Defining Brand Tribalism

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ABSTRACT

Much of the current popular and academic literature on branding suggests that marketers should develop deeper, more affective, relationships with their customers. Some authors suggest that competitive advantage can no longer be sustained on the basis of product attributes and perceived positions; today’s consumers want products and brands they feel are part of them and they can be a part of. Brand managers are advised to allow the consumer to co-create the brand and brand image; the brand community, cult, or consumer tribe facilitates the creation, communication, and, indeed, the evolution of the brand. This may move the branding discussion from brand culture or community to a more closely linked group of tribal members sharing more than the brand ownership and use. This research, therefore, develops a social and anthropological theory based measure of how closely consumers identify themselves as members of a consumer or brand tribe. The research follows accepted measure development paradigms to arrive at a brand tribalism scale allowing academicians and practitioners to measure, compare, and evaluate the level of consumer identification with a product or brand.
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1. Introduction

Consumers are now developing unique and vibrant relationships with their brands (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002) and conceptualizing the nature of these relationships has become increasingly important (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009; Veloutsou 2007). As Fournier (1998) illuminates, brand relationships are salient in the mind of the consumer, take a variety of forms, and have a number of life cycle variations. A singular and important characterization of the consumer-brand relationship has been in terms of a brand community (Cova and Pace 2006; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; O’Guinn and Muniz 2005; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009). However, consumer-brand relationships may also be characterized and measured in terms of brand personality, brand attachment, brand love, and the brand experience (Aaker, 1997; Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005).

Strong brand relationships have also been characterized as cults (Atkin 2004; Belk and Tumbat 2005; Wipperfurth 2005) and tribes (Cova and Cova 2002; Dinisio, Leal, and Moutinho 2008; Moutinho, Dinisio, and Leal 2008). In this sense, the brand unites ardent consumers in a structured social relationship (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001); binding members together through a shared social and interpersonal experience (Cova 1997). The consumer or brand tribe is both internally supportive of its members and resilient to external criticism (Luedicke and Giesler 2007); yet members of tribes may have limited relationships with one another outside that created by allegiance to the brand (Park et al. 2007). Further, loyal members of the tribe invest time, effort, and emotion in the brand, gain a sense of shared ownership (Cova and Pace 2006), alter the tangible and intangible characteristics of the brand through prosumption (Langer 2007),
and manage parts of the brand and its image (Deighton 2002; O’Guinn and Muniz 2005; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006; Wipperfurth 2005).

Much of the literature describing tribal behavior in brands relies on the postmodern or Latin perspective (e.g. Cova 1997; Cova and Cova 2002; Cova and Pace 2006; Dinisio, Leal, and Moutinho 2008; Moutinho, Dinisio, and Leal 2008). From this point of view, consumers seek self-expression, self-fulfillment, and shared experiences (i.e. personal sovereignty, Holt 2002) with the brands, products, and leisure experiences they favor (Brownlie, Hewer, and Traynor 2007; Henry and Caldwell 2007); it is the ‘linking value’ of the brand rather than utilitarian or hedonic value (Cova and Cova 2001, p. 67). Thus, brand or consumer tribes are so designated because they are characterized by the shared cultures, common languages, social conventions, and shared experiences that primitive tribes were known for (Sahlins 1961). The ethnographic nature of this research tells us much about the social structure, community interactions, and shared experiences of specific consumer or brand tribes; however, in contrast to other aspects of brand relationships the literature has yet to yield specific dimensions, measures, or effect sizes of tribal phenomena.

Thus, while some brands have been characterized as cult or tribal brands and others not (Holt 2002), these differences are currently unquantified. The purpose of this research is, therefore, to investigate the linkage between Sahlin’s (1961) anthropological theory of tribal behavior and today’s brand relationships. We develop a measure of brand tribalism in accordance with six aspects of tribes advanced by Sahlin’s (1961) segmentary lineage theory as well as Maffesoli’s (1996) conceptualization, and subsequently apply the measure in a study of loved and loathed brands. Our procedure is consistent with scale development paradigms proposed by Churchill (1979), and advanced by Gerbing and Anderson (1988). We begin by
developing a list of potential items from a review of the literature, reduce the item set through factor analysis, and subsequently illustrate the statistical validity and reliability of the new measure in a study of consumers’ loved and loathed brands. Our manuscript continues by discussing how defining and measuring tribal branding contributes to the brand management and consumer behavior research streams.

