Consumer Tribes

Bernard Cova • Robert V. Kozinets • Avi Shankar

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The Stockholm Brats' consumption ethos is about carefully assembling, displaying, and using various consumption objects to create just the right ambience of being 'in the know', or perhaps being cool (Nancarrow, Nancarrow, and Page, 2002) even though they would scoff at such a description themselves. If one had to settle for one term to describe the cultural organization of social logic by which the Brats operate, it would have to be 'style'. Style, or at least the Brats' specific rendition of this ephemeral quality, is what holds the *linking value* (Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2001, 2002) around which this specific market tribe congregates. In order to grasp how a specific rendition of style gets imbued with linking value, the chapter emphasizes how the community continually uses external factors from media and popular culture to structure its internal social organization. The purpose of this chapter is to add to the recent theoretical developments of the tribal aspects of consumption by looking at why and how certain consumption objects and activities have the potential to exert linking value, and how this linking value is valorized by its recognition of sources external to the specific tribe. In explicating this, the concept of subcultural capital will be introduced.

The outline of the chapter is as follows. First, the chapter will be positioned theoretically within consumer culture theory on communities and consumption. Then, the concept of subcultural capital will be explicated by drawing from relevant literature in consumer research and the social sciences more broadly. Next, the fieldwork and the sites underlying the empirical study will be described. Following, the ways in which the Brats embody both elements from popular culture and contemporary media commentary on their lifestyle by turning it into subcultural capital will be illustrated. In doing this, a number of illuminating examples of how the Brats are portrayed, chronicled, criticized, and debated in media and other cultural texts will be provided.

Theoretical positioning

Many studies within consumer research have hitherto focused on establishing whether it is feasible to talk of market-driven communities or subcultures. A theoretical common ground for this research is Maffesoli's (1996) work on neo-tribalism. Maffesoli looks at how the macro-forces of globalization and post-industrial socio-economic transformation have eroded the traditional bases of sociality. In the wake following this erosion, a dominant ethos of radical individualism has arisen, oriented around a perpetual search for personal distinction and autonomy in lifestyle choices. In Maffesoli's view, consumers respond to these potentially alienating and isolating conditions by forming more ephemeral collective identifications that are grounded in common lifestyle interests and leisure pursuits (cf. Cova, 1997; Maffesoli, 1996).

Prior research on community and consumption has either focused on a particular brand as the tie that binds consumers together (e.g., Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), certain consumption activities that serve this unifying function (e.g., Arnould and Price,

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Avi Shankar is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing and Consumer Research, in the School of Management at the University of Bath, England. He has eclectic research interests that can be broadly subsumed within three categories: critical analyses of contemporary consumer culture; consumer identity projects; and tribal consumption. Whilst the holy grail of the *Journal of Consumer Research* has thus far eluded him, he lives in hope. Meanwhile his ramblings can be found in, amongst others, the *European Journal of Marketing, Consumption, Markets and Culture, Marketing Theory* and the *Journal of Marketing Management*. When not writing these articles that no one seems to read, he is fully occupied with keeping his own tribe in order and has a keen interest in the production and consumption of vegetables and herbs, foraging for wild food in the valleys surrounding his riverside cottage and cooking the results of his exploits.

Stephen Treanor was one of the shining lights of the class of 2004! He achieved a 1st class degree in Marketing and Sociology at Stirling University, Scotland, prior to an MSc in Applied Social Research. His work has been published in the journal *Finanza Marketing e Produzione*. He is currently in the market for a post-graduate studentship and would welcome any offers.

Part I Conceptual foundations

1

Tribes, Inc.: the new world of tribalism

Bernard Cova, Robert V. Kozinets and Avi Shankar

Introduction

You hold in your hands a book that spans current thought about the role of the tribal in contemporary commercial society. Its chapters cut across the continents ranging from the philosophical to the grounded, from critical conjecture to ethnographic evidence, sampling a range of tribal identities, activities and practices along the way. In this chapter, we seek to add another conceptual piece to the contemporary jigsaw puzzle that is the current world of tribal consumption by considering some of the powerful tensions between commercial culture and communal collectivities that this book's topic and its chapters raise.

Consumer Tribes, the title of this book, is difficult and problematic. In the first place, the groups of people we examine in this book are doing far more than what is commonly glossed by the terms 'consumer' and 'consumption'. In common parlance and dictionary definitions, consumers are those who 'use up', 'destroy' or 'deplete' economic goods. But the Consumer Tribes in the chapters of this book are doing far more than that. They do not consume things

without changing them; they cannot 'consume' a good without it becoming them and them becoming it; they cannot 'consume' a service without engaging in a dance with the service provider, where the dance becomes the service. Participatory culture is everywhere.

No doubt there are some people who may take exception to the creativity and agency ascribed to consumers in this book's chapters. For a start they may say the term 'consumer' has become naturalized and normalized, not just within everyday business speak but also in everyday political speak too. From this view, 'people' have been turned into 'consumers' and are passive victims of the current, dominant mode of the capitalist system – an ideology of neo-liberalism – and its global, corporate juggernauts. To be sure, Marxian inspired theories of hegemony and ideology, although increasingly out of favour these days even within sociological and cultural studies circles, are an important addition to the critical examination of contemporary business practice. Marxian concepts such as commodity fetishism, reification, and commodification still provide perceptive insights for our understanding of a market society. But this passive absorption model of consumers is not what we see in the chapters of this book. Active and enthusiastic in their consumption, sometimes in the extreme, tribes produce a range of identities, practices, rituals, meanings, and even material culture itself. They re-script roles, twist meanings, and shout back to producers and other groups of people while they fashion their own differentiation strategies. They both absorb and resist the pre-packaged, off-the-shelf, brand-and-product meanings of marketers.

