



UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

# Tribal marketing: is there a tribe within the tribe?

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## Resumo

O objetivo desta pesquisa é avaliar se o grupo de investigadores que estudam o tema "consumer tribe" têm características semelhantes a uma "consumer tribe". Além disso, tem também como objetivo adicionar clareza conceitual entre os termos "brand community" e "tribal marketing".

Esta pesquisa utiliza uma abordagem método misto composto por duas fases. Primeiro, usa uma revisão sistemática da literatura para mapear a literatura sobre "brand community" e "consumer tribe", permitindo a identificação de características dos investigadores envolvidos. Os dados descritivos foi adicionados manualmente para todos os artigos de "brand community" e "consumer tribe" em jornais académicos, ao longo dos últimos 30 anos (67 artigos, 158 autores). Em segundo lugar, foi adotado um modelo para ajudar a identificar a possível existência de uma tribo (Silva e Santos, 2012), cujos dados recolhidos na primeira fase servem de apoio para ajudar a distinção entre os dois conceitos e identificar a presença de uma tribo entre os investigadores de "marketing tribal". Os resultados sugerem a existência de uma tribo entre os investigadores de "marketing tribal", liderados por Bernard Cova. Esta pesquisa argumenta que, como consequência deste manifesto de tribalização entre os investigadores de "consumer tribe", o futuro dessa tribo está em risco. Este termo de pesquisa pode acabar sendo incluído no conjunto de termos relacionados com "brand community", aparecendo apenas como um termo diferente para um conceito já existente, porém com um nome diferente.

Palavras-chave: Comunidade de marca, marketing tribal, consumo tribal, brand community, consumer tribe, brand tribalism, consumer research, community.

# Abstract

The purpose of this research is to understand if the “consumer tribe” group of researchers have similar characteristics to a “consumer tribe”. It aims also to provide additional conceptual clarity between brand community and consumer tribe concepts.

This research uses a mixed method approach composed of two stages. First, it uses a systematic literature review to map out the literature on brand community and consumer tribe, allowing the identification of the characteristics of the researchers involved. Descriptive data was hand collected for all brand community and consumer tribe articles in peer reviewed journals over the last 30 years (67 articles, 158 authors). Second, one model was adopted to help identify the possible existence of a tribe (Silva and Santos, 2012), which uses the data collected in stage one to distinguish the two concepts and identify the presence of a tribe amongst consumer tribe researchers. The findings suggest the existence of a tribe among the consumer tribe researchers leaded by Bernard Cova. This research argues that as a consequence of this tribalisation manifesto made by consumer tribe researchers, and its future of this tribe is at risk. This research topic can end up being included on the umbrella of brand community, being seem only as a different term for a concept that already existed, however with a different name.

**Keywords:** brand community, consumer tribe, brand tribalism, consumer research, community.

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

Consumer research is a core topic amongst marketing research arena. The introduction and development of internet helped to increase its frontiers by the inclusion of new research topics, like netnography and social media. Tribal marketing is one of those research topics which had benefit from the consumer research knowledge dissemination that internet leverages. A consumer tribe is a group of people emotionally connected by similar consumption values and usage, which use products and services to create a community and express identity (Cova, 1997 p297). Within the consumer research arena, another topic seems to gain interest over time, which has been also leveraged by the development of internet – brand community. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) argued that a brand community is a legitimate form of a community, on which, each member share a common interest (i.e. a brand), and creates an identity – including a set of behaviours, values rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy. Both topics, consumer tribes and brand community, seem to be very similar concepts as both refer to the linkage between communities, and products or services. Also, together with some consumer tribe characteristics, such as the vague theoretical definition of the concept (Cova and Cova, 2002) for instance, raised our interest about the existence of a tribe for the tribal marketing researchers. The aim of this research is to understand if the “consumer tribe” group of researchers have similar characteristics to “a consumer tribe”.

First, this study starts with a systematic review of the current literature on brand community and consumer tribe, which includes a brief explanation of the both concepts, and a theoretical comparison between both topics. Then, the model adopted (Silva and Santos, 2012) to evaluate the possible existence is explained, and it is discussed as the framework used to inquiry into the

phenomena under study. On chapter three the findings and results are presented and discussed, which includes two types of research: qualitative and quantitative. Fourthly, results are presented and lastly, the findings are examined and discussed, and limitations and hints for further research are proposed.

# Chapter 2. Brand community and consumer tribes – literature review

## 2.1 The concept of community and brand community

The development of internet increased the flow of information globally, which helped people to find similar interests across continents, and to find people with the same interests. These similar interests may act as the tangible link for people to gather and form a group of interest - a kind of community. Nowadays, communities can adopt two forms – either online or physically, however not mutually exclusive. This study refers to the people engaged in the community both online and offline.

