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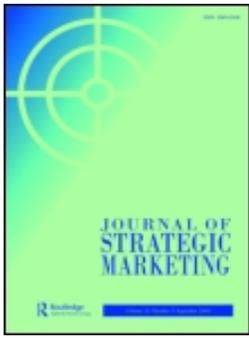
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## How to manage consumer tribes

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This paper reviews concepts of marketplace community, and considers the strategic opportunities and challenges communities present to marketers. Current attempts to operationalise consumer tribes by marketing consultants appear to conflate consumer tribes with brand communities. Alternative guidelines to foster specifically tribal approaches are considered. In particular, managers are advised to facilitate tribal consumers' roles beyond purchase, by offering points of passage and hybrid community platforms within 'seed networks'. These are fluid and interdependent networks of people, places, brands, objects, discourses, myths and feelings where consumers assemble playful, passionate, and entrepreneurial community around the linking value of multiple products and services. This approach is applied to the board-sport tribes that are facilitated by the action sports brand Volcom. Future research directions are considered.

**Keywords:** community; consumer tribes; brand community; seed network; consumer empowerment; Volcom

### Introduction

Faced with crowded markets, flat growth and growing cynicism, the most effective organisational tribe of the 21st Century is a single, united brand tribe. ([www.newbrandtribalism.com](http://www.newbrandtribalism.com))

Consumption communities are a vital element of the marketing environment. Carriers of meaning and circulators of value, these social groups are capable of undermining marketing campaigns or raising them up to new levels of success (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Cova & Cova, 2002; Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Ritson & Elliott, 1999; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Amongst some academics, the formation and operation of consumption communities has been regarded as part of marketing's unpredictable cornucopia, that some managers enjoy, whilst less fortunate counterparts remain envious observers (see Brown, 2007a). For management gurus like Seth Godin, and consultancies such as UK agency New Brand Tribalism, consumer tribes are sold as a silver-bullet leadership solution to offer marketing managers the 'Holy Grail of brand loyalty' (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002, p. 38).

This paper treads the line between these two perspectives of complexity verging on happenchance, and consultative reductionism. The paper begins by reviewing recent work in interpretive consumer research and marketing in order to explain some of the key

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characteristics of consumption communities, and illustrate how the characteristics of these communities can be leveraged in marketing practice. Following this, the paper attends in more detail to consumer tribes, and stresses that while often unpredictable, transient and ephemeral, tribes extend the role of the consumer in strategically important manners. In so doing, examples of tribal marketing in practice are critically examined. Following this, the paper offers the concept of 'seed networks' to understand some of the unpredictable qualities of consumer tribes, and to provide five interconnected tactics for marketing managers who would foster a tribe in their life. Finally, the case of successful action sports brand, Volcom, is discussed. The approach offered in this paper contributes to the growing literature on the management of consumption communities by offering a mode of understanding communities as hybrid networks (Thrift, 2007), consisting of (but not limited to) people, products, practices, services, desires, discourses, market infrastructures, experiences, and emotions.

### **Marketplace culture: kinds of community**

Traditional versions of marketing management posed a system in which marketing institutions organised knowledge, dominated promotional language, dictated the rituals of consumption, and protected the conventions of behaviour surrounding the brand. Hennion and Méadel (1989) however, argue that successive failures of advertisers to understand or control 'buyers' in this way, forced a shift in how this relationship was framed. This has led to the emergence of more complex views of 'consumers':

Buyer behaviour became consumer behaviour in a strikingly common progression: a researcher takes a working hypothesis in his/her study of a given 'effect', ... a survey is done; far from clarifying the domain by bringing positive, solid results as s/he had hoped, this leads the researcher to conclude that the results were ambiguous and that it is necessary to introduce more complex model of the elements in play; and the cycle starts over. (Hennion & Méadel, 1989, p. 192)

Furthermore, during the last three decades, marketing and consumer researchers have recognised that products and services should be thought of as processes rather than finished merchandise, meaning that consumers are integrated into the production system as producers (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995; Kotler, 1986). So too have conceptions of marketing promotions departed from top-down enterprises in corporate control, to multilateral negotiations within complex galaxies of 'brand culture' (Schroeder & Salzer-Morling, 2006). Here, promotional activity circulates amongst consumers to be interpreted (or roundly rejected) in novel and unpredictable ways (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Ritson & Elliott, 1999).

Of particular importance to this way of understanding the extended roles of consumers are studies of marketplace culture (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). These have delivered rich textual accounts of the extraordinary variety of manners in which consumers interact with consumable resources to establish social forms and relationships (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Cova, 1997; Kozinets, 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Delving further into this corpus of knowledge reveals the manners in which power is negotiated between marketers and consumers. At times, researchers have asked if the market has any power left at all (Kozinets, 2002), but in general, marketplace culture studies agree that there exist power-sharing situations that destabilise the dichotomous roles of 'producer' and 'consumer' (Shankar, Cherrier, & Canniford, 2006).

