

Explore the relevance of post-modernist neo-tribalism within contemporary consumption behaviours

Introduction

This essay will primarily consider the relevance of neo-tribalism within a contemporary marketplace, exploring how tribes impact consumption habits.

Main Body

Neo-tribes are defined as collective groups of people, commonly-linked together by shared or mutual passions, emotions or attitudes (Maffesoli, 1995). Across an academic discipline, neo-tribes have been conceptualised as a discourse of social fragmentation and individualisation within a contemporary society, pioneering the re-embrace and of historical tribal living (Hardy et al. 2018). In context, academics argue that as human beings have evolved to live within tribal societies, they will not be content until some semblance of traditional tribal lifestyles has been re-created (Maffesoli, 1996). In practice, contemporary neo-tribal members are thought to be active consumers whose consumption choices reflect a self-constructed notion of identity, for example football fans or music culture fan-groups (Hardy et al. 2018). Hetherington (1992) further indicated that neo-tribal members are fluid, choosing to disaffiliate from the masses and cultivate sub-cultures. An example includes goths, who have had a tangible influence on markets such as music, dress and style; with supportive research indicating that gothic furniture has had a surge in sales following growth of goth sub-cultures (Cova et al. 2012). Although the group has no official membership, participation within gothic interests forms an attachment between group members worldwide. A significant implication for marketers relate to the fact that unofficial neo-tribes such as goths are potentially difficult to market to or reach through traditional marketing methods.

As neo-tribes are commonly associated with trends (Cova, 1997), marketing therefore must be reactive to this process, referring to a dynamic capability whereby new or innovative trends disrupt the consumption market (Schumpeter, 1942). An example includes the recent Pokémon Go craze which led a 105% spike in Pokémon-branded merchandise within clothing, gaming and knitted teddy bears (Forbes, 2016). This thus identifies with the theory proposed (Maffesoli, 1996) that neo-tribal lifestyles are expressed through consumption to reinsert social identity; particularly in the case of the Pokémon Craze which was largely driven by nostalgia and emotions (LinkedIn, 2017). An important consideration relates to where consumer needs, affiliations and interests later change, consumers no longer are driven to participate (Hardy et al. 2018). In support, research now indicates that four-out-of-five Pokémon Go users have now quit, suggesting that in some cases neo-tribes can be temporary and therefore unsuitable to pursue as a long-term competitive strategy (BGR, 2017; Porter, 2008). Additionally, an historic example of a changing dynamic entity is the evolution and regression of mods and rockers in the 1960s' which now arguably ceases to exist (The Guardian, 2012). This is further exemplified by

contemporary pop-group One Direction fans labelled 'Directioners' (Buzzfeed, 2017); consisting of die-hard fans who frequently engaged with One-Direction related news across social media, including gig information, new songs and even possible sighted locations (Reysen et al. 2010). However, after separation in 2015, Directioners now have less affiliation, indicating that neo-tribes are temporary sources of a competitive advantage within contemporary marketplaces; as consumer interests increasingly shift (Porter, 2008; Hardy et al. 2018).

Furthermore, innovation in science and technology and cosmetic surgery growth within the Gen Y selfie generation has led to globalisation of the cosmetic surgery market in consequence (The Telegraph, 2014). Celebrity influencers such as the Kardashians have also fuelled a tribal following and had a widespread impact on cosmetic surgery enhancements worldwide (Jung & Hwang, 2016). For example, within the UK, Asda's £6 bottom enhancing pants contributed to a sales increase of 4,600%, selling out in just over a week (The Independent, 2015). In addition, the Kardashians are increasingly penetrating International markets such as India and developing tribal followings, symbolising a shift to normalising cosmetic procedures in Asia, diverging from historical resistance to western values and lifestyles (The Guardian, 2016; Business Insider, 2018). However, in juxtaposition, neo-tribalism has arguably contributed to growing resistance of contemporary cultural appropriation and de-racialisation whereby many consumers are looking towards 'skin-lightening' tactics (The Guardian, 2018) in consequence of an extreme need to conform within society's idea of beautification (Coombes, 2003; BBC, 2018). Here academics have identified a colonial issue whereby historically skin colour was linked to social class, with those traditionally top of the society argued to have the fairest skin (McIntosh, 2010). Within contemporary society there are still many reported cases of racial inequality within the workplace (Raconteur, 2018), suggesting the issue is still highly prevalent. Furthermore, a tangible strong demand within practice for de-racialisation procedures or skin-lightening indicate that many brands are attempting to capitalise and profit from neo-tribal inequalities present within contemporary consumption (The Guardian, 2018).

