Consumer tribes: membership, consumption and building loyalty

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to extend the emergent consumer tribe literature to facilitate a more complete understanding of the antecedents and roles implicit within consumer tribal membership. Principally a conceptual paper, this study focuses upon how a more complete understanding of consumer roles can be leveraged to create sustainable loyalty.
Design/methodology/approach – This study comprised an examination of the tribe’s social behaviour, membership roles and influence on individual consumption. The research was approached interpretively with a case study design investigating a tribe of vinyl record collectors in a New Zealand context.
Findings – Key findings include the confirmation of Kozinets’ antecedents of tribal membership and the four roles of tribal members previously conceptualised by Cova and Cova. The tribe was found to have a core set of values that moderated any individual differences. A hierarchy, managed through the distribution of “cultural capital”, was found to exist amongst the group. In an extension of Cova’s modelling a fifth role of “Chief” was identified, whereby the Chief was found to act as an opinion leader and organiser amongst the group.
Research limitations/implications – Owing to constraints of both time and research funding, only one tribe was examined in this case study, hence the results are very specific to the group studied. Future research should apply the managerial implications from this study to other case contexts to test and expand understanding of consumer tribe dynamics and the creation of consumer loyalty.
Originality/value – This paper creates a link between extant consumer behaviour, loyalty and consumer culture theory. The presented results have implications for the marketing manager through advancement towards creation of a model of tools a firm can use to connect with and build sustainable loyalty with consumer tribes.
Keywords Marketing strategy, Customer loyalty, Influence, Leadership, Consumer behaviour
Paper type Research paper

Introduction
A conventional perspective of marketing places individual consumers into market segments, to enable efficient and effective use of marketing resources. Common segmentation processes, however, have little appreciation of the presence of social connections and their potential influence upon consumption. Fortunately, post-modern research approaches offer a means to broaden our perspective of consumers (Gronroos, 2006) and examine their consumption within a social context. Tribal marketing is one such alternative perspective, whereby, consumers are found in some instances to initiate, build and maintain consumption-focussed groups (Cova and Salle, 2008; Kozinets, 1999).

Consumer tribes, a group of people emotionally connected by similar consumption values and usage, use the social “linking value” (Cova, 1997, p. 297) of products
and services to create a community and express identity. Theoretical developments in tribal marketing utilise Bagozzi’s (2000) concept of intentional social action, to link social context with consumption to understand “real” consumers. This approach proposes that social associations are the most important influence on an individual’s consumption decisions. Cova and Cova (2002) build upon this theoretical work to present tribes as an expression of both self and social identity. Earlier work by Maffesoli (1996) establishes, however, that consumer social identities and consumption choices shift according to situational and lifestyle factors. In this view, the consumer tribe can be understood and accessed through their shared beliefs, ideas and consumption. These findings would seem to indicate that an individual may belong to multiple tribes at the same time to express different aspects of their identity.

A tribal approach to consumer behaviour answers marketers’ calls to look beyond conventional marketing theory and avoid pigeonholing consumers (Addis and Podesta, 2005) through providing a means to segment groups of consumers based on meaningful shared characteristics. The affective attachment that tribal members possess for their tribe (Cova, 1997) provides an opportunity for marketers to foster meaningful and “symbiotic” relationships with groups of consumers. These relationships extend beyond a focus upon the level of repeat purchasing behaviour, to those based on affective bonds of loyalty, with the potential of “collective action” and advocacy from the tribe (Cova and Salle, 2008, p. 7).

This study extends earlier research by exploring the link between consumer tribes and loyalty. Firms supporting consumer-consumer relationships, such as consumer tribes, are proposed to create long-term loyalty through establishing both an emotional connection as well as a rational reason for commitment (Cova and Cova, 2002). A priori research indicates that the key to understanding and reaching the tribe as a collective is through their consumption. Consumption is seen to act as a tool for individuals to create and communicate self-identity (Belk, 1988; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004; Sirgy, 1982; Solomon, 1983).

This study examines the tribal phenomena among a group of vinyl record collectors. They were selected for their shared passion in collecting music in this format and their strong association with other vinyl collectors in an informal consumer tribe. The tribe was studied through a series of iterative in-depth interviews, providing insights into the group’s dynamics, tribal roles, consumption practices, values and related consumption loyalty.