The manners in which this power-sharing occurs offer divergent opportunities and challenges to marketers (Ponsonby-McCabe & Boyle, 2006). For instance, in conjunction

with empowered communities of consumers, the brand loyalty associated with Saab, Jeep or Apple is boosted to new levels (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Equally however, the meaning and value of marketers' offerings can be tossed about on unfriendly seas by communities such as adbusters (Klein, 2009), or by plundering tribes such as the 'chavs' that appropriated Burberry, threatening both brand values and heritage (Hayward & Yar, 2006).

Nevertheless, according to a number of emerging perspectives, far from being chaotic, post-modern terrors for marketers, consumption communities display logics that can be understood and put to use. In order to appreciate these, the next sections illustrate three kinds of community to have received attention in both academic literature, and the market at large: subcultures of consumption; brand communities; and consumer tribes. It is important to understand how these kinds of community afford different effects and possibilities that are of strategic importance to marketers.

### ***Subcultures of consumption***

Subculture emerged during the first half of the twentieth century as a sociological category to describe social solutions to unfavourable and alienating conditions. By subverting dominant institutions such as family, schooling, and market relations, members of subcultures develop marginal forms of value and status around alternative social ties (Goulding, Shankar, & Elliott, 2002). In some cases these subversions are directed at and through forms of consumer culture (Hebdidge, 1979), leading to further delineation of 'subcultures of consumption' in which members cohere and interact through 'shared commitment to a particular product class, brand or consumption activity' (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995 p. 43). Subcultural membership infers enduring social structures, strong interpersonal bonds, ritualised modes of expression and unique sets of beliefs that often preclude other social affiliations. These features impact on the identity of subcultural members, as well as the power that these individuals wield vis-a-vis the market (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

This impact occurs stepwise through processes of acculturation, evolution of motives as well as irreversible rituals and markers of commitment (Celsi et al., 1993). This progression often results in a perceived severance from 'mundane life' and 'mainstream culture', as well as political and aesthetic deviance amongst members who challenge 'the interrelation between technology, culture and consumption' (Giesler & Pholmann, 2003, p. 273). Indeed, subcultures of consumption abound with tropes of barbarity, rugged self-reliance, outlaw status, liberation from authority, relationships and schedules, and licence to behave in manners barred in more civil sectors of society (Belk & Costa, 1998; Canniford & Shankar, 2007; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Holt (2004) for example, explains how the contemporary appeal of Harley Davidson has depended to a large extent on countercultural meanings, bolstered of course by media phenomena such as the film *Easy Rider*, and by events that catch the attention of news media, such as those that occurred at Altamont in California, where outlaw bikers stabbed and kicked to death a spectator during a Rolling Stones set (see Osgerby, 2005). These powerful stories that circulate first in the media, and later in the imaginations of consumers, contribute to the formation of mythologies that have structured the meaning and appeal of Harley Davidson ever since. However, whilst the meanings and outlaw status created through subcultures of consumption may be central to the value and appeal of a brand (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), these features are rarely predictable.

Equally, the marketisation of subcultural forms has led to erasure, decline, or fragmentation of subcultures (Heath & Potter, 2005; Irwin, 1973). Together, these claims suggest that subcultures of consumption are tricky and unpredictable communities amongst which the contingencies of history preclude marketers' attempts to assemble them (Holt, 2004).

### ***Brand community***

In some cases the relationships between brands, products, and consumers are more predictable than those found in subcultures of consumption. One such relationship is described as brand community, a fabric of social relationships in which admirers of a brand experience shared rituals, traditions, and a sense of responsibility towards other members. Together these create profound and enduring interpersonal connections amongst members as well as distinction from non-users of the focal brand (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009).

