10 Totem on the timeline: consumer tribes, subcultures and the space in between

Author
Constantin-Felix von Maltzahn
Amsterdam Fashion Institute

c.f.freiherr.von.maltzahn@hva.nl

Abstract

Contemporary consumption is often understood as a collective pursuit, thereby emphasising the value of goods as a basis for socialisation rather than certain functional attributes. As a result, symbolic properties often take precedence over material ones and value becomes defined collectively and in a contextual fashion. One concept that seeks to address this transformation from a scholarly perspective is that of communities of consumption, which are community-type settings whose basis of sociality are shared interests, hobbies as well as brand or product preferences. Typically, communities of consumption are subdivided into subcultures of consumption and neo-tribes/consumer tribes. Despite similarities in their conceptual genesis, scholars seem to agree that sociality (i.e. the way members of consumer collectives relate to one another) is subject to different mechanics.

This paper argues that sociality is not actually the result of inherently different conceptual positions but instead produced by varying degrees of consumer involvement and agency. Understanding communities of consumption as a product of an internal state (i.e. involvement) and an external application (i.e. agency) allows us to assess differences in sociality as a function of belonging. Since belonging is rarely static and instead changes in response to differences in mental/imaginary engagement and practical expressions thereof, this study proposes an alternative model that defines communities of consumption along a continuum of involvement. In turn, this perspective enables us to account for the protean and inherently unstable nature of consumer collectives as well as

the changes that naturally occur over time when it comes to individually perceived significance of certain pursuits or interests in the life- and experience-worlds of consumers.

Introduction

In a contemporary consumption context, the concept of community is often viewed through the lens of marketplace cultures (Canniford, 2011a; Canniford and Shankar, 2011; Joy and Li, 2012; Närvänen, 2014; Rokka, 2010; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) or consumer tribes (e.g. Canniford, 2011b; Cova and Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2013; Mitchell and Imrie, 2011; Taute and Sierra, 2014). In both cases, the main conceptual framework is centred around an understanding of sociality that substitutes the modernist idea of permanent and enduring sites of identification (e.g. nuclear family, workplace, church) with dynamic, temporary formations of people that 'favour appearance and "form"' (Maffesoli, 1996: 98). Due to their 'polygamous' and transient nature, community in these contexts is defined in terms of heterogeneity (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2013) and fluidity (Bauman, 2000).

Conceptually, consumer tribes can be considered a riff on subcultures (Gelder, 2007; Hebdige, 1979; Polhemus, 1994; Polhemus, 1996). Subcultures, too, are community-type settings whose basis of sociality are shared interests or common causes. What distinguishes subcultures from neo-tribes are primarily two factors. First, in the majority of cases subcultures are defined by a more homogenous classification system for markers of identity (Hebdige, 1979), in that social bonds are typically less protean and instead defined by a singular point of view or a set of shared values that make them more enduring as sites of identification (Muggleton, 2000). Second, because subcultures are claimed to be bound by rather uniform and coherent social markers, they are also assumed to dominate people's lives to a greater extent. In a marketplace context, this concept has been extended to the idea of 'subcultures of consumption' (Goulding and Saren, 2016; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), which Canniford (2011b: 593) describes as a combination of 'enduring social structures, strong interpersonal bonds, ritualised modes of expression and unique sets of beliefs that often preclude other social

affiliations.' Due to the fact that consumption-oriented subcultures, too, are assumed to take on a more prevalent role in people's lives, thereby excluding some of the more perfunctory, 'flirtatious' bonds characteristic of neo-tribes, several authors (Bennett, 1999; Hesmondhalgh, 2005; O'Reilly, 2012) have pointed out that subcultures of consumption and neo-tribes are defined by different types of sociality.

