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**REPORT**

**FROM TRIBES TO  
COMMUNITIES:  
TOWARD A FLEXIBLE  
BRAND IDENTITY**

Madrid, April 23, 2019

Poet Alejandra Pizarnik once wrote that “no fear is as intense as that of losing one’s identity.”<sup>1</sup> The digital revolution has created a new multi-identity consumer profile. When grouped into communities built around a cause, they share a series of values. But how do these communities, which are located around the globe, build their identities?

## “No fear is as intense as that of losing one’s identity”

Like technological revolutions in the past, today’s digital revolution is beginning to create a social transformation. This change is driven by the immediacy and abundance of available information and knowledge. We are witnessing an unprecedented cultural exchange that dilutes geographical and conceptual borders, making us more permeable to people and ideas different from us.

Connectivity and lower transaction costs have multiplied our ability to choose what, when, where and how we want to consume. Today, we get to choose almost everything, from our workplace to our acquaintances.

Through social media, the new digital environment allows us to connect with individuals from any location, in any language and in any way, giving us the opportunity to group ourselves in communities based on shared interests, values or ways of understanding life. Unlike the tribes of the past, these communities do not belong to a specific region and are not exclusionary. This encourages the creation of a **flexible and multifaceted individual identity** that allows us to belong to as many communities and causes as we can relate to.

<sup>1</sup> Alejandra Pizarnik. Poesía Completa, La noche, el poema, 1969.

### TRIBES VS. COMMUNITIES

	PRIMITIVE TRIBES	URBAN TRIBES	COMMUNITIES
<b>GEOGRAPHIC REACH</b>	Local	Dispersed	Dispersed
<b>CHANNELS OF GROUP ADHESION</b>	In person	Mass Media	Social media
<b>CAUSE</b>	Defense against the environment	Rebellion against the environment	Diverse, compatible causes
<b>EMOTION</b>	Fear	Rebelliousness	Undefined, dependent on the community
<b>MEMBERSHIP</b>	Exclusive	Exclusive	Non-exclusive
<b>LEADERSHIP</b>	Leader or tradition	Aspirational or inspirational leader	Guides rather than leaders (if any)
<b>DISCOURSE</b>	Internal	Unique and shared	Unstructured
<b>VISUAL IDENTITY</b>	Artistic expressions, decorative objects, symbols, etc.	Music as artistic expression, clothing and accessories as symbols	Multifaceted and flexible

■ Opportunity of brands



**Brands seek to connect to these communities as a way to reach individuals with purchasing power.** However, for this strategy to be effective, the group must have solid identifying characteristics in terms of the purpose, discourse and images its members share. Consistency is essential for these communities to exist in the long term, which is of vital importance for the brand's initiative to be worth the effort.

## TRIBES AND BRANDS

Let us stop for a moment to consider the relationship between brands and urban tribes, which reached their peak in the second half of the 20th century. To a certain extent, it can be said that urban tribes inherited many characteristics from primitive tribes: They emerged as a group's response to its environment, they are exclusive from one another, they follow a leader and they place great importance on the external construction of their identity. However, they also build on characteristics of their own, which are especially relevant to brands:

- Belonging to an urban tribe is a voluntary choice, and, thanks to mass media, it is not limited to a specific region.
- These tribes appeared as a form of rebellion against the system, seeking to convey a specific message to the rest of society.
- The role of the leader is both inspirational and aspirational. Group members are not forced to follow their leader, but wish to do so and to emulate them.
- Their need to convey their purpose to society lends significance to their external signs of identity. Personal appearance, clothing, musical tastes and other accessories allow members to show who they are and display their sense of belonging.

In the 1979 British film *Quadrophenia*, directed by Franc Roddam, the lead character Jimmy openly states that he does not want to be like anyone else and that's what lead him to become a mod. Despite this declaration, as a member of his tribe, Jimmy wants to be like the other members of his group, with their clothing, music and Lambretta scooters.

*Quadrophenia*, based on The Who's rock opera, tells the story of a violent confrontation between mods and rockers over a weekend in 1964 in the coastal town of Brighton.

