RESEARCH

THE COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE OF BRAND CONSUMPTION. FROM THE SUBCULTURE OF CONSUMPTION TO THE CONSUMER TRIBE

La experiencia comunitaria del consumo de marcas. De la subcultura de consumo a la tribu consumidora

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ABSTRACT

There are numerous consumer taxonomies that address their behavior with respect to the brand. However, there is some confusion in distinguishing and defining the characteristics of the concepts included in these classifications. The main novelty of this study lies in the synthesis of the main theoretical contributions that study the collective behavior of consumers in order to explore the specific implications that they entail for brand management. For this, the conceptual differences between the terms subculture of consumption, brand community and consumer tribe are explored in order to propose a comparative frame of reference that relates the commitment to the brand, the sense of belonging among consumers and the construction of brand meaning for them. The results indicate that, in effect, the conceptual differences between these terms have to be addressed by brand management professionals in order to effectively implement the strategies of branding.

KEYWORDS: consumer communities - subcultures of consumption – consumer tribes - brand communities – neotribes – branding.

RESUMEN

Existen numerosas taxonomías de consumidores que abordan el comportamiento de los mismos con respecto a la marca. No obstante, existe cierta confusión a la hora de distinguir y definir las características de los conceptos que se incluyen en estas

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clasificaciones. La principal novedad de este estudio radica en la sintetización de las principales aportaciones teóricas que estudian el comportamiento colectivo de los consumidores con objeto de explorar las implicaciones concretas que suponen para la gestión de marca. Para ello se exploran las diferencias conceptuales entre los términos subcultura de consumo, comunidad de marca y tribu consumidora con objeto de proponer un marco de referencia comparativo que relacione el compromiso hacia la marca, el sentido de pertenencia entre los consumidores y la construcción del significado de marca para los mismos. Los resultados indican que, en efecto, las diferencias conceptuales entre estos términos han de ser abordadas por los profesionales de la gestión de marca con objeto de implementar de manera eficaz las estrategias de *branding*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: comunidades de consumo – subculturas de consumo – tribus consumidoras – comunidades de marca – neotribus – *branding*.

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RESUMO

Existem numerosas taxonomias de consumidores que abordam o comportamento dos mesmos com respeito a marca. Não obstante, existe certa confusão na hora de distinguir e definir as características dos conceitos que se incluem nestas classificações. A principal novidade deste estudo radica na sintetização das principais aportações teóricas que estudam o comportamento coletivo dos consumidores com a finalidade de explorar as implicações concretas que supõem para o gerenciamento da marca. Para isto se exploram as diferenças conceituais dentre os termos subcultura de consumo, comunidade de marca e tribo do consumidor com o objetivo de propor uma estrutura de referência comparativa que relacione o compromisso com a marca, o sentimento de pertence entre os consumidores e a construção do significado de marca para eles. Os resultados indicam que, de fato, as diferenças conceituais entre estes termos devem ser abordadas pelos profissionais da gestão de marca com o objetivo de implementar de forma eficaz as estratégias de *branding*.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: comunidades de consumo – subculturas de consumo – tribo do consumidor – comunidades de marca – neotribus – *branding*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The market evolves towards a sophistication in which there is a scenario where brands are configured as a fundamental strategic value (Fernández Gómez, 2013). Brands have been acquiring a great transformation manifested in a greater interest in the construction of messages that dialogue fluidly with the consumer's social universe. Specifically, we are faced with a new communicative prism in which the community takes its most relevant role in understanding consumers. The power of communities in the market cannot be underestimated because the social bonds among the subjects provide value and important resources that allow them to build their identity and influence their consumption choices (Närvänen, Kartastenpää & Kuusela, 2013, p. 358).

For some authors, this scenario is affected by many of the social changes that have been developing under the label of postmodernity, a social movement characterized by a hegemony of consumption that causes institutions such as the family, the workplace, the community or the church to have lost their legitimacy (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993, p. 228). This movement presents a consumer affected by a society that has a markedly fragmented character (Firat, Dholakia & Venkatesh, 1995) in which the individual has less and less support or social bonds to help him (cf. Cova, 1997, p. 300).

Faced with this perspective, the subject seeks in consumption that support that institutions used to provide by promoting the individual's approach to consumption to define their identity (Cova, 1997; Kozinets, 1999). This is how authors such as Drawbaugh understand it, who affirm that the decline that traditional institutions such as the church, family and community are suffering in some parts of the world causes an increasing number of people to go to trademarks to define their personal identity (cf. Drawbaugh, 2001, p. 5).

