

Contrasting Social Network and Tribal Theories: An Applied Perspective

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Abstract

This paper compares social network and tribal theory for their fit with the behavior of real music communities. These theoretical perspectives are attracting considerable attention as researchers and practitioners search for ways to conceptualise, measure, and interact with communities of consumers. The bases for this comparison are how these perspectives treat community boundary demarcation, communication processes, and the temporal order of events in community creation. Results indicate that social network theory provides a better fit with the behavior of real communities. These results imply that the a-priori expectation should be that consumer communities conform to the social processes suggested by social network theory. However important exceptions exist for the selective use of tribal perspectives.

Keywords: tribe, social, network, theory, community, music

1. Introduction

The business community often focuses on how to use consumers' social interactions to achieve marketing outcomes. New theories and tools are continually emerging that allow companies to leverage consumer social interactions for competitive advantage. One of the recent developments in the literature concerning consumer social systems is the introduction of tribal theory (Cova and Cova 2002). Business is embracing the tribal approach over classic social network theory (Freeman 2004:3). But an important question remains: what, if any, are the risks to marketing practitioners who fail to discriminate between the two theories at an applied level? A thorough comparison of the two theories is necessary to enable us to identify situations in which one theory may be more appropriate than the other, and if one may offer a better account of social processes.

Tribal theory proposes that the consumer is an independent decision maker and has a particular passion for an object or issue. Through sharing this passion with other consumers the decision maker builds relationships and ultimately shares information. From an applied perspective the emphasis is on two way communication; companies need to solicit feedback and be overt in their support of consumer activities, ideally through leveraging their shared passion and innate need for belonging (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). In contrast social network theory considers how different types of consumer dyads form the basis of social functioning and information communication. In application, the social network approach explores the importance of creating opportunities to generate word of mouth (WOM) exchanges within these dyads without the focus of the brand, or other passion, being the main basis of the relationship. Thus brand relationship strategies are based around identifying and infiltrating spheres of influence. In this paper these two theories are applied to a number of consumer groups to understand which offers a stronger account of the observed social phenomenon.

2. The Tribal Conceptualisation

Tribal theory emerges within the literature as an alternative conceptualization of how social groups form and communicate. Tribal theory helps to account for how social groups can focus on a single common interest. The interest acts as social glue for the members. Several themes in tribal theory also explain how a social system forms and operates (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007a; Hamilton and Hewer 2010). These themes include heterogeneity in the tribes (Earls 2003), intra-tribe communication, inter-tribe communication, inclusionary and exclusionary behavior of the tribe, and shared passion (Cova, Pace, and Park 2007b).

Of all these themes the most critical is shared passion. Shared passion is the emotion that unites the members of the tribe. For example, the apple computer now has a number of consumer groups who commit themselves to the furtherance of that brand and technology. Rituals and behaviors develop from this passion that act as a social cement, forming the foundation for group structure (Cova and Cova 2002; Hamilton and Hewer 2010). Any one individual is of little importance to the group as a whole, group survival is dependent on the collective commitment to the passion (Cova and Cova 2002).

The theme of heterogeneity in many ways arises from this focus on shared passion. As group structure is defined by the object that is the focus of passion for the tribe, the tribe has no need to have any other basis for homogeneity (Earls 2003; Hamilton and Hewer 2010). Thus heterogeneity can safely exist within a single tribe without damaging the ability of the tribe to function or communicate information.

The remaining themes provide additional insight into how tribes function. Intra- and extra-tribe communication, and indeed participation, explores how we can understand the boundaries of the tribe on an individual level. Those within the tribe take on numerous roles that support and promote tribe function. Cova and Cova (2002) describe four such roles;

participants, members, practitioners, and sympathizers. However, the literature does not exclude the existence of others. Observations of more generalized in-tribe behaviors are also common, with separate behaviors for outsiders presenting a demarcation between tribe members and non-members (Cova and White 2010; Hamilton and Hewer 2010).