So, in the first instance, let's be clear that Consumer Tribes rarely consume brands and products – even the most mundane ones – without adding to them, grappling with them, blending them with their own lives and altering them. Consumer Tribes *do* things. Consumers are people, yes, but people who live in a specific social and historical situation. This places them in a co-dependent relationship with commercial culture, one where industrial and post-industrial information economies create not only things, but critical elements of cultural, social, and self-identity, and where those identities are at both the bottom and the top of the proverbial economic–industrial–political pyramid. So let's be content for the moment in stating that consumers are consumers primarily in that they take commercial identities as important aspects of themselves and their collectives, that they use these identities to relate to themselves, to other people, and to the world around them through lenses that incorporate a vast range of commercial and commercially produced pursuits, objectives and definitions of the self.

And although it is currently in vogue, the term 'tribe' opens up yet another a hornet's nest of unwelcome associations. Perhaps most alluring of all is the notion that by calling a phenomenon 'tribal' we have somehow explained it. Like a semantic undertow, Consumer Tribes constantly draws us back to a Rousseauian version of contemporary society: a primitivist longing for better bygone days; a nested and natural nostalgia for a more pristine and closer world, where nature enclosed and emplaced humanity; where small kin-like groups of people bore tighter social bonds and loving links to the Earth;

where people were unburdened of repressive social logics and expressed themselves freely and in harmony; where daily life was openly charged with natural animal sexuality; where humans were free to breathe in the animist and transcendent spirit of the world; and finally where people were free to find their True Selves.

Jacques Barzun (2000) reminds us that the idealist vision of the past, of a place of powerful primitive retreat, is a constant cultural component of the Modern Age (for marketer's take on the retro, see Brown, 2001; Brown and Sherry, 2003; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry, 2003; Cova and Cova, 2002). In this volume, Robin Canniford and Avi Shankar's chapter on surf culture examines the construction and allure of the tribal metaphor. They identify how colonial discourse constructed surf culture through tribal tropes and later how commercial culture re-appropriated this tribal symbolism to imbue products and services with a sense of 'otherness,' excitement and danger. This otherness, the idea of a wild or *natural* human state to which we can return, or at least taste a little bit, is a myth whose potency has diminished little over the past 200 years. It refers us to some very important aspects of the phenomena we study here – the hunger of community, expression, transcendence, a natural state (see e.g., Goulding, Shankar, and Elliott, 2002) – and yet it is certainly not the whole story – the Consumer Tribes in this book are less rigid and fixed than their anthropological counterparts.

For the past decade or so, and inspired in part by the application of the theories of one the contributors to this book, Michel Maffesoli (see his chapter in this book), a new understanding of Consumer Tribes has emerged within marketing and consumer research theory. This perspective rejects an atomistic, overly individualistic, information processor view of people as individuals who are to some extent sealed off and separated from their experiential worlds – in short, assumptions underlying the type of research that still dominates the text books, journal articles, and LISREL models of our discipline.

Rather, a variety of studies from both a North American anthropological tradition and a European micro-sociological tradition accept as axiomatic that human life is essentially social. Social life is a rich, complex, kaleidoscopic confusion that cannot ever be represented by 'causes' and 'effects'. Such studies reject analyses of market-based phenomena through the imposition of abstract modernist structures (class, age, gender, and so on), what we can call a top down modernist sociology, in favour of what might be termed a bottom up postmodern sociology. In this view, the building blocks of human social life are not to be found in abstract categories applied to the analysis of social life, but in the multiplicity of social groupings that we all participate in, knowingly or not, through the course of our everyday lives. These *tribus* or little masses (popularized as neo-tribes) are fundamental to our experience of life in general. They differ from traditional tribes in an anthropological sense in one important way; we belong to many little tribes and not one tribe. From this perspective the consumption of cultural resources circulated through markets (brands, leisure experiences, and so on) are not the *sine qua non* of contemporary life, rather, they facilitate what are – meaningful social relationships. As

Bernard Cova (1997) has argued the 'links' (social relationships) are more important than things (brands, products, experiences, ideas).

So it's clear to say that when taken as some sort of explanation of contemporary practice, Consumer Tribes, our title, obscures more than it reveals. As Henry Jenkins (e.g., Jenkins, 2006) teaches us, our mass mediated world is filled with participatory personalities whose interests coalesce with commercial culture, such as in his example of consumers' interest in following an American Idol candidate blending extemporaneously and temporarily into tribal affiliations with Coca Cola bottlers around the world. These are relationships of passion and, as Marianna Torgovnick (1996) reminds us, the allure of the primitive, of the tribal, lies in its ability to arouse our desires and passions.