2. Brand Relationships

Consumer-Brand and consumer-to-consumer with-in brand relationships are undoubtedly the most important discussion in brand management today (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009; Veloutsou 2007). Much of the reawakening in consumer-brand relationships and the communities these relationships build is due to research by Fournier (1998) and Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), although other lines of research were investigating the personal and social value of brands at about that time (Cova 1997). Fournier (1998) points to brand relationships as a dynamic process; relationships may have a myriad of forms (e.g. kinship, friendships, affairs, enslavements, etc.) and may take a number of life cycle paths (e.g., biological, passing fling, roller-coaster, stable maturity, etc.). In introducing brand communities, sociological thought on communities is extended to include those who are allegiant to a brand; members brought together with a ‘shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility’ (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p. 412). Others see the significance of brand relationships as uniting those emancipated from the dominance of modern marketing and the culture of individualism (Cova 1997, Maffesoli 1996).

Much of the literature on brand communities takes an anthropological and sociological view (Thompson 2004); rather than a physical place, of the brand in the community (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). The idea of community,
as opposed to modern urban culture, is one of familiarity and respect, where everybody knows everybody; communities are bonded emotionally through shared values and ideals (Maffesoli 1996; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). An additional distinction can be made between the functionality of an individual in modern society and the social role of the person in his or her community (Maffesoli 1996, emphasis added); people of the community are conscious of a difference between themselves and others, share unique customs and traditions, and feel a sense of moral responsibility for each other and the community as a whole (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; O’Guinn and Muniz 2005).

The brand community research thus suggests that in order to build truly lasting relationships, the brand must be seen as a worthy relationship partner (Fournier 1998). Where the brand relationship was once conceived primarily as interactions between the company and its customers, brand relationship discussions now include customer interactions with other customers, the product itself, the brand, and the marketing entity (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). Consumption or brand communities may differ as local, regional, national, or global entities, may involve relatively minor to intense social contexts, and vary as to duration (Fournier 1998; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). However different they may be, however, all brand communities have unique ways of doing things, e.g., culturally accepted rules and procedures; there are common understandings, e.g., a common vernacular, expressions, and modes of operation; and community members are committed morally, intellectually, and emotionally to common goals and values (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; O’Guinn and Muniz 2005; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009).

Brands have also been shown to have a personality in the minds of their consumers (Aaker 1997). In this sense, brands are seen as being sincere, exciting, competent, sophisticated
or rugged; consumers develop a relationship with the brand as a symbolic extension of their own personalities (Aaker 1997). The personality of a brand seems to matter; brand transgressions damage consumers’ relationships with a brand seen as sincere but may help brands with an exciting image (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Research has also shown that individuals who believe that personalities can be modified tend to accept brand extensions more readily (Yorkston, Nunes, and Matta 2010). The influence of brand personality has been demonstrated in sports (Braunstein and Ross 2010; Heere 2010), student support of universities (Sung and Yang 2008), consumer goods (Thomas and Sekar 2008), retailers (Zentes, Morschett and Schramm-Kleine 2008), and charitable giving (Venable et al. 2005). When measures of a brand’s sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual qualities, e.g. the brand experience, are modeled in conjunction with a brand’s personality, there are positive effects on brand satisfaction and loyalty (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009).

The affective side of brand relationships has been investigated as far back as Shimp and Madden’s (1981) research; it seems that recent research on consumer behavior towards brands has disclosed anything but reasoned economic processes and rational choice (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003). This research stream suggests that, in some cases, consumers go beyond mere enjoyment and pleasure from products, services, and leisure activities; becoming very passionate about them and perhaps developing an emotional attachment to this consumption (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Emotional brand attachment has been shown to have three distinct dimensions of affection, connection, and passion (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005); although passion is thought to be both exhilarating and, at the same time, an unsettling source of motivation (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003).
Other research in this stream suggests that feelings for brands that have significant hedonic and symbolic benefits which go beyond satisfaction to a declared ‘love’ and integration of the product into the individual self concept (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006, p. 81). In this regard, practitioners are advised that the future goes beyond branding to the creation of ‘lovemarks’ (Pawle and Cooper 2006; Roberts 2004). Zaltman (2003) concurs, insisting that today’s consumers do not think in straight-line economic equations, often don’t know why they do things, experience life holistically rather than dimensionally, have faulty memories, and cannot be expected to interpret and respond to brand strategies correctly. From this viewpoint, consumers feel their way to and bond with those brands that understand and enrich their lives, real or imagined (Roberts 2004); consumers form relationships with brands that play a positive, proactive role in their real and aspirational existences (Gobe 2002). In response, brand managers are advised to understand what consumers want from the brand, allow them to manage and co-create that brand experience, and draw these positive emotions into their way of life (Aitkin 2004; Gobe 2002; Roberts 2004; Solomon 2003; Wipperfurth 2005).