Tribal theory overcomes one of the main practical challenges of conceptualizing a social system by emphasizing that marketers should focus on the tribe's passion. This focus provides a gateway into the tribe's culture, as the business can represent a compatibility with or sharing of that passion. This perspective is unlike the more general social network literature in which the behavior of the business is largely considered separately from the behavior of the network.

3. A Brief Overview of Social Network Literature

Understanding how communities of people interact within social networks and communicate information is highly useful information for marketers (Whyte 1954). Social networks often develop due to the informational advantage they offer participants. An individual forms or activates a specific social bond in response to a need for information. A typical case would be a person about to undertake a specific behavior checking with peers, whom possibly have experience of that behavior, as to whether it is likely to result in a positive or negative outcome. For example, a consumer about to purchase a brand of car can check with a peer who owns that car as to whether it is reliable. From an evolutionary perspective this offers considerable advantages to those who participate in social networks. Hence social network theories permeate not just the business literature, but also the environmental and biological literatures. Through time individuals are able to collect assortments of social bonds that are of benefit with these assortments continually changing

and developing. Such change allows rich and complex social structures to form across many individuals through which highly diverse types of information can flow.

Research into social networks in the marketing area builds on theories of how individuals and their relationships bring people into groups while providing a broader social fabric for the functioning of society (Burt 1982; Granovetter 1982; Rogers 1995). Three theoretical perspectives emerge within the social network literature (Greenacre 2010): (1) that social structure and information dissemination is an inevitable result of social interaction (Rogers 1995); (2) that the type of individuals in a group determines network functioning (Feick and Price 1987; Burt 1997; 1999); and, (3) that the nature of the relational bonds between individuals permits network structures to form (Granovetter 1973; 1982).

These theoretical perspectives contribute understanding of different aspects of the functioning of social networks. The first draws heavily on economic interpretations of information flow in markets proposing that information diffuses among individuals via numerous communication channels, and that each individual goes through an adoption and integration process for information (Rogers 1995). Although highly useful for understanding the social phenomenon that may help or inhibit information diffusion this theory is criticised for not examining how individuals themselves select, filter and change the nature of diffused information (Frenzen and Nakamoto 1993).

The second theoretical perspective examines the role of individuals in network functioning. Within this theory key types of individuals are critical to information communication (Burt 1980; 1999). Each individual serves a function in allowing information to flow around the network. Such functions can include being an opinion leader and introducing new ideas into the network, or being an opinion broker spreading information between sub-groups of people (Burt 1982; 1997). Some of the limitations in the diffusion literature are overcome by acknowledging the many roles individuals take in a network.

Complementing these perspectives is theory of how relational bonds impact network structure. Understanding the role that relationships play in forming the social fabric of networks expands on the role a single individual can play in network function (Granovetter 1973). The strength of the relational tie forms the basis of this theoretical perspective in many cases. Individuals in a dyad with a strong relational tie are likely to share their other strong ties permitting the formation of small social groups or cliques (Granovetter 1982; Iacobucci and Hopkins 1992).

Weak ties of the individuals in a sub-group are less likely to be shared and integrated into the group thus providing links beyond the immediate social group to other groups (Granovetter 1982; Iacobucci and Hopkins 1992). This conceptualisation offers insight into how different relationships lead to different communication and social behaviors across a network (Granovetter 1982; Iacobucci and Hopkins 1992; Yale and Gilly 1995; Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger, and Yale. 1998).

In reality, the best understanding of social networks comes from drawing on each of these theoretical bases to pose and answer questions regarding human interaction. Indeed a compromise between each of these perspectives likely provides the most comprehensive account of how social systems form and function, and how people communicate information naturally within such systems.

4. A Basis for Comparison: A Music Context

This study compares the insights of both the tribal and social network perspectives in relation to social behavior. By comparing these perspectives we are able to understand which offers a better representation of the behaviors of social groups. To date, these perspectives are largely compared on theoretical grounds alone. No research has undertaken an evaluation of explanatory power using the behavior of a social group.