In this chapter, we seek to delve deeper into the rotating cultural currents swirling around these ideas of consumption and production, primitivism and postmodernism, the commercial and the communal, nature and culture, past and present, oppression and liberation, conformity and transcendence, and to see what hybrid forms are born within them. As our headings, we offer statements about Consumer Tribes that form four coherent themes running through the chapters of this book: that Consumer Tribes are activators, double agents, plunderers, and entrepreneurs (see Figure 1.1). Through example and assertion, this introductory chapter circulates through meanings of consumers and

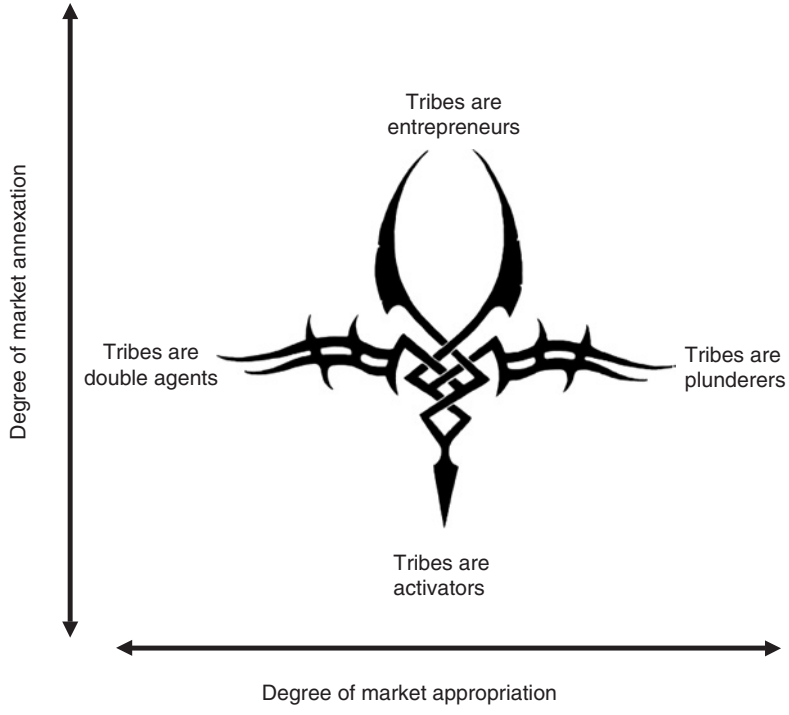

Figure 1.1 Mapping Consumer Tribes.

tribes as it tracks moments of resistance, co-construction, and transcendence, and finds within them new ways to see the relation of producers consumed, and consumers produced.

In Figure 1.1, we seek to encapsulate the various identities and associated practices that Consumer Tribes adopt. These range along two continua. The horizontal axis portrays the appropriation axis, the active tendency of Consumer Tribes to poach their creative material from the commercial marketplace, a practice that often gets tribes into trouble. This can range from the minimal appropriation of the double agent identity where, the Tribe enjoys being the target subject, passing on information to brand owners for example, and the distributor of marketplace objects, messages and meanings, to the pirate-like plunderers, who actively play with and shape objects whose rights may belong to other groups, invert and invent meanings, and spread their own messages. On the vertical axis, we have the amount of market annexing or building practices engaged in by the Consumer Tribe. On the low end, this holds the playing-within-the-market identity of the Tribe as an activator, wherein market-based norms and standards are respected, and the Tribe is firmly identified with the role of Consumer. At the high end of the annexation axis is the Consumer Tribe as entrepreneur, actively involved in entering into and expanding the marketplace, on a common footing with commercial producers as a creator of not only cultural and social value, but also economic wealth. Consumer Tribes and their members can move between these different active modalities and identities fluidly, shifting from one form of market interaction to another effortlessly.

Consumer tribes are activators

There are clear tensions revealed by our title of Consumer Tribes. Are people acting in some sense as self-regulating armies of robotic commercial drones or are they vividly alive, dancers on a stage? Are they retreating into an idealized past, or are they intrepid bricoleurs melding and collaging their way through a postmodern present? The reality of course lies somewhere in between these extremes; it is not 'either or' but elements of both. They are players as in performers, as in contestants, as in improvisers, supernumeraries, suzerains, overseers. Play activates. Tribes are activators.

Before we can truly explore these notions of play, we need to grapple for a moment with a question of control and freedom. Many contemporary studies of consumers are structured by a polarizing question. This question asks whether consumption involves consumers choosing between two theoretical alternatives. In one, they let themselves be immersed within and submerged by the system of commercial consumption. In the other alternative, consumers are dodgy dissidents who resist the market.

Based on the vision of Consumer Tribes, we would argue that this dichotomy is a poor representation of what consumption actually entails. Of course, these theoretical positions are not only extreme and ideal-typical but also strongly

marked by notions of power and opposition (Aubenas and Benasayag, 2002) that pose everyday questions in absolutist terms. We, of course, prefer Absolut markets to absolute ones. Embedded in logics of manipulation and control, the lens given by this dichotomous posing blurs the perception that 'consumer experience' is a complex, moment-by-moment, situated occurrence. Lived experience is never simple and binary, but ever-shifting, full of adjustments and hybridizations. To see consumer experience as a choice between slavery and freedom, structure and agency, passivity and rebellion is to use an analytical frame that equates the increasingly subtle techniques of postmodern marketing with the excessive manipulation of consumers.

However, we wish in this volume and beyond to argue for the delineation of ever more subtle, nuanced, dynamic, and complex systems that are at work in the commercial world. In these systems, consumers are not manipulated but engage in tacit compromises (Rémy, 2002). Consumers, in other words, are not näive about living in their commercial–material world: like Madonna, they are commercial–material boys and girls. They know the game plan; they read the playbooks; they know the strategy. Conscious of a partial manipulation, they decide to what extent they will be manipulated and they manipulate too.