Moral responsibility and religious zeal characterise the relationships that brand communities establish with certain products (Muñiz & Schau, 2005). Nevertheless, socialisation in brand communities seldom displays the political resistance, or strong social ties peculiar to subcultures. Studies suggest that brand community members are more likely to develop and seek likeminded individuals on the basis of devotion, lifestyle differentiation and even patriotic meanings associated with a particular brand (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). This can occur diffusely in cyberspace, or in geographically localised 'brand fest' events (Cova & Pace, 2006; McAlexander & Schouten, 1998). As a strategic resource therefore, brand communities differ from subcultures of consumption since there exist relatively centralised and conservative power structures located around the products and core values of a brand (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Also unlike subcultures of consumption, clear recommendations exist for building and extending brand communities (see Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Fournier & Lee, 2009; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Schau et al., 2009). This is good news for marketing managers. Brand communities uphold brand values, offer managers effective dialogue with loyal consumers, and enhance the co-creation of value by consumers and firms (Schau et al., 2009). These characteristics maintain appeal, and increase members' affiliation and commitment to the brand (Brown et al., 2003; Fournier, Sensiper, McAlexander, & Schouten, 2001; Franke & Shah, 2003; McAlexander et al., 2002). Moreover, brand communities have recently been shown to exhibit remarkably predictable characteristics in terms of their practices that can be grouped into four main categories: social networking; impression management; community engagement; and brand use. Together, these practices can be leveraged through 'seeding strategies' that foster a broad array of consumer-led activities around a brand (Schau et al., 2009).

### ***Consumer tribes***

More recent research, however, has found that many consumption communities do not locate their socialisation around singular brands. Less concerned with the brand per se, many consumption communities establish weaker connections with a variety of brands, products, activities, and services. This observation has led to another approach to understand consumption community as consumer tribes. Cova (1997) and Cova and Cova

(2002) describe tribal consumption as the search for social links with people through the 'linking value' created during the shared use of products and services. In general these communities exhibit four key characteristics: multiplicity; playfulness; transience; and entrepreneurialism.

First, tribes are multiple. Unlike subcultures of consumption, tribes rarely dominate the everyday life of the consumer. Rather, they represent partitions that punctuate the working week (Goulding, Shankar, Elliott, & Canniford, 2009). Moreover, membership of one kind of tribe does not preclude membership from other tribes or communities (Elliott & Davies, 2006). On the contrary, tribal theory stresses the occurrence of flows between different personas under different circumstances such that affiliation may vary dramatically. In the words of Bennett (1999, p. 599), 'notions of identity are "constructed" rather than "given", and "fluid" rather than "fixed"'

Second, tribes are playful. Tied to this multiplicity of membership and fluidity of identity, tribal consumption is often devoid of the long-term 'moral responsibility' felt by members of a brand community (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), or the reverence afforded to social hierarchies and totemic activities felt in subcultures of consumption. Rather, the consumer tribe engenders a kind of 'active play' with marketplace resources (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007). These resources include aesthetics, emotions, discourses, institutions, material culture, brands, fashion, music, places, spaces, and media (Brownlie, Hewer, & Treanor, 2007; Canniford & Shankar, 2007; Cova & Pace, 2006; Kozinets, 2007; Mafessoli, 2007; Otnes & Maclaren, 2007; Rinallo, 2007; Schau & Muñiz, 2007; Schouten, Martin, & McAlexander, 2007). In the process of play, tribal consumers plunder these resources, this is to say they deconstruct and reassemble them, initiating fast-moving, intertextual performances in manners that assign little reverence to products or brands. Instead, the value is placed on the possibility to reinvigorate passions and generate new forms of linking value (Brown, 2007b; Brownlie et al., 2007; Kozinets, 2007).

Third, tribes are transient. Connected to the rapid processes of bricolage, tribes emerge, morph, and disappear again as the combinations of people and resources alter. This generates situations that no one really controls; complex and emergent processes of transaction that may be critical and liberatory at one moment, yet at the next moment mean little beyond sensory intensity and pleasure (Goulding et al., 2009). Such a playful acceptance of rapidly changing, contradictory, and ambivalent meanings infers a power structure between consumers and the market that rapidly oscillates between manipulation and emancipation. This vacillation leads Cova et al. (2007, p. 8) to describe tribes as 'double-agents', groups who are content 'to be misled, to remember and to forget, and then mislead, and then manipulate these manipulations in ways that enliven their daily lives'. Many tribes continue to be content in expressing anti-market values through consumption of market-based culture for example (Goulding et al., 2009; Kozinets, 2002).

Fourth, tribes are entrepreneurial. These possibilities for playful plundering, combined with an open-minded attitude to the market, all amount to innovations that generate new paths for entrepreneurial venture (Langer, 2007). Goulding et al. (2009) for instance, chart the emergence of club culture as a tribal reaction to changing aspects of the political environment in which raves were outlawed. In response, the 'house music' tribe began temporarily to hire, re-brand, and redecorate regular nightclubs in order to replicate the atmosphere and appeal of raves. Early ventures of this type launched legitimate careers for outlaw ravers, and ultimately broke the ground for massive club brands such as Renaissance, Ministry of Sound, and Cream.