Alternatively, there are many cases where brands are favourably adopted by neo-tribes to differentiate and non-conform, including Quiksilver which is a well-known surfing brand (Maffesoli, 1995; Canniford, 2010). However, a limitation to consider is that brand adoption within neo-tribes can lead to other consumer groups being alienated (Marx, 1844); potentially negatively impacting brand perception. One example in practice includes the negative perception of the luxury Burberry brand once affiliated with what are referred to as 'chavs', a derogatory term to define a young lower-class person typified by brash and loutish behaviour and the wearing of (real or imitation) designer clothes (The Telegraph, 2004). A further example relates to reality TV star 'The Situation' from infamous US show Jersey Shore, who was paid a six-figure sum by the brand to prevent him from wearing Abercrombie & Fitch clothing; fearing damage of its brand upscale positioning (Reuters, 2011). Whilst in some cases neo-tribal association may not be negative, such as Vauxhall Corsa's affiliation as a car for 'male boy racers' which in turn has led to increased sales (Lumsden, 2015), alienation owing to tribal marketing or positioning can have a negative impact on overall sales by isolating customer segments. In support, whilst Harley Davidson enthusiasts are purported to be willing to spend around \$40,000 of disposable income on personalised bikes, a niche positioning as an 'All American Bad Boy' brand has resulted

in a progressive sales decline, with production scaled back and a subsequent job loss in result (The Guardian, 2015a).

Neo-tribes are a relatively recent social phenomenon whose presence is assisted by the digital networking, spanning across international boundaries (Bennet, 1999). Subsequently, authors concede that the gathering pace of consumer choice and technological developments have assisted in the volume and variety of tribal-group affiliation (Hamilton & Hewer, 2010). A benefit to marketers is that neo-tribal members are commonly less price-sensitive and therefore are likely to be willing to pay premium prices (Hardy et al. 2018). An example includes Apple Tech-heads who have formed a cult-like following and are extremely devoted to having the latest Apple products (Pongsakomrungslip & Schroeder, 2011). Whilst having loyal followers can benefit market share and subsequent profitability, the disadvantage is that where customers are dissatisfied and as a result walk away from the brand; they are increasingly likely to disseminate negative word-of-mouth, influencing brand equity (Hamilton & Hewer, 2010). In response, increased agility via dynamic capabilities can enable flexible resources to assist with keeping up with a changing market (Winter, 2003). For marketers, this can be achieved through utilisation of Big Data, given that a large proportion of tribal members communicate online through social media (Hamilton & Hewer, 2010). Subsequently, data and trend analytics could therefore assist brands with obtaining a competitive advantage via gaining insights relative to customer experience, interests and perceptions (LaVelle et al. 2011).

Conclusion

Conclusively, as contemporary neo-tribes are formed through emotion and lifestyle, they are arguably attractive targets owing to the emotional investment they hold which has led to reduced price sensitivity. However, in practice they can be seen as hostile target markets, given that they are fluid, dynamic and therefore prone to rapidly change. As such, whilst marketers can have competitive success through highly-focused target marketing; it is evident that durability and long-term strategic focus for neo-tribal segmentation is more ambiguous within a contemporary marketplace, given that modern tribal targeting can instigate alienation.