From this investigation, a discussion of tribal membership, influence on consumption and a model for building bonded loyalty with the tribe is presented. These findings provide direction for firms seeking to leverage the consumer-led values and preferences of the tribe and build loyal relationships. This may empower firms to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, secure future revenue, while simultaneously performing the social function of meeting consumer needs. While there are managerial implications that can be drawn from this study, in how marketers engage with consumer groups, the limits of the methodological design mean that it is principally a conceptual paper. The intention is to stimulate thought and expand the body of knowledge in this emergent area of consumer theory.

**Background**

*Developing customer loyalty*

Loyal customer-company relationships are widely accepted as an investment in future revenue and competitive advantage (Fournier, 1998; Gomez et al., 2005;
Loyalty, a customer commitment to repurchase, is particularly valuable as a competitive advantage due to the difficulty other firms have in replicating this bond (Kumar and Shah, 2004). However, the concept of loyalty as a straightforward compilation of behavioural and emotional components is of limited value, especially in the case of post-modern consumption. The context, product and an individual’s experiences do not produce one generic form of loyalty that will ensure repeat purchases (East et al., 2005). An alternative approach is required that considers the influence of social identity and social context on the formation of loyalty.

Emotional connections to the firm have been shown to be linked to the individual’s social identity (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). Social identity theory is used by Bhattacharya et al. (1995) to frame the consumer’s enduring loyalty as a form of identification with the brand or firm. This influence from a social group is also referred to as “bonded loyalty” (Oliver, 1999, p. 41), where people show a collective loyalty towards a product, brand or company. Bonded loyalty between a firm and social group is proposed by Genzi and Pelloni (2004) as a means of reducing switching behaviours and increasing customer perceived satisfaction. However, research on the nature of social alliances and loyalty has focussed on the internal side of organisations (Alvesson, 2000; Berger et al., 2006) and distribution channel contexts (Gilliland and Bello, 2002). Consumer-consumer social alliances and their effect on loyal preferences have received limited research.

**Why consumer tribes?**

Socially interconnected groups have been found to act loyally as a group because personal relationships are maintained through shared, regular consumption (Gainer, 1995). This concurs with Oliver’s (1999) concept of bonded loyalty. However, Gainer’s (1995) study looks at an arts audience which is diverse and bound by a shared passion for performance. In this sense, they are like a consumer tribe. Meanwhile, studies of consumer-consumer relationships and their influence on individual consumption have focussed on subcultures and brand communities (Berger et al., 2006; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). This research expands the focus on social relationships in the consumer behaviour area and looks into the dynamics of a consumer tribe for marketing opportunities.

Consumer tribes are a relatively new concept in social theory and yet have made a significant impact on marketing theory development (Cova and Cova, 2002; Cova and Salle, 2008; Gronroos, 2006; Kozinets, 1999; Penaloza and Venkatesh, 2006; Thompson et al., 2006). Consumer tribes differ from historical tribes by having a new social order, wherein status within a tribe is achieved by different and specific values (Cova and Cova, 2002). They are grouped around something emotional rather than rational (Cova and Cova, 2002). Consumer tribes differ from subcultures in that their connections are much narrower, with similar beliefs, values or customs setting them apart from the dominant societal culture (Schiffman et al., 2008). The term “brand community” is also an inadequate means of describing a tribe. A brand community is established around supporting a particular brand or product (Brownlie et al., 2007; Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2007). This contrasts with consumer tribes, which in some instances may diminish brand equity, similar to a consumer activist placing themselves in opposition to mainstream consumers (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004).

Shared consumption is the post-modern consumer’s means of creating a social link and building bridges between individuals (Cova and Salle, 2008; Simmons, 2008).
Therefore, consumer tribes present an opportunity to connect with elusive post-modern consumers. These are self-formed groups that hold meaning and relevance for the individuals within them, rather than attempting to create a homogenous segment from arbitrary characteristics.

Bauman (1992) considers consumer tribes, or neo-tribes, as solely existing around the use of symbolism to show allegiance to the group. This symbolic consumption is used to create a social link that is expressive of self-identity (Cova, 1997). The benefit of marketing to consumer tribes is that social influences are the most important influence on an individual’s consumption decisions (Bagozzi, 2000). Involvement with a tribe is an expression of self-identity, so the consumer tribe shares not only moral values or opinions, but consumption values and preferences. This provides opportunity for marketers to access a group of consumers, like a market segment, that actually connect with each other and share consumption preferences.