In the study of communities, and according to Mitchell and Imrie (2011) we may distinguish two types of communities: “consumer tribes” which are a group of people emotionally connected by similar consumption values and usage, which use products and services to create a community and express identity (Cova, 1997 p297); and “brand communities” which is a legitimate form of a community, on which, each member share a common interest (i.e. a brand), and creates and identity – including a set of behaviours, values rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Firstly we are going to focus our research on brand community and then on consumer tribe.

## 2.2 Brand community

As referred above, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) argued that a brand community is a legitimate form of a community, on which, each member share a common interest (i.e. a brand), and creates and identity – including a set of behaviours, values rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy. According to the authors, these communities are more likely to occur in brands with strong consumer awareness (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) work created, and set the tone, for the existing research current around brand communities. The authors refer to the brand community as a consumption community, explicitly commercial. They are mass mediated, stable and not physically limited (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), which helps the community to grow. On the opposite side, secrecy may block its development. The commitment amongst members is strong, with some different levels of commitment, but rarely extreme (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) which is consistent with the mass mediated characteristic – and mass mediated communities may be more difficult for an extreme level of commitment, for instance as being a leader, to impose.

The “consciousness of a kind” as referred by Gusfield (as cited in Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 414) is one of the most important element of a community. It refers to the intrinsic connection that members of the community feel toward other members, making them feel different from others, i.e. have a collective sense of difference to non-members of the community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Members share unique customs, traditions, language and values (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). According to the authors, a brand community includes two types of relationships: a customer-brand and community member-member

relationships. The customer-brand relationship is bilateral. On one side, it includes the firm efforts to promote their products and services among brand community members to increase engagement, and on the other side, it includes the communications coming from the brand community members to the firm. On the other side, is the relationship between members of the same brand community. It is established under a common interest – a brand, and it relates to brand community identity: behaviours, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy. McAlexander et al. (2002) enhanced Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) model of brand community in two types of relationship: the relationship between the customer and the company, and the existing relationship between the product and the customer. As the brand is the common interest for the brand community, the customer experience with the product may diminish or leverage the relationship with the community. The customer identification with the brand community leverages his/her engagement with the brand (McAlexander et al., 2002), contributing to increase sales. All relationships evidenced above highlight the importance of brand community surveillance from firms about their products and services. On the brand community level, firms can’t just rely on their communications to their audience to stay in control of their product. They also need to pay attention to what is happening surrounding the use of their products and services in among members of their brand related communities.

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) identified three components of a brand community. The first one is psychological linking – consciousness of a kind. It represents the connection that each member feels toward another member of the same community; and the sense of difference to non-members. It consists in three parts (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006): cognitive identification with the group, affective commitment towards it, and collective self-esteem. The second

component refers to the evidence of shared behaviours seen as rituals or traditions. These behaviours state the rules of the community, and can easily be physically perceived as tattoos or dress code for instance, or they can be intangible like a different language or behaviours. Lastly, we have the sense of duty to the community which varies on intensity and/ or levels of engagement. These three elements are important to help us identify if a tribe really exists or not.

Devasagayam and Buff (2008) identified two types of brand communities: transactional and relational brand communities. The transactional brand community is defined by low intensity – low frequency of participation and low involvement on part of the members. On the other hand, the relational brand community evidences a higher level of involvement. The levels of participation in the community are higher, as well as the sense of belonging and collective action. Buying decisions and cycles take less time when compared with the transactional brand community (Devasagayam and Buff, 2008). For the purpose of our research, we will only refer to relational brand communities, as they relate to a stronger engagement level, which seems to be more similar to consumer tribes.

## 2.3 Consumer Tribe

As for consumer tribe or tribal marketing – different names for the same concept - the topic is more recent when compared to brand community research. It was firstly introduced by Bernard Cova in 2002 on the article “Tribal Marketing: The tribalisation of society and its impact on the conduct of marketing”. This article has the same importance for the consumer tribe

currently as Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) article "Brand Community" has for the research surrounding brand community. It is a pillar of the current as it has marked the introduction of the term.

The term tribe, relates to the concept of community, and emerged as a central concept, as a metaphor to the re-emergence of the archaic values that related to the old concept of tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002). The authors argue that the term tribe refers to a smaller scale group, similar to archaic society's structures which have certain characteristics: the inexistence of a central power as to maintain order; act as a counter power to the institutional power; the links are not rational, but around emotion and passion; and find similarities to a clan, as a small group of persons that pursuits the re-enchantment of the world.

These authors consider both concepts – brand communities and consumer tribe - as similar, however Cova and Cova (2002) refuses the term community just as the group of people that share and engages with a similar interest around a brand. A community as it is used in the English language refers to a group of people with something in common, e.g. a district of residence, or an occupational interest (Cova and Cova, 2002). The same authors argue that communities don't emerge as a result of non-rational, archaic bonds like emotions and passion which differs from Latin countries, where the word community refers to "blood" linkage.