This paper seeks to develop an alternative approach by proposing a conceptual model of consumer communities (based on the basic tenets of neo-tribes and subcultures) that is defined along a continuum. At one end we find the tribal concept in its most literal form, which is highly relevant in all sorts of consumption contexts, but can be problematic in its almost exclusive understanding of sociality (and, by extension, identity) as being continuously in flux. At the other end we find a more enduring and less pluriform type of cultural identification that can be considered a variation on the theme of subcultures of consumption. Rather than trying to decouple neo-tribes and subcultures as diametrically opposed positions, however, this paper argues that they are variations of the same category, defined by largely similar drivers of social identification that can be distinguished by different degrees of consumer involvement.

Communities of consumption

For centuries the primary sources of cultural identification were families and ideologies, and maybe working environments. Nowadays, citizens (in the western world, that is) have become more emancipated, which prompted modes of socialisation to become more open, diverse and flexible. It is not necessarily the case that we find orientation by only one or two primary cultural reference points. Just like we build our identities from a range of possible options, our social behaviour is dependent on different contexts and life-worlds. In recent years, scholars have suggested different approaches to account for this transformation. One idea that has emerged in response to the changing nature of affective relationships between users and products is that of community-based consumer behaviour or, from a more conceptual point of view, communities of consumption (Canniford and Shankar, 2011; Kozinets, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002). In the literature, these are typically subdivided into two separate concepts; (i) subcultures of

consumption (Chaney and Goulding, 2016; Goulding and Saren, 2016; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and (ii) neo-tribes (Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2002; Maffesoli, 1996).

Subcultures of consumption

Subcultures are understood as one of the key manifestations of 'alternative forms of socialisation' of the 20th century (Yinger, 1960). Following Hebdige (1979), one of the primary features of subcultures is the subversion of normalcy. In other words, the prevalent value systems within the community differ from those of the social majority or a received, unquestioned world-view. As a result, members of a subculture are assumed to take an 'antagonistic' stance towards accepted social standards, or at least adopt a critical attitude towards them (Gelder, 2007). In a consumption context, this concept has been extended to subcultures of consumption (Chaney and Goulding, 2016; Goulding and Saren, 2016; Martin et al., 2006; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), the basis of which Schouten and McAlexander (ibid.: 48) describe as 'unifying consumption patterns [that] are governed by a unique ethos or set of common values'. Canniford (2011b) further distinguishes three defining features of subcultures; cohesion, dedication and resistance. *Cohesion* refers to the fact that subcultures are assumed to be governed by 'enduring social orders, strong interpersonal bonds, ritualised modes of expression and unique sets of beliefs that often preclude other social affiliations, thus impacting powerfully on the identity of subcultural members' (ibid.: 59). In this context, culturally defined accolades, hierarchy and authority reinforce existing social structures within a subculture. *Dedication* is to do with what Thornton (1995) refers to as 'subcultural capital', i.e. members showing their commitment through inside knowledge or regalia. Dedication manifests itself in a process of enduring acculturation, whereby repeated acts of belonging help reinforce the idea of membership as part of one's social identity. *Resistance*, finally, goes back to aspects that can be found in subcultures more in general such as the punk movement, i.e. subcultures of consumption, too, are assumed to display traits of counterculture, anti-establishment ideology, resistance to authority or liberation from social institutions (see also Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

While useful to an extent, some of these distinctions are problematic in the sense that they have been debunked both theoretically (Elliot and Davies, 2006) and empirically (Kates, 2002). Goulding, Shankar and Canniford (2013), for instance, argue that dedication is an attribute common to basically all forms of consumption communities and that actual social cohesion is an unlikely feature of community in a postmodern context (see also Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). Also the ideological underpinnings typically ascribed to subcultures (Bennett, 1999; Hebdige, 1979) are not quite as strong in a contemporary consumption context as previously assumed. The notion that subcultures tend to encompass an entire world-view comprised of value systems, political views, a certain taste in music, an identifiable style and sometimes even a distinct type of slang or argot has received some criticism (Elliot and Davies, 2006), because in reality the boundaries of subcultures (within and outside of a consumption context) are often not quite as clear-cut as frequently theorised.