### **Building consumer tribes**

The extended roles that consumers play in customising, subverting, and re-interpreting the meanings of consumer culture, tend to decentralise and destabilise the power of marketing managers (Shankar et al., 2006). At times this is beneficial, as is the case with brand communities, who buoy-up market offerings by using them in positive manners. Though we know quite a lot about how brand communities may be managed and leveraged (Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009), tribal thinkers often prefer theoretical descriptions of the commonalities, ordering structures and unlimited possibilities of tribes. Managerial advice that occurs within these studies tends to school managers in the values of acknowledging tribes' autonomy and integrity (Cova & Cova, 2001).

Part of the reason why this should be the case relates to the notion that nobody controls the plays and plunders that tribal consumers establish. Tribes engender brand culture as oxymoronic cultural jumbles – jungles even – where fragmented meanings and DIY entrepreneurialism grow wildly. It is hard to proffer reliable managerial advice when tribes keep changing what they do, where they do it and what they purchase in the process. To be sure, marketing with tribes in mind requires us to consider marketing as 'a massive cultural constellation' (Kelley, 2007, p. 53), a boundless playing field from which consumers will select, interpret, and reject a profusion of cultural offerings (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). Faced with the prospect of dancing an intricate *pas de deux* with these strange and unpredictable groups, marketing managers are looking to agencies, management gurus, and consultants for operational interpretations of consumption communities.

### ***Tribal consulting***

For marketing agency New Brand Tribalism, the tribal approach is a well-spring of opportunity to alleviate the insecurity of post-modern managers who gingerly navigate the communal marketing environment. In particular, the 'brand tribe' is sold as a solution for managers who wish to improve loyalty and brand equity. Seth Godin (2008) for instance, presents tribal communities as a silver-bullet marketing management solution. Godin's vision of tribes shares much with the academic literature – multiple affiliations, fluid structures, and constant change. Nevertheless, his and others' interpretations of consumption communities often conflate tribes with brand community. This occurs at three associated levels.

First, Godin's key message is that strong leadership directs consumers to form communities around a product or service, a characteristic of brand community rather than consumer tribes. Second, despite encouraging marketers to 'inspire' rather than exert authority, Godin cites exemplar leaders such as Steve Jobs, who are shown to direct from above. Strong leadership that orientates consumers around a singular reference point skirts close to a recommendation of the power structures common to brand communities. Third, Godin (2008, p. 21) informs us that smart leaders, 'increase the effectiveness of the tribe', by creating messages that people find appealing. Such advice again misses the point of tribes, which are more likely to be driven by transient pleasures and emotions than by measures of 'effectiveness'.

This version of tribalism is justifiably appealing to marketing managers wishing to influence linking value. Yet the original appeal of consumer tribes, as transient, multiple, and shifting, was in many senses driven by the *failure* of attempts to portray many consumption communities as singular, unified or reliant on one element, be this product, brand, or leader. It would appear that Godin, New Brand Tribalism and others represent an

entrepreneurial *consultatribe* who playfully plunder the approaches of the tribal school; a splendid reflection of tribal theory in practice!

Despite this pleasing symmetry, the image returned by these consultative reflections offer misshapen portrayals of consumer tribes. Consumer tribes are not brand communities. To be sure, the approach based on strong leadership, a singular brand and a focus on 'the bottom line' works for Harley Davidson. Grass-roots research and development amongst consumers is fed upwards to managers, and then back down to consumers in a 'steady stream of information . . . and a full range of clothing, accessories, and services' (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 54). This is a strategy that enhances consumers' involvement and erects barriers to exit.

Unfortunately, it is likely that tribal processes would outrun these deliberative and strategic communication channels. Indeed, a tribe's creativity, humour, excitement, and enthusiasm may have moved on before the organisational ethnographers had even filed their reports. Moreover, Cova and Cova (2001, p. 70) stresses that 'linking value is rarely intentionally embedded in the use value of the product/service concept' but emerges from tribal processes that transcend singular categories of products, services, and segments. By attempting to build and leverage a singular or unified vision of a tribe, marketers might stifle the creative productions of linking value from which a tribe draws breath, thus destroying a potential tribal strategy.

Extending this argument, one might ask whether or not tribes should be managed at all. Inserting contrived leaders or managers into a tribe runs the risk of creating yet another form of market-based governmentality (Cova & Cova, 2009; Shankar et al., 2006), as has been the case with word-of-mouth marketing (Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2009). These risks, however, are tied closely to heavy-handed applications of leadership and control. A tribe that retains the characteristics of multiplicity, playfulness, transience, and entrepreneurialism will stay lively, passionate, full of desire, in constant flux. As such, the tribe will remain in a state of co-creation with all kinds of market resources. Moreover, tribes as 'double agents' are somewhat *marketing-proof*; savvy enough to decide when they need to evade marketers' attempts to manage them. How then can we make recommendations to justify tribal marketing as an operational strategy? In the next section, advice is offered for managers to do just this by working *alongside* tribes, respectfully entering themselves into tribal life, through the notion of a seed network.