Consumers decide to what extent they will appear to be misled, to be truly misled, to remember and to forget, and then mislead, and then manipulate these manipulations in ways that enliven their daily lives and life (Badot and Cova, 2003). 'The neo-consumer model does not involve an individual who has been manipulated and hypnotized but one who is mobile' (Lipovetsky, 2003, p. 88) and can play, often simultaneously, at coupling hyper-commercialization with de-commercialization. What we are trying to understand is a process that lacks subjects, whether companies or consumers. Instead, we should be thinking in terms of processes where subjects like companies and consumers exist within the confines of a situation that no one truly controls. This is play, improvizational play, playing by the rules and playing with the rules, playing with the playbook and the other players, all elements that have been noted as important by several consumer researchers over the last decade (e.g., Deighton, 1992; Deighton and Grayson, 1995; Kozinets, Sherry Jr., Storm, Duhachek, Nuttavuthisit, and DeBerry-Spence, 2004).

The central tensions of consumption and production seem almost to contain within them the links to rituals of resistance and opposition, yet these rituals all too often turn out to be playful, hollow or bereft of real animosity or vigour. This disappoints some (perhaps many) researchers, whose own ideological stands tend to lead them to seek rebellious consumers, activists who will change the system. Yet the dialectics of tribes and tribalism are often equal parts playful and liberatory, a place where struggles against the system are cloaked less in ideologies of resistance and more in identities of liberation. They often take place in the context of a complex social process ever unfolding whose significance lies not in the value of its players' transactions but in the transaction of its play values.

We can see the metaphor of Consumer Tribes as players who activate and enliven a social process of commercial meanings and identity production–consumption. This theme runs strongly through many chapters in this book.

In their chapter on the British Royal Family, Cele Otnes and Pauline Maclaran unpack what seems at first to be obsessive fan behaviour into a tribal reconnection with history and tradition. In this reconnection, the mass media as societal proxy and socially constructionist creator of past and present plays a crucial role. Co-created through these institutional dynamics, followers of the British Royal Family build and play with their own sense of belonging and heritage.

These topsy-turvy liberatory (or were they oppressive?) dynamics of commercial culture are especially evident in the chapter by John Schouten, Diane Martin and James McAlexander. Their chapter charting the evolution of consumption meanings within the Harley-Davidson subculture or tribe questions our extant notions of meanings such as 'freedom' or 'machismo' and then shows how these meanings possess considerable semiotic flexibility when constructed by different social groups. Another important and very complementary look at the plasticity of masculine meanings is covered in the chapter on metrosexuality by Diego Rinallo, who looks at industrial- and consumer-oriented Italian fashion tribes. In notions of oppositional acceptance of mainstream 'hegemonic' masculinity – that constrain male action but also give metrosexuals something to individualize from and resist against – this chapter demonstrates how semiotic ambiguity underscores and supports the playful tribal venture. Meanings of masculinity and femininity are related fluidly to fashion and both tribalize into smaller groups and detribalize, as smaller group tastes become mainstreamed for wider acceptability.

In yet another related chapter, Jacob Östberg shows how the Stockholm Brat's tribalism is about carefully assembling, displaying and using various consumption objects to create just the right ambience of coolness. All of these chapters offer us a critical take on consumption meanings that illustrate beautifully how important a deep contextualization of meaning is when we seek to understand particular Consumer Tribes, with their immense proclivity for accepting/resisting play and for acting within a complex social process as activators.

Consumer tribes are double agents

Like Walt Whitman's metaphor of self, but literally true, tribes contain multitudes. It is no wonder then that they are constantly contradicting themselves; they are paradox incarnate. We emphasize with this construct the important limitations that come with viewing all tribal or communal consumer behaviour as oppositional or resistant. Many collective experiences tend to re-appropriate products and services from the consumption system without consciously associating any oppositional attitude with this act. For example, there is little opposition in the fannish activities of aficionados who dig up and revive vintage products like old Citroën cars (e.g., *Génération 2 CV*) or pre-war bicycles (e.g., *Confrérie des 650*). In their own way, these groups are imbuing such products with meanings and usages that differ from the ones they originally conveyed. They use them as physical forms that are like *tabula rasa* – but not quite, as the patina of age has not been completely worn clean of meaning – and are made new again by the inscription of additional meanings. Building

meaning through shared experiences and emotions constitutes a daily episode in the creation, consolidation, and preservation of a communitarian sentiment within these groups.

Moreover, certain re-appropriation actions are relatively spontaneous in nature. Consider the way that 'street persons' have hijacked Bavaria's deluxe beer, an 8.6 beverage that has now become a 'street beer'. Or the horror felt by deluxe champagne manufacturers Moët and Chandon when the working class 'Chav' subculture appropriated their luxury brand and bent its meanings. Another example is offered by 'flash mobs' (spontaneous get-togethers for no ostensible purpose; see Rheingold, 2003) where email round robins are used to organize gatherings of individuals with no shared past or future but who are happy to temporarily invade some commercial premises on the spur of the moment. For example, such a 'flash mob' materialized in a Rome bookshop. Between 200 and 300 people crowded the aisles, asking shopkeepers for non-existent books. They broke into a round of spontaneous applause. Then they dispersed. In the same neo-Situationist vein, Reclaim the Streets (www.rts.gn.apc.org) is an anti-capitalist movement whose aim is for 'local social–ecological revolution to transcend hierarchical and authoritarian society'. They use tactics like Street Football to protest outside gas (or petrol) stations. However, in an interesting twist the idea of Street Football has been hijacked by the largest lager brand in the UK, Carling, and featured in their latest television advertisement. What all of these actions have in common is that they are experiences that help products or services to transcend their status as mere merchandise, mere things. The consumption object becomes the agent or the double agent.