Neo-Tribes

A contemporary reprise of the traditional ethnic tribe, in his book *The Time of the Tribes* Maffesoli (1996) defines neo-tribes as small agglomerations of people whose meeting grounds are shared tastes or interests (e.g. hobbies, sports, clothing, music). Seen thus, they can be viewed as taste or interest communities in the sense of affinity-based networks. The process of socialisation in this context is realised through the sum of multiple temporary identifications that are based on, for example, 'wearing particular types of dress, exhibiting group-specific styles of adornment and espousing the shared values and ideals of collectivity' (ibid.: xi-ii). Across these temporary identifications the community setting creates a sense of belonging, or simply 'having something in common'. Importantly, though, this sense of affinity as well as the social links shared between members is typically limited to said passions and interests and does not extend beyond the immediate collective social context provided by goods and services. In contrast to subcultures of consumption, which are theorised to comprise a world-view that defines and dominates people's lives, neo-tribes are temporary affiliations of people that ebb and flow both in terms of duration and intensity (Cova and Cova, 2002).

Canniford (2011a, 2011b) singles out four characteristics pertinent to tribal socialisation; multiplicity, playfulness, transience and entrepreneurialism. *Multiplicity* refers to the fact that neo-tribes rarely have a dominant role in people's lives, but, instead, due to their protean nature, allow users to slip in and out of different facets of identity. Intimately connected to that, *playfulness* refers to the fact that people's engagement with tribes is not serious or tied to moral responsibility and value systems but can be cursory and somewhat frivolous. *Transience* relates to what Canniford (2011b: 595) identifies as 'a playful acceptance of rapidly changing, contradictory, and ambivalent meanings', in that meaning is continuously in flux, socially (re)negotiated and thus inherently unstable. *Entrepreneurialism*, finally, is related to the fact that members of neo-tribes are assumed to take an active, enterprising stance when it comes to their favourite brands and products, i.e. they might tinker and toy with them, 'mod' them and create sometimes whimsical, sometimes idiosyncratic meanings or physical extensions (Cova and Dalli, 2008; Cova and White, 2010; Kozinets, 2001).

What these different attributes point towards is that neo-tribalism is conceptually produced by a social context that views identity as fragmented and multifarious, polyvalent and inherently unstable, which marks a common theme in most of postmodern social theory (Allan, 1997; Allan and Turner, 2000; Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Firat et al., 1995; Harvey, 1989; Huyssen, 1984; Huyssen, 1988; Jameson, 1998). However, just as subcultures of consumption have been criticised for an overreliance on somewhat static social markers, several authors (Bennett, 1999; Hesmondhalgh, 2005; O'Reilly, 2012) have commented that, although useful, the tribal concept suffers from an overemphasis on social context as continuously in flux and permanently fragmented or, more to the point, 'never not' fragmented, which raises questions concerning the extent to which the overarching concept of tribalism (i.e. belonging to [imagined] communities of likeminded people) could potentially relate to more permanent sites of identification, as well (O'Reilly, 2012).

The involvement construct

Above we have seen that both subcultures of consumption and neo-tribes can be considered useful conceptual positions which, each in their own way, account for the fact 'that consumption activities, product categories, or even brands (…) serve as the basis for interaction and social cohesion' (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995: 43). At the same time, it has been argued that either one of them is compromised by certain assumptions that might seem rather definitive on paper, but create problems when reimagined in a space of actual consumption-based sociality. Rather than assessing subcultures of consumption and neo-tribes as diametrically opposed concepts, this paper argues that they can be envisaged as largely similar theoretical positions along a continuum, whereby differences between them can be explained by relative degrees of involvement (and, by extension, agency). Belonging to one or more consumer communities is therefore underpinned by the assumption i) that any kind of social reality is actively created and recreated through individual, collective or collectively-negotiated efforts, and ii) that belonging is precipitated by a relative degree of emotional and symbolic involvement (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2013; Von Maltzahn, 2013; Barthels and Von Maltzahn, 2015).