Communities, and/or tribes of music aficionados attract considerable attention throughout the social and communication literatures (Helyar 2007; Baym and Ledbetter 2009; Cheema and Papatla 2010; McLean, Oliver and Wainwright 2010). This type of community offers one of the best representations of a tribe (Helyar 2007) and as such allows us to examine a social situation relevant to the application of tribal theory. The choice of music communities thus provides a fair basis for the comparison of tribal theory to social network theory.

The use of several music genres within the Sydney scene allows us to examine how different social groups form and operate. The genres chosen are musical theatre, rave, indie, opera, hip hop and pop. These genres are a cross section of music communities, addressing a diverse set of demographic and taste groups. This cross section permits reasonable extrapolation of the findings across multiple social settings offering a strong basis for generalizability (Patton 2002). The use of multiple cases increases the opportunity to detect and explore any possible exceptions to the explanatory power of either of the two theories (Yin 2003). Using this type of case approach the full scope of the two theories can be considered.

5. Comparing Tribes to Networks (or Networks to Tribes)

The basis for comparing these two theories must be established before undertaking any reasonable comparison. The comparison in this paper addresses two elements of social interactions as they are important for understanding groups or communities. These elements also present two of the most important differences between tribal theory and social network theory (Halinen and Törnroos 2005). The elements are community demarcation and community communication.

Demarcation is a feature of social analysis arising from the need to specify the limits of the analysis, that is, where the community ends and there is no need for further analysis (Laumann, Marsden and Prensky 1992; Halinen and Törnroos 2005). Demarcation thus refers to the specification of the boundaries of the community. Due to the considerable impact that demarcation has on the definition and scope of the network a significant body of literature is dedicated to understanding it (Laumann, Marsden, and Prensky 1992). Failure to undertake demarcation in an appropriate manner can result in the omission of critical individuals in a social group from analysis, and indeed from the marketing efforts of a practitioner. In turn, poor demarcation may undermine marketing efforts, reducing the effectiveness of a campaign targeted at the community. Similarly, poor demarcation can lead to the inclusion of irrelevant targets, wasting marketers' time and resources by focusing on the wrong people. Thus demarcation is essential for both theory and application.

Tribal theory and social network theory each have different approaches to boundary demarcation. In tribal theory the passion is critical to demarcation. The in-group shares the tribal passion on some level; those in the out-group have little sense of that passion. Consequently tribal theory suggests the presence of strong in- and out-groups, particularly on the basis of participation in the furtherance of the passion (Cova et al. 2007a). Those within the in-group then take on functional roles in furthering that focal passion (Cova and Cova 2002).

Social network theory uses a different mechanism to establish community demarcation. As previously described social network theory emphasises the strength of the relational tie in the development of a community. Shared strong ties form the basis for small groups with unshared weak ties linking these small groups to form a broader network. This theoretical mechanism suggests that the strong in- and out-groups defined by tribal theory do not exist. Instead one or more centralised strong tie groups define the core of the community

with a fuzzy boundary of weaker tie relationships. This difference between social network theory and tribal theory presents the first basis with which to observe the behavior of music communities.

Proposition 1. The community has strong in- and out-groups with the demarking of these groups based on individuals' focus on the musical passion, supporting the presence of a tribe. Alternatively, such in- and out-groups are not present, just stronger and weaker social connections with only fuzzy social boundaries defined by weak ties, suggesting a social network.

Communication is another critical feature of social behavior. Substantial literature considers the effect of the structure of social groups, and their individual behavior on the occurrence of positive or negative word of mouth (Brown and Reingen 1987; File, Judd and Prince 1992; Yale and Gilly 1995; Samson 2006). These two theories have a similar focus, providing bases on which to map the communication content of community members. Each theory, however, approaches the mapping of communication from a vastly different perspective, making this a useful basis for theory comparison. The selection of the best theory to understand communication is fundamental for practitioners. Failure to understand what community members are talking about will lead practitioners to use incorrect language or content when dealing with this community. The use of incorrect language or content in marketing messages will almost certainly result in the rejection of the message, fundamentally undermining marketing efforts.

