

## **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** This paper attempts to extend the emergent literature on consumer tribes, in order to provide firms with a more complete understanding of this phenomenon. The main purpose of the study is to identify the existence of tribal behaviour, as well as to propose a model that could guide brands in the identification of tribal bonds.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This study comprises an examination of tribes' growing power and influence on consumers' behaviour. The research is approached interpretively with a case-study investigation of the Prius (Toyota's hybrid car) tribe.

**Findings:** Four different levels of involvement in a consumer-brand relation are proposed, "tribal" being the most desirable level for a brand to achieve. We also suggest some ways for firms to develop their tribes, and to benefit from that relation.

**Research limitations/implications:** One tribe was examined in this case study. Future research should apply to other case contexts. Levels of tribal affection should also be approached in other investigations, in a way that enables future representativeness and replication.

**Practical implications:** These findings provide direction for firms to be aware of the crucial power of tribes and its relevance in today's market context. This may empower firms to understand this growing force and integrate it within their marketing activities.

**Originality/value:** The originality of this paper resides in the systematisation of levels of affection in consumer-brand relation, which culminate in the tribal stage. Ways in which companies may support tribes are also suggested. The proposed model aims to be a guide for firms in the identification of tribal bonds and, consequently, in the improvement of the relation between the firm and the tribe.

**Keywords:** Tribe, Tribal Marketing, Cult, Passion, Influence, Consumer Behaviour, Co-production

**Paper type:** Research paper

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies are defined by larger freedom in terms of choice; each person's life seems to depend exclusively on each person's decisions. This panorama has been favoured by social progress and evolution throughout time. Technological progress has opened an easier way to a new expression of individualism. We are now in an era in which individualism is the primordial way of being (Elliott, 1997, 1999). Several authors call this period postmodernism, and consider it as a period of fragmentation: of market, media, society, experiences and even self (Jameson, 1990; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Cova, 1996; Strauss, 1997; Firat & Schultz, 1997).

As a result of these post-modern conditions, the needs and desires of consumers are becoming more volatile and fluid as the market's offerings keep growing. It is in this context that we should consider the concept of tribalism, defined as networks of people gathering together for social interaction, often around consumption and brands (Maffesoli, 1996; Cova, 1997; Kozinets, 2001; Thompson & Troester, 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004; Johnson & Ambrose, 2006). Tribes, in this sense, are groups of consumers that share an emotional link – a link with a brand but, most importantly, with each other.

Tribal consumption brought a revolution to the market, pushing brands to rethink their strategies. In this context, it is more important for a company to learn how to interact with a tribe than how to dominate markets (Cova, 2002). So, there is a new ethos of brand participation emerging, as tribes play, more and more, an active role in consumption; the presence of tribes of impassioned, united and expert fans has led to a re-balancing of power in company-consumer relations (Cova, 1997).

This paper intends to bring an insight to tribal consumption. It deals with the concept in two phases: in a first stage, by helping to systematise and identify the different levels of a brand-consumer relation, which culminate into tribal affection. For this, a model is presented in order to guide firms in the identification of tribal bonds. In a second stage, and considering the influence that tribes have, some suggestions for tribes' integration into marketing strategies are presented.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Introducing a postmodern view

Postmodernism is a sociological trend proposed by Lipovetsky (1983, 1987), which appeared as a new perspective on how to view and to act in the world, generally speaking, and in business world specifically (Brown, 1993). This era is characterised by extreme individualism and search for freedom from social obligations. Each individual shows their own personality, trying to make a difference. In this way, individualism is the primordial way of being in an age in which anyone can – and must – take personal action, so as to produce and show one's own existence, one's own difference (Elliott, 1997, 1999). This era is characterised by a new language, difficult to interpret (Simmons, 2008), as society is no longer unified and fragmentation is becoming stronger. In fact, fragmentation is the most visible consequence of postmodernism, and it is present everywhere: in markets, media and society. Some authors (Gabriel & Lang, 1995; Jameson, 1990; Strauss, 1997) even refer to a fragmentation of the self.

The consequences of postmodernism also affect consumption, which has turned into a means for individuals creatively to appropriate and build self-images that allow them to become more desirable and/or more likeable in various social contexts (Kacen, 2000; Daves & Brown, 2000; Goulding, 2003).

In postmodern culture, the self is essentially decentred, preferring the ability to switch images and utilise consumption as a means of constructing powerful images liberating it from monotony and conformity (Brown, 1995). Thus, postmodern consumption dictates that meanings of objects are no longer fixed and linked to their functions, but are free-floating as each individual may ascribe them the meanings s/he desires (Elliot, 1993). Therefore the value of brands becomes more symbolic than functional, as they have an impact on consumers' self-image. In this context, a consumer is not buying a pair of jeans but the image that the jeans are going to give him. Each consumer becomes, then, an "illusion consumer", as s/he buys images and not products (Elliot, 1999). In this way, as is stressed by Komaromi (2003), consumers perceive brands as a promise of a specific experience that, socially shared with others, leads to the formation of a community and a shared sense of identity.

This fragmented individualism has been accentuated by the technological progress, as any human being is now able to become the centre of a network as it is possible to reach almost everybody and everything very easily. This process of “narcissism” (Cova, 2006, pp. 596), induced by the development and widespread use of computers in all aspects of human existence, seems to characterise our current way of life (Cova, 2002). In fact, and paradoxically, technology has worked to increase this isolation, while still allowing us to stay in touch with the world (Cova & Cova, 2002).

As a consequence of this fragmentation, which is present in the entire society, consumers have a lack of commitment to a single lifestyle or belief (Simmons, 2008; Daves & Brown, 2000). In fact, postmodernism encourages the experience of many different ways of being, without conforming or committing to any single one (Firat & Schultz, 1997). So, we can say that consumers are no longer defined by the cost/benefit assessments of choices, but by the experiences acquired through consumption. Because of that, they have an “affinity to not commit or conform to any unified, consistent, centered field, idea, system, or narrative”. (Firat & Schultz, 1997, pp. 190)

### **The opposite movement of re-composition**

But, alongside this period of severe social dissolution and extreme individualism, some authors (Bauman, 1992; Maffesoli, 1988) argue that we are also witnessing an opposite movement of re-composition. People who have finally managed to liberate themselves from social constraints are embarking on a reverse movement to recompose their social universe (Cova, 2002). Simmons (2008) follows this line of thought by suggesting that, although postmodern consumers adore being individual, they do not want to do it in isolation or in communities with highly dispersed interest sets. In fact, these consumers show new forms of sociality and empowerment, based in interaction between peers (Cova & Pace, 2006).

Postmodernism is, then, a period that encourages a move away from individualism towards a search for more social bonds, introducing the concept of neo-tribes – networks of people gathering together for social interaction, often around consumption and brands (Maffesoli, 1996; Cova, 1997; Kozinets, 2001; Thompson & Troester, 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004; Johnson & Ambrose, 2006). In fact, people are increasingly gathering together in multiple short-lived

(ephemeral) groups, and we can readily observe the emerging of tribalism (Cova & Cova, 2002). Maffesoli (1996) calls this reverse movement the search for maintaining or (re)creating the social link.

But how can we define these new groups? It is said that tribalism is not recent, as it has pre-modern roots, and thus implies a return to an era that has been rejected by the modern thinking. It is in this context that we should consider the expression “re-rooting” (Cova, 2006, pp. 597), which refers to the desire for connection that is growing among consumers. We observe thus the “re-emergence of quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism and so on” (Cova, 2002, pp. 597). This author also asserts that the word tribe conveys the same characteristics as the notion of ethnic group, but on a larger scale: kinship, lineage and other blood-related attributes, as well as an absence of central power. Therefore, tribalism seems to be a way that consumers are finding to return to values that allow the establishment of emotional and strong bonds with a product and, especially, with each other.