### ***Seeding consumer tribes***

Having described the features of consumption communities and different examples of attempts to 'build' tribal strategies, I now wish to suggest five interdependent means by which managers may 'seed' consumer tribes in a manner that is more closely aligned with the tenets of tribal theory. Together these features represent what I will call a 'seed network', a supportive, hybrid collective of people, things, markets, discourses, and emotions through which consumers can be supported in their quests for linking value. The key benefit of the seed network is a platform on which tribal consumers can play, plunder, build passion, community, and entrepreneurial ventures.

### ***Providing the platform***

As the editors of this special issue discuss, platform technologies like Linux and Web2, determine and improve the possibilities for co-production and consumer involvement. Tribes such as Wikipedia, and the Chinese web-game phenomenon Shanda, perform

through these networking platforms, creating and sharing knowledge, play, communication, and innovation in open, democratic, and participative manners. Yet, tribes that perform on these stages do not necessarily feature strict value chains or pipelines, and we cannot easily draw organisational pictures of them. Leadbeater (2006, p. 8) explains with reference to the Wikipedia tribe:

Wikipedia is built up by lots and lots of people adding small bits of information and choosing where to put it ... Just draw it in your mind. What is it like? It's like a bird's nest with little pieces of straws of information all adding up to create a nest. Except this is a nest that builds itself; there's no bird building it.

In effect, tribes are huge 'bossless teams' (Barry, 1991), that require tools for innovation over and above strong leadership. Take eBay: not a product or a service as such, eBay is a 'self-help platform' and a set of tools that enable people to determine what to sell, how to advertise, how to ship, and how it will be paid for. Like many other new media businesses, ebay is built on open-access platforms that afford, even demand a participatory approach from consumers. Facebook too, enables users to build and install applications on its web-platform. At times, Zuckerberg has even held back Facebook's own applications in order to enable externally produced programs to succeed (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

A key element of tribal marketing therefore is not to seek the establishment of strict cultural scripts, traditions, or rituals. Rather, tribal consumers want a stage on which to improvise performances and assemble culture in a continual process of plundering, creativity, and innovation. These stages are not limited to the web of course; platforms can be streets, mountains, and beaches, or strange places that emerge only when consumers and producers bring different 'things' together. This is to say that tribal platforms can emerge from the co-presence of associated elements: rural fields + DJ + sound-system + ecstasy + partypeople<sup>n</sup> = rave, for example. This leads us to the notion of hybrid culture.

### *Hybrid culture*

Tribal perspectives view consumption communities as symbolically and emotionally constructed through shared product/service on these platforms. This is to say that consumers, products, services, spaces, places, and feelings are called into being through their interdependent associations (Cova & Cova, 2002). Abandoning a priori constructions and values, distinctions between consuming subject and material objects are dissolved, and identity and power are seen to exist amongst sets of related 'things' (Dant, 1998; Thrift, 2007). The process of calling these networks together and establishing meaningful opportunities for linking value is key to fostering a tribal approach.

Many organisations have developed this potential 'calling' as an effective strategy. The BBC for instance, despite its original top-down approach to product and market development (see Crisell, 1997), now offers the 'iPM' news blog, where Radio 4 listeners are encouraged to have their say on current affairs. BBC television programme *Antiques Roadshow* has created this kind of linking value for decades. The Roadshow temporarily assembles in a new place each week to offer a platform for shared passion, community evaluation and value, as well as the entrepreneurial excitement of finding a lost masterpiece. Likewise, building social capital between local communities and the BBC through 'bring and buy' fundraising events is a strategy that has enabled *Blue Peter* to sustain half a century of cross-generational appeal. Together, these tools have helped the BBC to become less a top-down disseminator of information, and more a platform that

fosters relationships and conversations that emerge from the co-presence of viewers and listeners, platforms and products; a networked process of power sharing.

### *Communities of affect*

Tribes congregate based on passion. Oftentimes tribes come together just because it *feels* good to do so (Cova, 1997; Goulding et al., 2009). The variety of emotions that surround various dance tribes are a case in point. Dance tribes revolve around shared passions for music and experiences of profound affectual transformations. Yet with these effects often comes a temporary loss of the everyday self, and everyday consciousness, in place of which emerge dream-like states where the individual explores his emotional and experiential capacity (Hewer & Hamilton, 2010). Such effects are difficult to theorise, let alone represent (Thrift, 2007). Perhaps this is why the emotional qualities of tribal consumption remain an aspect of the phenomenon that demands further research. Nevertheless, for examples of the importance of tribal affect in the marketplace, we need look no further than Redbull.