A criticism of Cova (1996); Cova and Cova (2002) consumer tribe definitions is that they are vague theoretical discussions (Huq, 2006). However, it can be argued that a flexible definition can be seen as a positive factor for marketers as it extends the amount of consumers associated with a tribe at any point in time, expanding the possible reach of marketing efforts.

**Consumption and self-identity**

The relationship between consumption and self-identity has been widely researched (Belk, 1988; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004; Sirgy, 1982; Solomon, 1983). Goods and services have a symbolic function of creating and protecting their self-identity (Belk, 1988; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Solomon, 1983). This presents an opportunity to develop customer loyalty through communication of the expressive elements of a firm’s offering (Leigh and Gabel, 1992). Traditional institutions, such as the family or work place that previously defined the self have largely been replaced by individuals’ consumption (Bagozzi, 2000; Cova, 1997; Goulding, 2003; Koziets, 1999; Ryan et al., 2006). Consumption is a contemporary tool for recreating communities in post-modern society (Cova, 1997). Cova (1996) and Maffesoli (1996) discuss that the role of products in a post-modern context is not so much in their functionality, but rather their “linking value” between the individual and society. This implies that self-identity is chosen by the individual through consumption, facilitating the post-modern individual’s creation of multiple self-identities. However, these identities are not limited to consumption practices alone. Cova et al. (2007) adopt the term consumer tribe to encapsulate shared consumption behaviour, activities and social interaction based around explicit shared values.

The post-modern consumption practices and values assigned to consumption of certain products and brands by a tribe provide unique characteristics for marketers to explore and leverage. Customer co-creation and co-production has been recognised as an area of consumer behaviour theory that cannot be ignored in the process of gathering marketing intelligence (Rowley et al., 2007). Researched areas such as product development, experience environments, loyalty schemes and virtual communities have all been identified as key points for customer involvement (Rowley et al., 2007). Tribal marketing scrutinises how tribes consume and “co-create” products for their own uses. This gives marketer’s another avenue for creating social interaction around their good, service or brand.
Building bonded loyalty with consumer tribes

Tribal membership is fluid and can fluctuate according to the involvement of the individual (Maffesoli, 2007). This poses a challenge for marketers in identifying and building long-term loyal relationships with individuals. Understanding why people participate in a particular tribe would provide direction in identifying when individuals are “in” a tribe and what is important to them in terms of the individual-social links associated with tribal membership. Kozinets (1999) found two antecedents of tribal membership in an online context. The first is the centrality of tribal consumption to a self-concept, or self-identity. This refers to how important the shared activity, passion or belief a tribe holds is to the individual. The second is the intensity of social relationships with other members. The strength of these antecedents will affect the degree of participation and involvement an individual has with the tribe (Kozinets, 1999). The tribal activities, consumption and shared belief(s) of a particular consumer tribe may place more, or less, importance on these antecedents, and perhaps include others related to linking value of tribal consumption. This linking value has been conceptually and empirically studied within tribes (Cova et al., 2007; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Patterson, 1998; Ryan et al., 2006). However, there is an opportunity to further explore Cova and Cova’s (2002) direction and examine how a tribe’s antecedents of membership (beyond the online context) and values can be leveraged as a loyalty-building tool.

Bordieu’s (1989) concept of “cultural capital” is used by Cova et al. (2007) to explain the knowledge, rules and hierarchy within a tribe. In the tribal context, cultural capital “consists of a set of socially rare and distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge and practices” (Cova et al., 2007, p. 136). With a tribal marketing approach, the company acts in a support role to the relationships within a group (Cova and Cova, 2002), with the goal being to build bonded loyalty. An understanding of the specific cultural capital of a tribe, and its symbolic meaning, presents an avenue for marketers to reach tribal members and develop a collective, bonded loyalty. Understanding the cultural capital of a tribe could also provide insight into ways of engaging members in the co-creation of products and, more importantly, the experiences they deliver (Rowley et al., 2007).

The social dynamics of tribes also provide insight for connecting with members on an affective level. Cova and Cova (2002) found four different roles to exist amongst consumer tribe members. These range from low participation (the sympathiser), to active members, to practitioners and lastly devotees, who possess high level of involvement and emotional attachment (Cova and Cova, 2002). The practitioner in a tribe has a similarity with the opinion leader concept; they influence the exchange of certain information among peers due to their own knowledge and authority in the area (King and Summers, 1970; Robertson and Rogers, 1972). In a post-modern consumer tribal context, it is fitting to use King and Summer’s (1970) description of opinion leaders as people with influence over the exchange of certain information. The roles members assume may have implications for whom, and how, marketers choose to communicate with the tribe.

