

# Brand Tribalism – A Netnographic Exploration of Virtual Communities

*Pasi Tuominen*

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# Brand Tribalism – A Netnographic Exploration of Virtual Communities

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**Pasi Tuominen**

*University of Hertfordshire Business School*

Email: Pasi.p.tuominen@sok.fi

**Keywords:** Tribe, Social Network, Consumer, Relationship, Marketing

**ABSTRACT:**

The article comes to the conclusion that brands can benefit from having a presence in Facebook and other Social Network Sites (SNS) if the objectives and the nature of the brand suit the environment. This study identifies the relations between tribalism and tribal marketing by analysing consumer behaviour and the formation of the tribes within a Facebook and blog environment. Studying one nationwide Restaurant Chain and three Hotel Chains, the study also concludes that to succeed in marketing efforts in Social Network sites, certain key issues should be considered. In these new media brands should follow the rules of social interaction and be transparent in creating positive impressions. It is also vital that marketers understand the community and be relevant and also enable sharing of content and allow engagement. A company's involvement in virtual communities can also result in a wider range of strategic and operational benefits. By inviting feedback, or simply observing conversations, a company can learn about customers' needs and inform its new product development policy. In the language of "service dominant logic", a company can involve members of the tribe in the co-creation of value through the generation of ideas. Brands should also take into consideration the difficulty of measurement, and the possible consequences of being absent from these media.

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## 1. Introduction

Social media resonate particularly well with many of the fundamental developmental tasks of present day multitasking individuals by enabling instantaneous and constant contact with peers, providing opportunities for self-expression, identity exploration, and social interaction, and facilitating mobility and independence. Six key features of interactive media—ubiquitous connectivity, personalization, peer-to-peer networking, engagement, immersion, and content creation—are emblematic of the ways in which young people are both shaping and being shaped by this new digital culture.

One of the most obvious linkages between new communication era and marketing is the knowledge and findings of Tribes and tribal marketing. Brand Tribalism is the tendency of people to make buying decisions based on shared beliefs about brands. Members of a brand tribe are not simply consumers; they are also believers and promoters. Brand tribes are capable of collective actions having implications for post-modern business. Much of the research on brand tribalism depicts 21st century society as a network of micro-cultures or "tribes". A key component of brand tribes is that they are organically and willingly formed through individual identification with a brand. Factors that contribute to the formation of a brand tribe are perceived brand authenticity, experiences felt through interaction with the brand and a collective sense of belonging within a group. Members of brand tribes share a deep conviction as to the notion of truth or rightness.

The notion of tribes and tribal consumption has been explored in the research and writings of several academics who have expressed tribal based views of brand, such as Maffesoli (1996), Cova (1997), Veloutsou and Moutinho (2007), Cova and Cova (2002), and Kozinets, Shankar et al (2007). D'Alessandro (2001) describes the tribes we belong to as "determined even less by geography, pedigree, race or religion. Instead, our tribes are determined largely by education and accomplishment, and they are manifested by the things we consume. More and more, they are brand tribes." Much in this area is still under-theorised. Academics have explored and discussed the degree of connectedness between consumers and brands and the implications for post-modern organisations and consumption. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) have been amongst those to call for further conceptualisations.

Unconsciously, as consumers and employees, we already belong to many brand tribes. Increasingly we will place greater trust in those brands who actively engage believers in the joy of the journey. Faced with crowded markets, flat growth and growing cynicism, the most effective organisational tribe of the 21st Century is a single, united brand tribe. Successful New Brand Tribes don't have to have the best customer service, they don't even have to have the best products – but you will have to have authenticity, a clear identity and an open approach to engaging with your tribe inside and outside.