### **Understanding tribes**

As a result of the change explained above, which is occurring in society and, consequently, in markets, we observe the explosion of tribes. A tribe is a network of people gathering homogeneously for social interaction, often around consumption and brands (Maffesoli, 1996; Cova, 1997; Kozinets, 2001; Thompson & Troester, 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004; Johnson & Ambrose, 2006). This group of people is emotionally connected by similar consumption values and usage, using the social link of products and services to create a community and express identity (Mitchell & Imrie, 2010).

The credo of this so-called tribal marketing is that consumers are looking not only for products and services which enable them to be freer but also for products, services, employees and physical surroundings which can link them to others, to a tribe. This network of heterogeneous people is linked through a shared passion or emotion (Maffesoli, 1996; Dionísio & Leal, 2008).

Tribal marketing has virtually rejected concepts such as consumer segments, market niches and lifestyles. Instead, we are talking of a unit of reference that is more a micro-social cohort of individuals that share similar experiences and emotions and bond together (Cova, 2002).

Although tribes existed before, postmodern tribes present some clear differences from archaic tribes: they are ephemeral and not permanent and totalising; a person can belong to several postmodern tribes, not only to one; the boundaries of the tribe are only conceptual and not physical; and the members are related by shared feelings and signs and not by kinship or dialect. These postmodern tribes are inherently unstable, small-scale, affectual (Maffesoli, 1996) and not determined by any of the established parameters of modern society. Tribes are constantly in flux (Cova, 2002) and exist in no other form but the symbolically and ritually manifested commitment of their members.

Tribes are, thus, more than a residual category of social life. Each individual can belong to more than one tribe and have different roles and tasks in all of them. Belonging to a tribe has become, to some individuals, more important than belonging to a social class or segment. The social link that characterised these groups allows tribal members never to be alone; they belong, in fact or virtually, to a vast and informal community (Maffesoli, 2000).

### **What a tribe is not**

If the common denominator of postmodern tribes is the community of emotion and passion, could they be called **communities**? In fact, there are similarities between tribes and communities, as both are symbolically constructed and based on a system of values, norms and codes – mental constructs that allow group members to formulate their own meanings. But aside from that, a tribe should not be mistaken for a brand community. The latter is explicitly commercial, whereas tribes are not. In contrast to communities, tribal marketing emphasises not the product or service for a specific consumer, but the product or service that holds people together as a group of enthusiasts or devotees (Cova, 2002). Tribalism is different from the concept of community insofar as it may manifest itself in non-rational behaviour (Cova & Cova, 2002). Muniz and O'Guinn (2000) distinguish between brand community and tribalism by suggesting that the former is normally less ephemeral, less geographically limited and more explicitly commercial than the latter.

Tribes are also different from **reference groups** or **psychographic segments**. They do not focus on normative influences of the group but on the linking element between their members. In contrast to a market segment, a tribe can be defined as a network of heterogeneous persons,

in terms of gender, age, sex and income, who are linked by a shared passion or emotion. This definition also helps to establish the difference between tribe and **segments**, as the latter is a heterogeneous group of persons that are not connected to each other. In this manner, a segment is not capable of collective action – “i.e. movements of groups of actors aiming to promote or defend their mutual interests” (Brito, 2001, pp.151) – while tribes are. Nor are tribes the same as **communities of practice**, which are focused upon “organizational learning and knowledge regeneration, although communities of interest rely on learning for social purpose or enterprise” (Harwood & Garry, 2009, pp. 69). Tribes are situated in a different level, as they are focused on a “cult-object” (Harwood & Garry, 2009, pp. 69).

Thus, we can say that tribal members differentiate from other groups of people because they really want to be connected. They do more than meet other consumers; they establish bonds between them.

### **Considering the linking value of a product/service**

In a context where social bonds are more and more valued, the primary task of tribal marketing is to consider the product or service from the angle of its linking value rather than its use value (Cova, 1999). Aubert-Gamet and Cova (1999) suggest that modern consumption emphasises the use value of services while postmodern consumption essentially emphasises the social link – i.e. the linking value of products or services.

The **linking value** is the product or service’s ability to contribute to the establishment and/or reinforcement of bonds between individuals. Therefore, the greater the ability to develop or strengthen the tribal bond, the greater will be the **linking value** of a product (Cova & Cova, 2002). It is important to say that the linking value it is not defined by the company. It is not the service provider who determines that their organisation provides linking value but rather people who are going to experience it that will give it this meaning (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999).

In this context, where sociality gains importance, there is room for the flourishing of the concept of “connectedness” (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2008, pp. 314), which defines the link between consumers and brands, provided by the ability of a certain product to function as the basis of this connection.

Considering that nowadays consumers are looking not only for products and services which enable them to be free, but also for products, services, employees and physical surroundings which will link them to others, to a tribe, we can say that they no longer consume products for their utility, but because of their symbolic meaning, which represents images. In fact, the image does not represent the product; it is the product that represents the image (Cova, 1999). Thompson and Holt (1996) assert that tribal members are constantly on the lookout for anything that can support their communion, or make it easier. It is in order to satisfy this desire for communion, tribally-based consumers will seek out products and services more for their linking value than for their utility.

This panorama may manifest itself in the rejection of a virtual satisfaction through its purchasing value. Therefore, we verify consumers' direct satisfaction through emotions shared with others. This way, satisfaction seems to be originated not by consumption, but by the experiences shared among consumers (Cova, 1997). Consumers want to connect and interact with others who have the same interest. Although the consumption of a certain product may be a preliminary way of connecting, it is not what consumers are looking for. More than consuming together, individuals want to establish a bond, a connection that goes beyond the consumption of a common product or service.

### **Tribe's leader and tribe's WOM**

In each group, there is an opinion leader who exerts influence on others because of his/her special skills, knowledge or personality, among other factors. Individuals who are admired or who belong to a group to which other individuals aspire can exercise an influence on information processing, attitude formation and purchasing behaviour (Bearden et al., 1982; Netemeyer & Teel, 1989). Mitchell and Imrie (2010) consider the leader as the "chief" of the tribe (2010, pp.48), when they say that this figure is an opinion leader among the group; an influencer on the exchange of information, but also a facilitator of where and how the tribe socialises. Leaders are also found to possess status and respect within the tribe, which makes them crucial to any attempt to connect to the tribe at large; they are gateways of access and insight into the tribe's dynamics.

Godin (2008) also emphasises the importance of a leader in the connection of tribe members, by saying that a tribe is a group of people connected to each other, to a leader and to an idea. This author stresses the importance of this figure in the tribe, arguing that there is no tribe without a leader but also no leader without a tribe. The leader acts as a bonding element among the tribe, as s/he inspires and influences other members. Godin (2008) explains this inspiration, arguing that the leader fuels a movement by creating things that did not yet exist, but which people wanted. Roger's (1962) pioneering study into the diffusion of innovation suggests that opinion leaders can exert direct influence in the adoption of innovation through word-of-mouth communication. In fact, by creating a tribe, and, consequently, a movement around an idea, tribe leaders are taken in deep consideration, as they are frequently admired by other members of the tribe. Because of this, their word-of-mouth influence may reach huge proportions.