Research issues

The above critique of the literature indicates that further research is required into consumer tribes as an antecedent to creating bonded loyalty between a firm and specific group of consumers (Gomez et al., 2005; Oliver, 1999). While there have been several conceptualisations in the area, no empirical studies have examined why people
participate in tribes and how this contributes to the development of loyal relationships between the firm and group. The first issue addressed in this research investigates:

RQ1. Why people form consumer tribes and how their membership influences their consumption of goods and services?

This question aims to investigate the role of antecedents found by Kozinets (1999) and determines any other factors influencing tribal participation. Second, this question examines the role of cultural capital and any visible purchasing or loyalty preferences derived from socialisation in a specific consumer tribe.

The literature reviewed shows “bonded loyalty” (Oliver, 1999, p. 41) between the firm and a group of consumers is a highly effective marketing strategy. Therefore, the second issue addressed in this research examines:

RQ2. How can a firm effectively support and communicate with consumer tribes to build this loyalty?

Here the research agenda investigates how the dynamics and consumption of a consumer tribe can be leveraged for both marketing communication and building the affective component of bonded loyalty.

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) summarises the extant literature and identifies areas the research questions seek to investigate. The antecedents on the left shaded in grey are drawn from Kozinets (1999). The overlapping circles replicate Cova and Cova’s (2002) diagram of roles within a tribe. Meanwhile, shaded arrow between of firm support and tribal membership represent a conceptual relationship (Cova and Cova, 2002), which is examined in the current study. The model makes a link between Oliver’s (1999) bonded loyalty concept and Cova and Cova’s (2002) proposal that support of a tribe is an effective way to build customer loyalty; through cognitive and affective pathways. The following methodology section discusses how these questions were addressed in a case study.

Methodology

Research design

The research design was part theory building, part theory testing. A framework of how tribes form and behave was applied to a specific case to contribute and expand on the existing body of consumer research. Arnould and Thompson (2005) justify this research purpose and position studies of neo tribes, or consumer tribes, under the consumer culture theory framework. In this case, the social context is inextricably linked to individuals’ perceptions and behaviour; therefore, a qualitative approach is appropriate (Carson et al., 2005). In-depth interviews were deemed most appropriate for the investigator’s purpose of gaining overview of the context, and insight into tribal activity, membership and consumption practices.

Case study method

Case studies have been widely used in studies of social groups, and consumer tribes in particular (Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2007; Cova and Cova, 2002; Cova et al., 2007; Dionisio et al., 2008; Huq, 2006; Kozinets, 1999). Case study research was considered an appropriate means of examining people within a specific context (a consumer tribe) without control or manipulation of the relevant behaviours (Perry, 1998; Yin, 2003). A single case study design was applied to this research problem to gain
multiple insights on one particular tribe. The research was limited to one case study due to time and resource constraints.

*Case boundary: the tribe of record collectors*

The selected case was a self-formed group of adult record collectors (i.e. people who collect vinyl music records). These consumers formed a tribe through sharing distinct consumption behaviours, use of targeted publications, stores and online information/trading sites and special-interest events. Previous research has been done in this area of collecting behaviour. Shuker (2004) found record collecting to be a social practice that forms the core component of a dedicated individual’s social identity. Vinyl records are a product with linking value (Cova, 1997) between individuals and a social community. For collectors, Bourdieus (1989) “cultural capital” is not only in the collection itself. The non-tangible aspects of knowledge, searching and prestige associated with the acquisition (Belk, 1995) are intrinsically linked to the collection and collector’s status.

The sample was selected using a snowballing technique from another researcher’s contacts and individuals suggested by informants as the research progressed. As the study progressed further individuals were added to ensure all the roles identified in Cova and Cova’s (2002) earlier study were replicated in this case. In total, six individuals...
were chosen to gain a variety of perspectives and understanding of the levels of involvement within the tribe, and triangulate data for reliable analysis (Yin, 2003).

Record collectors in this case study were defined with Cova and Cova’s (2002) roles of tribal membership. Informants were purposively selected (Carson et al., 2005), through an initial conversation, to gauge which role they were most likely to identify. The following descriptions were modified to apply to this specific tribe:

- **Sympathisers.** Individuals with an interest in music and the vinyl format, however, actual consumption of records and knowledge of the practice is relatively small.
- **Members.** This role includes people who actively collect and socialise with the tribe, in physical and virtual spaces.
- **Devotees.** These members have a long-standing passion, knowledge and involvement with the tribe. They may not be as frequently active as members, but consider record collecting a central part of their self-identity.
- **Practitioners.** This role includes members who DJ with their collections, either professionally or informally with friends. It may also include staff and sellers of records; however, their personal collection is not motivated by generating profit.