Consumer tribes are heterogeneous. They can't be the consequence of demographic segmentation or any type of modern society parameters (Cova and Cova 2002). They are unstable, constantly changing and manifest by the symbolic and rituals committed actions of their members. Cova and Cova (2002) call these new "tribes" – postmodern tribes. Postmodern tribes represent

clear differences to archaic tribes: they can temporary and non-totalizing; membership is not exclusive, contrary to archaic tribes where members were required to belong to only one tribe; postmodern tribes don't have physical limitations. Archaic tribes have; members of a postmodern tribe are linking by passion. Members of archaic tribes are linked to dialect or kinship.

In relation to exclusiveness, the belonging to a postmodern tribe doesn't mean that members can't have a "normal" life (Cova and Cova, 2002). It is more about a consciousness of a kind, and the adoption of a different behaviour, clothing and language. Each member will adopt these at different levels of engagement. Following this Latin view of society, Cova and Cova (2002) considers that marketing can act as a vector for the tribal linkage: We see marketing as the activity of designing a launching of products and services destined to facilitate the co-presence and the communal gathering of individuals in the time of the tribes: a kind of tribal marketing (Cova and Cova 2002: 7)"

The above sentence may suggest that a product or a service, may be considered as a tangible evidence of an emotion or passion, and therefore become the alibi, the reason for the existence of a tribe. This is emotional driven, instead of rational. The tribal evidence is demonstrated by behaviours such as: ceremonies, rituals, traditions, language, a sense of shared commitment, with which brands tend to associate. The consumption within the boundaries of a consumer tribe by a member may be used to reinforce their own self-identity (Cova, 1997), thus reinforcing the consciousness of a kind - a unique identity that is perceived as different from non-members. The social influence of the group has more impact than the member individual's consumption decisions (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011).

Kozinets (1999) identified self-identity and social relationships intensity as two of the antecedents for tribal membership within an online context. Self-identity refers to how much important is the passion a tribe holds for the individual. Social relations refer to the level of engagement that each member have within the community. Regarding the post-modern tribal paradigm, Maffesoli (1996: 72-103) offers six characteristics of tribes: a material sense of belonging; collective and tactile understanding of being part of the community; the 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; a mysterious aspect to the social network which governs tribal group behaviours without central management; the tribe is posited as an elective, affective society where the group is put before individual members; there is a level of obscurity; as such, tribes protect themselves, their members, and their rituals with a vow of secrecy; although tribes may have goals, what is most important is the affective effort expended to create, constitute, and maintain the group as a whole;

## 2.4 Consumer tribe and brand community – differences and similarities

Whether we speak about consumer tribes or brand communities, there is clear evidence that this topic has a space on the marketing research arena, which can be noticed by the quantity of papers written surrounding both topics.

Although there is no clear consensus about the distinction between both terms, it seems to exist some clarity regarding two different streams: the consumer tribe linked to the work of Bernard Cova and the brand community

associated with Muniz and O'Guinn. On one hand, there's research about brand community following Muniz work: which includes the ones that recognises themselves as followers of this stream, and also the ones that don't have knowledge of the consumer tribe approach and treat it simply as a brand community. The development of social media has contributed to the awareness of the term "brand communities" among the marketing research arena. It seems to be common to refer to any type of group that have an interest on a brand as a "brand community". On the other hand, the stream referring to the group of researches that follows Bernard Cova's initial research about consumer tribes, regarding the Latin community approach to consumption.

The first related article published about consumption and community was written by Bernard Cova in 1997 "Community and consumption: Towards a definition of the "linking value" of product or services". On his article, Bernard Cova focus in the impact of post modernism has on society and consumption, on which consumers move from an emphasis on the utilitarian value of products and services, to an emphasis on social link. The term neo-tribalism is referred in the paper but without any mention to tribal marketing or consumer tribes. The first tittle related tribal marketing article was published by Cova and Cova (2002) – "Tribal marketing: the tribalisation of society and its impact on the conduct of marketing". This article is the main reference article for the consumer tribe researchers, as it cited by almost consumer tribe researcher. On the brand community side, on the same parallel, "Brand community" was the first "brand community" tittle related article to be published. It was written by Muniz and O'Guinn in 2001. It is also the reference article for the brand community stream of researchers. Thus, although there's evidence that suggests that tribal marketing may have surged before the "brand community" topic, it

is difficult to express which one emerged first has both group of researchers refer to two articles that have a difference of one year in time.

If a differentiation exists between the two streams, it may be argued that it comes from the consumer tribe authors, since the initial need for differentiation started on this side. The “differentiation need” topic is not new and has originated some research around it, however but no convincing distinction was drawn. Mitchell and Imrie (2011) refer on their article a criticism of Cova’s work – that the consumer tribe definitions are vague theoretical discussions. On the other side, it may be seen as positive as it may help marketers to extend the amount of consumers associate to a tribe, and consequently increase the reach of their marketing activities (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). For these authors, a brand community is established around the like for a specific brand or a product, for which a consumer tribe may weaken its importance. It suggests that a consumer tribe arise from a sociological trend, and then the brand is introduced. It may link to the notion that consumer tribes are ephemeral (Cova, 2002) and that brand communities are stable (Muniz and O’Quinn 2001), since brands are under control of managers and sociological trends depend on society. Mitchell and Imrie (2011) also suggest that brand communities rise under the common denominator of a brand, and it is exclusive to one single brand, whereas for consumer tribes, a brand may come after, and exclusiveness for a single brand is not required.