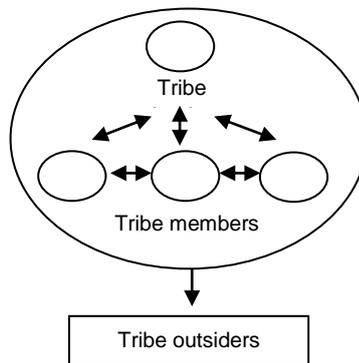
As presented above, tribes have a large influence on purchasing decisions. This influence is based in the strength of word of mouth. Word of mouth is recognised and considered one of the most influential sources of information transmission in the marketplace (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). The power of this efficient tool has been amplified by the internet boom, as it is easier for consumers to find, evaluate and exchange their own information. The increasing influence of word of mouth is also related to the deeper credibility that effective consumers have on potential consumers, as they are regarded as a fairly objective source of information, because their views are based on direct personal experience (Charlett, 1995).

Arndt (1967) emphasises that communicators and receivers of word of mouth are active, independent participants in mass-scale communication. So, consumers' search for information often starts by asking communicators about their opinion of something from which they have already usufructed. Frenzen & Davis (1990) go further in this research and identify closeness, intimacy, support and association as considerable elements of the word of mouth process. As all of these characteristics are present in tribes, this statement reinforces the increasing power that tribes now exercise. In their turn, Bansal and Voyer (2000) argue that, the stronger the tie between sender and receiver is, the greater also is the credibility given to that information. Cova and Pai (2008) add that strong ties between people allow the circulation and exchange of value. In this way, proximity between tribe members amplifies the effect of word of mouth. Word-of-

mouth information seems to be a risk-reducing information source, frequently used in purchasing decisions.

The consumer-to-consumer communication process assumes special significance in tribal contexts, generally speaking, and in leader-tribe communication specifically, as the one-to-many message figures prominently. In fact, this type of viral communication can be established in several ways, systematised in Figure 1 (see below).

Figure 1. Types of viral communication in tribes: leader to tribe, tribe to leader, tribe member to tribe member and tribe member to outsider



Source: adapted from Godin, 2008.

The free flow and exchange of information on the internet potentialises not only one-to-many but also many-to-many communication. With this, postmodern consumers are able to find a public forum in which they can express, define and differentiate themselves from those that matter, through their consumption experiences (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997).

### **The end of the production/consumption division**

Online consumers appear to be more active, participative, resistant, playful, social and communitarian than ever before (Kozinets, 1999). They want to become influential participants in the construction of experiences (Firat & Schultz, 1997). As a consequence, companies no longer communicate with these empowered customers; instead, they provide a forum for exchanging interests with them (McWilliam, 2000). Tribal marketing has contributed to an increase in consumer participation, as the presence of tribes of impassioned, united and expert fans has led to a re-balancing of power in company-consumer relations (Cova & Pace, 2006).

Consumers want to be set free from market constraints and social and cultural conditionings (Kozinets, 2001). Kozinets and Shankar (2007) claim that consumer tribes will become the new

marketers of the century, as a force that will end the production/consumption division. By playing the role of co-producers, consumers interact with market in a transformative way (Holt, 2002). Indeed, consumers also produce; they give actual value to goods and services they consume (Firat and Dholakia, 2006). They not only react but they also build their own consumption objects, both physically and culturally (Keat et al., 2004).

Consumer empowerment has been defined as letting consumers take control of variables that are conventionally pre-determined by marketers (Wathieu et al., 2002). Empowering consumers does not mean helping them to escape the marketplace (Kozinets, 2002) or freeing them for a possible dependence on a company's product. It is more a matter of giving them greater control over their relationship with their beloved brand (Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2004). Hence, this desire for participation exists because consumers now increasingly see brands as shared cultural property (Holt, 2004). So, it is expected that they also want to take part in the productive process of that brand.

One way of participating in the productive process is manifested through “we-intentions”, which are “intentions to participate together as a group” (Bagozzi et al., 2006, pp. 242). These “we-intentions” are characterised by (1) mutual responsiveness among participants to the intentions and actions of others, (2) collective commitment to the joint activity and (3) commitment to support others involved in the activity. Tribes develop “we-intentions” because they do not wait to be invited to participate; they just do it (Aubert-Gamet, 1997). Marketers who understand the structure of a tribe have a lot to win, and can profit by supporting it. Cova and Cova (2002) note that the idea of partnership between the company and the tribe is another crucial dimension of the tribal approach that deserves to be explored.

With the growing power of word of mouth, consumers are now capable of effecting bigger changes, making a statement of power. This empowerment of the consumer has been enhanced by tribalism. In fact, consumers are grouping together in online communities that are able to generate offerings, services or even brands (Cova & White, 2010). This way, they are becoming active parts of the production process.

As companies increasingly rethink the fundamental ways in which they generate ideas and bring them to market, the open innovation model has appeared (Chesbrough, 2003). In this

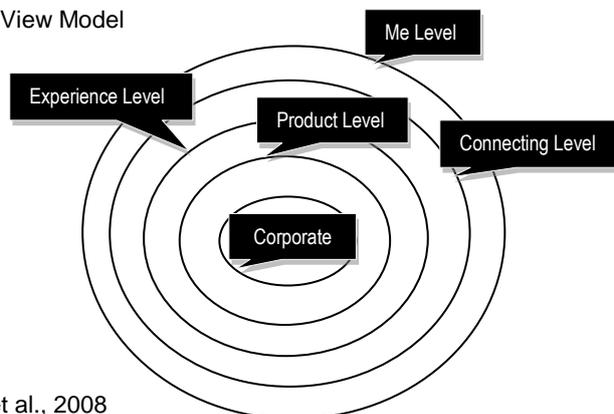
new model, ideas that originate outside a firm's own labs can be brought inside for commercialisation. In other words, the boundary between a firm and its surrounding environment is more porous, enabling innovation to move easily between the two. This way, companies enjoy the usufruct of knowledge that comes from the outside, namely from tribes. This situation benefits both parties; on one hand, tribes want to have something to say about the product or service they love and, on the other, companies can know what customers think about their product, have access to that knowledge, and use it to make improvements. In this way, companies do not produce alone; instead, they co-produce with their consumers. These active consumers can therefore be called "prosumers" (Kotler, 1986).

Concepts such as this, which express the participation of consumers in the production process, can help us to respond to our research questions. In fact, the more participative the consumer becomes in the production process, the more involved he gets with the brand. This involvement can give rise to a process that could bring the brand to the tribal stage.

### **Involvement in the consumer-brand relation**

When the consumer becomes a "prosumer", s/he is actively involved with the brand. There are different levels of involvement of the consumer with the brand in a consumer-brand relation. In the literature reviewed, we found the Orbit View Model (Silva et al., 2008), which claims that tribal marketing reaches its final purpose when consumers are strongly involved with the brand. This is an analytical tool to differentiate levels of consumer-brand involvement that suggests five different levels of involvement: Corporate Level, Product Level, Experience Level, Connecting Level and Me Level. These five levels are sketched in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Orbit View Model



Source: Silva et al., 2008

The first level of this orbit is the Corporate Level, which refers to the image built by the firm around the brand. The Product Level is the second level of the Orbit View Model, which materialises the first one, referring to all the products commercialised by the company. It is important to note that these products should be in symbiosis with the brand image projected at the Corporate Level. When the company creates tools that allow consumers to live a customised experience with the product, the brand-consumer involvement is placed at the Experience Level. By allowing this, companies can lead consumers to the creation of connection networks around the brand, i.e., the Connecting Level. This model argues that the involvement between the consumer and the brand reaches its maximum at the Me Level. At this point, there is a connection between the “me” and the “brand”, which leads to interaction and conversation among consumers. In doing this, consumers become active participants in brand strategy, performing tribe tasks.