Consequently, there is a need on the part of individuals to compensate for this lack of references through consumption. One of the ways in which this compensation is manifested is in consumers grouping around what are called consumption communities (Canniford, 2011, p. 58). These groupings have important implications for the study of brands as they show how social consumption improves the utilitarian nature of a product or service thanks to the value obtained from its connection with a user community (Mathwick, Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2007, p. 832).

Despite the fact that these consumer communities are of vital importance to address the theoretical development regarding consumer behavior, the implications that these groups have for brand management and the need to distinguish between the different categories of communities have not been rigorously addressed by the academic world. In this sense, it is suggested that there is lack of consistent and consensual descriptions around the different forms of community.

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2. OBJECTIVES

This paper has a double objective. Firstly, it seeks to synthesize the theoretical contributions that study consumer group behavior in order to explore the specific implications they pose for brand management. Secondly and more specifically, it is proposed to analyze the conceptual differences existing between the terms found in order to propose a comparative frame of reference that relates the commitment to the brand, the sense of belonging among consumers and the construction of brand meaning for them.

3. METHODOLOGY

Given the theoretical nature of this paper, bibliographic meta-analysis has been used, which has been developed through a longitudinal study. In this case, the study has been concerned with analyzing the phenomenon since 1995, the date of publication of the first scientific article dedicated to the study of consumer group behavior in relation to brand management, up to the present day. This temporal criterion has allowed us to obtain both cross-sectional information on the object of study and a holistic view of the concept since, otherwise, the evolution of the phenomenon could not have been observed together with other terms that appeared over time as well as the way in which its characteristics and implications interrelate.

Table 1 briefly presents the main authors (although the list is more extensive, as can be seen in the final references in this article) that have been reviewed.

Table 1. List of analyzed authors.

AUTORES	AÑO	PUBLICACIÓN	CONCEPTO
Cova & Cova	2002	*European Journal of Marketing*	Tribu consumidora [Consumer tribe]
Kozinets	2007	Routledge (monográfico)	Innotribe
Goulding & Shankar	2011	*Annals of Tourism Research*	Neo-tribu [Neotribe]
Canniford	2011	*Research in Consumer Behavior*	Comunidades de consumo [Consumption communities]
Price, Thomas, Schau	2013	*Journal of Consumer Research*	Comunidades de consumo [Consumption communities]
Bazaki & Veloutsou	2010	ATINER (monográfico)	Neo-tribu [Neotribe]
Richardson	2013	Palgrave Macmillan (monográfico)	Tribu consumidora líquida [Liquid consumer tribe]
Biraghi, Gambetti & Pace	2018	*Journal of business research*	Tribu consumidora [Consumer tribe]
Mamali, Nuttal & Shankar	2018	*Marketing Theory*	Tribu consumidora [Consumer tribe]
Taute & Sierra	2014	*Journal of Product & Brand Management*	Tribu antropológica de consumo [Anthropological consumption tribe]
Muñiz & O'Guinn	2001	*Journal of Consumer Research*	Comunidad de marca [Brand community]

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Thompson & Throester	2002	*Journal of Consumer Research*	Microculturas de consumo [Microcultures of consumption]
Schouten & McAlexander	1995	*Journal of Marketing*	Subculturas de consumo [Subcultures of consumption]
Kett	1999	*Sociology*	Neo-tribu [Neotribe]
Thomas, Price & Schau	2013	*Journal of Consumer Research*	Comunidades de consumo[Consumption Communities]

Source: self-made.

4. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

4.1. Results of the transfer of consumption to the study of the groups

The examination of the analyzed literature related to the description of the organization of consumers around groups and their relationship with brands reveals a significant ambiguity that manifests itself in determining the characteristics that define and differentiate each type of group (Thomas, Price & Schau, 2013, p. 1012). There are several terms specific to the marketing literature that cause some conceptual confusion and it seems essential for us to clarify them to approach the objective of this paper.

Although the concept of "community" is an inescapable condition for understanding the concepts that approach collective consumption from a brand perspective, it is in this aspect where terminological confusion proliferates, resulting in a true overlap of similar terms regarding collective consumption (Thomas, Price & Schau, 2013, p. 1012). To this end, we have recapitulated those concepts that are most repeated and cause the most confusion throughout the academic literature, that is, the *subculture of consumption*, the *brand community* and *the consumer tribe*.