**Data collection**

Six iterative in-depth interviews, of an hour in duration, were conducted. The iterative nature of the interviews meant recontacting some participants to ask further questions relating to findings of later interviews. At the conclusion of data collection, further analysis was performed in two stages. Selective coding reassigned the initial codes to new codes that identified the research questions, emergent themes and trends (Carson et al., 2005). A framework of implications was then produced to summarise key findings and managerial implications. A summary of the findings from the research is presented in the next section.

**Discussion**

**The tribe**

The tribe’s emotional connection with each other was found to be based on a shared passion for listening and playing music in the vinyl record format. Informants were attracted to this particular music medium, and were consumed with collecting it, because of an appreciation of the medium, nostalgia for the music and also the rarity of its availability. Record acquisition was also a means of creating and establishing status, also termed symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1989), among collecting peers:

I mean there’s no point in grabbing this cool record and going “Wahoo I’ve got this”, well there’s not much point unless you can show someone else (Mike).

The social use of records was also apparent in the informants’ preference for face-to-face tribal interaction:

The radio show is like a good chance to catch up, have a few beers and play some new records and talk about them. That stuff’s like part of the culture, like meeting up in the record store [...](Matt).

In this sense, the tribe becomes very local, with a network of people connected through different friends, work places and a willingness to connect with other collectors.
The tribe and self-identity
Searching, collecting and playing records were emphasised as important to who they were, and was also reflected in their day-to-day lifestyles. An intense passion for collecting records was evident, with reported sacrifices, or irrational consumption decisions, made for feeding their addiction. Indeed, the terms “addiction” and “habit” were repeatedly used to define their collecting behaviour:

In my younger days [...] I’d go without paying rent, I’d go without eating, just to get one piece of vinyl [...] (Matt).

Tribal values
Three clear themes emerged from the informants’ definitions of collecting and sharing records. First, a common goal of uniting people through shared music consumption was present among the informants:

It’s almost uniting people that still maintain vinyl and think that way [...] (Matt).

There’s a certain responsibility that comes with having this community. It has to be kept alive [...] (David).

Second, an appreciation for high quality, art and heritage associated with the music product was expressed explicitly and emphasised throughout the interviews:

What I do still buy is a lot of classic older records [...] just for that sense of history and you know their smell [...] (Matt).

As far as I’m concerned, I’m presenting my taste to people [...] (David).

Finally, acquisition and dissemination of knowledge were regarded, as part of collecting and participating in the tribe. This was their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989); the consumption of vinyl records began with a search or “hunt”, involved discussion and research, ending with sharing and comparing. There was a sense of purpose to collecting and sharing among the tribe:

I have a lot of pride in having the collection, but it would be irresponsible for me not to be sharing it with people and sharing the knowledge I get from it (David).

These three themes can be considered values of the tribe, unique to their group and uniting the variances of personal taste in record collecting. The influence of these values, particularly, the quality associated with the vinyl medium, transgressed into other consumption choices. For example, fine food and beer were perceived to complement the quality and socialisation associated with collecting vinyl records. This presents a key reason for the firm to understand tribal consumption and appeal to what they value.

The presence of tribal values in consumption choices was evident in music retail outlets and other consumables not related to music. Products influenced by the involvement with the tribe included vinyl records themselves and audio equipment. A new release on vinyl is recognised as higher quality than other music formats, as it has a more expensive production process. Appreciation of high-quality and original pressings expressed values art, heritage and a “higher consciousness” amongst tribal members:

I’ve always thought vinyl sounds a lot better, you get a high quality artwork in the packaging [...] (Mike).
RQ1. Why do people form consumer tribes and how does their membership influence the consumption of goods and services?

The antecedents of tribal involvement identified by Kozinets (1999) of “centrality of the tribe to self-identity” and “intensity of social relationships with other members” were found to be salient in this context:

- My music collection [...] it’s more to me (sic) than anything else I do [...] (Todd).
- You’ll always find either a mutual artist or something that sort of connects you [...] (Matt).

The strength of these antecedents was reflected in the time, effort and a passion exhibited for keeping the group of collectors alive. The “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1989) of records and music knowledge formed a currency of trade among members, facilitating socialisation and creating a tribal community around this particular consumption.