Tribal marketing being a strategy that aims at the creation of social groups around a certain product or service, the relevance of this model is based in the establishment of the different levels of affection in a consumer-brand relation. It is very important for companies to know on which level are their consumers are placed, in order to adapt a strategy that promotes the existence of tribalism.

### **Losing control over the brand to the tribe**

The influence of tribes over brands can also carry some disadvantages for companies, and these need to be assessed. According to Cova and Pace (2005), one critical aspect of tribal marketing is the risk that the tribe may expropriate the brand to the extent where the company loses control over it. Dionísio et al. (2008) agree with this, suggesting that the problem most usually found with tribal brands is a force of opposition to the company. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) state that activities and interpersonal associations that people undertake in order to give their lives a meaning are, in our days, the most powerful organising forces in modern life.

It seems that the power of the tribe is now unquestionable to companies. Commercial organisations have recognised this and, as a consequence, are increasingly recruiting tribe

members to be an active part of their marketing strategies. Situations like this are becoming more frequent these days, which helps to corroborate our investigation.

The emphasis of this approach of the company to the tribe is not on gaining market share but, instead, on gaining acceptance from tribes and joining in tribal activities. To gain acceptance from tribal members, companies have to take a very subtle and collaborative approach (Harwood & Garry, 2009) carefully balancing tribes' pros and cons.

It is becoming very important for companies to know how their products or services can support a tribe. Tribe members should therefore be regarded by companies as partners, and not as mere players in the market. In fact, firms must recognise that tribal members share a collective experience of consumption which can help firms in the approach of potential buyers, by reducing the formal borders of the firm among consumers. Therefore, a tribe should not be excluded from the firm, but considered part of it. The opposite also applies, as the firm must be part of the tribe. This is why the tribal consumer is assuming more and more importance in marketing theories. Yet despite this importance, consumer-consumer social alliances are still under-researched (Mitchell & Imrie, 2010).

### **3. RESEARCH ISSUES**

This study examines the tribal phenomenon among a group of Prius lovers located in Portugal. The creation of this tribe is based in the shared passion of its members for this hybrid car. The tribe was studied through a series of in-depth interviews that provided insights into the group's dynamics. From this investigation, a model of tribalism was proposed, with the aim of being able to provide directions for companies to be aware of the growing power of tribes and its extreme relevance in today's market context. Another important research issue can be derived from this one, regarding marketing policies. As new tribes are emerge and change consumption habits, the market must adapt. Companies have to adjust their strategies to this active, participative and demanding group of consumers that want to establish bonds with a brand, but more especially with other consumers. In fact, consumption is no longer regarded as a way of giving sense to life but, instead, as a way of creating an emotional link between consumers. Thus, firms have to interact with their clients in an effective way that allows the establishment of an emotional relation with them. Interacting with a tribe is therefore more important than dominating

markets (Cova, 2002), as the collective experience of the product, as lived by tribe members, can be very beneficial for companies. Tribes want to play a role in whatever concerns a product's strategies. Supporting tribes and taking advantage of their influence and power is now a matter of survival for many firms. Thus, it is very important to know how a firm can effectively support a tribe in order to take advantage of its existence. With this we intend to understand the growing force of the tribe and to integrate it with firms' marketing policies.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

##### **Research Design**

We follow a research design based on theory building through a conceptual case study. With this case study, we intend to contribute to the expansion of consumer research's existing body of knowledge, by studying how tribes are created and the existing precedent levels of that creation. A qualitative approach was followed and semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to gain an overview of the phenomenon. In order to ensure an impartial view of the case, not only tribe members were interviewed but also a member of Toyota's institutional communication department. This way, researcher could not only study the existing relations among members of the tribe but also the extent to which this group of passionate people is recognised and considered to be an active part of the firm's strategic choices.

##### **Case Study Method**

Case-study research is considered an appropriate means of examining people within a specific context, without controlling or manipulating their behaviour (Yin, 1994). A case-study design is applied to this research problem to gain multiple insights into this specific tribe. Personal interviews were conducted in order to gain insights on the problem, as well as a netnographic approach. Netnography is usually defined as a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from online, computer-mediated or internet-based communications, and requires an immersive combination of participation and observation (Kozinets, 2002). In this specific case, researcher observed and participated in the online meeting point of the tribe. The research was limited to a single case study owing to constraints on time and resources.

## **Data Collection**

With the goal of obtaining the differing perspectives of the members of the tribe, and their differing levels of tribal engagement, five individual interviews were conducted. Four of those individuals belong to the studied tribe (Informants 1, 2, 3 and 4), one of them being an assumed leader (Informant 1). The fifth element (Informant 5) belongs to Toyota's department of institutional communication. This latter informant was considered necessary in order to ascertain the depth of the brand's knowledge of, and interaction with, the tribe.

The four elements of the tribe who were interviewed, aged between 30 and 50, were chosen from the tribe's online chat and selected randomly. One of them – Informant 1 – is the tribe leader, and was specifically selected as someone who played an important role in the tribe. All the in-depth interviews (ranging from 25 to 60 minutes) were undertaken on a semi-structured basis, with consented recording.

## **5. CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

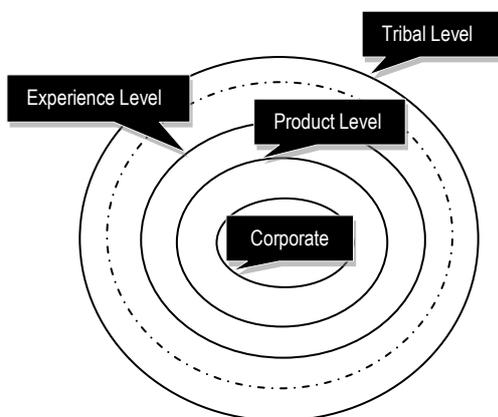
On basis in the reviewed literature, we propose a model that aims to be of use to firms in the identification of tribal bonds and, consequently, in the improvement of the relation between the firm and the tribe. First, we will try to place tribalism in the different levels of involvement in a consumer-brand relation, by trying to know which the stages of a consumer-brand relation are. After being able to recognise different involvement levels of consumers with brands, placing tribalism in it and, therefore, understanding what a tribe is, we needed to understand what levels of commitment should the firm manifest towards the tribe, through different resources levels. With this, we aim to understand how can a firm effectively support a tribe in order to take advantages of its existence.

### **5.1 The stages of a consumer-brand relation**

On the basis of Silva et al.'s (2008) Orbit View Model, we attempted to develop a conceptual model able to define different levels of affection and involvement in the consumer-brand relation, and therefore to identify tribalism in it. The adaptation of the model proposed aimed to

be an analytical tool of different levels of engagement existing between consumers and brands. In order to do so, four levels are proposed: Corporate Level, Product Level, Experience Level and Tribal Level. Figure 3 systematises the model. Comparing with the Orbit View, which is build on five different levels of involvement in a consumer-brand relation, our model proposes only four levels, merging the Orbit View's Connecting and Me Levels in only one – the Tribal Level. We understand that consumers benefit most from their consumption and marketing experience with a brand when they are totally connected not only with the values proposed by the brand but also with other consumers who share the same experience. It is not consuming, therefore, that is the most important thing to the consumer, but sharing that consumption with others. This is the ultimate level of involvement with the brand, at which consumers are looking for products or services that do more than recognise them as individuals; they connect them to elements of a strong community. In this respect, the brand has reached the tribal level, as consumers are connected to each other, to a leader and to an idea.