3. Brand and Consumer Tribes

Consumer tribes may be defined as “people who are devoted to a particular brand” (Arnould, Price, and Zinkhan 2004, p. 441). From the Latin or postmodern perspective, the brand becomes valued for its ability to link or unite consumers in a social order of their own device, hence, a tribe (Cova 1997; Maffesoli 1996). Brands, products, and leisure activities are consumed less for their utilitarian or hedonic values and more for their social linking value (Cova and Cova 2002). Consumer or brand tribes depart from the typical segmentation variables of social class, demographics, or product benefits; they are instead characterized as: a) sustained admirers of a specific brand, b) having common traditions, stories, lived experiences, even
rituals, c) share a common consciousness and kinship, and d) have a felt moral obligation to each other and the brand community (Henry and Caldwell 2007). In addition, one of the most important aspects of tribal groups is their common opposition towards an adversary (Kozinets and Handelman 2004).

Cova and Pace (2006) offer a perspective on tribes as being endowed with several characteristics: there is an ethnocentric mentality, there are ceremonies, rituals, and traditions associated with the brand, and a there is a sense of shared commitment and responsibility to the community. In an extensive delineation of the tribal paradigm, Maffesoli (1996, pp. 72-103) offers six characteristics of tribes. First, there is a collective and tactile understanding of being in the community, a material sense of belonging. Second, tribal social life is established only in relation to the group; tribes are highly ethnocentric and one must either be for or against the group. Third, there is a mysterious, even religious aspect to the social network which governs group behaviors without central management (see also Belk and Tumbat 2005). Fourth, it is an elective, affective society where the group is put before the individuals composing it. Fifth, there is a level of mystery; tribes protect themselves, their members, and their rituals with a vow of secrecy. Lastly, tribes may have goals and objectives, however, what is most important is the affective effort expended to create, constitute and maintain the group itself.

Much of the research from this stream suggests that these tribal groups insist that their brand become part of them rather than the other way around; they don’t consume—they prosume (Firat and Schultz 1997; Kozinets 2007; Langer 2007). For instance, ‘cruisers’ find individuality and authenticity through styling and customizing their cars as well as social affiliation from informal gatherings (Brownlie, Hewer, and Traynor 2007). The Harley-Davidson brand may be defined as much by the people who ride it and by what they do with it as by any company
generated marketing efforts (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Nutella, a well-known hazelnut spread, empowers aficionados by hosting a web site where loyal fans shape and reshape the brand and brand image by posting stories, images, and videos of themselves (Cova and Pace 2006). Such consumer empowerment does not come without risks; once the tribe takes control or hijacks the brand, brands are seen as independent of the control of brand managers and the company for better or worse (O’Guinn and Muniz 2005; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006; Wipperfurth 2005).

Tribal behaviors, as well as their responses to management actions, may not always be positive and must be planned for strategically (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006); the global anti-branding, anti-commercialism movement is an increasingly disruptive social force (Holt 2002). For example, management eventually had to respond to grassroots’ protest sites and successful hacking attempts in protest of Nike’s employment practices (Holt 2002; Solomon 2003). Newton brand aficionado’s worked tirelessly to keep an outdated technology alive long after Apple had abandoned the brand (Muniz and Schau 2005). When Quaker tried to mass market the acquired brand Snapple, tribal response was decidedly negative and quite vocal (Deighton 2002). Research also indicates that relationships with those brands thought of as sincere suffer after a perceived brand transgression while relationships with those brands perceived as exciting may be enhanced by such actions (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004).