The experience of transcendence enables people to enact a ritual of decommercialization even as they continue to operate within a market framework, that is, to work within the staging that brands and companies have built. In Dougie Brownlie, Paul Hewer and Stephen Treanor's chapter on Car Cruisers we see the creative ways that commercial culture, in this case that surrounding cars, is re-integrated into the lives of Car Cruisers. Moreover, the staging of The Cruise temporarily invades spaces, like the deserted car parks of out-of-town shopping centres at night. In this way the predominantly young men are able to express their creativity and shared identity providing them with a sense of community and belonging.

The success of a beer called Pabst Blue Ribbon (PBR) is also significant in this respect.[1] Since the 1970s, this venerable but watery brand, a flag carrier for Pabst breweries, had struggled in the US markets. It hit its nadir in 2001 when fewer than 1 million barrels were sold, 90 per cent below the 1975 peak. All of a sudden, sales began to explode, with growth reaching 5.3 per cent in 2002. Even more significant is the fact that Pabst Blue Ribbon (PBR to its fans) is omnipresent in San Francisco, New York or Chicago's trendy bars today. PBR is now the fifth biggest seller in Portland, America's capital of micro-breweries, right behind giants like Coors Light, Budweiser, Bud Light and Corona.

[1] Based on the data published in 22 June 2003, *The New York Times Magazine* and October 2003 *Business Digest*, No. 134.

This breakthrough is all the more remarkable because it owes little to marketing done by the company that owns PBR. Pabst has done very little advertising over the past two decades, operating as it does in a market where giants like Budweiser or Miller think nothing of spending tens of millions of dollars to increase market share. So how can we explain PBR's sudden return to popularity? The most interesting thesis is that, paradoxically, the absence of marketing around the product may have contributed to its success. By the late 1990s, PBR was suffering from poor distribution, a cheap reputation and an almost see-through image. These traits, associated with the unfounded rumour of Pabst's impending bankruptcy, may have contributed to the beer's being adopted by so-called alternative circles, such as New York bike couriers, who inscribed their own meanings on the brand. Pabst was so out it was in. So uncool it became cool.

Cool people, *people in the know*, began consuming PBR without Pabst's executives having strategically targeted or even envisioned the possibility of them drinking it. Because the brewery was originally based in Milwaukee, and the Wisconsin brewery later shut down, PBR's fans view their consumer behaviour as a gesture of solidarity with workers from America's heartlands. Part of the story may be an act of resistance to the market economy and unfettered globalization. Part of it might be, as Alex Wipperfürth (2005) argues, sheer dumb luck, the 'serendipity' of having your brand be at the right place at the right time with the right set of (tired, square, or non) meanings. The key for Pabst was not their marketing of the brand, but their not marketing of it.

Faced with this re-appropriation by consumers, Pabst's executives (surprisingly enough, or perhaps with only the savvy that comes from being a commercial giant like Miller) developed a marketing strategy diametrically opposed to the customary managerial recipe for a fast moving consumer product. The new strategy is based on no aggressive marketing, no new packaging, no widescale media campaign and no spectacular contracts with sports or music stars. Instead, Pabst is to have a low profile, as discrete a presence as possible in underground circles, plus a few hundreds micro-projects like small mountain biking competitions held on vacant lots, point-of-sales distributions of badges or tee-shirts, financial support for local musicians, and so on.

A cynic might say that this low-key strategy is intended to help Pabst fly under the collective cultural radar, to make people forget, or at least ignore, that Pabst's Wisconsin workers were all fired during the 1990s when the brewery delocalized to Texas. At the same time, it would be wrong to view the strategy as an example of contradiction, or even worse, as a manipulation. The beer's success is much more strongly rooted in a rejection of aggressive marketing than it is in the distraction away from a corporate social responsibility reckoning. Above all, PBR's anti-capitalist image has been entirely formulated by consumers themselves, and it would be difficult for them to complain now if this image does not correspond entirely to reality. All they can do is ignore the reality, as long as the company does not remind them of it. This will be their compromise with the commercial world.

These consumers will have been complicit with, but not tricked by, the way PBR's current image was built. In short, they are not trying to escape the market (Kozinets, 2002a) but to play with it. And this play has magical overtones. 'Re-enchantment occurs through distancing consumption and production from the structuring productivity and rational rules normally in effect . . . as if consumption, freed from its normal and adult status as a duty, can return to playfulness; the material world can become seat of the sacred again; consumption can become (re)ensouled' (Kozinets, 2002a, p. 32). Consumer Tribes breathe magic breath into dead and dying things, but they also suck the life from thriving brands. They work both sides.

The metaphor Consumer Tribes as Double Agents runs through Clive Nancarrow and Pamela Nancarrow's chapter on how Seagram, the world's largest alcoholic drinks company tried to understand the 'cool' people of a 'cool' inner city area of London. The dance between 'producers' and consumers' casts the cultural intermediaries, the cool people, in an uneasy relationship, caught between the narcissism of being identified as 'cool', yet potentially tainted because of their association with and bit-part in the marketing process – the identity tension between being a sell out or a cool urbanite.

How to face a world in which Consumer Tribes are Double Agents? We maintain that enlightened marketing professionals should be humble and almost self-effacing in nature. They will be concerned to avoid being guilty of poor taste, to not push too hard, to avoid being seen as trying to structure the experience of consumers and cramp their style, but also to spark and fan the ever-flickering flames of transcendent enchantment. A related theme courses through the chapter on a 'non-marginal, non-stigmatized' brand community by Hope Schau and Al Muñiz. Drawing on autobiographical experience, this ethnography of the Tom Petty fan community focuses on fans' uneasy maintenance of distance, the balancing act of kratophany that, the chapter's authors suggest, distinguishes mainstream devotion from marginalized fanaticism. Although the music and entertainer inspired devotion that felt and looked religious, this was subject to a rational temperance, a reordering of a social world in which the commercial commingles with sacred realm.