In textbook conditions tribe-members are unified by an unshakable belief in the brand and what that brand stands for. In good times that tribe will act as a single united voice selling the virtues of the brand and recruiting new tribal members. In tough times the tribe will stand as one and fight for the brand and what it stands for. Some organisations have achieved outstanding results through the power of their tribes, others have suffered the serious consequences of their tribe uniting and turning on the brand. Those companies that don't identify and embrace their tribes or fail to gel with them are likely to suffer at the expense of their competitors who do. This allows organisations to create new value at the heart of their business for competitive advantage and business performance.

As of the marketer's perspective, there are unique implications when individuals within a group coordinate their decisions. Like a word-of-mouth social interaction, the lifetime value of any given customer will depend on the customer's demand and others' demand that is generated by the customer's social interactions. However, unlike word-of-mouth where the social interaction is primarily relevant for customer acquisition, coordinated decision-making implies that the social interactions are relevant for every purchase occasion. In such cases, a marketer cannot invest heavily in an initial social interaction such as a referral with the hope that it will generate a long stream of future revenue. Rather, the marketer's focus is on incorporating the social interaction into all marketing mix decisions. A conservative 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, postmodern research approaches offer a means to broaden our perspective of consumers (Grönroos, 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 focused groups (Cova & Salle, 2008; Kozinets, 1999).

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. Consumer tribes, a group of people emotionally connected by similar consumption values and usage, use the social "linking value" (Cova, 1997) of products and services to create a community and express 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 & 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 & Salle, 2008).

This study extends earlier research by exploring the link between consumer tribes, loyalty and company generated stimulus. Companies' 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 & Cova, 2002). Previous 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 & Grathwohl, 1967; McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004; Sirgy, 1982; Solomon, 1983).

This study examines the tribal phenomena among a group of restaurant and hotel customers. The tribes were studied through a series of long term netnographic observations, providing insights into the group's dynamics, conversational practices, and related consumption loyalty.

## **2. Developing customer loyalty**

Loyal customer-company relationships are widely accepted as an investment in future revenue and competitive advantage (Fournier, 1998; Gomez, Gutierrez, & Cillan, 2005; McAlexander, & Roberts, 2003; Srivastava, Shervani, & Fahey, 1998). 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 & Shah, 2004). However, the concept of loyalty as a straight forward compilation of behavioural and emotional components is of limited value, especially in the case of postmodern consumption. The context, product and an individual's experiences do not produce one generic form of loyalty that will ensure repeat purchases (East, Gendall, Hammond & Lomex, 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, Rao and Glynn, 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), 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 focused on the internal side of organisations (Alvesson, 2000), and distribution channel contexts (Gilliland & Bello, 2002).

Consumer-consumer social alliances and their effect on loyal preferences have received limited research.

### **3. Tribalism as a form of shared consumption**

Culturally and socially interconnected groups have been found to act loyally as a group because personal relationships are maintained through shared, regular consumption (Gainer, 1995). This statement is in line 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-to-consumer relationships and their influence on individual consumption have focused on subcultures and brand communities (Berger et al., 2006; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & 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 still relatively new concept in social theory and yet have made a significant impact on marketing theory development (Cova & Cova, 2002; Cova & Salle, 2008; Gronroos, 2006; Kozinets, 1999; Penaloza & Venkatesh, 2006; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 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 & Cova, 2002). They are grouped around something emotional rather than rational (Cova & 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, Bednal, O'Cass, Paladino, Ward & Kanuk, 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, Hower, & Treanor, 2007; Burgh-Woodman & 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 & Handelman, 2004).

Shared consumption is the postmodern consumer's means of creating a social link and building bridges between individuals (Cova & Salle, 2008; Simmons, 2008). Therefore, consumer tribes present an opportunity to connect with elusive postmodern 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, Cova and Maffesoli's (2002; 1996) 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.