Figure 3. New Orbit View Model



Source: Adapted from Silva et al., 2008

Indeed, merging those two levels in the Tribal Level is necessary. We argue that tribalism is the maximum point of involvement that can exist between a consumer and a brand and, consequently, with other consumers. We verify the emergence of tribalism when consumers are so deeply involved with a brand and with one another, in a tribe, that they start connecting with it and, more important, with other consumers that have the same interest. At this level, the brand becomes a part of consumers' lives, as the basis of an emotional connection created among consumers.

The constructs of these four ascendant levels are an attempt to characterise marketing evolution through time, from a merely transactional point of view to the perception that the consumer is also a co-producer who takes action and wants to be an active member of the entire process of value creation. Tribal affection represents the last and ultimate level of brand affection, as this model argues that this state is the most desirable for a company to achieve. In fact, the ultimate goal of a company is to establish an emotional and strong bond with the consumer that leads them to search for a shared consumption experience with members of a tribe. This is the so-called tribal level. This robust connection ensures a deep loyalty to the brand, which can grant the smooth and regular flow of sales that is the ambition of any firm.

The following four levels define the evaluation in involvement with a brand, starting with a lack of real involvement and finishing with a tribal relation. In the model proposed, brand-consumer involvement is present at a high and deep level, at the Tribal Level.

#### *Corporate Level*

The most basic level refers to a company's marketing strategy, which does not request or even allow consumer participation. Therefore, there is no connection at all with the consumer at this point. The consumption process is merely transactional, as the communication is mass-projected to an undifferentiated client. The character of this transaction is purely utilitarian. As the protagonism is all in the firm's hands, and there is no involvement of the consumer with the brand.

#### *Product Level*

This is the point at which a brand's strategy is materialised, through the delivery of a product or service that proposes a higher utilitarian satisfaction to the consumer; the firm has something physical to deliver to the consumer. Acquiring the product or the service can be the starting point in building a relationship: consumer and brand start a mutual exchange of energy.

#### *Experience Level*

At this point, companies create interaction platforms with consumers that allow them to have dynamic and distinctive experiences. The goal is to transmit to consumers the idea that the brand cares about them. In fact, it cares so deeply that it even creates complementary services that allow consumers to enlarge and enjoy the product or service in a bigger extension. The

ultimate goal is to personalise the consumer-brand relation, by making consumers feel that they have an unlimited experience that no one else has. Consumers feel they are understood by the brand, which knows and fulfills their needs and desires, being always by their side. At this level, the consumption process begins to be endowed with a relational focus.

#### *Tribal Level*

At this level, consumer is an active part of the brand, not just a reactive receiver of a firm's message. This participative attitude leads to the formation of interest communities around the brand. The consumer has the initiative, by having an interest and sharing it with people who also have it. It is important to note that individuals do not get together to please the brand; they get together because they share a common interest in the brand and want to be connected to and communicate with each other because of it. The tribe is voluntary; people get together because they have the choice and want to do so, in order to establish an emotional connection that goes way beyond consumption.

Tribalism is more than the alignment of company, employees and brand goals in the same marketing strategy; it is about consumers also participating and getting involved. This aspect of tribalism was observed in this case study, as we can see by this informant's statement:

"We [tribe and firm] are all together in the same goal, defending and promoting the car." (Informant 3)

In a tribal context, an emotional connection has been created between the brand and the "me", i.e. the consumer as an isolated individual. This connection characterises the creation of the tribe – the "we". At this level, the consumer exists not only as an isolated individual but also as a tribe member who connects with others – tribe members but also tribe's outsiders, recruiting them and allowing the tribe to grow and gain more members. This connection with members within and outside the tribe is mainly based on word of mouth. In fact, word of mouth has immense potential in a tribal context, as discussions take place within the tribe and ideas are quickly shared among members.

This viral influence is also present in the tribe studied, as can be verified in the following statement:

"I know we [the tribe] have influence in potential buyers' decisions. They [potential buyers] came to us looking for answers." (Informant 1,2)

"Of course we influence people to buy the car. It happened with me." (Informant 3)

For a company to grow in the market, it needs to find customers that, more than just buying and believing in the brand, want to support and join it. When this occurs, the connection between brand and consumers can be considered spiritual, as the brand seems to make a difference in consumer's lives. Prius seems to have huge influence in its buyers' lives, as we can see in following statement:

"We don't drive a Prius. Prius drives us." (Informants 3, 4)

#### *Tribes: The ultimate level*

Brands need to establish true and deep relationships with consumers. In fact, repeated transactions are only a precursor of the establishment of a relation. When the bond is created between consumer and brand, this relation brings mutual advantages and privileges; the brand captures consumers' loyalty, and consumers see themselves as actively involved in the activity of the company.

Our model argues that the relation between brand and consumers achieves its deepest and most important level when it gets to a **tribal** level. At this level, consumers demand participation in the process of consumption; they want to be an active part of it, with an opinion that really matters. When this relation achieves the tribal level, brands can expect loyal consumers, who request participation in value creation. We therefore incline to agree with Kotler and Kartajaya (2007), who claim that marketers are no longer in charge: consumers are. These authors also say that there is a multitude of approaches to consumer that brands can take, as long as any of them allows the creation of personal conversations among consumers. And in order to create these conversations, companies need to promote the freedom to be talked about, and integrate consumers in their marketing strategies. In doing so, they allow consumers to feel that they are part of brand strategy, having influence in brand decisions. In addition, the firms benefit from knowing what consumers think about them, where they might otherwise not know at all.

By knowing what consumers say, feel and how they react towards the brand, firms can better adjust their products to consumers' needs. By doing that – fitting consumers in a better way and benefiting from this relationship – firms allow consumers to feel that they have been heard, and have a prominent role in the value-creation process. It is therefore a win-win situation for both sides.

Cova and Dallı (2008) have come up with the concept of “guardian”, by identifying the consumer as a defender of the brand and its values. “Advocate” is also a word that Cova (2002) uses to describe tribal consumption. Our model proposes that consumers have evolved to an ambassador status, where they not only defend but also represent the brand, inside and outside the tribe. They are, indeed, more involved in promoting the passion than the firm’s own marketing people, since they like to show off without seeking any reward, doing it for the simple pleasure of defending what they believe in (Cova & White, 2010). This is very important because, at this level, consumers feel themselves part of the brand, which has an important meaning in their lives. In fact, this meaning is so relevant that makes them stand for the brand.

We will now present the studied tribe in more detail, justifying why we believe it to be at the tribal level.

### **Introducing the Prius**

When analysing factors that affect car-buying behaviour, several factors must be taken in consideration, such as reliability, safety, technology and appearance, among others (Banerjee, 2010). Environmental issues, including the use of fuel-efficient or alternative-fuel vehicles, and new online information search tools, are additional factors that reflect changes in today’s automotive landscape. Fuel efficiency and environmental issues are now in the forefront of consumers’ minds, as concerns about environmental sustainability and global warming increase. Consumers now have a multitude of sources from which to collect information during the car-buying process (Banerjee, 2010).