Unless consumers developed a sport/lifestyle based on the search for eyeball-popping caffeine overdoses, it is unlikely that Redbull could have been positioned as a locus for a subculture of consumption or a brand community. Instead, Redbull has constructed itself as *the* high arousal brand, a platform for communities interested in peak performance and edgework (Lyng, 1990). To achieve this, managers at Redbull construct symbiotic relationships with for example, big wave surfers, skydivers, and breakdancers. It is not specific activities that matter as much as the willingness to engage in adrenalin-pumping madness that links Redbull's community. For the elite communities of fearless athletes, Redbull offers sponsorship and promotional support in order for them to reach the market and perhaps other sponsors. For consumers, the website provides another platform for crazy ideas, film, music, dance, and action-sports that can provoke visceral responses (see [www.redbull.com](http://www.redbull.com)).

### *Network opportunities*

If a tribe is a heterogeneous network of consumers and things assembled in order to create pleasurable and sociable results, then the tribal marketer must remain attentive to all the elements that make up these networks. Studies show that architectures – such as clubs, streets, and cyberspaces – as well as material products – be these rollerblades, ecstasy pills, or computers – represent the disciplinary and liberatory tools for community formation amongst consumer tribes (Cova et al., 2007; Goulding et al., 2009; Kozinets, 2002; Visconti, Sherry, Borghini, & Anderson, 2010). This networked view extends all kinds of possibilities for enterprises to implement a tribal approach. Rather than seeking to provide a wholesale platform for tribal community however, as is often the case for managers who seek to foster brand community, tribal networks offer opportunities to all kinds of business ventures that can insert their services and products into existing tribal platforms, as sympathetic network facilitators.

Skateboarders and in-line skaters, for instance, like to use obstacles and features of street architecture to foster activity and community. By observing the networks that skaters create around these architectures, a skate-shop, hotdog stand, or café for instance can be inserted sympathetically into the existing tribal network as a means of enhancing skateboarders' experiences in that network. Indeed, with tribal consumption communities, marketing managers do not necessarily need to locate their market offering as the centralised locus

of consumption (as is the case with brand community). Rather, they are confronted with opportunities to assign their product, service or brand as a useful *point of passage* within a tribal network. This is to say that as much as consumers need focal products and services in their lives, so too do they need cultural corridors that help them to maintain the performances of their tribal networks. This is a thin line that the BBC, Facebook, Redbull, and many small businesses tread skilfully.

### *Identity in flux*

Tribal networks change constantly. As such, it is important for the tribal marketer to remain close to the network, monitoring carefully those elements that might alter. While the board-sport retailer or café might benefit from fostering itself as part of the network constituting a skateboarding tribe, a council's decision to alter the local architecture in order to prevent skaters riding boards on pavements, walls, benches, or steps (commonly achieved by installing lumps on hand-rails, or bumps on kerbs and pavements) would have profound effects for the status of that network in which the retailer is embedded.

This is to say, the different people, objects, places, and things that come together in the tribal experience often have divergent strategic goals (McLean & Hassard, 2004). If the networked elements of the tribe are unstable because of these divergent goals, then it is not surprising that tribes are often transient and unpredictable; that their identities are 'fluid rather than fixed' (Bennett, 1999). A key facet of network approaches is an emphasis placed on the continual performance that emerges from the co-presence of associated elements (Latour, 1996). Managers do not necessarily like this tribal implication. Indeed, if tribes are harbingers of increased uncertainty within marketing processes, then why would any marketing manager in her right mind consider tribal marketing as a potential strategy?

The answer to this question lies in consumers' desires for constant change (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003). The potential for constant change within hybrid networks benefits both consumers and managers of ebay (via the constant stream of goods that pass through its platform); the iPM news blog (as news issues change daily); and Facebook (as friends constantly alter the visual and emotional tone of each other's profile pages by sharing pictures, applications, and conversations). Constant change can offer other benefits too. For instance, a close, stable relationship between consumers and the market often crosses a line beyond which the psychic benefits of being part of a marginal group are lost. Apple, for instance, in its journey from outsider to mainstream aspirational brand has lost much of the quirky, warm appeal that Apple users once enjoyed, and is now regarded with similar scepticism to its rivals (Shankar et al., 2006). Through constant movement and creative change that blur the meanings of products and services, these kinds of difficulties can be avoided, maintaining instead a sense of edginess and challenge.