Tribal theory suggests that the focus of all communication should be on the shared passion, or at least serving the ends of the shared passion. This focus on the passion is the hallmark of tribal theory. As the social group formed on the basis of this common passion group members must continue to communicate regarding that passion in order to remain a

tribe member. To allow for efficient social functioning elements of normal social exchanges and nominal other communication would also be present.

Social network theory suggests that communication would be multi-structured and highly variable. As such social network theory imposes a weaker assumption on the communication content of community members with no requirement for homogeneity. Communication is likely to be highly contextual, addressing numerous possible topics. This important difference regarding communication behavior provides another opportunity to evaluate the fit of the theories to the music communities.

Proposition 2. The communication of the community centres on the object of shared passion, supporting the presence of a tribe. Alternatively, the communication of the community is multi-structured and driven by context, suggesting a social network.

The first two propositions led to considerable debate among the analysts regarding the interpretation of the collected data. A consequence of exploring these differences in interpretation was the emergence of a third proposition. This proposition addresses the temporal order of community formation. The temporal order of community formation refers to the sequence of events that generate the social group (Halinen and Törnroos 2005). Temporal order addresses fundamental assumptions of both theories and as such provides the strongest basis for comparison. Temporal order also has direct implications for practice. For marketers wanting to promote burgeoning communities the failure to understand how they form limits their ability to effectively place resources that encourage their development. Such a failure also reduces the ability to target and use such communities to support any marketing strategy.

Within tribal theory the passion is the instigator of social group formation (Cova et al. 2007a). An excellent demonstration of the passion forming prior to the relationships in the community of interest is in the model provided by Dionisio, Leal and Moutinho (2008)

regarding football tribes and the passion they hold for a club. Within tribes each member develops their individual passion, to differing extents, and then shares this passion with like minded people. Thus in the majority of cases the formation of the passion in the individual occurs prior to community formation.

Social network theory supposes a very different temporal order. Within this theory strong and weak tie relationships form prior to the establishment of any strong communal passion. The relationships comprising the community can have many bases, with some based purely on social proximity. This theory emphasizes that relationships within the community will emerge naturally in response to each individual's situation and need. This assertion does not preclude the presence of homophiles; indeed individuals who are similar on multiple dimensions are more likely to form a relationship due to shared understanding (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). The important difference is that no overarching passion is acting as a formative basis for the relationships in the community. Any shared passion would more likely form after the development of initial relationships.

Proposition 3. The relationships forming the basis of the community developed *as a result of* individual passion being shared, supporting the presence of a tribe. Alternatively, the shared passions developed after the relationships defining the community were formed, suggesting a social network.

Table 1 summarises the three research propositions. With these propositions in place it is now possible to compare these two theories.

Table 1 here.

6. Method

The nature of the research propositions and the presence of different language and sub-cultural norms across the various focal music communities led to the adoption of a qualitative methodology. Such a method can accommodate these differences while permitting the exploration of underlying similarities in community behaviours (Burns 1989; Silverman 2006). In particular the need to explore the nuance of temporality demands a qualitative approach here. With respondents often unaware of the temporal order of actions during relationship formation a qualitative method offers enough sensitivity and flexibility to detect small differences in temporal order (Gordon 1999:85).

A three tiered co-creationist process of data collection and analysis was used to allow a more objective and rich data comparison. The first tier of the process employed a peer interviewing technique (Elliott, Watson and Harris 2002). Junior researchers with strong connections to the general music community were recruited as interviewers. Each interviewer developed their own moderator guide focusing on the main themes of tribal theory and social network theory. Such use of interviewer-developed guides was found to be necessary for the most appropriate questions to be asked of each quite unique respondent. The interviewers' knowledge and input for the guides was considered an important pre-condition for gaining adequate understanding of the focal communities (Kvale 1996). In total there were nine interviewers in the field.

The use of peers for the interviews was also to allow for probing from an informed and understanding interviewer who has similar unique insight into the music community (Rapley 2004). The interplay between the general knowledge of the interviewer and the specific knowledge of the respondent allowed for substantially richer data collection (Fontana and Frey 2003; Silverman 2006:145).