Prius is Toyota’s hybrid compact car, powered by fuel and electricity simultaneously. Prius is a Latin word meaning “before”; according to Toyota, the name was chosen because the Prius was launched before environmental awareness became a mainstream social issue. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) considered the Prius 2010 to be the most fuel-economical of all the cars on the market. Known as the first mass-produced hybrid vehicle, it was launched in Japan in 1997 and subsequently introduced worldwide in 2000. This eco-friendly car is now sold in more than 70 countries and regions, with its largest markets being Japan and North America. The car arrived in Portugal in 2000. In May 2008, global cumulative

Prius sales reached the 1.000.000 vehicle mark, and in September 2010, the model reached worldwide cumulative sales of 2.000.000 units.

More than a car, Prius has become a cult object, an icon of green motoring and the world's most advanced expression of green mass mobility. This has happened because this full-hybrid car, which has become a reference point for hybrid technology and innovation, combines three distinct benefits: (1) driving pleasure, (2) space, style and design, and (3) low cost of ownership. It presents itself as a car made for people who take chances and dare to escape from the established rules of society. It is a car of today for people of tomorrow, designed for people who write the word future in a different way. High technology, potency and great performance are among the qualities attributed to it.

For all of these reasons, owning a Prius means more than simply owning a car. It is not just a means of transportation; for the consumer, it is a greater source of pride than simply owning a car, or even owning another hybrid. Prius drivers feel themselves to be the owners of a special car, superior to other eco-friendly cars. This is the pioneer in terms of eco-friendly mass-produced cars, which provides pleasant driving while helping the environment and saving money.

There are currently approximately 2.500 Prius in circulation in Portugal. The current model is the third generation, the differences between generations being related to design and technology. The first generation, launched in 2000, found little acceptance, and only four cars were sold that year. Until 2005, when the second-generation Prius (2G) was launched, Toyota had sold only 52 first-generation cars in Portugal, representing just 0,3% of its total sales in the country.

To heighten awareness of and interest in the car, Toyota launched the 2G with a strong promotional campaign. In 2005, 200 Prius were sold, representing 1,8% of the brand's global sales. Last year, the contribution of the Prius to Toyota's Portuguese sales had grown to 4,7%, with 356 cars being sold, despite the crisis affecting the world economy in general and the Portuguese economy in particular. A year after the 2G launch, the online community Prius PT ([www.prius-pt.com](http://www.prius-pt.com)) was created by one car owner (Informant 1).

The lack of a place where all buyers could connect, share histories and clarify doubts about this car led this individual Prius owners' forums in the UK and the USA. He then decided to

create a Portuguese forum. Having started as a platform of interest and for the sharing of information, is it now a tribal manifestation. The forum now has about 900 members, who are either Prius owners, potential buyers or merely curious consumers, who visit it in search of information. Out of these 900, only 100 effectively share a tribal connection. These 100 individuals want to connect, share personal information and even organise meetings and, in order to do so, use the forum on a daily basis. They know each other's families and consider themselves as friends, and commonly use the word "family" to describe their relation, as we shall see later.

In this study, we will analyse the existing bond between these tribe members, as well as their relation to the company. The innovative and pioneering nature of this car has been a connecting element between the tribe members. When launched on the market, the car was met by considerable scepticism. In fact, doubts about the innovative system and advantages of this model can still be observed today. This disbelief has played a unifying role, as it increased the proximity among owners, who joined together for the same goal: to defend the car. The emotional connection of this tribe was found to be based on a shared passion for this specific car. So, it is important to think on how much individuals can be brought together by a brand car, which seems to be the only element they all have in common.

### **Tribal Values and Rituals**

On the basis of our interviews, we were able to identify three clear values that were common to the tribe members interviewed. First, we frequently heard that the choice to buy this hybrid model was related to environmental concerns. A vehement care about nature and its sustainability were already present in the individuals' minds before the purchase. The car is only a purchasing decision taken in conformity with that thought. These **environmental worries** extended into other consumption choices, as we can confirm through sentences such as:

"Of course driving no car is better for the environment; as that is not possible, we chose a car that respects it." (Informant 4)

"All these persons have in common a huge respect and communion with environment." (Informant 1)

"The car starts to command us in the matter of spending less; this saving happened first in driving but is now in all other aspects of our daily life. Prius drives us and not the opposite." (Informant 3)

Besides the ecological concern, the informants also mentioned a kind of **peace of spirit** that could be extended to driving, as expressed in the statements:

"We have pleasure in driving it." (Informant 2)

"It's so easy to drive it; driving doesn't have to be a stressful thing." (Informant 4)

Finally, the spirit of **defence of the car** against the initial disbelief it encountered, was also referred to as a unifying factor and assumed value in the interviews:

"There are few of us, and the initial lack of faith around this car brought us together." (Informant 2)

"We're all together in the same goal; when something wrong is said about Prius in the media, of course we take action at the same instant; we need to clear people's minds." (Informant 3)

These three topics can be considered the values of the tribe, unique to the group and acting as a linking bond between members.

**Rituals** are a tribe's expression of shared beliefs and social belonging (Segalen, 1998). A tribe relies on rituals to express its existence and sustain its membership, as they help to establish and sustain every lasting social relationship. In order to perform their function as a social connection, rituals need to be supported in various ways: these can include the use of sacred or cult objects, ritual clothing, the existence of sacred or ceremonial places, magical or ritual words, idols, icons and sacred images (Cova & Cova, 2002). Where Prius tribal rituals are concerned, two were identified. The first is the use of a small sticker that members place in the back of their car, with the name, logo and website of Prius PT, the online forum created about Prius in Portugal. Stickers have two main objects: identifying tribe members and also advertising the forum – both to those who have a Prius but have not joined yet, and also to those who don't. The second ritual identified was the act of waving, signalling with the car lights or even stopping to talk when passing other Prius owners.

"Stickers are our visiting card, a way of saying 'I belong here [to the tribe] and I'm proud of that'." (Informant 1)

"It's really funny. When we pass another Prius on the road; we wave to each other, blow the horn and, if we have time, stop and talk." (Informant 4)

"I immediately look at the back of the car; if it has the sticker, it's one of ours". (Informant 3)

### **Other important issues on a tribe**

Some important tribal characteristics were identified in this tribe. Indeed, it is possible to identify a sense of **hierarchy**. This was confirmed not only by the leader, who agrees with that status, but also by other informants' comments about his role. His motivation to form this movement and willingness to take the first step in contacting other members position him as a leader

among the tribe. He is aware not only of his influence on other members, but also that the tribe respects and recognises his status, as we can see by the following statements:

“Yes, I know I have influence on others’ opinion and that’s why I try to be more careful about what I say. But I always stayed true to myself and said what I think.” (Informant 1)

As defined by Godin (2008), the leader is a key element of the tribe, as leaders don’t exist without a tribe but, also, a tribe can’t exist without a leader. One of the most recognised characteristics of leadership is charisma. A leader is someone who challenges the status quo and involves others in that curiosity for change. It’s about bringing something new to people; something that makes them feel that it was always right but hasn’t been done so far. In this panorama, the leader is a visionary, offering others a vision of something that could exist but hasn’t yet.

Indications of **tribal connectivity** and support were also registered, with the term “family” coming out in almost all the interviews. As a matter of fact, there is a strong feeling of proximity between tribe members, which appears as something natural and inherent to the forum, but also as something desirable for all of the members. Meetings were referred to as an important way of providing this proximity, as informants expressed strong motivation to engage with other members.

