures of consumption often came from different socio-economic backgrounds, crossed diverse age ranges, had different ethnic backgrounds or bridged the gender divide. Instead of specific demographic similarities, members of these ‘subcultures’ shared certain experiences, arising from a particular consumption activity. For example, the ownership of a motor cycle brand, such as the Harley Davidson community (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), or watching specific television shows, such as Star Trek (Kozinets, 2001).

However, while membership of subcultures of consumption was largely self-selected, rather than ascribed, it was not entirely free of the influences of established factors such as social class, gender or ethnicity. Holt (1997) cautioned that basic demographic principles were still influential factors for consumption behaviour. However Holt conceded that existing social patterns became subtler and started to be increasingly complemented by consumption activities. Nevertheless, members needed to have the financial means to purchase certain goods that were required to participate in these subcultures, for example purchasing and owning an Apple computer, despite members not sharing other, traditional socio-demographic similarities.
Concurrent with the research into subcultures and consumption taking place in Britain, the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli (1988) studied a similar phenomenon though his work was based on work with French ‘conventional’ consumers, rather than based on rebellious youth subcultures in Britain. He focused particularly on the rise of the perceived individualism in mainstream culture. However, paradoxically, in his book *Le Temps des Tribus* (*The Time of the Tribes*, published in 1996) he concluded that, rather than rising dramatically as many people feared, individualism is outdated in contemporary society. Instead, he found that post-modern society is best understood as an assortment of intermittent social groupings, which are characterised as fluid, occasional and in constant formation and dispersal. Alluding to indigenous structures, Maffesoli called these communities ‘tribes’. In his view, contemporary ‘tribes’ replaced traditional tribes, which were life-long, static and based on membership by ascription or birth, such as social class. Tribes, as described by Maffesoli, had strong similarities with the subcultures of consumption described by Cova and Cova, both being ‘inherently unstable, small scale, affectual and not fixed by any of the established parameters of modern society; instead they can be held together through share emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs and consumption practices’ (2001: 67), and many researchers started to use both terms, often interchangeably.

Some scholars, for example Bennett (1999), suggested distinguishing between historical tribes, such as Indian tribes in America, and contemporary, fluid tribes, by using the term ‘neo-tribes’ to describe these contemporary communities of belonging, where members enact particular, shared lifestyles. However, works by, for example, Cova and Cova, Maffesoli and Godin (Godin, 2008) popularised the simpler notion of ‘tribes’.

Fundamentally, both subcultures of consumption and tribes describe similar concepts characterising contemporary consumer behaviour, based on a post-modern, fluid society, where consumers self-ascribe to communities of meaning and belonging. In other words, consumers choose to be part of several, occasionally even seemingly contradictory, communities or tribes. Consumers can navigate between the selected communities, while choosing to join and relinquish their membership from communities as they wish. For example, people can opt freely to join a Mac User Group, or to no longer take part in meetings of a local Mac User Group. Or they can buy a different computer. It is important to note that much of the research into consumer tribes significantly predates the emergence and widespread adoption of social media.

These tribes have primarily three functions:

Firstly, they enable sharing of functional knowledge, for example, how to use emerging technology in the case of computers, or share new software and experiences with new hardware in the local Mac User Group.

Secondly, they offer a place of social bonding, support and belonging, allowing individuals to create an identity that helps distinguish them from ‘others’. For example, Mac users vs. PC users, also famously used in Apple’s ‘I’m a PC, I’m a Mac’ advertising campaigns.