Cova and Cova’s (2002) four tribal roles were confirmed to exist in this case context; however, a new role of “Chief” was identified within the tribe. This applied to individuals in the practitioner and member roles who held a high level of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989) organisation of tribal activities and were influential on other members (both potential and existing). The chief is essentially an opinion leader among the group, an influencer on the exchange of information (King and Summers, 1970; Robertson and Rogers, 1972) but also facilitator of where and how the tribe socialises. Individuals in the role of “Chief” are important for marketers seeking to gain access and insights into the tribe’s dynamics, its consumption and values. Chiefs and Devotees were also found to possess status and respect in the tribe, which makes them crucial for connecting and communicating with the tribe at large.

Figure 2 shows the relationships and tribal roles assumed by informants. Two-directional arrows indicate an existing relationship, while one-directional arrows show a desired relationship. Aaron assumes the role of “Chief” in this case. He is positioned as the most central informant due to his practitioner status, influence on others and organisation of Vinyl Club (an event). His organisation of the Vinyl Club event is motivated by socialisation and reflects the tribe’s use of consumption to create and maintain social relationships:
I really wanted to start this thing called Vinyl Club [...]. I wanted to go around to peoples' places, bring our records around, talk about them and hopefully have a few whiskies as well [...]. (Aaron).

Part of the reason [Aaron] started the Vinyl Club, so that we can get together and show our records. Not for showing off purposes, but for like that’s really cool – a sharing thing [...]. (Mike).

A sense of hierarchy was recognised by the researcher. Indeed, both Aaron and David considered themselves as influential on other collectors. This was confirmed in other informants’ comments about them. Having specialised knowledge, gathered through the length and intensity of their collecting behaviour, was expressed as valuable and a motivation for engaging with other members:

I feel I can approach my subject matter with authority. Which as I was saying to you before, I feel like, accepting that there’s a lot of other people out there with authority, it’s an exchange of information, it’s a cultural language if you like (David).

Todd indicated a desire to become involved with local collectors, as shown by an arrow towards Aaron, as Vinyl Club was recognised as a method of increasing his participation with the tribe.

The term “cultural language” was an interesting choice of words as it directly expresses the social use, or Cova’s (1997) linking value, of vinyl records. The “cultural language” is in a sense a currency within the tribe, indicating status.

Aaron and David showed noticeably higher status among the small group of informants. Aaron’s organisation and motivation to form Vinyl Club position him as a “Chief” among the other tribe members. Not only does he have respect and influence through his knowledge and passion for record collecting, but acts as a gateway for members (and potential members) to socialise and share their passion. This was found explicitly in Todd’s willingness to attend a Vinyl Club event:

I would like to meet people and get involved [...]. (Todd).

Membership and consumption

Tribal membership in this case was found to influence the consumption of music, vinyl records in particular. Records held a linking value (Cova, 1997), or social use, for creating and maintaining relationships with others in the tribe. The functional utility of records was found to be usurped by their use as a cultural language for members wishing to express self-identity and communicate with other members through an expression of taste. Indeed, the consumption of records and involvement with the tribe were almost inextricable. The “centrality of the tribe to self-identity” and “intensity of social relationships” were found to both be antecedents of involvement and drivers of consumption choice. This is because socialisation was identified as an essential component of vinyl record collecting behaviour. The enjoyment of exhibition, learning and status attached to a collection cannot happen in isolation. Therefore, the more an individual associates themselves with the tribe, the higher the tribe’s influence on their consumption will be:

RQ2. How can a firm effectively support and communicate with consumer tribes to build this loyalty?

Addressing the RQ2 provides specific managerial implications for firms wishing to engage in a tribal marketing approach. Bonded loyalty (Oliver, 1999) was framed
as a central reason for firms seeking to understand and support consumer-consumer relationships within the tribe (Cova and Cova, 2002). It was found that loyalty to the firm can be encouraged by supporting the tribe in three key areas: antecedents of membership, movement through roles, and maintaining tribal consumption. A model of tribal support focusing on these areas was developed for firms wishing to create business-tribe relationships. Marketing communications with the tribe should align with and express the values they hold. In this case, the tribal values of unity, quality and knowledge provide avenues for creating marketing messages that resonate with the tribe.