Along similar lines are Paul Henry and Marylouise Caldwell's exploration of the Cliff Richard Meeting House. In this chapter, we learn how fans develop a type of para-social relationship with Cliff Richard that involves careful psychic negotiation by tribe members. To be a proper and appropriate fan requires the support of feelings of not being a fan. To avoid losing her soul, the fan of the brand must be a double agent who can both care and critique, think and love, reach and resist at the same time.

Building-related realizations of delicate balance into marketing is light years away from the sledgehammer models that powered the repetitive advertising of the 1980s. Today's marketers monitor their actions, and those undertaken by their company, to ensure that they never fall prey to overkill. Salomon understood this clearly when it wrote a charter stipulating the need to avoid any misdeed that could lead to its being accused of behaving like some vulgar 'world company' (Cova and Cova, 2001). The firm banished all frontline actions

that failed to entail a passion for sports. For example, local competition winners no longer receive mobile phones as their prize but the right to demonstrate their skills to an audience of champions. Salomon has also created new operations instead of transplanting them onto existing ones. A single logic is at work here, one aimed at sustaining the passion for (and practice of) sports through the organization of major meetings for fans' benefit. The company is careful not to co-opt its tribes, ensuring that all communications, including direct mail programs, are as unaggressive as possible. The goal is no longer to highlight Salomon's image in a particular market but to help the company become a fully fledged member of different tribal movements, much as an individual fan can become, with all of the non-commercial connotations that follow from such a positioning.

Consider the opposite example. Companies and their marketers need to avoid affirming their capitalist vocation as loudly and overtly as Frank Riboud, the CEO at Danone, a French food giant, did in 2001 with an ultra-commercial discourse that shocked consumers and torpedoed their attempts to achieve the double-agent's ever-unsteady compromise with large corporations. That year, a management study about possibly cutting back capacity in Danone's European biscuit operations was leaked to the press, where it was described as an ineluctable reality. A consensus hostile to the firm soon took shape and Danone was accused of sacrificing workers to the demands of the financial markets. Frank Riboud said that the restructuring was necessary in order to guarantee the future success of the company and to make it competitive versus major rivals. Riboud was accused of being overly focused on protecting the interests of Danone shareholders. A critical website (www.jeboycottedanone.com) became a huge success, sporting justifications such as '*A boycott is the last remaining form of political action in a society where money has profoundly perverted the democratic system.*' Indeed, once all other forms of interaction are excluded, all that remains for consumers is to revert to the old solution of rejection and politically shaped activism.

Whether in their experiences with Pabst, Salomon, Tom Petty, or with other products like Red Bull or Nutella (Cova and Pace, 2006), consumers are not being misled by marketers and corporations. They are fully aware that what they dealing with are products emanating from companies that operate in a commercial world. At the same time, they are free to choose the extent to which they want to be tricked in their consumption experience. On empowering Web2.0 media like CurrentTV and YouTube, they are free to 'make their own (non-commercial) film' about a product, brand or company, as long as the latter is careful to offer signs that are congruent with this image and do not take on other, more commercial overtones. Walking a tightrope of resistance and passion, the tribe acts as a double agent.

Consumer tribes are plunderers

Tribes are not squeaky clean, by any means. They are often charged with acting like pirates, and are often guilty as charged. Not only are they pirates, but also they are marauders, pillagers, plunderers, hooligans, gangsters and

hijackers. We argue that some of the charged ideas flowing from the polarizing internal contradictions and complexities of Consumer Tribes can help to reveal and delineate more nuanced and dynamic understandings. Two important senses of their leaning towards plundering or 'hijacking are critical here – one academic (de Certeau, 1980) and one pragmatic (Wipperfürth, 2005).

Michel de Certeau's (1980) construct of hijacking followed from his cogitation of the various primitive aspects of consumers over a quarter of a century ago. Today's consumers hijack things in a way that differs from the variant that Situationists used to defend (Vanegeim, 1967), as explained by Michael Borras,[2] an Underground Internet Artist who manages the *Systaime* website (www.systaime.com) which specializes in artistic hijacking: 'The principle underlying the name "Systaime" [*Trans. Note: A title incorporating the root word "aime", meaning love in French*] is the idea that to by-pass a system (an IT system, a political organization, etc.) or to hijack or subvert it, a person must first be in love with it.' We can see in this statement the same ambivalence, the same paradoxical qualities that inform our conception of the Consumer Tribe as a Double Agent. Why would I steal something I didn't care about? Something is only worth plundering if it truly captures the heart.

Some of the same reasoning applied to consumption plunderings happens on a collective basis. For example, activist consumer groups like *The Media Foundation* (which publishes Adbusters; see Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Rumbo, 2002), *The Billboard Liberation Front* and the *No Logo* groupies of Naomi Klein (2000) use their affection for the marketing system to subvert it. *The Media Foundation* produces false advertisements call 'subvertising' and has even started manufacturing and marketing its own brand of anti-brand 'blackspot' shoes. These activist groups are not plentiful or powerful: they are not legion, nor do they necessarily have the support of broad swathes of the general population, even among young persons or web activists. The extreme nature of 'Adbusters' discourse, which tends to revel in revealing corporately sponsored murder, linking America to the world's consumption and environmental ills, and decrying the consolidation of the media industry, is a poor reflection of the complex and contradictory relationship people have to the commercial world and its brands. However, without the extremely intense focus on the ghouls of the corporate world and its dark legions of brands, Adbusters' writers, Naomi Klein, and other activist journalists would have little to write about.