#### **4. Consumption and self identity**

The affiliation between consumption and self identity has been widely researched (Belk, 1988; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004; Sirgy, 1982; Solomon, 1983). Goods and services have a symbolic function of creating and protecting their self identity (Belk, 1988; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Solomon, 1983). This presents an opening to develop customer loyalty through communication of the expressive elements of a firm's offering (Leigh & Gabel, 1992). Traditional institutions, such as the family or work-place, which previously defined the self, have largely been replaced by individuals' consumption (Bagozzi, 2000; Cova, 1997; Goulding, 2003; Kozinets, 1999). Consumption is a contemporary tool for recreating communities in postmodern society (Cova, 1997). Cova and Maffesoli (1996; 1997)

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 postmodern individual’s creation of multiple self-identities. On the other hand, 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 postmodern 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, Kupiec-Teahan & Leeming, 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.

## **5. 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, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007; Muniz & 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 tribes' antecedents of membership (beyond the online context) and values can be leveraged as a loyalty-building tool.

Bourdieu'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 & 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 provides 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 & 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 & Summers, 1970; Robertson & 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.

## 6. Methodology and study design

In order to clarify the identified issues, a netnographic data mining exercise was devised. The focus of the study was the three largest hotel chains in Finland, Estonia and Russia (St. Petersburg) and one nationwide restaurant chain with 20 outlets spread around Finland.

All possible brand related interactions, blog posts, comments, likings and the mentions were collected using Whitevector Chat Reports™ monitoring tool and Facebook Insight reports. Whitevector's Chat Reports service is a web-based service that provides consumer brand teams with a comprehensive picture of what is being said within online social media discussions. Retrieved data was analysed using combination of quantitative analysis and a discursive analysis of the messages. The study was conducted between August 1<sup>st</sup> 2010 and November 31<sup>st</sup> 2010 with the dataset illustrated in tables 1, 2 and 3.

	Hotel Chain 1	Hotel Chain 2	Hotel Chain 3
No. of Hotels	46	56	24
No. of Rooms	7 330	10 272	4 735
Sold Nights	1 471 866	2 326 136	1 022 318
FB Fans	1 629	2 610	7 917
<i>Men</i>	34	31	27
<i>Women</i>	66	69	73
13-17	6,4 %	5,3 %	2,8 %
18-24	6,8 %	7,8 %	7,7 %
25-34	33,5 %	32,2 %	39,6 %
35-44	28,9 %	34,0 %	37,1 %
45-54	18,2 %	15,2 %	10,3 %
55+	6,2 %	5,5 %	2,5 %
Company Created			
Content	11	21	60
User Generated Content	8	86	95
Likes	71	131	1246
Comments	4	9	24

Table 1 Dataset of Hotel Chains

Restaurant	FB people like this	www visitors	www visits	monthly active FB users
Restaurant 1	462	7514	9140	182
Restaurant 2	417	25553	31503	79
Restaurant 3	385	5007	7557	232
Restaurant 4	321	5801	6760	125
Restaurant 5	182	7285	8618	87
Restaurant 6	357	4125	4996	114
Restaurant 7	787	7895	10490	429
Restaurant 8	1310	5390	6328	906
Restaurant 9	830	8876	12774	263
Restaurant 10	419	6229	7654	263
Restaurant 11	397	3553	4341	357
Restaurant 12	681	12893	15424	380
Restaurant 13	1329	5926	7827	344
Restaurant 14	368	4393	5763	273
Restaurant 15	351	3471	5004	281
Restaurant 16	845	4686	5516	181
Restaurant 17	182	10497	12690	140
Restaurant 18	685	6829	8673	180
Restaurant 19	5333	9624	11226	661
Restaurant 20	1468	9334	12180	385
Restaurant 21	169	7495	8352	60
Restaurant 22	332	2963	3618	89

Table 2 Dataset of Restaurant Chain

Restaurant Chain Conversations	Restaurant Chain Mentions	Campaign Conversations	Campaign Mentions
803	1205	98	174

Table 3 Dataset of restaurant chain conversation volume

## 7. Findings of the study

### 7.1. Enabling shared consumption and the formation of an online tribe

Despite having only 1.6 million Facebook users and a much undeveloped blogging culture in Finland, the Tourism and Hospitality industry was the first to experience the possibilities of the new social networks. The distribution of the followers is still uneven and likewise the Hospitality industry in Finland, the national chains rarely gain large popularity within customer groups. This study proves the possibility to change this assumption. Thus being the smallest of the studied hotels, chain 3 managed to attract almost the same amount of Facebook followers than the rest of the industry in Finland.