“Meetings allow us to know other members and their families. We are so comfortable with each others that we are, ourselves, an enlarged family.” (Informant 4)

“We are a group of friends, it has created a connection. We have a lot of intimacy and meetings help to maintain it.” (Informant 3)

In order to ensure this personal connection, and as a proof that tribe members explicitly want this proximity, tribe has some participation rules. In fact, one of the forum’s **rules** is related to the establishment of a minimum of posts (one in each six months), to make sure people do indeed want to belong to the forum and interact with other participants. Someone who doesn’t interact with the rest of community during this period is automatically banned by the system.

“I want this to be a live community; we don’t want to be a lot of persons who don’t interact. If you want to be a part of this family, you have to communicate. There is no place here for those who don’t do so.” (Informant 1)

A strong **sense of pride** was also observed to stem from belonging to this tribe.

“I am proud of saying I belong here.” (Informant 3)

“I know people are proud of this and I am proud of that feeling.” (Informant 1)

As it is normal in tribal contexts, **word of mouth** has special relevance. In this specific case, word-of-mouth power is increased by sellers' low knowledge of the car. As a result, word of mouth was intensified among consumers.

"We know that information shared in the forum is taken into serious consideration. That's why we need to be careful about it." (Informant 1)

"The seller doesn't know enough about the car. As it is not easy to understand I imagine it's also not easy for them to explain. So a lot of people come to us looking for answers." (Informant 3)

Firms can benefit a lot from the identification of tribalism in relations with consumers. When this involvement between both parties reaches the tribal level, there are many advantages to be found. From what we have seen, we may summarise some key features that allow us to characterise a tribe (see Table 1).

Table 1. Key features that characterise a tribe

Key features	
Values	Sense of Pride
Rituals	Leader
Hierarchy	Word of mouth
Connectivity	

It is therefore imperative that, after recognising the tribe's features as as those listed above, the firm commits to the tribe, supporting it effectively. With our second research question, we intend to help to respond to that challenge on how can a firm support the tribe in order to capitalize from it.

## 5.2 The firm capitalization on the tribe

Consumers build tribes, with or without firms. The challenge to firms nowadays is to work with and for the tribe. This concern arises because the growing power of tribes has led firms to approach them in a different way. Rather than being against a tribe, they must learn how to recognise, legitimate and support it. By doing this, and committing to tribes, firms can take advantages of tribes' existence.

We propose a model of commitment between the firm and the tribe, in which different levels of commitment are defined. We then relate these different levels to the resources used by the firm and the benefits obtained. It is important to note that these stages conceptualise an

evolving process of commitment. The commitment between firm and tribe is established at Stage 3, but there is no dependence between the stages, in that the commitment is stronger in Stage 3 than in Stage 2 and, subsequently, in Stage 1. A description of these three stages is given in Table 2, with examples of resources that can be used by firms at each stage in order to establish a commitment to the tribe.

Table 2. Stages of commitment between the firm and the tribe

Stages	Resources Involved
<b>1) Support the tribe:</b> Provide resources for its existence	Provision of economic support Promotion of convivial atmosphere among potential tribe members Provision of physical space for tribe to meet
<b>2) Feed the passion:</b> Allow the feeling of “being special”	Recognition of tribe’s actions and status Provision of first-hand information Giving special benefits to tribe members
<b>3) Integrate the tribe:</b> Integration in both online/offline strategic marketing policies	Using important tribe members as opinion leaders inside the tribe (such as tribe leader) Using tribe members as brand ambassadors outside the tribe Using tribe as a barometer of product satisfaction and acceptance

**1) Support the tribe.** Firms can commit to a tribe by providing resources that support its existence. This support can be given in order to attempt to work on the tribe’s creation, but it also can be given if the tribe already exists, by allowing it to flourish. Resources such as economic support, physical space for tribe members to get together or even organising social meetings are examples of support to the tribe provided by the firm. In fact, providing a convivial atmosphere among potential tribe members seems to be a very important step, a kind of incubator that induces a greater desire among people to get together. This situation was observed in the Prius case study. When Prius – 2G was launched, only 50 first-generation cars had been sold. To ensure that this did not happen again with car’s new generation, Toyota developed a strong promotional campaign to improve the awareness and lower any suspicion about Prius. One of the several actions conducted during this campaign was the organisation of a meeting with Prius buyers. This meeting may have helped the creation of the tribe, as we can see by the statement of Informant 5, a member of Toyota’s institutional communication department:

“Different public relation forces may have helped the tribe’s creation; it was easier for them [tribe members] to get together, as we started motivating a connecting point provided by the organisation of meetings among buyers.” (Informant 5)

Tribe members seem to agree with the previous idea, as can be observed in the following statement:

“Yes, it is possible that the meeting organised by Toyota had created a kind of spark among us, inspiring us to connect.” (Informant 4)

It is important to clarify one point concerning tribal support: a tribe's autonomy is one of its most important characteristics. In order to build a good relationship between the firm and the tribe, it is important that firms keep two essential aspects in consideration: support should not collide with the tribe, and some institutional distance between the two needs to be kept. In fact, the more indirect and invisible the help, the better it is. This situation was verified in this case study by the following statements:

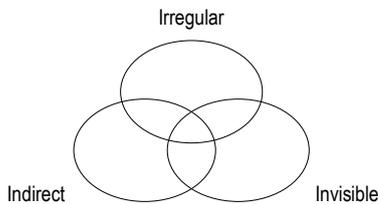
"There is Toyota's position and there is ours; they are different things and that's how we want this to be."  
(Informant 1)

"We always had the choice to support the tribe in an indirect way. We are present, but not in a visible way. Most of all, we respect who they are." (Informant 5)

The whole tribe doesn't need to be aware of all the details of this help; it just needs to feel supported. The leader is an important gateway at this point; communicating with the tribe through him creates a personal and credible channel.

The firm must be a non-intrusive enabler of these personal expressions (Cova & Pace, 2006). We argue that support to the tribe should be characterised by the 3 I's rule: it must be invisible, indirect and irregular (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. The 3 I's rule



This support must be invisible to avoid tribe members feeling that the tribe is losing its autonomy; irregular because the firm should support the tribe but also respect its privacy and freedom of choice; and indirect – not all the tribe members need to know exactly the kind of support provided by the firm. In this context the leader plays an important role as a gateway between the tribe and the firm. The most desirable place for a firm's support to be is in the middle, where the three circles cross each other.

**2) Feed the passion.** The second stage of commitment between a firm and a brand refers to feeding the passion of the tribe for a certain product and/or service, by allowing the feeling of “being special” among tribe members. Recognising the tribe’s actions and status is a simple way of feeding the passion, as tribes want their effort to be recognised by the firm. This desire for recognition was observed in this case study, as we can see in the statements of informants described below:

“If we are defending this car against everything and everyone, we also want to be recognised.” (Informant 1)

“This relation [firm-tribe] is good for everyone: for us, because we like what we do and are recognised, and for the firm, which has a lot of free communication.” (Informant 1)

Besides this tribe’s recognition, there are other ways in which a firm can feed the passion of the tribe. Providing tribe members with first-hand information, or giving them special benefits from other buyers are just a few examples. In this case study, we also observed that the firm takes some actions in order to encourage the feeling of “being special” among tribe members, as can be verified in the following statements:

We feel they [firm] care about us.” (Informants 2 and 3)

“They [firm] organised a meeting for Prius owners. It is something that wasn’t done for other car models. It makes us feel special.” (Informant 3)

As emphasised by Cova, tribes of cyberenthusiasts want to take part in a firm’s decisions, and have the power to do so. Firms should therefore feed the passion of tribes for a certain product and/or service, in order to emphasise that participation.