The marketer’s challenge of effectively reaching a group fluid in membership (Maffesoli, 2007) is lessened by the strong emotional connection tribal members had in regards to their consumption and sharing of vinyl records. The outcomes of the research suggest that face-to-face interactions are preferred over online areas for socialising. This concurs with Rowley et al. (2007) research direction in the need to create experiences with consumers to develop loyalty. Firms can support a tribe through resources available to them (such as a retail space or audio equipment) to facilitate socialising. This supports the group in a manner that does not push them to purchase, rather it creates an emotional relationship without a marketing or sales message. The event called Vinyl Club, organised by Aaron, was a successful example of such support. Aaron exhibited an appreciation and loyalty to the venue that housed the second Vinyl Club event. It was preferred over their first venue as they provided a social space for collectors to talk, trade, play records and form new relationships. Whereas the first venue was focused on generating income through the bar and pushed the group out before they were ready. Events such as Vinyl Club can increase an individual’s self-efficacy and reduce other barriers of tribal participation. This in turn strengthens their association with the tribe, and the firms supporting it.

**Implications for building loyalty with the tribe**

The value of a firm understanding the dynamics of tribal roles lies in supporting the individuals’ involvement within the tribe, facilitating group activity and aligning marketing efforts with the tribe’s values. Figure 3 shows four ways in which firms can approach supporting a tribe to develop bonded loyalty. The left-hand side proposes actionable tools the firm can use to support and communicate with the tribe. The impact of these actions is in facilitating individual involvement and tribal socialisation, allowing for feedback with the firm. The proposed results of these actions are achieving affective loyalty and, overtime, bonded loyalty with the tribe.

**Tool one.** The first tool appeals to individuals wishing to make contact with the tribe, through providing accessible social networks, both locally and globally. Access to information about music culture, collecting culture and purchasing places could also facilitate learning valued by the tribe, therefore, increasing involvement and respect among tribal peers. The firm’s position in aiding individual’s ability to participate with the tribe can build positive affective associations with the customer.

The internet is a key information medium used by the tribe; it has become a hybrid resource of information, communication, purchasing and facilitation of tribal membership. This facilitation occurs through allowing individuals, who are limited in time and/or money, to connect with other collectors through online forums, locate and purchase records without a physical visit to a record store. The internet also facilitated exploration of new genres and artists that ultimately contribute to the specialised
knowledge (i.e. cultural capital) and authority of individual members. The internet can be utilised by marketers in providing information and purchasing resources, and reaching tribal networks in the online context.

**Tool two.** The second tool is directed at utilising the purchase environment. Various stores and events, such as book fairs, wherein tribal members were found to have ritualistic behaviours attached to visiting them. An accompanying “thrill of the chase” was found in digging through record bins. Record collectors were found to have a cognitive loyalty to their preferred retail suppliers through frequent visits, repeat purchases and a willingness to recommend. Affective associations were formed by how they perceived the physical and social feel of the store and its staff. An explicit desire for record stores to accommodate collectors’ individual and collective needs was expressed. Record stores were suggested as a venue for extending the social network, facilitating tribal activities of playing and discussing music, and as a way of promoting the vinyl medium. Declining sales of vinyl records appeared to bring the tribe closer together, expressing the theme of unity desired among the tribe around shared values.

The tribe was found to have a declining membership and expressed a need to keep the community “alive”. While membership is inherently dependent on the individuals within the tribe, a commercial opportunity exists to support the group and expand the membership. Commercial support of events such as Vinyl Club meets multiple goals of facilitating socialisation, progressing individuals’ movement through the roles and keeping the community active.

**Tool three.** This tool uses the chief of the tribe as a “gateway” for understanding specific tribes and communicating with other members as an “opinion leader” (King and Summers, 1970; Robertson and Rogers, 1972). Aaron, the Chief in this case, acted as a gatekeeper to a particular local tribe and felt a degree of responsibility in connecting the local community of collectors. Communicating with the tribe through a chief creates a credible and personal channel between the firm and tribal community. This presents opportunity to receive feedback on the firm’s marketplace offering and also marketing efforts. However, Chiefs are human and a degree of caution should be taken to avoid mixed messages or negative results.
Tool four. Here, the firm aims to communicate with the tribe through “cultural resources”. The case found that tribal member’s opinions were more influential than those outside the group. A firm that fosters interpersonal interactions amongst tribal members through communication with the tribal chief has the potential to build Oliver’s (1999) bonded loyalty. This loyal relationship holds more sustainable value as it is generated through consumer-consumer relationships (Gainer, 1995), which holds more authenticity than direct business-consumer relationships. This can be described as a business-tribe relationship.