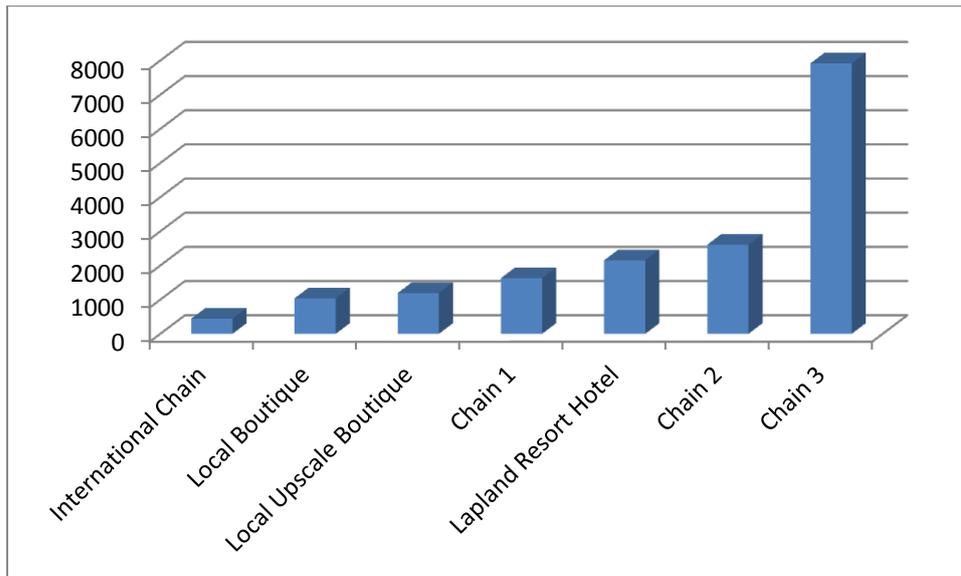


Figure 1 Distribution of the TOP 7 Hotel Facebook fans in Finland

At the beginning of the study the restaurant chain studied had an unorganized and uncontrolled presence in Facebook and no brand related blog. Only few of the chain units were utilising Facebook in their local customer communications or any other mean. During the study, the SNS strategy was established and the following actions resulted the growth of Facebook followers amount to near 20 000 and a dominance in share of electronic voice.