The sampling plan for the source respondents used a peer selection process. Highly centralised figures within each music genre were identified using the unique knowledge of

the interviewers. This purposive approach targeted first the genre of interest, and second, within that genre, people who were active participants in the social scene and had a long history within that scene. Each interviewer sourced two respondents for a specific music genre. This two-step approach ensured accurate identification of respondents with substantial knowledge and experience of the social dynamics of the specific scene.

The second tier of the research consists of a thematic content analysis of the interviews by two independent analysts (Braun and Clarke 2006). Initially only a single analyst was used with the results for all of the music genres being largely the same. The one notable exception, however, was the genre of indie. During the analysis the complexity of the indie group's behavior was seen to be much greater than that of the other communities. Due to the complexity present a second analyst was introduced with each analysing the data separately. The analysts employed a procedure which treats the information from both the respondent and interviewer as necessary inputs to understand the social processes that are the focus of this research. This constructivist approach both acknowledges and supports the role of informants and researchers in the co-creation of knowledge (Silverman 2006).

The third tier of this process was a consequence of the results from the analysis in the second tier. Although the two analysts reached identical conclusions regarding nearly all of the music genres across the key topics, they reached quite different conclusions regarding some aspects of the indie music genre. To overcome problems created by this difference the third tier introduced another analyst. The objective for this analyst was not to interpret the original transcripts but to moderate a debriefing of the two analysts. Such moderation permitted the exploration of the different interpretations and the impact of these differences on the analysis. Having adopted this method for the indie music genre with surprisingly rich results a similar approach was then repeated for the other genres, in these cases confirming their homogeneity.

To illustrate the impact this tiered approach has on the results the homogenous music genres are grouped together for the following interpretation. The results for these genres were not a basis for contention between the analysts and as such they are discussed here as a single phenomenon. Evidence is drawn from all of the specific genres throughout the analysis to support the testing of the research propositions. The results for indie are treated as a separate case with a more detailed interpretation provided. The implications of this exceptional case are quite profound for the research propositions.

7. Results

The results of this research largely confirm the experience of both academia and industry regarding the complexity of mapping community behavior (Halinen and Törnroos 2005). However, important differences are identified between tribal theory and social network theory when they are applied to the real cases of the various music communities.

7.1 Community Demarcation

On the basis of community demarcation considerable support is found for tribal theory. The music communities of hip hop, rave, opera, pop and musical theatre demonstrate evidence of strong in- and out-groups. Those within the community devote considerable time and effort to their passion. One musical theatre respondent explained that “...in the last 2 years, it’s been all of my life.” A raver suggested “...when I was brand new in it there wasn’t a lot that would make me **not** want to go.” Enthusiasts actively monitor artists that they particularly like, subscribe to numerous publications that provide information about upcoming events, and follow rumours about possible shows. “The only way you can get to know [about] auditions, tickets, information, release dates, [is] it’s all over the internet at the moment... You get information from say aussie theatre dot com, stage whispers, there was

another one; there's just a few websites you can go to that tell you what shows are coming up. And you can go to the actual production company's website, like, you've got squeaking floors, you've got squabbalagic, you've got the production company; and yeah, or you've just got contacts, like you've got other enthusiasts who tell you this is coming...."

The in-group members of each tribe dedicate considerable time and effort to their passion. This is particularly apparent amongst aficionados who spend time learning about the in-group's history and socio-cultural norms (Arnould and Thompson 2005). An opera enthusiast explained "To appreciate opera you need to be quite cultured, you need to have an understanding and appreciation of classical music and of the history of the art form, the heritage of opera and of the technical skill that goes into putting on a performance by the actors, the technical and production team and the like."

Sub-tribes have particular taste preferences within each genre, but all form a coherent larger genre-based tribe centralising on the core passion. Such is the dedication to this central passion that many would, in the words of a musical theatre in-group member, "see virtually anything musical theatre and they don't care necessarily [about] venue so much or whether it has won those Tony awards or who wrote it or whether Barbara was in it or whatever, they're gonna go see it mainly because it's a musical and musicals are fabulous [sic]". In all cases there is a clear in-group that centralises on the tribal passion.