Thirdly, these tribes create and share a set of collective rules and behaviours, which allows tribe users to distinguish each other from non-tribe members, for example, camping out in front of Apple stores before their opening.
While social barriers, in principle, were coming down as early as the 1970s and 1980s, geographical distance often made it difficult for consumers to join tribes they wanted to be a part of, but which were not local to their community: Think of being a solitary punk in a small community, or the only gay in the village in the 1970s or 1980s – or simply the only Mac user based in a small township where another Mac User Group was far away. If a specific tribe was not established in the local community, consumers had no access to any of the support functions of the tribe. For example, there was no access to shared social support, such as personal support vis-à-vis non-tribe members who may question the rational for tribe membership. Similarly, a geographically remote tribe member had no easy access to knowledge about tribe practices and behaviours, for example, for Star Trek fans, practising speaking or writing Klingon, reading about events organised for other ‘Trekkies’ or knowing where to purchase Trek memorabilia. The evolution of technology brought the possibility of tribal support beyond confined geographical borders, offering access to global support and access to knowledge independent of locality. Maybe it is therefore unsurprising that many ‘traditional’, ascribed subcultures, for example homosexual men, ethnic minorities as well as other self-selected, alternative lifestyle tribes, were amongst the earliest adopters of the Internet (boyd and Ellison, 2007).

The Internet, almost from the beginning, offered subcultures ‘social networking’ features by enabling individuals to connect to fellow subculture members globally. More details of these features are discussed in Chapter 4, but especially the introduction of the World Wide Web made connecting to fellow tribe members via the Internet easy and convenient. Gay.com, arguably the first social networking site in the world launched in 1994 (Campbell, 2005). It offered ‘perceived usefulness’ and enhanced ease of use, by enabling access to social and emotional support from other gay men. It therefore encouraged the early adoption of new technology in this particular subculture around a decade before the emergence of ‘mainstream’ social networks.

Similarly, as boyd and Ellison (2007) point out, other minority groups quickly followed in the ‘social networking’ footsteps with their own sites: Asian-American social networking site AsianAvenue and African-American social networking site BlackPlanet both launched in 1999, while MiGente, aimed at Hispanic Americans, launched in 2000. Friendster, arguably the first mainstream social networking website, launched in 2002. However, while Friendster targeted the social mainstream, it nevertheless initially focused much of its marketing activities on alternative lifestyle tribes, for example through promotions at the Burning Man festival (boyd and Ellison, 2007), an annual summer solstice art and radical self-expression festival held in the Nevada desert, described as a place where the participants are ‘not the weirdest kid in the classroom’ (Steenerson, n.d.). It is, therefore, fair to say that subcultures have been a vital part of the early development of the Internet and social networking, and just as observed by the researchers at the Birmingham CCCS, original subculture-linked behaviour became over time adopted by a more mainstream audience. Concurrently, society as a whole moved from societal mainstream to a society of subcultures or tribes. Subculture-like behaviour is further a fundamental part of contemporary offline behaviour and mirrored in social online behaviour. However, it is important to point out that consumer tribalism
SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

predates social networks significantly. Therefore, while technological progress, and with it social networks, are likely to have accelerated the trend, social media has not instigated it. Rather, social media has taken online, facilitated greatly and made more visible, the emerging tribalisation of society. However, social media fulfils a very different role than traditional media. Rather than informing consumers, social media is a means of self-expression of consumers, where consumers can declare their allegiance to certain tribes, at least temporarily. Consequently, the social media environment for brands and marketers is likely to be highly distinctive from traditional marketing environments. Rather than being an environment in which consumers seek primarily information, consumers seek self-expression. Are brands therefore ‘uninvited’ as Fournier or Avery (2011) suggest? Or do brands play a different role?

From Subcultures and Neo-tribes to the Tribal Mainstream

While this social movement was originally most evident in the case of subcultures, such as minority ethnic groups, and teenage groupings, it soon spread to almost all parts of society. However, rather than grouping around shared sexual practices or ethnicities, the mainstream adaptation of community seeking focused on gathering around shared, 'ordinary possessions' (Bromberger, 1998).

This means that simple goods become items through which an individual simultaneously expresses their individuality while at the same time these possessions allow the individual to buy into a community of belonging. These may be communities that are completely brand-neutral, for example a vintage car owner club, where the criterion of admission is not a particular brand of car, but simply possession of a vintage car. However, in many cases, they may be brand-specific, for example, Mac User Groups, which were extremely popular amongst Apple Mac users in the 1980s and 1990s, and have been a significant factor in creating the 'cult'-like image of the Apple Mac (Belk and Tumbat, 2005).