The literature surrounding both concepts seems to suggest that two streams exist: one for brand community which follows Muniz and O’Quinn research; and another for the same parallel between to consumer tribes and Bernard Cova. Also, the articles analysis suggests that the tribal marketing community of researchers may act themselves as a tribe. As an example, the consumer tribe

group of researchers tend to include on their research, a comparison with brand community as a concept opposed to tribal marketing, however that doesn't seem to be the case for the brand community side, at least with the same intensity. Brand community researchers appear to not recognise, or not be aware, of tribal marketing as a concept.

## Silva and Santos (2012) proposed method to identify a tribe

On their model - Stages of commitment between the firm and the tribe - Silva and Santos (2012) on which three levels are identified. These levels of commitment are associated to the level of resources used by firm to support the tribe existence and the benefits gained from it (Silva and Santos, 2012). They are divided in three stages:

- Stage 1 – tribe support: firms to provide support for the existence of the tribe. This support can be economical or physical, aiming to promote the tribe members gathering and expansion. The firm should not be intrusive on the tribe as it could damage their characteristics. They should be invisible, indirect and irregular.
- Stage 2 – feed the passion: increase of members feeling of “special”. By recognising the tribe status and actions, the firm is feeding the passion for the brand. Tribe members are given special benefits, have access to first-hand information and power is given to take part on the firm's decisions.
- Stage 3 – Integrate the tribe: integrating the tribe. This stage evidence is reflected by the integration of the tribe members on the firm's marketing activities. Tribe members are considered as brand

ambassadors outside of the tribe; the tribe may be used as a product satisfaction indicator, and some important members of the tribe pushed to move forward and act as opinion makers inside the tribe.

According to Silva and Santos (2012), the more resources the firm invests on the tribe the more benefits the firm can gain from it. In the parallel, the higher the tribalisation of the firm's brand, the more the firm can benefit from this relationship. To help identify each level of commitment, Silva and Santos (2012) identifies a set of features that allow firms to identify a tribe. It includes: values, rituals, hierarchy, connectivity, sense of pride, leader and word of mouth (Silva and Santos, 2012).

Consumer tribes exist, with or without the presence of a firm. Firms can make the most of consumer tribes by using them to reach new audiences, and different levels of consumer engagement, and consequently gain benefits from it. On the other side, the negligence of a tribe can not only be a missed opportunity, but also a risk to the firm / brand reputation. Firms can take advantage tribes existence by assuming the tribe existence and working towards it, whether is for gaining benefits from its existence, or the minimise a possible damage in the firm's reputation risks.

## Chapter 3. Research method

To better evaluate the existence of a tribe amongst the consumer tribe researchers, a mixed method approached was used composed of two broad stages. First, we used a systematic literature review to map out the literature on brand community and consumer tribe, allowing identifying the characteristics of the researchers involved. Descriptive data was hand collected for all brand community and consumer tribe articles in peer reviewed journals over the last 30 years (68 articles, 142 authors). Second, we decided to adopt the model proposed by Silva and Santos (2012) which uses the data collected in stage one to distinguish the two concepts and allow the identification of a tribe amongst consumer tribe researchers.

Primary data was hand-collected using a systematic literature review process, in order to be able to use Silva and Santos (2012) model to identify on which stage of commitment between the firm and the tribe is. This process considers only peer reviewed articles published in the last 30 year, using as keywords and title related expressions of brand communities or consumer tribes and related terms. In order to identify the relation between both concepts, it was assumed that an article would only be related to the topic if related keywords were found in the abstract or the article title. In addition, to maximise search accuracy only a few keyword were considered. For the term brand community, only articles referring exactly to “brand community” were taken into account. For “consumer tribes”, the criteria was more flexible. Some authors link Bernard Cova’s work to other keywords as other than tribal marketing to refer to the same topic: consumer tribe, e-tribalised marketing, and brand tribalism. This process resulted in 67 articles written by 158 authors.

Once captured the relevant articles for the purpose of the present study, the data was hand added into a table. For each record/article was captured the following information: author name, country, state/city, affiliated university, article source, publication, keyword, link to keyword (on the abstract or title), theoretical current reference (Bernard Cova or Muniz and O'Guinn), method used, main keyword and number of citations for Bernard Cova and/or Muniz and O'Guinn.