Consumer tribes have been delineated in such diverse markets as motorcycles (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), computer products (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005), cars (Brownlie, Hewer, and Traynor 2007; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) and sports (Cova and Cova 2002; Dinisio, Leal, and Moutinho 2008; Moutinho, Dinisio, and Leal 2008; Taute, Sierra, and Heiser 2010). More importantly, whether you take the postmodern or Latin
perspective (Cova 1997; Cova and Cova 2002; Cova and Pace 2006; Dinisio, Leal, and Moutinho 2008; Henry and Caldwell 2007; Moutinho, Dinisio, and Leal 2008) or an anthropological or sociological view (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Taute, Sierra, and Heiser 2010), consumer tribes have distinct cultures, attitudes, social relationships and behavioral characteristics. However, since most of the research has centered on interpretive studies of individual brand communities and tribes, there exists no definitive dimensions or measurement characteristics independent of the context in which they are inductively generated.

4. Segmentary Lineage

Sahlins (1961) proposed a theory of segmented lineage to explain the predatory behavior of tribes. This theory describes tribes as social-cultural-ethnic entities and different from political organizations; tribes are more organized by threat than by cohesive political or social structure (Sahlins 1961). The behavior of highly brand allegiant consumer tribes may be analogous to tribal behavior in that primitive tribes had basic characteristics in common with the characteristics of current consumer communities and brand tribes described in the academic and popular literature (Atkin 2004; Fournier 1998; Maffesoli 1996; Muniz and O’Guinn 1995; O’Guinn and Muniz 2005; Wipperfurth 2005).

First, there is segmentary lineage, a linearity or common thread that binds segments of the tribe together. In the primitive tribes studied, this association was hereditary as, for the most part, primitive tribes were descendants of a few family groups banded together (Sahlins 1961). In postmodern terms, Maffesoli (1996) suggests that consumer or brand tribes are similar to rural agrarian communities of the 1700-1800’s, where the descendants of a few founding families worked and lived. The brand tribe is thus characterized as a close knit, affectively joined society
which exists without effective central control or government (Cova and Cova 2002; Maffesoli 1996). For example, users of Apple products may be linked through the use of a certain product (e.g., Muniz and Schau, 2005) or as a member simply of Apple brand aficionados whether they use a Mac, iPhone, or iPad. Other authors suggest that brand allegiances may be formed in childhood by social and cultural conditioning then passed from generation to generation (Blumenthal 2005, Moore and Wilkie 2005; Roberts 2004).

Second, while members of primitive tribes shared a sense of oneness, there was great social and economic sovereignty among the respective tribe members (Sahlins 1961). Current conceptualizations of brand tribes suggest there is a broad range of social contexts; members may be on an intimate basis or share little other than the brand (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). Consumer tribe members may come from a myriad of backgrounds with their affection for the brand as the only thing linking them (Cova 1997), and segments of the tribe can be easily identified as different from other, segments of the tribe’s brand e.g. surfers, surfing fans, and less authentic imitators (Moutinho, Leal, and Dionisio 2007). Cova and Cova (2001) suggest that tribal members have a feeling of identification with other brand members; this may include conspicuous use of the product, identifying apparel, or some sort of badging (Cialdini et al., 1976).

Third, primitive tribes had limited sociability and the normal state of affairs is toward political fragmentation (Sahlins 1961). However, the common thread that binds them allows them to coexist in relative harmony without a permanent social structure in place, yet band together to achieve common objectives or celebrate through rituals and ceremonies. Current behaviors akin to these tribal manifestations are activities such as participation in a virtual community for a brand (Cova and Pace 2006) or as a brandfest participant (McAlexander,
Schouten, and Koenig 2002). Discussants of consumer tribes describe a shared religiosity where symbols and ceremonies give the group a shared meaning (Cova and Cova, 2001). Cova and Cova (2002) suggest that tribes cannot rely on authority to maintain their community and social structure; hence tribal brands are often described as co-created by the company and the community (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009).