These music genres also have distinct out-groups that in essence are not a part of the music community. Respondents are keenly aware of the demarcation between those who are in the in-group and those in the out-group. When explaining how to recommend a performance to a colleague, a musical theatre in-group member said, "well there are two categories [of people], well there're two answers really.... my non musical theatre answer, entirely different. For starters I would never tell anyone who does not know musical theatre to go see Kiss of the Spider Woman." While the in-group members often share their passion

with out-group members, and make attempts to find common ground, this is not a major component of the relationship. An in-group pop enthusiast explained how effectively she communicates with out-group and other non-group members as, “I think very effectively. Because I just identify [and] communicate with them on the level of whatever music they like, instead of trying to say ‘Oh hey, rock fans, I really like pop music. You should listen to pop’.” Though in some circumstances the out-group is deemed unreachable with respect to the passion. An opera member explained that the prerequisites for an appreciation of opera “are not things that come instantly to everyone”. No matter the opinion of the in-group towards the out-group the demarcation is readily apparent offering strong support for tribal theory.

The only exception to this result is the indie genre. In this community no strong out-groups emerge although, almost paradoxically, an in-group is present. The in-group shares the passion for the genre. One member suggested that “...you can sort of pick them out of a crowd.” Indie is also distinct from other music genres, but in a non-specific sense. “[unlike popular music] Indie is made for like the listening experience.” No sense of a clear out-group among the respondents emerges. The lack of an out-group arises from the shared passion actually being a blend of passions for art, fashion, music and literature. Indie community members are accepting of people with a passion for any combination of these. “...it's sort of the same like the fashion and the music. Like the dress style is like a big aspect of the Indie scene.”

As a consequence the demarcation breaks down for this genre. In this case the in-group is characterised as simply a collection of stronger tie connections, with highly fuzzy boundaries that bleed into a diverse set of related social scenes. The presence of such fuzzy boundaries suggests that this one music genre is more compatible with a social network

theory account of the social system. Despite this one exception, the results largely support the tribal account in proposition one.

7.2 Community Communication

Examining the communication behavior of the various communities gives considerable support for tribal theory. The communication among members of the opera, rave, hip hop and musical theatre genres tends to centralise on the shared music passion. A rave member explained that “...the guys that were into techno music always talked about going to rave parties.” In many circumstances the communication among community members is recognised as focusing solely on the passion. An opera enthusiast suggested that “my friends which are interested would interact in the same way I would, and between my friends yes [there] would be word of mouth [about the opera]”. Even when considering future communication there is a clear desire to continue to communicate about the passion. A musical theatre aficionado, with a sarcastic/comical tone of voice explained that, “It’s a huge inconvenience to have to talk about musical theatre which I love so much.” Such explicit announcements of a desire for communication about the passion are not uncommon among the respondents. An example from a raver included, “It was only like you know 500 people that turned up to this rave party, that everyone talked to each other, everyone was nice to each other ...at the end of the day, I had enjoyed it and I had a good night...” and from a hip hop listener “previously I have isolated myself [socially] to hip hop listeners.” This finding offers strong support for the tribal account of the social system.

Two exceptions to this result are the pop and indie genres. The pop community is characterised by a much more diverse collection of social sub-groups that have quite disparate communication. Each sub-group shares many different subjects of communication other than pop. When discussing a central focus such as a key personality or mode of

communication amongst pop members, one respondent explained that “it may be hard to define, because everyone is individual and different and unique.” Highlighting this lack of centrality in communication is that “they [pop listeners] are in their own self contained world, enjoying whatever they want, doing whatever they want. But that’s very general...” This heterogeneity in communication is not a source of conflict. The members of the community seek shared understanding of differences, rather than communicating only on a single passion. The same respondent further explained, “I like soundtracks and music from video games as well, so if there are people who like rock music, and I like rock music, you know I’d talk to them about that and I might try to mention and see if they like video game music as well and if they don’t that’s ok, I won’t try to push it.”