Also, as to test the maturity of both terms, a lookup field was added for methods used for each article. Each method used was labelled as qualitative or quantitative. This information allowed understanding on which stage of development each possible stream was in. The assumption made was that when a new topic arises, researchers will focus on understanding the phenomena, and then will move to measurement, via the implementation of models developed on the previous stage. In other words, the use of qualitative studies may be more predominant for a new topic than the use of quantitative studies. Methods considered as qualitative for this study were: interview (semi structured; in depth), documental search, focus group, participant observation, ethnography, netnography and case study. On the other side, methods that were considered as quantitative were: interview structured / direct), questionnaires, survey and experiments.

Besides the addition of the lookup field related to test each stream maturity, two more fields were added to test the cross reference for both streams. In this present study, cross reference refers to the count of citations of every article, regarding the two streams initiators. The exercise was as simple as to count to number of citations that exist on an article for 1) Bernard Cova, and 2) Muniz and O'Guinn, separately in two columns. These fields provided information

about the times that Bernard Cova was cited on articles labelled as consumer tribe and on the articles labelled as brand communities, and also the same for Muniz and O'Guinn. It allowed to understand how niche, or not, were both terms, e.g. if the researchers of tribal marketing only cited Bernard Cova or also cited Muniz and O'Guinn and vice versa.

# Chapter 4. Discussion

As discussed above a set of data was captured as to provide more information about the existence of a tribe, namely their key features. After the data capture two tables were built. Table 1 is related to the amount of quantitative versus qualitative research methods used in articles for the two topics – brand communities and consumer tribes, and table 2 is related to the count of citations of each reference author, i.e. Bernard Cova and Muniz and O’Guinn for each article.

Table 1 maps the data regarding the articles that were written for three periods: between 1990 and 1999, between 2000 and 2009 and between 2010 and 2014. It is divided in two small sub tables; one for brand community related articles, and one for consumer tribe related articles. For each column, of each table, two rows were added, one related to the number of qualitative studies, and another, related to the count of the number of quantitative studies.

**Table 1. Number of consumer tribe and brand community articles per author on peer reviewed journals over time (1990-2014)**

	Count of articles by type of method				% of articles by type of method			
	1990-1999	2000-2009	2010-2014	Total	1990-1999	2000-2009	2010-2014	Total
<b>Brand community</b>								
Qualitative	0	38	18	56	0%	57%	40%	50%
Quantitative	0	29	27	56	0%	43%	60%	50%
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>112</b>				
<b>Consumer tribe</b>								
Qualitative	4	21	13	38	100%	91%	68%	83%
Quantitative	0	2	6	8	0%	9%	32%	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>46</b>				

**Data source:** collection of descriptive data from all “brand community” and “consumer tribe” related articles over time (1990-2014)

Table 1 evidences a clear distinction about the stage of development that each possible stream is. On the brand community side, it was possible to observe that the stream has developed from the second period to the third period of analysis, more significantly than the consumer tribe stream.

Firstly, nothing was written about brand community for the period between 1990-1999. This was the period on which the first article about consumer tribes was written. Then, for the period between 2000:2009, most of the articles written used qualitative studies as methodology – 38 authors included on their articles qualitative methods for a total of 67, which 57% of total. Lastly, in just 5 years, brand community authors seem to use more quantitative methods than qualitative. For all periods on analysis, the relative weight for use of both type of methods by authors, was balanced for both types, coincidentally, 50%. This figure may suggest that, on the period between 2000:2009 the authors were trying to understand the concept of brand community, and to do so, they needed to use to methods which help them to understand the concept, like in depth interviews, or case studies – qualitative methods. As research develops, and models become available, the “what is it” authors’ needs may replace the “how much is it” need. Authors may now purse the validity and measure of their models and use more quantitative methods, like questionnaires and surveys.

The same observation for the consumer tribe table 1 reveals different figures. The balance for the total methods used for this topic present no similarities to the brand community stream. Overall, the relative weight use of qualitative methods is much higher that then the use of quantitative methods, namely 83% for qualitative and 17% for quantitative. For the period between 1990-1999 only four authors wrote about consumer tribe topic, and nothing was

written about brand community. Then, in the next period, the topic seemed to gain interest. For the period 2000:2009, 23 authors wrote about consumer tribes on which, 21 of 23 authors followed a qualitative method, and in the period 2010:2014, 13 of 19 related to a qualitative method.

To help better understand the existence of a tribe for the tribal marketing researchers, another data query was conducted. This second data query looked for signs of tribalism between the researchers of brand communities and the researchers of consumer tribes. Important to refer, that another metric was used regarding the previous table. On the previous one, the count was made for authors, and on this query the count will only consider articles. The assumption made is that for the cross reference, results could be influenced by the amount of qualitative studies of “consumer tribe”, and consequently present higher observation than actually exist. For every article was counted the number of times that Bernard Cova and Muniz and O’Guinn were cited, whether if it was a brand community or a consumer tribe article. The results are illustrated below on table 2.