In both cases, products and brands were no longer just providing a utilitarian value, as seen in traditional marketing (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). Instead, specific brands or products became means of self-expression, through which consumers express their self-concepts (ideal or actual) and act as a 'linking value' (Cova, 1997) – further discussed as a theoretical concept in the next chapter – providing social links in a post-modern consumer society.

Tribes or Brand Communities

There is some terminological confusion about tribes and brand communities. In fact, some contemporary practitioners and occasionally researchers use both terms interchangeably. Particularly within the marketing profession, the term brand community appears more popular because of an implied direct connection to a specific brand, although is sometimes applied to what are brand-unrelated tribes. This confusion is understandable, particularly as both words have become significant buzzwords for modern marketers. In some ways, both terms describe similar concepts, but they are different in focus, and it is therefore important to differentiate between them.
Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) define an online brand community as ‘a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand.’ Tribes on the other hand are a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations and shared behaviours, also expressed or experienced through the consumption shared products of symbolic meaning. Thus, as previously implied, the difference between these two in relationship to brands and consumer behaviour, is that brand cultures have an explicit, usually specific brand focus. Tribes are broader, based on other aspects, but consume products that have a symbolic meaning for tribe members, for example through rituals or as a way to recognise other tribe members.

However, even brand communities are not singularly fused on brands and social aspects play a noteworthy role in maintaining the community and brand loyalty (Marzocchi et al., 2013; Scarpi, 2010; Zaglia, 2013). Therefore, while the ‘wider’ tribes may be more opaque to the marketer than communities explicitly linked to a brand, a successful marketing campaign, on- or offline, is less likely to maximise its effectiveness if the marketer focuses only on the specific brand community. Ultimately, both brand community and wider tribe are in most cases bound together by social connections. For example, members of the Fountain Pen Network forum on the Internet share information about fountain pens they collect both via brand-specific forums as well as cross-brand forums, for example, members will interact with fellow tribe members in forums related to finding inks or discussing retailers and collector shows. However, tribe members split into brand-specific communities for discussing specific pens by visiting brand-specific forums or writing brand-specific blogs on the general ‘tribal’ website.

It is important to point out that much of the research into the effect of tribalism and post-modern consumer society was originally focused on high value brands and high-involvement products. To some extent, these products still provide the most enduring examples. However, there is now increasing evidence that low-involvement products, such as chocolate spread (Cova and Pace, 2006) and drinks (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009), are equally influenced by tribal connections. This is somewhat counterintuitive when considering traditional models of involvement, which conventionally suggested that consumers tend to create emotional bonds nearly always with high-involvement products (Martin, 1998).

ThinkBox: Tribal Consumers

List some of the ‘tribes’ you are familiar with.
Can you identify three consumption behaviours that identify tribe members for each tribe?
Describe how each of these behaviours signals membership to the tribe.
Tribal Consumers and Traditional Marketing Concepts

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, modern consumers are best characterised by tribes rather than socio-demographic variables. This has significant impact on the way marketing should approach such consumers, as much of traditional marketing theory suggests a static approach to marketplace behaviour.

Bearing this in mind, it seems tempting to think of tribes as comparable to, if not synonymous with traditional ‘market segments’. However, there are some stark differences. Segments are usually seen as subgroups of a market, made up out of clearly defined, homogenous consumers who share similar characteristics. Customers are seen as passive in selecting which segment they belong to and segments are furthermore mutually exclusive.