**3) Integrate the tribe.** The third stage of commitment refers to firms’ integration of tribes in their online and offline strategic policies. Tribal members are true ambassadors, who defend the brand with a deep level of commitment. Firms can take advantages of tribe members’ loyalty, integrating them into their marketing policies, by using them as representatives of the brand inside and outside the tribe. Inside the tribe, firms can communicate with tribal members using attractive and well known key-figures, such as the tribe leader, who will work as referents. This way, firms can reach tribal consumers without being received with distrust, as they are doing it through an important gateway of access – its leader. Therefore, the firm should cultivate a close

and confident relationship with the tribe leader, a situation which could be observed in this case study:

“We try to maintain a special relation with all the members but, as that is impossible, he [Informant 1] can be an easier way to access the tribe”. (Informant 5)

“When I receive feedback or information, I share it with the other members in our forum.” (Informant 1)

Outside the tribe, firms should use these special ambassadors among potential buyers, in online and offline moments. Using tribe members in advertising campaigns is an example of this integration, because consumers want to hear about the brand from other consumers, not from firms. In offline contexts, tribal members should be invited to brand events, not only as participants but also as speakers.

Tribes can also be integrated in the strategic policies of the firm by acting as a barometer of product satisfaction and acceptance. Tribal consumers experience the brand in a strong and deep way. Therefore, they know not only the brand's strengths but also the less positive aspects that could be developed in a different way by the firm, thus generating better results. Firms cannot create meaning this way alone; they do it in partnership with tribes of active, loyal and influential consumers, who act as an acceptance barometer of the product or service. This situation was observed in this case study, as we can see in some informants' statements:

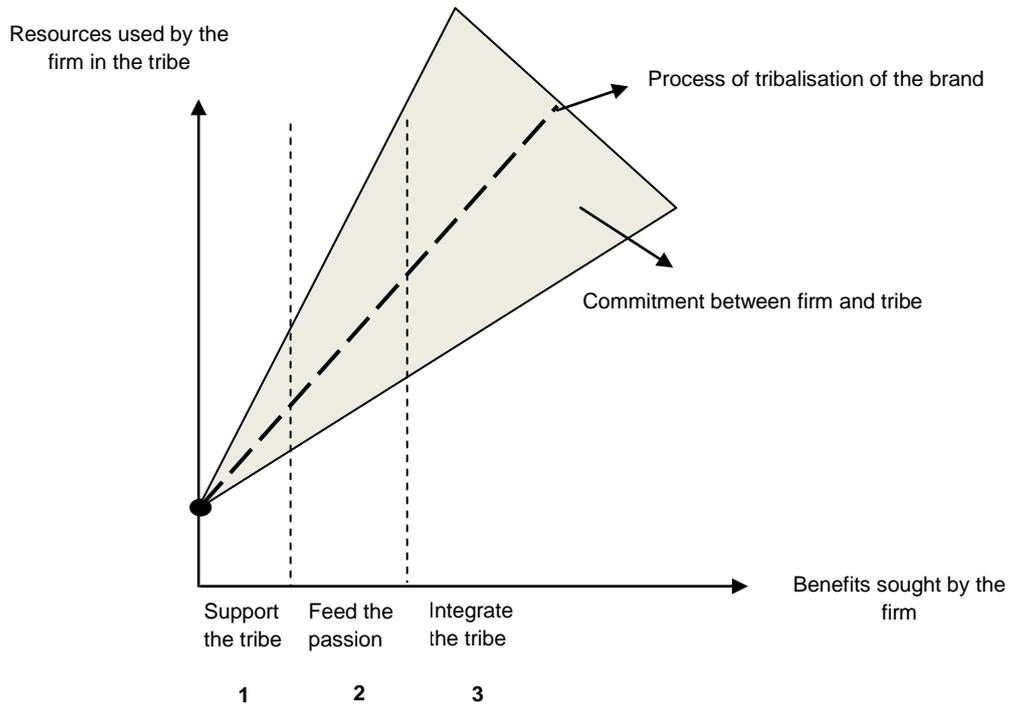
“By speaking to them [tribe members], we can take note of possible failures in this model, and try to correct them in future models”. (Informant 5)

“We give our opinion about the car's advantages and disadvantages, so Toyota can make improvements in next models.” (Informant 2,4)

This third stage is the one that involves a higher commitment between firm and tribe, as both are working together in the product creation and development, for their mutual good.

Up to now, we have taken a close look at each level of commitment between firm and tribe. From now on, we will focus on the relation between commitment of firm-tribe and the tribalisation of the brand, as explained in Figure 5.

Figure 5. The different levels of firm-tribe commitment and the tribalisation of the brand



Tribalisation is regarded as a process that implies commitment on the firm's side, as has been argued so far. In that process, the more resources the firm devotes to the tribe, the more benefits it is likely to obtain. By this line of thought, firms can gain more advantage from a tribe's existence if their commitment is situated at Stage 3. Therefore, the stronger the commitment, through the assortment of resources assigned to the tribe, the higher, also, is the tribalisation of the brand. In turn, the higher the tribalisation of the brand, the more the firm can benefit from this relation.

The apex is not centered in the figure. This is because, at the starting point, firms are already applying resources to tribes, but they still haven't received any benefit from that investment. As the investment of resources starts growing, and so the commitment, the firms start to usufruct from that investment.

## 6. FINDINGS

From this case study, it was possible to verify that tribes are new players with an important role in the marketing context. They are groups of connected consumers who share a passion for a product or service, establishing a connection with other consumers with the same needs,

preferences and affections, through a highly effective word-of-mouth process. In tribes, consumers share valuable qualitative information, in a natural and spontaneous way, which is nurtured by a passion.

We believe that the tribalisation of brands is the result of an evolution in the way firms are approaching consumers. This happens because consumers experience the brand. Therefore, they know its strengths and weaknesses, they have ideas on how firms could do things better, and ideas for new products that firms could develop. In brief, consumers know what firms can do differently in order to succeed. More than establishing a relationship with consumers, firms need to create strong bonds with them by creating or strengthening tribal atmospheres. The Prius case study shows that clearly, as the firm committed with a group of consumers that are truly ambassadors of the brand. By committing with consumers who have a strong emotional connection with a brand, firms can take advantage of a tribe's existence and grow in the market. However, it is important to be clear that only after a period of investment will positive results start to surface. Firms need to monitor, activate and respond to, but especially learn from, tribes.

This exploratory research contributes to a better understanding of tribal relationships and offers firms a deeper insight into tribal dynamics. There can be no doubt that tribes are now a part of the social landscape. In order to engage with a tribe and get competitive results, firms need to move from talking to consumers to talking through consumers.

### **Limitations and further research**

Only one tribe was studied, owing to economic and time constraints. Considering the fact that results are dependent on social and geographical contexts, findings should not be generalisable to other tribes.

This research has identified the following areas that require further investigation:

- It would be relevant if future studies could investigate the different levels of brand affection within a tribe.
- Future investigations should also take into consideration not only the study of multiple tribes but also different types of tribes, such as, for example, tribes created around low-involvement products. Another suggestion is related to tribes created around a service, as the main focus of tribal studies has so far been on products.

- Future research shouldn't forget, as well, the sustainability of a tribe. Will a tribe's future be in danger when the connection to the product starts to decrease for some reason? Adapting this question to the specific case of Prius, what will happen to the tribe when all cars become hybrid and when having one will no longer be synonymous with difference and therefore regarded with disbelief? Studying how a tribe and its relations can be affected by some type of change in the main product that led to its creation would also be a good starting point for future research.

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