The joy of plundering what one loves is found throughout the chapters of Consumer Tribes, blended inextricably with the joy of creation and origination evident in the chapter by Dave Park, Sameer Deshpande, Bernard Cova and Stefano Pace on the Warhammer tribe. Members of this tribe feel a sense of accomplishment from personally creating figurines, painting them, and assembling warrior replicas. Their research highlights how this tribal production is not freed of structural constraints such as age, gender, and cultures.

The plundering and pillaging processes are evident in Stephen Brown's boisterous chapter on the *Harry Potter* tribe. So passionate are the Potter Tribes

[2]Interview published in *Technikart*, No. 77, November 2003, p. 102.

that, amongst many activities, they write their own stories – hundreds of thousands at the last count – produce their own podcasts, create their own games like Live Action Role Plays, all distributed and mediated via the World Wide Web. As Brown's chapter illustrates, the waltz between brand owners and brand community is often an uneasy one.

Robert Kozinets returns to his roots to examine a related phenomenon in the *Star Trek* world, where *Star Trek* becomes both stolen property and gift. As prosuming productive consumers, *Star Trek* fans have a history of shoplifting the text, then blowtorching their own elements into the mythic mix. The latest and arguably greatest incarnation of this is fans' creation of new episodes of the show, written and starring themselves, broadcast to the world over the Internet. Kozinets theorizes what happens when corporate pull yields to citizen push: the vaunted and vaulted media property opens like a budding flower, becoming wikimedia. The tribe becomes like a hive of active bees, collecting, organizing, creating, reproducing, distributing, making networks, closing deals, being entrepreneurial (as we shall soon see): they become inno-tribes.

The phenomena are related to what the psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron (2003) was demonstrating when he analysed the behaviour of today's teenagers and deduced that modern adolescence manufactures playful individuals, that is, *homini ludens* (Huizinga, 1951). What we have is a playful humanity that disobeys but does not rebel. Instead of confronting things, it bypasses and plunders them. It lacks any illusion of utopia. Plunder and pillage is interesting because it is temporary, a type of bracketing of a tribe just a 'movin' through. Just as the feral participants at Burning Man plunder corporate colours, logos, and codes to welcome people to the 'Black Rock Café' (Kozinets and Sherry, 2005), these people are engaging in dipping and diving into various social worlds, with their various rules and relations to social and market logics endlessly shifting and morphing. Products, brands, companies, cultures, and identities constantly change as one form morphs into another, and those forms are altered individually and collectively shared.

For consumers, plundering may be an act of resistance, but there is little doubt that this resistance has changed form, if not substance, over the past few years. The purpose is no longer to do battle with markets and companies construed as core institutions, but to play around with the markets even as one plays them. This means that confrontation *per se* is not an essential activity. 'We don't need to ask ourselves whether we are free or enslaved . . . since we become completely free once we experience freedom' (Aubenas and Benasayag, 2002, p. 74). In the play spaces of ESPN Zone Chicago, Kozinets et al. (2004, p. 671), found that 'the wills of consumers and producers tend to be far more overlapping, mutual, and interdependent than commonly recognized.'

In other words, plundering is less and less of a conscious, revolutionary countercultural action, and more of an aestheticization of the daily experiences (see Featherstone, 1991). Consumers hijack commercial reality when they work in a group and with relative unawareness of exactly what they are doing, devising a zone of ephemeral and limited autonomy inside of the market system (Desmond, Mc Donagh, and O'Donohue, 2000). It is a *stylistic*

move. In the commercial interstices of temporary autonomous zones (Bey, 1991) and in hypercommunities (Kozinets, 2002a), what is created is not only community, meaning, or matter, but also pop vox, bleeding edge, lead user style, and fashion: art.

For Alex Wipperfürth (2005), this 'brand hijack' occurs when a group of consumers takes a brand away from its marketing professionals in an attempt to enhance its further development. Such brand hijack phenomena are accentuated when interactions with the brand tribe occur on-line (Kozinets, 2002b; O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005). Recent research has highlighted many problems a company can have when interacting with this kind of hard-to-control collective actor whom the net has spontaneously helped to foster and nurture (Broderick, MacLaran, and Ma, 2003). On-line consumers would appear to be more active, participative, resistant, militant, playful, social and communitarian than ever before (Kozinets, 1999). They want to be influential participants in the construction of experiences (Firat and Shultz, 1997). The shared passion that certain consumers have for a cult brand will translate, through a range of collective learning systems, into expertise and competency, imbuing on-line tribes with greater legitimacy in production and marketing matters (O'Guinn and Muñiz, 2005). As a result, companies are finding in this era of collective intelligence that they have to adjust to the presence of tribes comprised of impassioned, united and expert fans. Because of technology, there is a re-balancing of company–consumer power relations occurring on a massive scale, one that has only just begun and some of whose implications we explore further in our next section.