However tribes, while indeed subgroups of a market, don’t share any of the other characteristics of traditional segments:

- Tribes are commonly not clearly defined, particularly on social networks, where people may follow a brand religiously – or indeed visit a brand community sporadically. Therefore, membership of a tribe is by definition hard to establish.
- Tribes are often a community of heterogeneous consumers, bound by consumption behaviour and shared experiences, but few other demographics. While some common demographics may be evident in some cases, for example, in the case of tribes related to highly priced goods members are likely to have a relatively high income; this is not true in other cases. For example, income, age, gender or many other segmentation variables cannot be used to characterise Star Trek fans effectively. Therefore, traditional tools have only limited validity in a tribal marketplace.
- Tribes are often interconnected; and tribe ‘members’ can be a member of seemingly contradictory tribes. For example, owning a VW Beatle does not preclude the owner from owning another car, maybe even a similar ‘cult-like’ car like a Mini.
- Tribe members are seen as active, although to varying degrees. Often tribe members don’t simply consume – they are advocates and active promoters of consumption in their own right. This view is different to segments, which see members as passive consumers, incapable of collective action (Cova and Cova, 2002).

The more fluid view of tribes is therefore contradictory to some established marketing assumptions, challenging the static and positivistic conventions underlying many traditional marketing approaches.

Moreover, tribal consumers challenge some other assumptions made in traditional marketing, for example, marketing practices such as relationship marketing, which place great emphasis on enhancing customer/brand relationships. Customers in a traditional marketing view are enticed and loyalty gained through frequent contact and consistent, personalised customer service at the point of contact between customer and brand. In the tribal view, the contact between brand and customer is subordinate to the contact between customers: the brand supports the relationship between different consumers and acts as a link between individuals.

Importantly for tribes, brands are not consumed for their utilitarian value and contemporary consumers, especially when engaging in tribal marketplace behaviour, are
not focusing on rational, utilitarian, logical or largely cognitive brand choices. Rather, consumers choose brands because of their experiential or indeed affectionate value. One could argue consumers are developing an affective loyalty (Cova and Cova, 2002) to the products they consume because of the consumption experiences at different stages, rather than the product attributes.

Consequently, brands depend upon their consumers to forge relationships. Thus, the traditional view of the exchange between organisation and consumer has lost importance. This view is replaced by a more fluid view, where brand and a community of consumers are in a perpetual state of ‘mutual indebtedness’ (Cova and Cova, 2002: 614), whereby the brand enables the consumer to recognise fellow tribe members while simultaneously individual tribes rely on brands to provide products in accordance to the values of the tribes, and to provide the tribes with means to recognise fellow tribe members. Many social media sites rely on rapid identification of fellow tribe members, for example, when reading reviews on a user-generated website like TripAdvisor, small clues in the reviews can identify reviewers as tribe members and make their reviews more relevant to the reader, for instance, when a child is mentioned (tribe = parents), or a preference for healthy food at breakfast (tribe = green) etc. Similarly, when posting pictures on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook, brands that appear and the type of picture are all part of self-expression by the individual users, enabling browsers to quickly identify the poster as a fellow tribe member, or not. Brands in particular have then become paradoxical in a social media context. On the one side, they are uninvited, commercialising a space originally made for people to connect. On the other side, they are essential tools for recognising tribal allegiances and enabling social networking beyond the point of close friends. But to do so, brands need to be prominently displayed or alluded to, so that casual friends or browsing bypassers can recognise the individual characteristics of the poster through the embedded meaning, or linking value, of the brands.

SUMMARY

This chapter discussed how consumption and consumer behaviour has changed in the last part of the twentieth century. Consumption has moved from a largely utilitarian function, to a symbolic and experiential one. Concurrently, modern society became increasingly individualistic, abandoning established socio-cultural structures and rejecting established social norms and networks. Tribal structures, often centred around shared consumption activity, have taken the place of established social structures. Technical advancement, such as the Internet and social media, have further accelerated these changes by allowing tribe members to communicate and share consumption experiences almost irrespective of geographical location.

Tribal consumption challenges established marketing thinking, because tribe members are by their very nature fluid, frequently contradictory and exist in a mutual indebtedness with brands, that are used for tribal membership recognition and providing social links.
Much research has already focused on explaining tribal behaviour, especially within online communities, as these are often more accessible and easier to research than offline consumption communities. However, there are still some interesting areas that can be explored as most of the current research has been based on active participants of these communities, i.e. people that post rather than merely lurk. Similarly, there is only limited research on events prior to, or indeed post, participation in brand community groups.