Both tribes emerged in the 1950s', the mods in the United Kingdom and the rockers in the United States. Both subcultures had highly defined visual identities. The mods, with their short hair, tight-fitting dark suits and long green parka coats, considered themselves intellectuals akin to the beat and modern jazz generation. The rockers, with their pompadours and long sideburns, were rock and roll fans with a more progressive ideology linked to social injustice.

Motorcycles were an object of desire in both tribes: Lambretta or Vespa scooters, in the case of the mods, and larger motorcycles such as the British BSA, Triumph or Norton for the rockers. In this sense, Jimmy's striking Lambretta, with its 10 mirrors, practically shares the spotlight with the lead character in *Quadrophenia*.



The film was not received particularly well by audiences or critics at its release due to the harshness of certain scenes, but it has become a cult classic. Jimmy's Lambretta sold for 54,000 euros at a 2008 Bonhams auction<sup>2</sup>—a lot of money considering the scooter was originally designed to motorize war-torn Italy and was therefore inexpensive, easy to maintain and reliable; hardly a luxury item.

In the context of urban tribes, brand outreach efforts are justified by the possibility of being acknowledged by tribe members as creators of certain symbols of identity, such as the Lambretta was for the mods.

Hippies, mods, rockers, hipsters and goths have all built a story around shared values and aesthetics. Brands play a key role in this story by providing the material objects necessary for each group's expression of identity.

However, the fact that belonging to one tribe makes it impossible to belong to another requires a serious commitment from the brand. When their product is linked to a certain tribe's values, it shuts down the brand's opportunity to appeal to other tribes, excluding a large portion of the market.

<sup>2</sup> "54.000 euros por la Lambretta de Quadrophenia," Solomoto.

## COMMUNITIES AND BRANDS

Under the assumption stated in this article, new online communities seem to hold greater appeal for brands. Since they function as permeable groups whose members can join all the communities that relate to their identities, brands don't face the same issues of exclusivity. However, precisely because they are made up of individuals with wide-ranging interests, they do not have clear leaders—aside from the occasional influencer, who acts more as a guide than an actual leader. Although their identities are clearly defined in terms of purpose, they are not always as clear in terms of their message or image.

Another challenge is that brands can no longer use the same strategies they used in the past to connect to these groups. Group members flat-out reject being targeted for connection. This rejection is based on decades of advertising and an environment in which we seem to have lost our ability to distinguish true from false. Consumers are aware of their power and demand a functional relationship from the brand: they accept it only when it provides them with a clear benefit.

Therefore, they accept being targeted by brands whose value proposition fulfils at least two requirements:

**1.- True and real.** Modern consumers are unforgiving toward brands that lack authenticity,<sup>3</sup> and they highly prize coherence between storytelling and storydoing. When a brand targets a community, it must never be perceived as opportunistic. Furthermore, the company's value proposition and purpose must not only be compatible with the community's cause, but complementary. In other words, **brands must seek to connect with communities with standards that allow them to fulfil the company's purpose.**

**2.- Non-exclusive.** As mentioned above, community members join many communities and take part in all causes that interest them, as based on their own individual identities. Companies must therefore define their purposes based on strong value propositions that can relate to various causes in a coherent way.

**3.- Beneficial for members.** Benefits must not come solely in terms of products or services, but be for members of the community, favoring its development and its continuity. **To help sustain the group, brands can help communities build public and recognizable identities by contributing specific content and experiences to each community. This content can be shared by members of the group to create a sense of belonging.**

Brands must adapt to each community to build a connection, using a more flexible message and more adaptable identity. This is an opportunity for any brand willing to engage in an exercise

<sup>3</sup> "El consumidor coherente. Marcas Auténticas," Quiero (2017)

<sup>4</sup> Such as "Nuestra verdad es Nuestra verdad" or "Celebra lo que eres"

<sup>5</sup> Case Study, Señora Rushmore

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.puromarketing.com/42/22337/poder-imagen-contenido-visual-nos-atrae-tanto.html>

in humility by creating **proposals based on listening** to communities, then offering them tailor-made experiences in an ongoing feedback loop.

The identifying features individuals relate to within each community are determined by how they consume and share content, leaving out those not to their tastes or any they find unrelatable. The ability to convey emotion is crucial, as emotions are the key to holding a group together. To paraphrase acclaimed speaker **Simon Sinek**, if you speak from the heart about your beliefs, you will attract like-minded people. The more dispersed the group is, the greater the value of sharing the same emotion.