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Overall, the seeding of a consumer tribe demands a different approach to the building of brand communities. The seed network is not intended to provide structured advice. Tribes are too messy for that, driven by strange logics that bear commonality with particle physics (Cova & Cova, 2001). Indeed, it might be said that tribes obey a kind of uncertainty principle: the more marketers know about a tribe, the more likely the tribe will do something to break *our* rules. The seed network therefore, offers a guide to foster platforms on which consumers can create hybrid forms amongst products, places, and people. Following from this are emotional appeals, constant change, and entrepreneurial

opportunities to insert new products and services as points of passage within the network. Finally, the seed network offers means to understand the contingency and transience of tribes by recognising that the absence of an element in a network (or the presence of a new element) can cause the tribe to disappear or change into another form altogether. In order to illustrate elements of the seed network in practice, let us now consider the case of surf, skate, snow, and motocross phenomenon Volcom.

### **The case of Volcom**

Volcom was founded by in 1991 by longtime surfer and former Quiksilver employee, Richard Woolcott. The company designs and manufactures action-sports clothing and accessories, which it sells through its own retail stores, online retailers, action-sports retailers, and major department stores including Macy's and Nordstrom. In 2009 the company enjoyed 16% growth, and a net income of US\$21.7m, based on US\$280m sales (MarketWatch Inc., 2008). My longitudinal, naturalistic observation of surfing and skating culture suggests that by the mid-1990s Volcom was delivering a radical, hip, and underground image loved by young action sports enthusiasts. This image enabled the brand to leap-frog over established brands like Quiksilver and Billabong whose market offerings were felt to offer young skaters and surfers little distinction from non-board riders, or worse still, their parents. Under a banner of 'liberation, innovation and experimentation' intended to fuel the 'creative spirit of youth culture', Volcom's 'Brandifesto' states:

The goal of Volcom is to provide clothing to people who share our passion for art, music, film, skateboarding, surfing, snowboarding and motocross. We are focused on supporting athletes, artists and musicians; providing a means for creative individuals to come together and collectively express themselves. This collaborative effort results in everything from the ever-growing 'Let the Kids Ride Free' contest series to the high-profile 'Volcom Pipeline Pro' surf competition on down to our in-house independent record label – Volcom Entertainment. ([www.volcom.com](http://www.volcom.com))

Far from merely offering clothing, Volcom extends platforms of support, interest, and passion to consumers as producers of art, music, and action sports culture. The website ([www.volcom.com](http://www.volcom.com)) feeds consumers a hybrid platform mix that is structured like a well-balanced investment portfolio: event management, athlete and competition sponsorship, local competitions for young board riders, an online store, online gallery-platform for artists, in-house music label, as well as a 'Volcommunity' brand community. These resources offer a smorgasbord of interlinked platforms through which Volcom consumers can creatively assemble activities and identity. Consistent with the tribal approach, Volcom prefers not to dictate what its customers want, or how they might behave on the platforms offered:

Volcom's belief that 'the only constant is change' defines our willingness to embrace the complexity and diversity that exists in the world and our ability to apply it to our overall creative output. It also speaks of our open-minded approach to business and life in general. This flexible outlook enables Volcom to take on many meanings and stay relevant on many levels. ([www.volcom.com](http://www.volcom.com))

This quotation illustrates how Volcom is acutely aware of the need for rapid flux and fluidity of meaning in the youthful action-sports scene. Nevertheless, this does not imply that they remain ahead of their market by predicting new fashions. Nor does it imply that they follow their market by cool-hunting the latest styles. Rather, Volcom fashions itself as an instrument for empowered customers to use its creativity to develop and fertilise Volcom's styles and brand meanings. Volcom's web presence is peppered with

Table 1. A typology of consumption community.

Form Feature	Subculture of consumption	Brand community	Consumer tribe
Locus	Activity	Brand	Linking value
Power structure	Hierarchy of core members	Hierarchy of core Members + brand managers	Diffuse, democratic, hybrid network
Purposes	Sociality, response to alienation	Brand use, sociality	Sociality, passion
Time span	Long-term	Long-term	Transient
Structure	Slow to change	Slow to change	Fluid, fast-moving
Social position	Marginalised	Mainstreamed	Mobile

contributions from consumers who orbit around the skateboarding tribe; so too are there the photographic and video traces of the competitive platforms that it offers to young surfers at beaches on all three seaboards in the United States. Indeed, Volcom's web-spaces intimately connect with real-time, real-place action sports; no skate-park is complete without a huge Volcom 'Stone' sticker installed on a ramp or bowl.