Zaichkowsky (1985: 342) defines involvement as 'a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests', which is short-hand for the degree to which certain brands, products or product groups constitute engaging and focal activities for people (O'Cass and Julian, 2001), while Richins et al. (1992: 143) further establish that *enduring* involvement is 'an individual difference variable representing the general, long-run concern with a product that a consumer brings to a situation.' As such, the concept describes how consumers connect personal needs, aspirations and value systems to goods as stimulus objects. Perez Cabañero (2006) further specifies that involvement is connected to an assessment of the importance of the stimulus, which produces certain types of behaviour and agency. As a result, the concept mediates between self-image and product image and constitutes a relational factor for predicting purchase motivation (Evrard and Aurier, 1996).

Consumer involvement can be classified according to four different dimensions (Zaichkowsky, 1985; Laurent and Kapferer, 1985). *Product knowledge* refers to the extent to which consumers gather information about products, evaluate purchases and show high levels of interest in the actual product. As a rule, the more knowledge consumers are eager to obtain about a certain brand or product, the higher their involvement and connection will be. *Alternative evaluation* refers to the extent to which consumers search for competing alternatives in the same market segment. The more consumers are involved with a product, the more likely they are to compare different brands and products prior to the buying act and make them subject to post-purchase evaluation. *Perception of brand differences* refers to the extent to which consumers actually perceive differences between brands and turn them into dependent variables of the purchase decision-making process. Greater scrutiny and stronger beliefs in specific brands within a given product group typically equal a higher level of involvement. *Brand preference* refers to the likelihood and degree to which consumers are committed to one or more brands in particular or buy a larger number of goods from one and the same label. Generally speaking, the higher the level of involvement, the stronger the level of brand patronage will be.

Collective manifestations of belonging

In a scholarly context surf cultures have been identified as exhibiting tribal bonds (Canniford and Shankar, 2007; Moutinho et al., 2007), and so have coffee connoisseurs (Kozinets, 2002; Torres Quintão et al., 2017), the running community (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2013) and clubbing culture (Goulding and Shankar, 2011; Goulding et al., 2013). Examples from a fashion context include sneakerheads, denim lovers and brand-centric outdoor communities (Barthels and Von Maltzahn, 2015). Subcultures of consumption, on the other hand, have been studied in the context of Harley-Davidson owners (Hopkins, 1999; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) as well as various music communities (Chaney and Goulding, 2016; Goodlad and Bibby, 2007; Healey and Fraser, 2017; Podoshen et al., 2014; Ulusoy, 2016). In each of these cases, more traditional demographic markers of socialisation (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, religion, marital status, education etc.) are replaced with a focus on shared passion. What connects people and provides a basis for

social identification is not where they come from, what or whom they believe in or what they do for a living, but what they are excited about or the degree to which they are both emotionally and materially invested in a certain type of product or brand.

By way of example, it would be unlikely for the global community of sneakerheads to be composed primarily of heterosexual, married, university-educated Caucasian males with a medium to high disposable income (i.e. a type of 'demographic bracketing' that is commonly espoused by traditional marketing textbooks). In fact, a much more likely scenario is that sneakerheads actually come from all walks of life; they might be 18 or 80 years old; they might have very different educational and professional backgrounds (e.g. blue-collar worker, stay-at-home mom, high-ranking manager); they might be bi-, trans-, homo- or heterosexual; they could be married, single, divorced or live in a patchwork family; they might have children or not; and they may be religious believers, agnostics or atheists. The underlying assumption behind consumer communities is that those aspects hardly matter[1] when the basis of socialisation is shared excitement around new product announcements, legendary shoe models, exclusive 'drops' or limited-edition sneakers.