**Table 2. Number of times that Bernard Cova and Muniz and O’Guinn were cited on peer reviewed articles over time about consumer tribes and brand communities (1990-2014).**

	Total number of citations		
	Bernard Cova	Muniz and O’Guinn	Total
Brand community	15	39	44
Consumer tribe	21	11	23
Brand community	34%	89%	
Consumer tribe	91%	48%	

**Data source:** collection of descriptive data from all “brand community” and “consumer tribe” related articles over time (1990-2014)

To make the analysis more rigorous, the count of the citations refers to the whether one of the author was referred or not on the specific article. If was referred, even if five times, it was counted as one citation, and if wasn't referred any, was counted as zero. If all citations were counted, again, an outlier article could damage the actual observations. Also, the citations' counts are not mutually exclusive. This means that both authors can be referred on an article and counted twice.

For the 67 articles analysed, 23 were related to brand community and 44 were related to consumer tribes. Among the articles for brand community, 39 referred Muniz and O'Guinn and 15 referred Bernard Cova. Almost all researchers are aware of Muniz and O'Guinn work, however only almost a third refers Bernard Cova on their article. On the consumer tribe side, the same parallel exists however on a different intensity. Bernard Cova was referred 21 times on the 23 existing consumer tribe articles. Also, almost half of consumer tribe articles referred Muniz and O'Guinn, 11 of 23 available articles. So, we may conclude that consumer tribe researchers cited more Muniz and O'Guinn that brand community researchers cited Bernard Cova.

## 4.1 Key features of a tribe

To understand if the "consumer tribe" group of researchers have similar characteristics to a "consumer tribe" we adopted the framework proposed by Silva and Santos (2012) which uses data collected in stage one. According to the framework seven characteristics that should be used to identify a tribe:

## **Leader**

We consider Bernard Cova as the leader of this tribe. Firstly, because he introduced the consumer tribe topic among the consumer research arena. In 1997 on his article "Community and consumption: Towards a definition of the "linking value" of product or services". Two years after, Bernard Cova wrote another article about the tribal marketing, on which the term tribal marketing was firstly visible on the article title: "Tribal marketing: a Latin deconstruction of a northern construction". Secondly, due to the number of times that the author was cited on consumer tribe related articles. Bernard Cova was cited 21 on possible 23. Thirdly, the number of co authorships. Bernard Cova, participated in 4 articles after in co authorship. Lastly, the book entitled "Consumer tribes" (2007). This book was coordinated by Bernard Cova, Robert V. Kozinets and Avi Shankar, and gathers articles, not peer reviewed, written by consumer tribe researchers allowing them to present their research about consumer tribe concepts and examples.

On this model, Bernard Cova acts as the firm, and the researchers that follow his stream can be considered as consumers, or as the members of this tribe. Robert Kozinets, on his hand, is not a leader of this tribe however plays an important role on the community, for his work on online communities' analysis via netnography.

## **Rituals**

As demonstrated above, the consumer tribe group of researchers use similar methods on their articles. Almost every researcher used qualitative methods on their work, more precisely 83%. This figure ties with the suggestions made by Taute and Sierra (2014) regarding the critics about the vague theoretical description of brand tribalism, on which brand tribalism is only ascertainable

through qualitative approaches. On itself, could be an evidence of a shared behaviour – a ritual. Another evidence of this so called ritual can be found on the “Consumer Tribes” book (Kozintez, Cova and Shankar, 2007). The book has 20 chapters about tribalism consumption on which almost all are brands / “social groups” case studies, e. g. Hummer, gothic entrepreneurs, Warhammer games, Star Trek, among others.

Also, consumer tribes research “members” actively participate on a Facebook group to discuss about consumer research. Bernard Cova, Kozinets and Avi Shankar are active members of Facebook groups surrounding consumer research. The most relevant one is the Consumer Culture Theory Facebook group ([www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536](http://www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536)). It is an academic driven closed group which aims to discuss topics related to the link between consumer actions and cultural meanings. Overall, what this two evidence aims to support is that is clear that members of the proclaimed tribe of researchers, are aware of each other’s, and that they gather surrounding a common topic – consumer tribes. Also, on an annual basis, members gather together on a conference supported by the consumer culture group (<http://consumerculturetheory.org/>), to present and discuss recent research about the topic. The last one was held in Helsinki Finland.

### **Sense of pride**

The sense of pride may be present in the consumer Culture Theory Facebook group ([www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536](http://www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536)). As mentioned on above on “rituals”, it is an academic driven closed group of tribal marketing researchers, which aims to discuss topics related to the link between consumer actions and cultural meanings. Bernard Cova, Kozinets and Avi Shankar are active members of the group. Members seem to be proud and enjoy being part

of this tribe of researchers. The Consumer Culture Theory Facebook ([www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536](http://www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536)) group mentioned above also gathers physically. Members annually gather to present and discuss recent research about the topic (<http://consumerculturetheory.org/>). The last one was held in Helsinki Finland. It can be understood as another evidence of sense of pride, as it reinforces their own self-identity (Cova, 1997), thus strengthening the consciousness of a kind - a unique identity that is perceived as different from non-members.