The fourth aspect suggests, however, when in competition for resources or under threat, there is a tribal massing effect, where members will band together to oppose a stronger tribe or to take advantage of another weaker tribe (Sahlins 1961). Modern day examples of tribal behavior where any opposition between groups extends automatically to any and all members of other tribes include football fans (Taute, Sierra, and Heiser 2010), motorcycles (Schouton and McAlexander, 1995) and electronic devices (Muniz and Schau 2005). O’Guinn and Muniz (2005) suggest that this opposition to other brands is a crucial aspect of brand communities or tribes; members may also turn against the company when brand community members feel betrayed by the company (e.g. Deighton 2002) or act as double agents (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007).

Fifth, there is structural relativity in which the members are essentially peers; leadership is relatively weak at the tribal level yet members tended not to think of themselves as a people but the people (Sahlins 1961). The group thus forms a social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1985); members self-identify with the group such as when fans use the term “we” when they speak of their favorite team (Cialdini et al., 1976). Maffesoli (1996) suggests that the creation and continuation of the tribe is the most important social function of micro-groups in today’s postmodern environment. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) refer to this aspect of tribes as the sense of inclusion in the in-group; Cova and Cova (2001) refer to this trait as group narcissism. Other
descriptions of such tribal behaviors outline a distinct class structure; true believers can be distinguished from “wanna-be’s” (Moutinho, Dionisio, and Leal 2007).

Lastly, the tribes see themselves as having no boundaries or limitations imposed by other social structures, and can only be described as ethnocentric (Sahlins 1961). Physical boundaries such as mountains or rivers were common for ancient tribes; in today’s tribes the boundaries are conceptual (Cova and Cova 2002), particularly in tribes organized and perpetuated on the internet (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). Each tribe is a culture unto itself, members have their own language, conventions and customs; rejecting the norms imposed by other cultures (Brownlie, Hewer, and Treanor 2007). Tribes are an elective sociality where individuals freely associate without centralized management; in fact, much of tribe formation may be a response to market capitalism and the strictures of modern society (Maffesoli 1996).

5. Item Generation

Both Sahlin’s (1961) anthropological description of primitive tribes and Maffesoli’s (1996) postmodern view of consumer tribes hold that there are six distinct attributes of tribes and tribal behavior. While there are differences in these views, the research streams built upon such sociological and anthropological theories have much in common. Consistent with Churchill’s (1979) measure development paradigm, we therefore turned to the literature on brand community, brand tribalism, and social identity theory for items indicative of tribes and tribal behaviors.

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) suggest that brand communities exhibit at least three attributes of pre-industrialized society: members are conscious of a bond between themselves, they share rituals and traditions, and there is a shared sense commitment to one another and the brand. Algesheimer, Dholokia, and Herrmann (2005) develop a five item measure of
identification with the brand community; this construct is consistent with their shared social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1985) and an adversarial relationship to other competing brands (Taute, Sierra, and Heiser 2010). The literature on brand community suggests that brand relationships exist between the individuals, the product itself, representations of the brand, the company, and other brand owners (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002).

In adopting the tribal brand metaphor, Cova and Cova (2002) reject the modern construct of community as denoting a body of people aggregated by residence, occupation, or interest. For them, the modern community construct is devoid of the emotion, passion, and feelings which exemplify consumer and brand tribes (Cova and Cova 2002). In this sense, consumer tribes essentially reconstitute archaic value systems including a more local sense of group identification, morality, and ethnocentrism; tribes are held together by shared emotions, lifestyles, and consumption behaviors (Cova and Cova 2001). This line of research suggests that tribes may be defined as any group of people having interests in a specific brand or product through which they create a distinct society with its own ‘myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy’ (Cova and Pace 2006, p. 1089).

Both the brand community and consumer tribalism research streams point to social identity theory as fundamental to the formation and description of these social orders (Algesheimer, Dholokia, and Herrmann 2005; Moutinho, Dinisio, and Leal 2008). According to social identity theory, social group members self-identify with the group and hold themselves out as representative of the group; in turn modeling their attitudes, emotions, and behaviors according to group norms (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). These normative controls solidify group membership and define the group’s unique position in society (Reed, 2002; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1985). In this sense, consumer or brand tribes function as micro or sub-cultures.
defined through their own shared experiences, emotions and realities (Cova and Cova 2001; Cova and Pace 2006; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982).

**Data Collection**

We drew fifty-five items from the literature review.
References