Across both physical and mediated contexts, the basis for socialisation and belonging is people jointly exercising their passion. Cohesion and recognition within the community is established through implicit markers of identification in the form of (i) 'inside knowledge' (i.e. in the sneaker context this could be product knowledge and history as well as knowledge about the latest releases, specific product features as well as collectively negotiated know-how about how to get your hands on new product drops or how to tell real from fake products etc.); (ii) shared rituals (e.g. how to properly take care of sneakers, how to wear them or how to display them in your home); (iii) a shared language, which typically is some form of slang or vernacular using acronyms, terminology or even some kind of argot achieved through deliberately 'butchered' or acontextual terms, where

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[1] Gender may be an exception, to a degree. While consumer communities are often described as not being gender-specific, this author's research did not always support that notion. In certain cases, gender does not matter at all, while in others devoted, female-centric collectives emerge as a result of often male-dominated areas such as the community of denim lovers or the hi-fi community. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) identified similar dynamics in the Harley-Davidson community.

certain words or expressions take on their own, collectively negotiated meaning within a community; and (iv) iconic/totemic products (e.g. knowledge about, and possession of, legendary product releases such as an original pair of 1985 Nike Air Jordan 1, Louis Vuitton's 2009 'Don' and 'Jasper' sneakers in collaboration with Kanye West or adidas' 2013 release of JS Wings 2.0 'Black Flag' in collaboration with fashion designer Jeremy Scott and rap musician A$AP Rocky).

Across these shared markers of identification, belonging is implicitly established via in- and out-groups: the more knowledge members possess of the culture; the more they are 'in the know'; the more they engage in, and publicly display, shared rituals (for instance, on YouTube, Instagram or Facebook); the more (ideally highly coveted) products they own; the more they are able to 'speak the language' (…), the more they will be viewed by others as part of the community but also develop a sense of self around being part of the community. As a result, belonging can be seen as a function of repeated engagement with the culture, where emotional proximity with both material objects and, by extension, members is usually concentric with the level of individual personal involvement (Von Maltzahn, 2013).

Engagement on a continuum of involvement
The notion of individual involvement helps explain the contextual nature of both neo-tribes and subcultures of consumption, in that belonging is typically understood as a function of engagement with some form of cultural capital (i.e. inside knowledge, shared rituals, shared language, iconic products). This is to say that belonging is not actually predicated on possession of specific items but rather develops through engagement with a culture and its implicit, ritualised and collectively negotiated behavioural and symbolic codes. As a result, communities of consumption are commonly defined by extended periods of social learning (Goulding et al., 2013), whereby the very process of learning itself is turned into a variable of involvement in the sense that increased specificity of knowledge is precipitated by more engagement with a culture, more exposure to collective markers of belonging, and therefore a higher degree of contextual knowledge.

Due to the fact that inside knowledge is contextual, specific to contingent social environments and often involves highly stylised patterns of socio-symbolic identification (Brownlie et al., 2007; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), it is for people within the community precisely the sense of continuous (re-)enactment of collectively codified markers that defines belonging in the first place. Still, while involvement is not only a precondition for, but actually a driver of, belonging, it is not necessarily experienced the same way by all members of the community. In fact, part of what makes consumer communities such a fertile ground for study is the fact that it is not essential to establish convergence within a culture for individual members to extract meaning. As Chalmers Thomas et al. (2013: 1012) explain:

> *[A consumer community] avoids the need to assess the degree of convergence across the minds of individuals, since community is comprised of those who feel and experience a sense of individual and collective belonging. (…) Belonging is, therefore, defined by each individual in reference to the dynamics of the community. Specifically, an individual's sense of belonging is reinforced (or diminished) through engagement with the community and its practices.*

What this points towards is that inasmuch as communities of consumption are diverse in composition and architecture, they are also heterogeneous in the way belonging is experienced by different members. As suggested above, the idiosyncratic nature of communities of consumption is only appreciated over time, because it is reiterated and re-enacted by members over and over across different culture-specific contexts (e.g. websites, forums, Facebook groups, specialised shops, trade fairs etc.). Meaning unfolds and produces manifestations of belonging through enacting identity in the form of engagement with collectively negotiated social markers. Being part of a consumer community, therefore, is best viewed not as an act but as a process (or 'journey', for want of a better term), where members acquire knowledge of a culture and its rituals exclusively through engaging with it, thereby advancing over time from the status of innocent (and largely ignorant) neophyte users to adept and established members. The result is that the more members engage with a culture, and community-specific practices, the more these

practices tend to take on meaning, and the higher the likelihood that their identity will be defined by them to some degree.