Volcom recognises that tribal consumers exhibit multiple identities, and instead of seeking to place itself at the centre of any one identity, it seeks to permit hybrid networking opportunities, offering various beach, pavement, and web-based corridors for its consumers to stroll, surf, and roll down. Furthermore, Volcom's strategy of extending support for whatever values and practices its consumers wish to develop also elides the dangers that tribal communities are unpredictable and transient. Volcom eschews unified or concrete brand values other than creativity and innovation (key tribal characteristics), and instead offers webspace and events as empowering polysemic platforms. Here, playful activation and plundering processes occur, such that Volcom – like Facebook and Shanda – enlists consumers as consultants, developers, and managers. Finally, through this strategy, Volcom retains its edginess and marginality by staying close to the sources of changing and challenging fashions.

## Conclusion

This paper began by outlining why consumption communities are an important way to consider the managerial implications of consumers' behaviours beyond purchase. These characteristics of these communities are summarised in Table 1.

Perhaps most difficult of these forms for the marketing manager to implement strategically is the subculture of consumption. The mythology, authenticity, and narratives that are so important to brands like Harley Davidson, are built up during long, convoluted histories that blend haphazard media mirages with unpredictable activities (Holt, 2004). Note also that many subcultural groups have at some time or another faced legal and moral censure because of the activities around which they locate (Canniford & Shankar, 2007; Goulding et al., 2009; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Whilst moral panic can do wonders for one's image in a youthful market segment (Heath & Potter, 2005; Holt, 2004), it can also lead to a diffusion of power throughout a wider network than the manager might desire, through political and legislative action for instance.

Brand communities offer a more easily managed strategic resource. Consumers who keep faith in a single brand sustain meaning and value through social use and moral responsibility, and feed information back to managers in order to maintain the relevance of

the resources offered. Whilst strong values and loyalty fostered around a core brand would seem like the gold-standard community to improve brand equity, singular and focused socialisation around a brand is rarer than the use of a variety of market resources in combination. Tribal community offers a different solution that helps managers to work with consumers who do not want to build very strong links with singular brands. Rather than providing *the* locus of consumption, tribal marketing involves inserting one's market offering (not even necessarily a brand) as a useful 'point of passage' in a tribal network.

Tribal marketing demands that managers provide platforms and pathways on which consumers can assemble community, meaning, and value for themselves. Tribal consumers do not want to be led; they want to lead, as activists and contributors. This is part of the reason that tribes cannot be managed through traditional means. Rather, through the features of a seed network, marketing managers can enter into productive and symbiotic dialogue with consumers, fostering and nurturing their extended and hybrid roles in the production of linking value. To be sure, from diffuse power structures and consumer-led innovation, plundering, and entrepreneurialism there follows transience. This demands constant vigilance from marketers in order to retain relevance in the network and maintain their offerings as useful points of passage in a tribal network. On the other hand however, tribal networks are often full of consumers who are willing to invest their time and creativity. This feature often sustains members' interest by constantly renewing innovation, passion, and play (Kozinets, 2002).

For these reasons, the tribal approach is not a second-place position for marketers who have failed to create a brand community. Whilst brand values may be less hallowed within tribes, the points of passage and networks that tribal marketing can offer and facilitate are highly respected. In essence, this point goes back to Cova's maxim 'the link is more important than the thing'; if marketers can offer foundations for linking value, then consumers are likely to celebrate (Cova & Pace, 2006).

### ***Future directions***

Future research might seek to understand what makes one kind of community network transform into another kind. Despite the structure of Table 1, it is not always useful to observe subcultures, brand communities, and tribes as distinct categories. They might be fundamentally different theories, but on the ground there appears to be overlap between hard-core subculture members and less interested tribal consumers. Likewise, through time, the motivations and challenges faced by subculture members change, often leading them to seek out new possibilities for community (Goulding et al., 2009). This explains why there is so much interchange between the labels that marketing academics assign to community. Whilst the philosophical foci of subcultures and brand communities may be different, they are not discrete or static categories, somehow frozen in time and space. Consumption communities face new challenges on a daily basis, and it is these contingencies, as aspects of the networks that make up communities, that determine communities as processes of continual performance.

Related to this point, it appears that despite the non-political view cast over tribes, there are examples of communities that at one moment display values and behaviours based on aesthetics and style, yet changes in network configurations can lead them to political action. This was the case with Cornish surfers so fed up with filthy water that they formed Surfers Against Sewage in order to lobby politicians, the National Rivers Authorities, and water providers. So too is there a necessity to explore further the ethical factors of communal consumption (Cherrier, 2007; Veer, 2011). Faced with moral and

ethical alterations in the community network, how do consumer tribes or subcultures of consumption cross-over with social movements? It is questions such as these that may offer continued potential to develop responsible and ethical roles for consumption community in socially beneficial and sustainable manners.

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