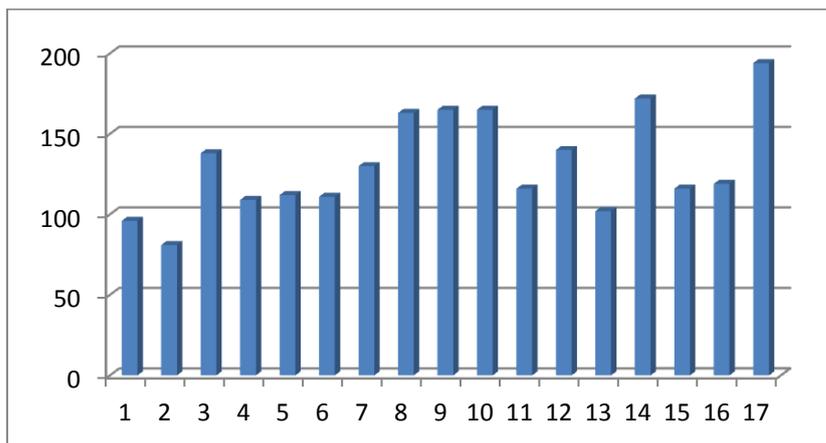


Figure 2 Weekly conversations and mentions of the restaurant chain

## 6.2. Tribal activity and social dynamics

The social dynamics of tribes also provides insight for connecting with members on an affective level. From the observation of the restaurant chain and hotels it was possible to identify four different roles to exist amongst consumer tribe members. These ranged (following the Cova&Cova 2002 findings) from low participation (the Sympathiser), to active Members, to Practitioner and lastly Devotees, who possessed high level of involvement and emotional attachment. The Practitioner in these studied tribes had 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. Worthy of notice was the unexpected level of active members in the hotel chain 3.

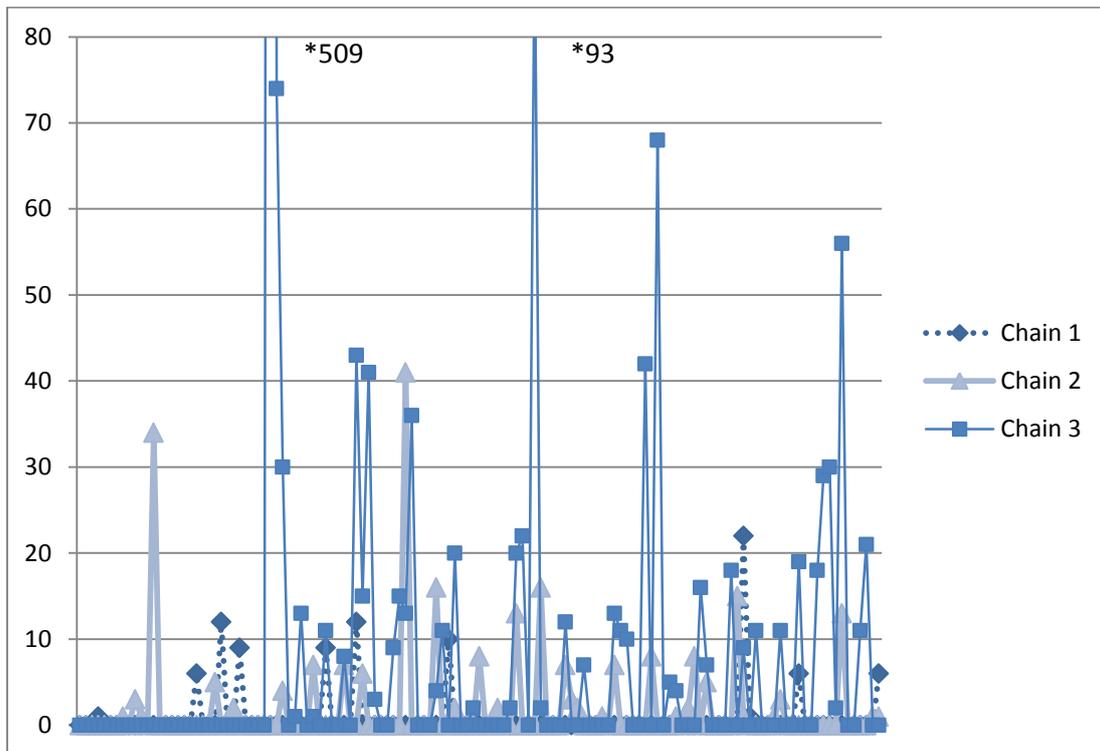


Figure 3 Facebook fans' reaction (likes& comments) to hotel chain created content

The conversations were empowered by stimulus from the restaurant chain which led to conclusion that tribe related (week-end program, dating, trends and music) had a positive stimulus and company related (i.e. products, prices, opening times) had a negative influence on conversation. However it was noticed that company related issues concerning exclusive offering or price premiums created more conversation and especially likings. Within the 120 days of observations it was clear that Thursday

and Friday represented the most active discussions in Facebook but the conversation continued in other platforms peaking on Mondays. Further analysis of these days revealed that the restaurant tribe started planning the weekend already on Wednesday, and was seeking advice and likeminded people to join their plans. Sunday and Monday discussions in other platforms were mostly retrospective in nature, analyzing the previous weekend. The practitioners played key role in starting new conversations during mid-week days.