### **Hierarchy**

A hierarchy seems to exist amongst the consumer tribe researchers on which Bernard Cova is the leader. This is evidenced by in the following behaviours. Firstly, the “consumer tribe” tribe cites Bernard Cova and not the opposite. Secondly, the fact that is the most famous researcher on the tribe; judging by the number of times that Bernard Cova was cited – 21 times in 23 articles total articles related to consumer tribes. Lastly, Bernard Cova took the initiative to disseminate his research by coordinating a book about the research surrounding the topic that he has introduced in 2002 on his article “Tribal Marketing: the tribalisation of society and its impact on the conduct of marketing”. The book is entitled as “Consumer tribes”.

### **Connectivity**

Evidence suggests that some connectivity seem to exist among the consumer tribes researchers. Firstly - the book “consumer tribes” form Bernard Cova, Robert V. Kozinets and Avi Shankar (2007). It compiles articles written by consumer tribe researchers, more precisely 35 authors. 13 of them were either cited on articles labelled as consumer tribes, or were authors of those same articles. Secondly, the evidence provided by social media grouping – the

Facebook group [www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536](http://www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536). It is an evidence of the existent connectivity amongst members, as the annual event on which members gather physically present and discuss recent research about the topic (<http://consumerculturetheory.org/>).

### **Values**

The research methodology used by researchers of this tribe seems to act as an evidence of s shared value. Overall, as showed on table 1, the relative weight use of qualitative methods is much higher that then the use of quantitative methods, namely 83% for qualitative and 17% for quantitative. This is consistent with Bernard Cova's reference to the value of a tribe, on which is only observable through qualitative approaches (Cova, 2002).

### **Word of mouth**

The Consumer Culture Theory Facebook group - it acts as an evidence of the existent word of mouth ([www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536](http://www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536)), more precisely an online word of mouth. As mentioned above, it is an academic driven closed group which aims to discuss topics related to the link between consumer actions and cultural meanings. Another evidence of word of mouth is the one surrounding the members' conference supported by the Consumer Culture Theory group. Members annually gather to present and discuss recent research about the topic (<http://consumerculturetheory.org/>). The last one was held in Helsinki Finland.

## 4.2 Stages of commitment between the firm and the tribe

As evidenced above, the consumer tribe group of researchers and the main researchers are in an advanced stage of commitment, more precisely on stage 3 – integrate the tribe. This stage is characterised by three elements (Silva and Santos, 2012). First, the use of tribe members as opinion leaders inside the tribe. Avi Shankar, a researcher from the University of Bath in the UK, was the co-author of the book “consumer tribes” in 2007, together with Robert Kozinets and Bernard Cova, two important references in the tribal marketing arena. He only participated in one peer reviewed article related to tribal marketing, which was in 2013 – Learning to be Tribal: facilitating the formation of consumer tribes.” Secondly, the use of tribe members as brand ambassadors outside the tribe. The same author actively participates on the Consumer Culture Theory Facebook group ([www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536](http://www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536)). He acts an opinion leader inside this group, together with Bernard Cova, and some of the cited researchers for tribal marketing. Thirdly, the model refers to the use of tribes as a barometer of product satisfaction and acceptance - the discussions on the Facebook group ([www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536](http://www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536)) - Consumer Culture Theory – may act as feedback for the strengths and the weaknesses of tribal marketing on the consumer research arena. For instance, its awareness or its lack of awareness.

Figure1. Key Features of a tribe

Key feature	Evidence
Leader	Bernard Cova
Rituals	Posts on Facebook group; gathering in conferences;
Hierarchy	The recognition of Bernard Cova as the leader, number of times he is cited;
Connectivity	Consumer Culture Theory Facebook group; consumer tribes book
Values	The use of qualitative studies
Word of mouth	Consumer Culture Theory Facebook group; consumer tribes book; Consumer Culture theory conference
Sense of pride	Posts on Facebook closed group; gathering in conferences;

Key features of a tribe model adapted from Silva and Santos (2012).

# Chapter 5. Findings

The present study argues that the “consumer tribe “group of researchers are themselves be regarded as a kind of a tribe within consumer research arena, and share a common passion – tribal marketing. In this chapter, it is going to be discussed some of the above results and is also included some observations that were not captured on the results chapter, however may also contribute to this research objective.

The findings captured and allowed to describe the existence of tribe behaviours for the tribal marketing group of researchers. The tribe was initiated by Bernard Cova in 1997, and gained strength over time as members has joined the tribe. The existence of tribe raises some interrogations for the future of tribe, not only as the tribe on itself, but it coexistence with brand community. Some considerations are explained below.

## Growing interest for both topics

It was possible to observe that there’s a growing trend for research surrounding brand communities and consumer tribes. After 2005, after the social media boom, academia seemed to spend more attention to both topics. At the current running pace, evidence suggests that by the end of 2019 the number of authors and articles that have written about both topics will be higher than for the period between 2000:2009.