From this perspective, we can think of belonging as a function of involvement along a continuum, where different users maintain different types of bonds (i.e. agency and experiential significance) based on the fact that they extract meaning from community-specific practices in different ways. Schouten and McAlexander (1995: 48) have tried to account for the diversity within communities of consumption with a 'simple, concentric social structure' composed of (i) hard-core members (ii), soft-core members and (iii) more peripheral affiliations. Critically, though, their model was developed to account for hierarchical differences and a certain social order within the community. While a hierarchical framing may have been an attempt at accurately capturing the dynamics at play in the community of Harley-Davidson owners that their study sought to explore at the time, it ignores the basic fact that most consumer communities are best accounted for in terms of what unites them rather than what separates them. Also, a later study by Martin et al. (2006) found that most of these hierarchical differences had but vanished in the decade following the original research. Still, the framework can be useful for explaining commonalities between different types of consumer communities and how sociality is produced within them. Rather than taking hierarchy as a point of departure, however, this paper argues that differences in affiliation, and thus differences in how different types of consumers develop more frivolous/ephemeral ('tribal') or more uniform/enduring ('subcultural') bonds, can be explained as a function of their respective involvement with community proper.
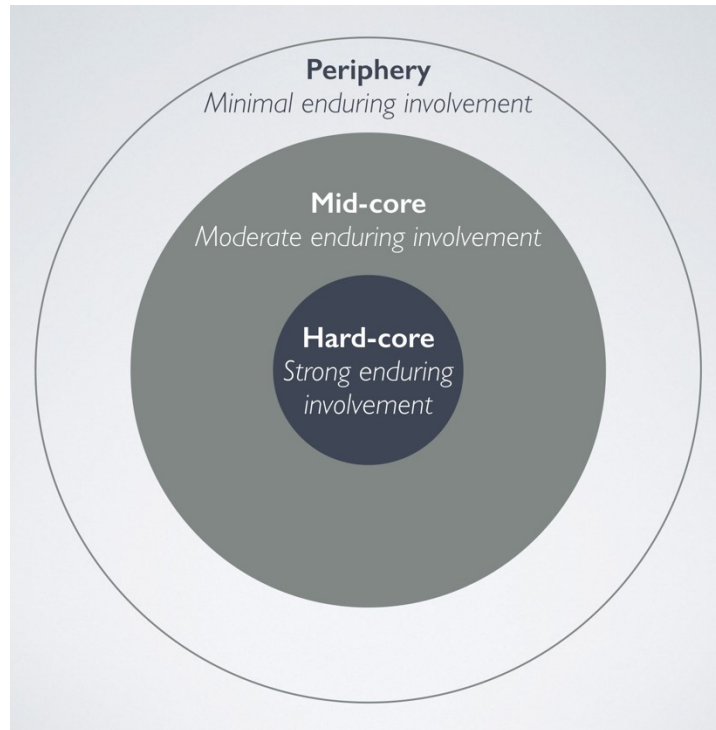
Fig. 1: Three levels of community involvement