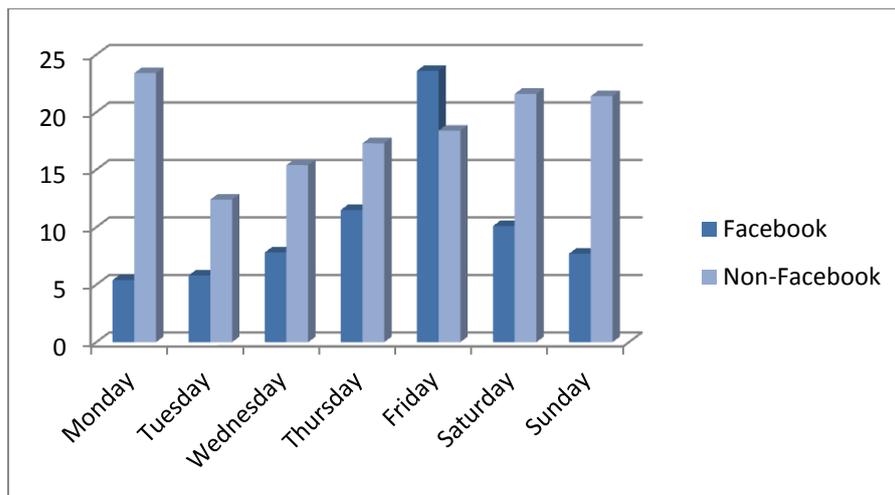


Figure 4 Average spread of daily conversations and mentions of the restaurant brand

### 6.3. Comparison of the Hotel Chains consumer tribe management

The findings show clear difference between the three major hotel chains in Finland. If the traditional measures of marketing reach would be in consideration, one of the hotel chains (3) would be the dominant with more than 42% of the Facebook followers of all hotel followers in Finland. This dominance is even stronger when compared to the size and the number of hotels and rooms each hotel has in their inventory. The fundamentals of managing tribes in social media i.e. understanding the community and being relevant and also enabling sharing of content and allowing engagement were all on higher level that of the competitors. Hotel chain 3 managed to form a self guiding and self stimulating tribe which creates 2.1 times more content than the fans of the competitors and the company generated content is liked 3.3 times more often than the closest competitor.

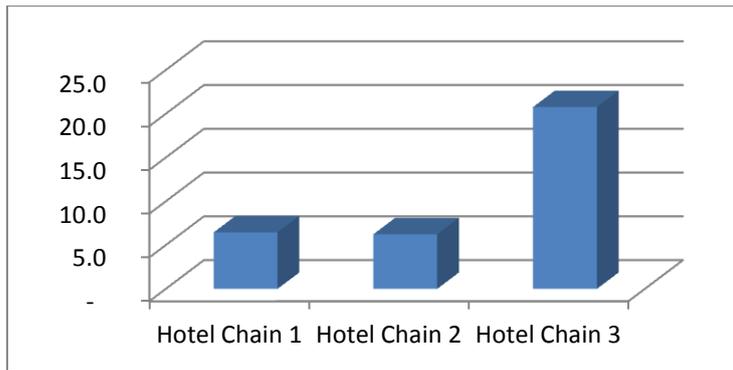


Figure 5 Likings of Company Generated Content

One of the key findings was the promptness of response from the hotel chain 3. Regardless of the platform or issue, a customer issues including questions, feedback or appraisal was returned within an hour, thus enhancing the trust within the tribe. One interesting observation and worth further study is the notion of negative reaction of over 65% of the posts from hotel chain one. Most of the negative reactions were originated from hotel chains offering some price incentive and the complaints were about the limited availability of the offer. On the contrary, chain 3 managed to find the style and the sentiment of their tribe by combining entertainment and play into the conversation thus generating outstanding positive activity within the tribe. A notably significant correlation ( $R^2 = 0.829$ ) was detected between the likings and chain 3's entertainment valued stimulus.