This trend will help marketers to better understand how brands may interact with consumers, regarding possible opportunities and threats. It will also help

brands to better position themselves according to sociological trends and help to make more informed decisions surround the level of interaction that a brand should, or should not have, with these groups e.g. within consumer tribes how can research help managing the existing consumers passion.

## A coexistence of brand community and consumer tribes

The abundance of literature for both topics raises no questions about the place in marketing thinking that whether brand communities or consumer tribes have. As showed on results, research went into different directions, and as time goes by will raise more discussion about the differences between consumer tribes and brand communities. Can they coexist? Findings suggest that there is no contra tribe against the brand community researchers. As showed on results, almost 50% of total consumer tribe articles cited Muniz and O'Guinn, as to differentiate consumer tribes from brand communities. There are no similar behaviours on the brand community researchers' side. This tribe of researchers don't aim to replace the concept of brand community; instead their goal is to justify a place for consumer tribe among the consumer research arena. Nevertheless, when referring to the difference between both concepts, some authors critic the vague theoretical description of brand tribalism (Taute and Sierra, 2014). Cova and Cova (2001) suggest that the linking value to the group, value of the tribe is only observable through qualitative approaches. As referred above, it may limit the development and acceptance of the topic by the consumer research academia, and may consequently include brand tribalism on the bulk of brand community.

## The “consumer tribe” as a tribe

The findings presented above provide evidence that the consumer tribe group of researchers are a tribe themselves. It is not only visible on the commitment between the firm and the tribe but is also expressed on the key features of a tribe (Silva and Santos, 2012). This can be evidenced by the existing interactions amongst the members of the social media - Consumer Culture Theory ([www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536](http://www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536)), and the book “consumer tribes”. The book gathers articles about consumer tribes that were not published and acts as a systematisation and state of art for the topic, which can be seen as a starting point for new developments. However, it can also be considered as the last effort to get a place on the marketing thinking. This is because, as mentioned on the literature review, consumer tribes are ephemeral (Cova, 2002) and brand communities are stable (Muniz and O’Quinn 2001), which is consistent with the critics for which the value of a tribe is only observable through qualitative approaches. Authors appear to focus their research on the “understanding” of consumer tribes. Most of the articles are case study based, to understand and validate the presence of a consumer tribe. This may limit the development and acceptance of the topic by the consumer research academia, and consequently include brand tribalism on the bulk of brand community. The more frequent use of quantitative studies in the future may significantly help consumer tribes to gain their place among the consumer tribe arena. The last aspect of this discussion refers to the mutation of the concept. Although the same, it is clearly noted that the term has shifted from the initial term “tribal marketing” to “consumer tribes” more recently. This may operate as an approach to better position the concept among the consumer research arena, increasing its awareness.

The exclusiveness of the tribe, the vague theoretical definition of the concept (Cova and Cova, 2002), the ephemeral existence of a tribe (Cova and Cova, 2002) and that tribes are only observable through qualitative approaches (Cova and Cova, 2002) are evidence of the risks of this tribe. Tribal marketing seems to struggle to be recognised by members outside of the tribe, and that may have difficult tribal marketing's aim to have a place in the consumer research arena. Because of this tribal marketing may fall into the umbrella of brand community, being seen only as a different term for a concept that already existed, however with a different name. The concepts seem already to be very similar. A brand community is a legitimate form of a community, on which, each member share a common interest (i.e. a brand), and creates an identity – including a set of behaviours, values rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). A consumer tribe is 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 and to create a community and express identity.

## Consumer tribe / brand community article label

For this research, a set of descriptive data was collected from articles that included the terms "consumer tribe" or "brand community" on the title, or mention a similar concept within the abstract. This means that some of the articles that were tagged as "consumer tribe" may intrinsically refer to a brand community without knowing and vice versa. It may take more impact when considering the different research maturities that both currents have; referred above as qualitative vs quantitative relative weights. However, readings suggest that consumer tribe articles will have fewer articles tagged as "brand community", as authors tend to include a distinction to brand community. This

tends to not happen on the brand community articles on which there's no mention to consumer tribes whatsoever.

As for the development of this research, and as demonstrated above, the terms seem to be similar, which has limited our work. Some researchers may refer to tribal marketing and use another similar term as a keyword and therefore not included on this research. Another limitation is related to the method usage on each article. Some researchers used mixed methods, however as to make the research possible, if more than one were mentioned, the choice goes for the one that is most emphasised on the article. As for future research, another quantitative study, for the same terms type of community, could give more clarity to both terms. It would be able to identify within the cited consumer tribes, how many surged under the umbrella of a tribe, or on the other side, if the tribe already existed and then the firm positioned to gain benefits from that association. The existing evidence between both terms – “consumer tribes” and “brand community” - can provide more clarity to both.

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