

Post-Modern Tribes as a Marketing Tool

Laura A. Ripamonti

Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

Armando Cirrincione

Università Bocconi, Italy

INTRODUCTION

In 1994, Peters (1994) claimed that we are experiencing crazy times and that calls for crazy organizations. As a matter of fact, we are embedded into a complex and “transitional” historical phase, that philosophers and social scientists define “post-modernity.”

This phase is characterized by a progressive skepticism towards the exasperated individualism generated by the liberation movements and towards the rationalism of the modern period. This shifting of perspective does not crystallize in any specific movement, but, on the contrary, it is a mosaic composed by a plurality of different ideologies.

At any rate, at least two major forces are dominating the scene of the change: a strong, diffused commitment toward the re-composition of a fragmented society, and a general collapse of reality, which becomes more and more merely illusion and image. This implies, on one hand, the rise of a new kind of “tribes” or *communities* and, on the other, an increasing power of the *hyper-reality*. Both phenomena are fostered and supported in their new expressions by the ICT (information and communication technology). Consequences of this silent revolution should no longer be underestimated, since they are producing new business models (among which one of the most investigated is the open source movement—see for example Lee & Cole, 2003; von Hippel, 2001) and call for an innovative approach, both to the organization and to the relation with the market.

A small (but increasingly enlarging) group of visionary companies (among which Salomon, Nike, LOMO, etc., as extensively analyzed e.g., in Cova, 2003 or in von Hippel, 2002) are riding this wave, but, according to us, their approaches are still too rooted in the current “traditional” business and marketing models, lacking a deep long term vision on the mighty implications offered by the virtual-real interplay, and thus possibly missing part of the related opportunities.

In this work we try to give some hints on these issues, unveiling the implications of post-modern communities as powerful marketing and business tools, by offering insights on an empirical case study: a state-of-the-art company that has been born and lives (prospering) on a model based *exclusively* on an effective mix of virtual image and tribal online activity.

BACKGROUND

Post-Modernity: A Tale of Consumption as a Tool for Constructing Meanings

In sociological studies the term post-modernity defines the “defensive” reaction people showed, starting from the second half of the last century, towards the neo-positivism of science and towards the illusion of freedom and happiness it brought along. Until then it was a commonly accepted idea that the “scientific approach” was freeing people from every constraint due to cultural burdens, underestimating the consequences deriving from the fact that it was also destroying all traditional cultural landmarks (Bauman, 1990). But in recent times, it became more and more clear to people that science is just a matter of technical tools: it is not necessarily meant at boosting happiness, nor it is able to supply any “new meaning” to life in substitution of the “traditional” ones it swept away. Sadly, it also became clear that freedom has a “dark side,” outfitted in loneliness and absence of values.

As a consequence, people have begun searching a new sense for their lives, defining new *identities* in *their own worlds*, built on that *freedom* modernity has left them with. This process by no means implies embracing extreme individualism, but, on the contrary, the building of *communities*, that represent an anchor against the loneliness people have fallen into (Maffesoli, 1996).

While modernity was the time of *rational order*, post-modernity is the time of *identity* and *community* built on emotional states and experiences of life. People reject the dominance of reason (that now appears as the most straight constraint), and, without losing technical advancements and the idea of freedom, they conquest their own way of living and expressing themselves.

“Meaning” and “experience” are the main concepts linked to post-modernity (Brown, 1993; Cova & Badot, 1995; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). *Experience* is the way of looking at life, while *meaning* is the way of making sense of it. Life is the sequence of situations we are embedded into, but upon which we do not have any control. The only way we can dominate this chain of situations is giving them a meaning through *participation*. Participating is actively driving our life: the way participation is acted defines our personality.

There are virtually infinite possible ways of participating, and everyone chooses the way more congruent with her self-image, way of being or even transitory emotional state. This is possible thanks to *hyper-reality*, a new way of looking at reality (Cova & Cova, 2001). Reality is not just the tangible world, but it is made of an indefinite amount of possible worlds, where everybody “can be herself embedded into an experience.” Hyper-reality is not only a product of imagination: it becomes true through the *socialization* of images, languages, rules, roles and it is magnified by ICT, through virtual constructions and communication (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995).

The *socialization process* allows the creation of new identities, exploiting the *relationships* established among social beings (Elliott, 1999). Building new self-identities through socialization is a question of sharing of passions, hobbies, interests, ways of being, and moral beliefs with people who recognize us into the relationship.

Everybody longs to express their self-images in spontaneous *relationships*: this is the base of *tribes*. Tribes are post-modern communities, different from the communities of practice *à la* Wenger (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), since through them people build their own identities in new possible worlds, where everyone can become the one she decides to be. A tribe is built on the shared meaning of the *sense* given to different situations: a noun, an object, an emotion, a tangible experience are all pieces of the same idiosyncratic world that belongs to the tribe, and whose members contribute in building.

Any object can acquire a special meaning within the borderlines of a tribe, and lose it outside them. Thus, every behavior may acquire a special sense within a tribe, contributing to the definition of the self-image within it.

Each post-modern individual belongs to several tribes: hyper-reality refers also to this multiple-belonging. Switching from a tribe to another is as easy as changing your dress: it is sufficient to change the meaning attached to things, nouns, behaviors, for sharing a different world with different people.

Consumption and *possession* are among the most important behaviors underpinning both identity and belonging to a specific tribe (Elliott, 1994). Through consumption, people aim at constructing symbols and experiences, while possession anchors their identity to the tangible world and communicate a durable belonging (Belk, 1988). Through consumption, everyone communicates the belonging to a specific tribe, and sometimes consumption becomes the essence of a tribe. Consumption is defined within a system of rules that tribe’s members share and accept. This system of rules makes the tribe able to exist and to perpetuate itself, but it also makes members able to construct their own identities and to conduct a life congruent with that identity (almost within that community).

Evolving Tribal Gaming Communities: From Paper to Bytes

Role-playing games (RPG) perfectly reflect post-modern people attitudes: players are requested to assume a new imaginary identity, a life-conduct coherent with that identity, and to accept rules and roles that allow the community to survive. The target of role gaming is more than winning: it is becoming someone we long to be.

RPG’s popularity increased continuously since the creation in 1974 of their renown progenitor Dungeons & Dragons (D&D for short, see Butterfield et al., 1982; Gygax, 1979).

In these games, players adopt the personalities of fantastic individuals, and interact with other players’ characters according to precise rules that decide the outcomes of the interaction. The diffusion of personal computers connected to the Internet boosted the spreading of RPGs, moving them online, and budding phenomena like MUDs (multi-user dungeons) or play-by-mail-games (PBM). Although well-studied from

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