The tribe in the case study expressed values of unity, quality, and disseminating knowledge. Firms and can appeal to this by expressing these values in their own brands, marketing communications and product offering. The tribe would also value genuine interest in facilitating and maintaining a community based on these values. For example, a retail supplier could benefit from having social events, talks and product information and history for collectors in-store. Owing to the fluid nature of consumer tribes, a method for feedback and reciprocal communication is necessary identifying and reacting to the needs of a targeted tribe.

Conclusion
This study advances understanding of tribal membership and its influence on consumption behaviour. The concept of consumer tribes is investigated as it presents an alternative approach to understanding and connecting with consumers (Cova and Cova, 2002). Unlike conventional segmentation, where consumers are arbitrarily grouped by segment characteristics, tribes are identified as consumer-driven groups that hold meaning for constructing an individuals’ self-identity and creating new communities based on shared beliefs, passions and ideas. The link between tribal marketing and consumer loyalty theory is explored to generate an actionable model (Figure 3) for firms seeking to develop bonded loyalty with a tribe (Oliver, 1999). This model details four tools that can be utilised by marketers wishing to target and build loyal relationships with a tribe, or tribes, that have a connection to the firm.

The results of this case study provide evidence supporting many elements of Cove and Cova’s (2002) earlier conceptualisation of the roles inherent within consumer tribes, while simultaneously extending theory through introducing the additional role of “Chief”. The “Chief” role provides direction for marketers seeking to understand and communicate with a tribe. The “Chief’s” role as an influencer and open channel of communication has significant value for building relationships with the tribe at large. Despite an observed hierarchy among members, the tribe was also found to possess a sense of unity and a sharing ethos.

A specific set of “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1989) and defined values were found to be associated with tribal membership. Sharing individuals’ collections were discovered to be a key component of record consumption. Playing and discussing the music acted as a “cultural language” that connected members from all walks of life. The cultural capital held by members was also a source of establishing status. Therefore, consumption in this case context has the post-modern utility of building social relationships and constructing self-identity. This finding presents an opportunity for marketers to provide products and tailor their brand image to facilitate tribal membership as a pathway to developing functioning tribes that have a positive disposition towards the firm.
Finally, tribal bonds were found to be primarily based on affective rather than on rational or commercial bases. This provided a foundation for investigating the proposed link between building loyalty with tribes. Cova and Cova (2002) suggested affective bonds could be created with a firm through maintenance and facilitation of the tribe. The result of this is ultimately a bonded loyal relationship with the tribe (Oliver, 1999) which has value for creating sustainable, long-term revenue focus (Kumar and Shah, 2004).

**Future research directions**

A case study of vinyl record collectors was used to explore the consumer tribe phenomena. This research method provides insight into a particular tribe’s consumer behaviour, values, loyalty and preferences that can be used by firms. This research approach could similarly be applied to other tribes connected with different product categories, brands and companies to identify how to influence tribal actors for the mutual benefit of the tribe and the firm. Future research on tribes should examine if Kozinets (1999) antecedents apply to other consumer tribes.

The finding of a chief role also warrants further investigation into the existence and influence of this opinion leader amongst the tribal members. The role of the internet and social networking is also an area which cannot be ignored. How tribes use the search, communication and exhibition facets of the internet may influence how, and where, marketers should be focussing their attention.

Further research on business-tribe relationships is also needed to establish the effectiveness in supporting a tribe to create a bonded loyal relationship. A longitudinal study of specific tribal marketing efforts and its effectiveness in creating and maintaining loyalty would be appropriate. Measures of tribal use (of supporting activities) and behavioural outcomes (such as repeat sales) may also provide an empirical grounding for this approach.

**Limitations**

The case study could be enhanced by investigating multiple tribes, including different types of tribes. While the informants’ demographic characteristics and backgrounds varied, the theoretical generalisations cannot be considered as generalisable to the whole population of record collectors, or tribes in general. Rather this study contributes to a stream of consumer culture literature (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) and consumer-led perspectives on how supporting consumer tribes create customer loyalty (Fournier, 1998).

The link between creating bonded loyalty and support of a tribe was derived from an integration of the informants’ motivations, consumption, behaviour and social interactions as tribal members. This link requires future empirical research to establish its validity (Healy and Perry, 2000). It is proposed that further studies investigate commercial support of a tribe through multiple cases and longitudinal research designs.

**References**


Further reading

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