Indie music too has more diverse communications than tribal theory might suggest. The communication in the indie community decentralises, but not because of inherent diversity as with pop, but due to the presence of the blend of passions providing multiple combinations of communication bases. Community members appear to have difficulty articulating what they talk about with fellow community members due to this diversity. Though when prompted for a comparison to other genres respondents highlight the aspects of the indie culture about which they communicate. An enthusiast commented, “I can’t really see them [rock listeners] as going to art galleries or cafes or anything.”

Overall these results tend to support tribal interpretations of community communication with most music communities adhering to the tribal perspective. However, it is important to explore how the remaining exceptions can be explained, or not, by either social network theory or tribal theory. To search for the basis of these differences the two analysts were debriefed about why they thought these exceptions arose, as per the third tier of the research method.

The contrast between the initial results of the two analysts for the indie tribe is important. Although resolved with the debriefing procedure this contrast is a fruitful place to start exploring the exceptions, as the indie genre offers the strongest exception in the analysis. Interrogation of the two analysts revealed the temporal order of group formation was the basis for their initial contrasting interpretations. To illustrate this difference using proposition one, the first analyst argued that the in-group of the indie tribe predated the passion, and was thus just a circle of friends. This interpretation suggests social network theory has the greatest explanatory power. Analyst two identified that new friends had subsequently joined the in-group based on their shared passion, suggesting a tribal account. Each analyst chose a different point in time in the community's history on which to base the analysis implying a different temporal order for relationship formation whilst not specifically looking for this temporal order. Thus, proposition three explores this issue for all music genres.

7.3 Temporal Order

Turning to the order in which the community forms relationships and individuals develop passion, there are quite contrasting results compared to those for the previous propositions. This contrast is the decisive element for evaluating the theories by providing a fundamental source of difference.

For the musical theatre, rave, opera, pop and hip hop genres the relationships comprising the core community group form prior to the sharing of the passion. "A friend of mine ... like I was listening to the music he was listening to so and you know [it was] kinda cool [sic]." In many cases the basis of the initial relationship is not the passion. The relationship is sometimes a gateway to the passion, but even this highlights that the relationships comprising the community develop prior to the passion taking hold. "I think it's during the high school [that I was introduced to pop]. A friend introduced a Japanese

animation actually. The story was about ...a pop rock band.” And from another “the fact that people my own age and in my own school were part of this scene [attracted me to hip hop].” The relationships comprising the respondent’s core group also blur between those with the passion and those without the passion. “I have quite a tight core group of friends that would even be interested in the opera, plenty that wouldn’t be interested at all to be honest.”

This evidence suggests that the social network theory account of community formation is more appropriate. This is a strong conclusion regarding the fundamental assumptions of both theories.

The indie genre again proves an interesting exception. There is no specific temporal order regarding individual passion formation and relationship formation. This lack of a specific temporal order produced the initially confused interpretations by the analysts. Some relationships form prior to the sharing of the passion, others form as a consequence of the passion. “I dunno [how I started listening to indie]. I think, a couple of other people in the band lent me Interpol's first album, a few Joy Division ones and a whole lot of the Cure, because they were listening to it so much, that changed what music we were playing in the band and because I was in the band I was listening to that kind of music and it like grew on from there.” Throughout the interviews respondents blur the temporal order rotating explanations of how they started in the indie scene. “You find bands and you tell it to your friends and vice versa.” In many regards the weak community demarcation previously discussed allows community members to evolve passionate and non-passionate relationships both within indie and in related music genres. “I think originally, because I was a little Led Zeppelin, Jimmy Page loving nut, this was kind of like boring and not great. I remember a friend of ours went to one of the early Come Together festivals and it was mainly Indie rock bands. I used to pay him out and then two years later I went to Come Together and remember really enjoying it.” This finding suggests a complex interplay between passion and

relationship formation. The nebulous nature of the passion results in a blend of relationships within the community creating a mixture of temporal sequences on the individual level.

Table 2 summarises each of the findings. With these findings we can now evaluate each theory.

Table 2 here.