A good example of the way strong audiovisual content can mobilize a dispersed community that rarely comes together can be found in the advertising campaign "Dad, why is Atleti our team?" Launched by soccer team Atlético de Madrid in 2001, the campaign used emotion to maintain cohesion among its supporters. In the original ad, a child asks his father why they support the team, and his father is unable to answer. The content immediately struck a chord among the team's supporters, who probably all shared memories of similar conversations they had with their fathers or their own children. The ad evoked the vibrant energy of the soccer field and the feeling of belonging to a community that takes pride in its values. Since then, each new version of the ad with a new claim<sup>4</sup> is featured in the sports section of the evening news. The agency responsible for the ad says the campaign provides the best explanation of what it means to be an Atleti supporter: passion shared from one generation to the next.<sup>5</sup>

## VISUAL EXPERIENCE

We know the human brain processes images up to 60,000 times faster than text, and it has a greater capacity to retain visual content than any other form of information. A total of 40 percent of users react better to image-based content than plain text,<sup>6</sup> and publications with visual

content are visited 94 percent more often.<sup>7</sup> It could even be said that today's communication needs to be visual or it won't reach its audience at all.

## “We should reconsider how far we are willing to go to make our brand identity flexible”

People's natural knowledge of visual and graphic language is so vast that their adhesion to or rejection of our brand depends almost entirely on the quality of what we produce. As companies, we must introduce ourselves with the prevailing tools and languages our target communities use. More than ever, we must assume the medium is the message: **our visual communication is the most powerful way to convey our brand identity.**

If we want our content to express our value proposition and purpose while helping define the identity of our target communities, we should reconsider how far we are willing to go to make our brand identity flexible, which would allow individuals from different communities to relate to it.

A good example of this is Vodafone's content strategy in its official social media profiles. If we analyze the language, tone, formats and visual identity of Vodafone YU, Vodafone Giants, Vodafone TV and Vodafone Empresas, we see that each channel adapts to its target community: *yusers* (young users), gamers, TV show and film fans and companies interested in the digital transformation, respectively.

Banco Santander is also a leading name in social media branding, with the promotion of the **1/2/3 Smart Account** designed for customers between 18 and 31 years of age who want not just money, but new experiences. The website's design and language appeal to a younger audience and

focus on vital experiences, and the product was presented through the award-winning brand film “Cuánto.”

In the fashion industry, a well-known case is that of Louis Vuitton. With the launch of their new “V” leather line, featuring a practical design, they were able to show that luxury is compatible with a hectic urban lifestyle. The line's designs feature a different signature, one consisting of a V-shaped pattern designed by Gaston-Louis Vuitton that he used on his own briefcases. The company also launched their “MoVers” series, done in collaboration with young professionals linked to artistic and aspirational lifestyles, such as famous skater Alex Olson or digital artist Ryoichi Kurokawa. Using this strategy, Louis Vuitton targeted a group of young urban professionals who are not traditional consumers of its products. As an aside, it is worth noting that users on several skate-related forums and blogs envisioned Louis Vuitton becoming a brand used by skaters worldwide. This dream is not far from reality, considering the relationship between luxury brands and the world of rap music.<sup>8</sup>

As stated at the beginning of this article, no fear is as intense as that of losing one's identity. This fear is also a privilege, because you cannot lose what you don't have. From the moment our parents name us, we spend the rest of our lives trying to discover who the person in the mirror is. We consider how we wish to present ourselves to others, whether we are alone or in a group. Individuals welcome any help in this pursuit of identity. Those brands capable of embracing this have an unparalleled opportunity; the intersection between their identity and that of their target communities will provide an opportunity to convey their value to consumers and achieve the brand engagement they so long for.

<sup>7</sup> <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2016/10/research-b2c-content-marketing>

<sup>8</sup> “A cada trapero su marca de lujo: una historia de amor recíproca,” Smoda

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She has participated in over 50 audiovisual storytelling projects for different organizations and companies, including BBVA, EY, Coca Cola, Campofrío, Asociación para el Progreso de la Dirección, among others.

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