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# Could Brand Tribes Facilitate Transformation of Their Members?

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research aims to determine whether brand tribes could provide their members with transformational benefits. It investigates, for one of the first times, the link between two key concepts of brand tribalism and customer-level transformation. By looking closely at the individual-level outcomes of joining brand tribes, this research complements a large body of past research that has mostly emphasized collective nature of tribalism (e.g., Taute Sierra, 2014).

Following the conquest of differentiating oneself (Cova, 1997), many postmodern individuals define themselves as members of various micro-tribes (Maffesoli, 1996; Cova and Cova, 2001). Members of a brand tribe share a life vision as well as a common subculture, and are bonded through solid emotional links (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). Formation of brand tribes has lately received high attention due to its vast positive impacts on customers' affective commitment and development of brand relationships (e.g., Silva and Carnido, 2012; Badrianaryanan et al., 2014; Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2016).

Past research confirms that brand tribes play a key role in empowering their members through ways such as increasing their power perception, tolerance and helping behaviors (e.g., Lee and Kim, 2018). Participating in a tribe also helps one to develop a sense of superiority (Johnson et al., 2020) and passionate entrepreneurship (Goulding et al., 2013). Accordingly, we suggest the following hypothesis:

**Research Hypothesis:** Brand tribalism positively impacts transformational experience of customers.

Our conceptualization of customer transformation is based on emerging streams of Transformative Consumer Research and Transformative Service Research (e.g., Anderson et al., 2011; Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016), which focus on improving individual and collective well-beings through stimulating positive changes. Our hypothesis is inspired by past

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studies that point to the importance of societal influence on long-term transformation of an individual (e.g., Rosenbaum and al., 2011; Anderson and al., 2013). We also refer to recent studies that emphasize the role of interaction and resource integration (e.g., Previte and Robertson, 2019) as well as compliance and social support (e.g., Heini et al., 2020) in transformational value creation.

To test our model, we conducted a self-administered online survey (with an equivalent paper-and-pencil version for those who preferred it). The sample consisted of undergraduate and graduate students of a large North American university, who participated on a voluntary basis. Subjects were instructed to answer the questions with regards to their preferred brand of smart phone. In total, we had 417 usable responses for analysis. The sample had a composition of 49% male, 50% female, and 1% other respondents. The majority of respondents (73%) were aged between 20 and 24.

Brand tribalism as a second-order construct was measured with the scale proposed by Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009), which integrates five dimensions: degree of fit with lifestyle, passion in life, reference group acceptance, social visibility of brand, and collective memory. To measure the second-order construct of transformational experience, we followed the study of Boonchoo & Thourungrroje (2017), which referred to four components for transformational expectations including self-transformation, relationship transformation, hedonic transformation, and efficacy transformation. To validate the research model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was performed. The findings provided strong support for the research model. As foreseen in our hypothesis, brand tribalism was found to be a major antecedent of transformational experiences in customers.

This study makes significant contributions to both marketing theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, it serves as one of the very first attempts to link the two key domains of brand tribalism and transformational marketing. Our outcomes add to previous findings on the advantages of brand tribes by showing that such tribes could bring about positive changes to the lives of their members on several dimensions. For brand managers, our study proposes an effective solution for offering superior sources of customer value. Our findings suggest that creating transformational value for customers would be possible through sufficient investment on establishing a strong brand tribe. This notion could serve as a guideline for brand managers in their differentiation and positioning endeavors.

**Keywords:** *Tribe, Brand Tribalism, Customer Transformation, Transformational Marketing*

*References are available from the authors upon request.*

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Saeed Shobeiri**, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of marketing at Teluq University in Montreal, Canada. He investigates how certain consumption experiences may cause customer transformation in the long run. His research focuses on designing products and services that may facilitate profound changes in both individuals and groups.

**Jean-Luc Bernard**, M. Sc. is a doctoral student and a Lecturer in Business Administration at UQTR (University of Quebec at Trois-Rivières). He concentrates on developing a new scale to measure customer's perceived omnichannel shopping experience. His other research interests include digital retailing and marketing communications.