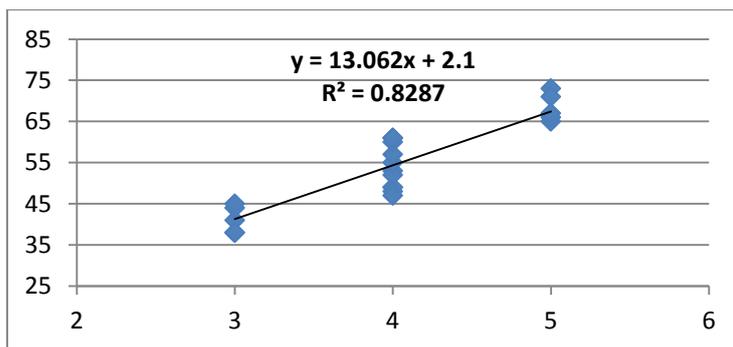


Figure 6 Linear regression of Chain 3's entertainment valued stimulus and likings

## **7. Conclusion**

Social network sites (SNS) have a practical cognitive function in facilitating product choice. There is nothing new in the effects of a buyer's peer group in influencing purchase decisions and basic buyer behaviour models have traditionally included peer group influences on the final outcomes. There is a lot of evidence, for example that when comparing professional and personal services providers, customers prefer to be guided by information from friends and other personal contacts rather than a company's formal promotion mix. Naturally, positive word-of-mouth recommendation is generally dependent on customers having good experiences with an organisation. An important communication objective for firms is often therefore to leverage "free" positive promotion through word-of-mouth recommendation, and to limit the damage caused by negative word-of-mouth.

Consumer tribes, a group of people emotionally connected by similar consumption values and usage, use the social networking sites - provided by products and services - to create a community and express their beliefs and identity. In this view the consumer tribe can be understood and accessed through their shared beliefs, ideas and consumption. The findings of this study would seem to indicate that an individual may belong to multiple tribes at the same time to express different aspects of their Identity. The substance of the service or product offered and the strength of the relationship to other tribe members will affect the degree of participation and involvement an individual has with the tribe.

Following the Ferguson (2008) findings, this study found further evidence that, instead of a dyadic relationship between the company and its customers, marketing increasingly has to become involved in a triadic relationship between the company, the customer and the community to which the customer belongs. As well as telling their friends, messages left with social network sites can spread a message very rapidly. Social network sites can pose a threat as well as an opportunity to companies as they can rapidly spread the views of dissatisfied, angry customers.

## **8. Implications for management**

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 &

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 cultural capital held by members was also a source of establishing status. Therefore, consumption in this case context has the postmodern 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. 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 which has value for creating sustainable, long term revenue focus (Kumar & Shah, 2004).

A company's involvement in social network sites can also result in a wider range of strategic and operational benefits. By inviting feedback, or simply observing conversations, a company can learn about customers' needs and inform its new product development policy. In the language of "service dominant logic", a company can involve members of the community in the co-creation of value through the generation of ideas (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008).

The findings of the study provide direction for firms seeking to leverage the consumer-led values and preferences of the tribe and build loyal relationships and enhancing purchase intention. This may empower firms to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, secure future revenue, while simultaneously performing the social function of meeting consumer needs.

## **9. Limitations of the study**

While there are managerial implications that can be drawn from this study in how marketers should engage with consumer groups, the limits of the methodological design mean that this principally remains a conceptual paper. The intention is to stimulate thought and expand the body of knowledge in this emergent area of consumer theory.

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