Figure 1 defines three dimensions of community involvement, which each correspond to a relative degree of engagement with, and agency within, a culture as well as their impact on the way individual members will likely experience belonging and extract meaning and/or a sense of self from community-related practices. Importantly, these dimensions are not static but should rather be viewed as fluid, organic and dynamic. At the very heart of the community we find members with the highest degree of involvement who engage with community-related aspects of consumption in a continuous and (quasi-)enduring fashion. In the context of sneakerheads, which this text touched upon earlier, these could be shop owners or people running sneaker-specific websites, Instagram accounts or some other form of publication. In the motorbike or car tuning community, we could think of owners of specialised garages, hobbyist 'grease monkeys' or people who act as moderators/admins on forums. In the context of the whisky community, these could be bar owners or people who started producing their own brand of tipple. In each of these cases it is likely to assume that involvement is produced by high levels of engagement with community-specific practices, maybe even to the extent of having become second nature. Typically, the hard core is comprised of people who are invested in a culture to

such an extent that identification with their passion (and, by extension, community-related practices) has taken on a superordinate role in their lives, e.g. individuals who moonlight in some capacity as cultural gatekeepers or who dabble in 'modding' community regalia with high symbolic value. As a result, involvement is strong and enduring to the extent that engagement with community proper is a structural element of their identity and habitus, rather than a fleeting occurrence. It is probably fair to assume that hard-core members can be considered some form of pivot of the community, in that their relationship with manifestations of cultural capital is the most definitive and easily identifiable. Because of the fact that their involvement is (quasi-)enduring, their relationship with a culture, its members and community-specific practices can almost be compared to a lifestyle. Arguably, these may be the most pronounced and obvious manifestations of enactment and belonging (i.e. they 'are' the culture, as it were), since involvement is not purely situational or temporary. At the same time, although culturally significant, members of the hard core can be considered outliers for the most part, as most people neither have the time nor the energy or resources to devote major parts of their life to one specific activity or interest.

The by far bigger share of members can be found in what we could perhaps call the 'mid core'. Members here maintain an ongoing, yet situational and time-bound engagement with a consumer culture, in that they opt in and out of community contexts depending on time and resources. While involvement in this category is significant enough for certain hobbies, brands or passions to constitute focal activities, the relationship of members with a certain culture will be codefined by other, sometimes more, sometimes less engaging, affiliations. An example of this archetype (for want of a better term) would be the passionate hobbyist who exercises his/her passion diligently and in a serious fashion, and who spends time exchanging thoughts with likeminded people on specific forums, Reddit or Facebook groups. These are active members and typically contributors, who devote time and resources to community-related activities. However, more likely than not people in this category are not part of one, but a plurality of cultures. Let's say Person X is invested in the hi-fi community, the espresso community, the barbecuing community and the car-tuning community, each of which is tied to certain commitments in terms of

time and resources. It follows naturally that involvement will be less uniform and defined by a wider number of factors. This does not make members a less integral part of a community, but rather showcases how they are malleable and dynamic formations whose social fabric can be composed of multiple different levels of identification.

The third dimension are the fringes or periphery of a community. Members may be passionate about whatever holds the community together, but their involvement in terms of time as well as emotional and economic resources is limited, and likely does not constitute a focal activity in people's lives. Technically, this could be the result of three different things: (i/unlikely) a person might either be interested in such a wide number of activities at a given moment that involvement for each one of them remains fleeting and unfulfilled since each is predicated on what was earlier identified as extended periods of social learning; (ii/likely) a person used to be an integral part of a community and has in the past devoted time and resources to understand and decode community-specific rites, rituals and symbolic markers, but either has moved on to something else or simply is unable to exercise a hobby frequently enough to be an active member of the community, barring isolated and sporadic incidents; (iii/likely) a neophyte is interested in a certain activity or brand but has yet to decode, understand and absorb a community's collective markers of identification that provide the basis for active engagement. In the latter case it could be the starting point for more enduring types of involvement in either the mid or hard core of the community.