4.2. Subversive consumer groupings: the consumer subculture

In 1995 the authors Schouten & McAlexander contribute one of the most complete studies about collective consumption through the so-called subcultures of consumption. In their article published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* entitled: "Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers" (1995), they thoroughly analyze the term based on the following definition:

> We defines a subculture of consumption as a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity. Other characteristics of a subculture of consumption include identifiable, hierarchical social structure; a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values; and unique jargons rituals, and modes of symbolic expression (1995, p. 43).

Through this definition, the researchers state that the concept contains an important sociological character that identifies a "subgroup" of society with a series of unique conditions that transfer them to consumption.

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That is why, when it comes to understanding the concept of subculture of consumption, it is necessary to recognize that, on the one hand, it is a term that draws directly on sociology and stands as an alternative grouping to other social options, and that, on the other hand, it considers a group of consumers who share a certain commitment to a brand. Likewise, another characteristic that helps us distinguish this concept is the subversive character that these subcultures of consumption contain. In the aforementioned article, Schouten & McAlexander emphasize that, as a result of their ethnographic study, there is a certain degree of marginality and subversion (cf. 1995, p. 48). The members of the community that they call "HDSC" (*Harley-Davidson-oriented subculture of consumption*) offer a series of behaviors that distinguish them from other forms of grouping in their interest to respond in an alternative way to what is established (Bazaki & Veloutsou, 2010, p. 163).

This way, among the members of the subcultures of consumption there is a certain interest in marginality, in the rejection of what has been established and in experiencing difference from others. This is how De Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan understand it when they affirm that these groups share beliefs and experiences that set them apart from the rest, and how, even on certain occasions, they may come to be perceived as protesters to the established authorities (cf. 2007, p. 197). Indeed, this particularity is precisely one of the characteristics that most clearly show the differences between subcultures of consumption and other types of groupings.

Also, this subversive trait manifests the close sociological relationship that we have already noted about the concept. The fact that it falls under the category of "subculture" indicates that it is a grouping with a specific "way of life" that cannot be restricted to the limits of a consumer community" (cf. Bazaki & Veloutsou, 2010, p. 163).

Finally, another characteristic that distances subcultures of consumption from other concepts is the hierarchical nature of the former. In this sense, Schouten & McAlexander maintain that "each subgroup within the HDSC maintains a formal hierarchy of officers" (1995, p. 49) and advance in the idea that the status between members is conferred "according to their seniority, participation and leadership in group activities, riding expertise and experience" (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 49), something that a great majority of academics do not find in other concepts such as brand communities or consumer tribes.

With all this, it is paradoxical that the conceptual confusion regarding the subculture of consumption affects other concepts. This fact is of special importance to us, given that the concept of brand community is commonly linked to that of consumer tribe. For their part, Woodman & Brace-Govan try to explain the reason for this confusion, offering a point of view that understands that the concept of brand community comes from an evolution in the study of subcultures of consumption:

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Yet, in recent years, the meaning of subculture in marketing discourse has been encroached upon by the concept of consumption, hence giving rise to the phrase «subculture of consumption», which in turn has spawned the study of «brand community» (2007 , p. 193).

For this reason, we will now outline what is understood in academic literature as brand community and the differences that it implies with respect to the consumer tribe.

4.3. Devoted consumer groups: the brand community

The term *brand community* is coined by Albert Muñiz & Thomas O'Guinn, who in the article "Brand Community" (2001), published in the *Journal of Consumer Research,* provide the following definition: "A brand community is a specialized, nongeographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (2001, p. 412). This article, which lays the foundations of the concept, is the most cited work on brand communities and from which authors such as Veloutsou and Moutinho start to propose their definition: "A brand community is as an enduring, self-selected group of consumers, sharing a system of values, standards and representations, who accept and recognize bonds of membership with each other and with the whole" (2009, p. 316). Similarly, we find the case of McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, who also offer their particular view about the brand community: "We take the perspective that brand community is customer-centric, that the existence and meaningfulness of the community in here in customer experience rather than in the brand around which that experience revolves" (2002, p. 39). Following the original definition of Muñiz & O'Guinn, which has served as a common framework for the vast majority of researchers, it is worth noting that there are several characteristics that will help us to understand the concept in greater depth. Muñiz & O'Guinn understand that the brand community:

> Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Each of these qualities is, however, situated within a commercial and mass-mediated ethos, and has its own particular expression. Brand communities are participants in the brand larger social construction and play a vital role in the brand's ultimate legacy (2001, p. 412).