Consumer tribes are entrepreneurs

When we look at a particular act of brand plunder, the re-balancing of power between tribes and companies constitutes little more than a passing phenomenon. It would be easy (and it is easy) to exaggerate the importance of single instances of plunder. But the evidence points to a more dynamic view. Plunder transpires as part of a Consumer Tribe movement that is itself in the midst of a broader process of development. Tribes are poised to become collective actors in the marketplace, much in the same that way that companies already are. The marketing competencies of tribes will soon rival those of companies. Indeed, just as Napster once looked like the Grim Reaper for a bloated and rapacious music industry, so too should the thought of *Harry Potter* fans making and sharing their own games, or *Star Trek* fans producing their own television shows and broadcasting them to the world through the Internet send a chill down every media executive's spine. In other words, we are already at the point where marketing is no longer the reserved domain of companies and corporations, but a set of practices, accesses, codes, and rituals that are available to all communities: this is the re-emergence of marketing 'as the empowering "tool" of the post-consumer (and) would tend to re-establish democracy in a form that is viable – based on the constitution of post-consumer

communities or tribes' (Firat and Dholakia, 2004, p. 27; see also Gabriel and Lang, 1995).

Anders Bengtsson, Jacob Östberg and Dannie Kjeldgaard (2005) provide us with a fascinating case study of subcultural resistance. Their videography and ethnography show how a subculture resists tattooing's commercialization by detailing tribe members' and artists' perception that a boundary exists between the sacred, non-commercial sphere of tattooing and the profane, profit-maximizing realm of the commercial world. What we see at work here is a type of resistance that manifests through limiting the community's entrepreneurial capabilities. By limiting their own commercial capacities, they try to ensure the continued authenticity of a production that is supposed to remain pristine and not be subverted by any contact with the market (hence with the dominant cultural and economic system). Interestingly, the same debate is happening among hobbyist, consumer bloggers, like the Barq's Man. Here is what the Barq's Man (*aka* 'Michael Marx') says about being paid to promote a brand through his blog:

> I continue to blog about Barq's simply because I love the brand, I love the product, and I'd love to see the world drinking Barq's. You couldn't pay me to do it. If you did, I would lose my independence and independence is the best part of blogging. On the other hand, isn't getting paid to do what you love something that people aspire to? What about all those people who have monetized their hobbies? World class chefs, adventure tour guides, professional athletes? Is it still fun for them? Or is it more about the money? This issue can be argued both ways, but I do believe that where there is money, there is obligation. And with obligation independence is reigned in. And in the case of this Barq's blog, the fun is in the freedom.
>
> (*Source*: http://www.thebarqsman.com/, downloaded 9/13/2006)

The key to decoding these accounts is the romanticized and mysticized, yet culturally resonant assertion that, just as communities and markets do not mix, authenticity belongs to practices and personalities that are on the margins or as close to the outside of the market as possible. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have shown (2006), if it is to regenerate itself, capitalism must look outside of the commercial sphere for the layers of authenticity in which it will be wrapping its product offerings.

As the ambivalence in the Barq Man's quote attests, however, today's tribal reality is much more complex. As Bruno Latour writes (1991, p. 167) 'In the middle, where there is supposed to be nothing, you find almost everything'. Between markets and communities is much hybridization. Collective tribes are increasingly capable of collective action and prepared to interact with the market in a way that is more and more entrepreneurial. Indeed, as recently discussed by Thomas O'Guinn and Albert Muñiz (2005), one key element in today's tribe-market interactions is that companies can lose part of their

control over a brand, to be replaced by a Consumer Tribe that is trying to re-appropriate it. Alternatively, as Christina Goulding and Mike Saren highlight in this volume, Goth tribes form their own markets and engage with each other in the production and consumption of good and services. Here the market transactions are marked by tribal affiliation and the reconnection of 'producers' and 'consumers,' the very antithesis of globalized, corporatized and socially distanced relationships that characterize many market relationships. In Roy Langer's chapter on the Fetish community in Denmark, he also highlights the entrepreneurial activities of its members. The on-going tension between sub- and mainstream culture is highlighted and the ensuing problems and challenges that this creates for the tribal marketer is identified, as they seek to maintain boundaries of distinctiveness between tribal and mass marketing.

The engagements tribal members have with one another can be marked by conflict. Kristine de Valck's chapter in this book examines the contested meanings and practices of members of a food consumption on-line community. The on-line war of an e-tribe underscores that the apparent tribal uniformity of a differentiated group can cloak brewing conflict and disagreement within the tribal fabric itself. We see conflict and differentiation in other tribal settings. The devoted Hummer tribe explored in Marius Lüdicke's and Markus Giesler's insightful chapter is in a perpetual state of conflict with the mainstream. Constantly seeking new justifications for the basis of their brand identification, the members of the Hummer tribe reveal the potent pressures that brand tribe members can never completely avoid, and the discursive strategies that they must adapt and adopt.

Let's add to these examples by exploring two clear-cut and demonstrative cases of tribal entrepreneurship that are characterized by different gradations of this phenomenon. Consider first The Paris Roller Case. This example is based on the interaction between roller skater tribes and companies/brands in France, as explained by Boris Belohlavek, VP of Paris Roller, an association created by roller skating fans in 1998 to manage and supervise Friday night mass skate tours in Paris, some of which have witnessed as many as 25,000 persons skating from one end of the city to the other. Belohlavek feels that 'Brands have a role to play in the tour but must be entirely under the Association's control'.

It is critical to note that these tours grew organically from the streets; they are not the product of someone's calculated initiative but simply reflect the libertarian wishes of a few skaters for a new way of enjoying their city. As the tours grew in size, companies and their brands began to take an interest and tried to sponsor the tours. This of course is the traditional co-optational marketing approach. But it didn't work. Remember the Barq man's comment, that 'if you pay me, I would lose my independence'? Tribe members were very quick to understand that for the tour to retain its cultural purity they would have to develop certain competencies not only to resist the companies and brands but also to co-operate with them based on sets of rules that were defined by the tribe itself and not by the business world. This was a remarkable undertaking to witness. The community said no to sponsors, and then