As established earlier, it is not possession of consumer goods that defines involvement with a community, but rather engagement with specific symbolic, behavioural and linguistic codes that function as collectively negotiated markers of identity as well as 'barriers' between in- and out-groups. Applied to the three dimensions outlined above, this means that involvement is the highest in the hard core, as a result of their level of engagement with community-specific practices in terms of resources, knowledge, emotional investment and time. This category is the one closest to subcultures of consumption not so much in the sense of value systems, a specific world-view or the fact that other affiliations are more easily excluded, but rather in the way that a certain passion

or hobby can constitute a significant and focal activity in a person's life to the extent that it might (but does not have to) dominate it. The mid core is what comes closest to how neo-tribes are typically defined, in that belonging and meaning are extracted from a wider number of cultural reference points and involvement is less uniform, and instead negotiated between a plurality of collective markers. The periphery, finally, does not actually compare to either subcultures of consumption or neo-tribes unless peripheral involvement is framed as simply the starting point of a process of social learning. In fact, barring neophyte status, most people in this category likely engage with community-specific practices rarely or not at all, so they might best be viewed as 'bystanders' who are intrigued but whose sense of involvement is low and probably insufficient to produce a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

In the literature, neo-tribes and subcultures of consumption are usually treated as two different – and largely incompatible – concepts, whereby the former typically is framed as a series of temporary affiliations with different cultural reference points while the latter is based on a more static model of social behaviour which tends to dominate people's lives to a greater extent. Although compelling, this kind of conceptual decoupling is not always productive, in that some of the assumed differences between neo-tribes and subcultures of consumption are not quite as pronounced as is often theorised. In certain instances, it has even been shown that these somewhat monolithic positions are inconsistent with theoretical and empirical evidence. Rather than looking at differences between these positions, the latter part of this paper has attempted to make a case for the fact that they can be viewed as variations of the same theme, united by largely similar attributes and distinguished rather through different levels of involvement than actual conceptual differences. Since both subcultures of consumption and neo-tribes are defined by (extended) periods of social learning, which provides the basis for understanding and appropriately using (sub)cultural capital, their mechanics of sociality are virtually identical, i.e. both types of community fasten on the notion that members extract meaning and experience a sense of belonging based on repeated and continuous engagement with codified and collectively negotiated practices. The magnitude or extent of engagement,

as this paper has argued, can be viewed as a function of involvement: the more a person exercises a certain passion; the more s/he is aware of, and knowledgeable about, community-specific, socio-symbolic manifestations of belonging; the more an activity or brand constitutes a focal activity in a person's life, the higher the degree of involvement will be.

Based on the above idea, this paper mapped out a concentric model comprising three dimensions of involvement: hard core (strong enduring involvement), mid core (moderate enduring involvement) and periphery (minimal or no enduring involvement). These three categories are neither static nor specific to certain types of people. Instead, they provide a roadmap for identifying belonging at different levels and according to different degrees of involvement, while the borders between them are fluid and loosely defined as affiliation keeps on changing according to different parameters. Basically every community affiliation, however enduring and significant for individuals in the long run, starts at the periphery level, since newbies by default possess neither the knowledge nor the means to develop and/or maintain stronger bonds. After all, it is precisely the fact that community-specific cultural practices have to be interpreted, learnt and adopted over time that produces, and over time reinforces, involvement and a sense of belonging. While certain members will never extend their affiliation beyond what can be considered perfunctory and peripheral (or even lose interest in a culture within a short period of time and move on to other pursuits), others develop a more enduring and passionate relationship that over time has them inch towards the mid core or hard core of the culture, depending on how strong their involvement is and how much time, energy and resources they devote to exercising their passion. Belonging, therefore, is not defined by possession of goods, or even knowledge of community-specific practices alone, but rather a person's level of engagement with a culture and the degree to which his/her actions constitute a focal activity. This paper seeks to contribute to the theme of *Community: ID* by providing an alternative approach to understanding the mechanics of consumption-based affective relationships. Rather than assessing relative degrees of belonging as a result of different forms of sociality, this analysis suggests that belonging can be understood as a

consequence of consumer involvement and the changes that naturally occur in terms of engagement and agency.

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