8. Discussion

These results present a unique comparison of tribal theory and social network theory. Clearly each theory provides a substantially different account of community formation and functioning to which no community perfectly conforms. The conclusions from the temporal order of community formation do suggest that the a-prior expectation of a researcher should be the presence of a social network. However, this research also demonstrates that under some circumstances the social network will exhibit tribal behavior. Thus in some minority of communities tribal theory offers an effective gateway to exploring and understanding community functioning. The main basis on which researchers should consider the application of social network theory versus tribal theory should be the temporal order of passion and relationship formation. If relationships exist prior to the formation of a passion then social network theory should be used. If individual members of the community feel passion for the phenomena of interest and then form the community by sharing this passion tribal theory is more appropriate. If temporal order is unclear then little theory exists to tell researchers what to do.

The main advantage of tribal theory is the provision of a metaphor. This metaphor of people being in a tribe describes how to interact with a community of consumers actively involved with a product or brand. The broad conformity of social behavior to many

dimensions of tribal theory suggests that it may be useful for practitioners to retain this metaphor. However tribal theory does not provide an adequate account of how a social system can evolve, due to its emphasis on the role of a single passion in social cohesion over the role of natural self organization processes that occur in all social systems. Future advances in social network theory have the potential to render tribal theory moot. Researchers must account for the discrepancies between these theories to provide practitioners with the greatest opportunity to find best practice.

9. Implications and Future Research

For practitioners who are relying on either tribal or social network theories in the development and implementation of communication strategies these findings have important implications. If a target community formed using a social network process, with relationships predating the passion, then brands or organizations looking to become active members of this community will have great difficulty in obtaining membership. In order to gain access to such communities the most successful strategies will be those that are not centralised solely on the brand or other targeted passion but rather those that create vehicles for community communication and participation. Respecting and supporting the relationships in the community provides a more natural transition for the brand into the community.

A tribal strategy may still prove successful even with the barriers to community entry posed by social network processes. By focusing on the object of passion among community members the brand will more likely succeed in achieving inclusion in the in-group. The presence of in-groups in all of the focal communities of this study suggests that moves to target specific members will aid integration. The success of a tribal approach is even greater if the formation of the community reflects tribal theory, with the passion predating the relationships.

Researchers wishing to explore community formation often develop a quantitative approach. These findings suggest that future research should consider this decision carefully. It is questionable whether a quantitative approach to the application of these theories is able to detect sensitive phenomenon, such as temporal order in community formation. This need for sensitivity presents an interesting challenge for methodological selection. The choice of a quantitative method can result in great difficulty in assessing the absence of sensitive phenomena, as they simply won't appear in the results. Data generation tools specifically designed for capturing temporal order, and other similar sensitive community processes, should be developed to prevent important omissions in research (Halinen and Törnroos 2005).

The implications for this type of comparative research are important not just to the academic understanding of human processes, but also for applications of this knowledge. Knowledge of how consumers behave and the implications of this is of vital importance if businesses are to survive in the current consumer environment. Both tribal theory and social network theory serve as relevant bases for practice and are often applied with success. However, in a highly competitive marketplace, businesses need to understand which theory offers them the best insight into their consumers. Strong theory with good application can be a powerful source of competitive advantage. Thus academics must continually question which theory is best for a chosen phenomenon.

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Table 1
Summary of Research Propositions

	Theme	Tribal Theory	Social Network Theory
P1	Demarcation	Strong in- and out-groups based on the focus on the passion for the music	Weak in- and out-groups with fuzzy boundaries defined by weak ties
P2	Communication	Centres on the objects of shared passion in the group	Multi-structured and contextually driven in the group
P3	Temporal Order	Relationships formed as a result of individual passion being shared	Shared passion developed after the relationships were formed

Table 2
Summary of Research Results

	Theme	Theory Supported	Conforming Groups	Exceptions
P1	Demarcation	Tribal theory	Musical theatre, rave, opera, hip hop, pop	Indie
P2	Communication	Tribal theory	Musical theatre, rave, opera, hip hop	Indie, pop
P3	Temporal Order	Social network	Musical theatre, rave, opera, hip hop, pop	Indie