A further interesting potential area to explore is the interaction between online and offline consumer behaviour. As many brand communities are not purely virtual, the difference between the virtual consumption experience and, for example, gatherings, shows and meet-ups in real life could be an interesting avenue for future research.

Finally, inter-tribal behaviour and tribal rivalry could yield interesting results. A prominent example might be the ‘Rich Kids of Instagram’ (http://richkidsofinstagram.tumblr.com/) phenomenon, where members of one tribe try to ridicule members of the other tribe and their consumption practices relying on social media tools.

Netnography is a type of ethnographic research used to study behaviour of individuals online. The word is a contraction of *ethnography* and *Internet*. While netnography shares many aspects with ethnographic research, such as being immersive, adaptable and naturalistic, it offers some advantages over traditional ethnographic research, namely, data collection is frequently faster and less expensive, as researchers can rely largely on existing, textual data available rather than having to conduct, for example, interviews or observe participants over an extended period of time.

Kozinets (2002) divides the netnographic research process into five stages:

1) Selecting an appropriate online community
2) Gathering and analysing data
3) Analysing the data
4) Ensuring ethical research standards
5) Triangulating the findings

**1) Selecting an appropriate online community**

After formulating specific research questions, researchers have to spend some time getting to know the online community they are researching, which includes identifying where community participants congregate, that is, they need to identify specific websites, newsgroups, forums or chat rooms for investigation – and evaluate which of these, or which combination of these, will be included in the research project.
Because each online group may be made up of different participants, use group-specific language and have other interests and behaviours distinguishing the group, the researcher should take care to know as much about each of the groups as possible prior to selecting appropriate groups and starting the data collection.

Kozinets (2002) suggests that when deciding between different groups, preference should be given to communities which have five research-relevant advantages:

i. communities that are focused as much as possible on the research question
ii. communities that have a high enough traffic, i.e. number of postings
iii. communities that have a large number of posters (or participants) to yield potentially fruitful results
iv. communities that yield rich and detailed postings or data
v. communities that offer appropriate between-member interactions related to the research question

2) Gathering and analysing data

Once the researcher has chosen the online communities to be investigated, the data selection process can begin, focusing on two types of data – firstly the copied data from the online groups, or originating from group members and secondly data in relation to researchers’ observations, feelings and ascription of meanings.

In order to deal with the likely large amounts of data the researcher encounters upon data gathering, Kozinets recommends a number of ways to categorise the data to help the researcher make sense of the online interactions.

Firstly, messages can be categorised into primarily social and primarily informational messages – or on-topic messages and off-topic messages – depending on which is more suitable for the research context. For example, an online forum about handbags may contain messages in which members talk to each other in a social way, such as playing word games with each other. These messages are likely to be off-topic. Messages relating to identifying handbags in television shows and messages discussing newly released handbags would be classified on-topic messages.

Secondly, the contributors (or posters) of the messages may be categorised based on their involvement with the community. Kozinets in previous research (1999) identified four levels of involvement with the community which may be used to classify the contributors:

**Tourists** are contributors that have loose ties to the community and are not highly involved in the community. This type of contributor can often be identified by trivial questions being posted.

**Minglers** have well established social ties in the community – but do not, or only to a minimal extent, engage in the consumption behaviour of the group.

**Devotees** are the opposite of minglers, in that they engage significantly in the consumption behaviour that is the subject of the group, but have relatively few ties.

(Continued)
Finally, *insiders* combine both strong social ties to the group and engage in extensive consumption behaviour.

A particular focus point for researchers is also not just the information related to the consumption activity, but also the interaction between different groups of contributors, specifically, researchers should focus on how consumption is socially reinforced and minglers and tourists are converted to become more engaged in either or both consumption activity or online community.

During the research it can useful to write reflective notes on the messages reviewed, including notes on how many messages were evaluated and from how many participants. However, as most online data can be stored relatively easily, an alternative way to collect data is to download the data without writing notes. Data collection online should continue until no new insights are produced.

### 3) Analysing the data

Data analysis in netnography relies on analysing the textual data derived from the data collection. Relying only on the analysis of textual data makes netnography different from ethnography, which aims to balance both observational (behavioural) and discursive (spoken) data. Therefore the focus of netnography shifts towards recontextualising the data collected rather than contextualising behaviour in ethnographic research (c.f. Kozinets, 2002 for a discussion of this shift).

Some of the data analysis can be assisted by software traditionally used in qualitative research, such as NVivo, as well as widely available web-based tools in order to enhance the analysis. See Kozinets (2010a) for a discussion of several tools which researchers may find helpful for locating online groups and analysing the data.

### 4) Ethical considerations

Contrary to traditional ethnographic methods, where participants agree to take part in an interview or focus group, posts and messages used by netnographic researchers are unlikely to have been created with the intention or consideration of being studied. Therefore, it is important that netnographers follow strict ethical guidelines to ensure that netnographic research does not become perceived as disrespectful or intrusive, potentially damaging the reputation and possibility of future research efforts.

To avoid ethical problems, Kozinets recommends that netnographic researchers should follow four steps:

Firstly, they must disclose their identity, affiliations and presence when conducting the research openly and fully.

Secondly, researchers should reassure participants that any data collected will be kept confidential and anonymous.
Thirdly, researchers should seek to triangulate their results (see also step 5), i.e. they should incorporate feedback from participants when reporting about the online communities they have studied.

Finally, Kozinets further recommends in the case of quoting participants verbatim, for example, by inserting postings directly from a bulletin board or Twitter updates, participants should be contacted directly and permission sought, even if the material is available in a public forum.

5) Triangulation of results

As a final step, the researcher should make the findings available to the communities studied, for example, by posting the report or report highlights on a web page and invite comments and feedback, or by sending the report to community members. This final step is useful as it can enable the generation of additional insights, can prevent ethical issues from arising, and importantly, can establish an on-going interaction between researcher and online community.

For a more extensive discussion of using netnography as a research approach, see Kozinets, 2010b.

Case Study: The Locker Room

Male grooming is a fast growing market segment in Asia. In order to reach and engage Malaysian men, Unilever created an online portal site together with MSN which focused on creating a ‘hangout’ space for men to find out more about male grooming, while focusing on providing information about Unilever brands such as L’Oréal, Garnier and Nivea, which are popular brands for skin and hair care and deodorants in Malaysia.

The key concept was to enable users of the site to gain knowledge about the latest gossip and news regarding girls, sports and grooming – and be seen to be ‘in the know’ by their ‘bros’ or tribe members. At the same time, Unilever wanted to avoid intrusive branded advertising, relying therefore more on subtle product suggestions placed within the content of the Locker Room site.

The site provides content based on three distinct content areas, mirroring market research by Unilever about target audiences.

According to figures from Unilever, the portal achieved over 910,000 unique visitors during the first eight months, and 1200 likes and 1500 shares on social networking sites. Further research suggested that brand awareness and purchase consideration also increased amongst visitors (Rajagopal, 2013).

However, although the site was a success amongst visitors, the site largely relies on providing content from editors, presented in a blog-like fashion. The site does
not, however, provide facilities for user-generated discussion, apart from comments on the blog posts. Social features used on the site include sharing of content in social networks, visitor polls and the use of hash-tagged links to other social media platforms, such as Instagram.

Questions to Consider:

1. How does the site foster ‘tribal’ behaviour amongst its users?
2. What mechanics are used to combine offline tribes and online tribes (if any)?
3. Why would Unilever not provide more direct user-to-user discussion or user-generated content?
4. The site is branded with MSN Locker Room, but not as a Unilever platform. Which ethical issues do you see with this?

Further Reading


References