Thus, there are three features that make up the definition of brand community: *consciousness of kind*, ritual character, and a sense of moral responsibility (cf. McAlexander, Schouten & Koening, 2002, p. 42). First, Muñiz & O'Guinn understand that the brand community is characterized by a shared consciousness that refers to the sense of belonging to the group. This is how they understand it when they affirm that this consciousness refers to the intrinsic connection "that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community. Consciousness of kind is shared consciousness, a way of thinking about things that is more than shared attitudes or perceived similarity […]" (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 413). Indeed, it is a consciousness and a way of thinking shared by the members of

the community, which at the same time conceives a feeling of difference from those who do not belong to the group.

At the same time, the authors advance that the way to perpetuate that consciousness is carried out through rituals. This ritual character, in addition to representing the second characteristic feature that brand communities contain, manifests the vital processes in which the community is reproduced and transmitted. Every time one of the rituals is started, the members of the community are validated in their knowledge of the community (cf. Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 421).

Regarding the third trait, that of moral responsibility (sense of moral responsibility), it alludes to the "sense of duty or obligation to the Community as a whole, and to its individual members" (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 413) and it stands out for the moral duty shared by its members due to a result that, we understand, originates naturally, as a consequence of the first two characteristics. In this sense, we start from the idea that, if there is a shared consciousness that is reflected in a series of social practices —which in turn integrate a series of values among the members of the group— moral responsibility will inevitably develop.

However, the most relevant idea that emerges for our study refers to the hegemony that the brand entails for that community. In their article, Muñiz & O'Guinn argue that admiration for a certain brand is indeed the key to being recognized as a member of a certain brand community:

> members also frequently note a critical demarcation between users of their brand and users of other brands. There is some important quality, not always easily verbalized, that sets them apart from others and makes them similar to one another. Such a demarcation usually includes a reference to brand users being «different» or «special» in comparison to users of other brands (2001, p. 418).

Devotion to a particular brand greatly supports the sense of belonging that members of that particular "brand community" can eventually incorporate. In fact, the authors acknowledge that "[…] the shared consciousness of brand communities is also informed by an explicitly commercial and competitive marketplace ethos (eg, Coke vs. Pepsi)" (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 419). So the feeling that community members feel for Pepsi is just what differentiates them from the community of members who admire Coca-Cola, and in turn what makes them part of that shared consciousness of belonging to the same community.

4.4. The emotional bond as a consumer binder: the consumer tribe

One of the recent developments in academic literature on different consumer groups is the so-called consumer tribes. This concept was developed since 1999, when the academic Bernard Cova highlights an alternative approach to relational marketing, traditionally promoted by American thinkers, called tribal marketing that seeks to adapt to the demands of the Mediterranean market. This trend is presented as a new perspective that makes it possible to understand the relationships among

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consumers (Tuominen, 2011). Consumer tribes are understood as the main agent of this approach, based mainly on the recognition of the importance of establishing emotional ties between individuals beyond consumption of the product itself (Silva & Santos, 2012). These tribes have considerable implications for consumption and, more specifically, for the study of the brand. One of its most significant features regarding these implications is the approach of tribal marketing strategies towards creating a network of people whose main objective is to find social interaction around brands (Saat, Maisurah & Hanim, 2015).

It should be noted that the traditional marketing perspective, which includes a dyadic exchange between the organization and the consumer, loses importance in this case. Instead, the tribal perspective advocates an approach between consumers, subordinating the role of the brand to the relationship between them. The brand supports the relationship between consumers and acts as a link between individuals (Dahl, 2014). This perspective focuses on the study of the consumer, understanding the consumer as a truly active agent in consumption, thus highlighting the consumer's power in strategic brand decisions. Thus, this trend understands that value is created by consumers themselves, who are considered to be agents integrated into the marketing process with the capacity to explicitly contribute to the creation of values for brands (cf. Cova & Dalli, 2008).

Likewise, consumer tribes differ from other previously discussed concepts such as brand communities in a fundamental feature: the aspect that the brand acquires for its members. If, to these communities, the hegemony of the brand is their main insignia, in the case of consumer tribes it is the relationships between their members that take on greater importance (cf. Dahl, 2014, p. 21).

In the same way, Goulding, Shankar & Canniford understand it when they express that: "[...] unlike brand communities tribes do not seek iconic brands as loci for consumption experiences. On the contrary, within tribes, the social links established between consumers [...] are more important than whatever is being consumed (Cova, 1997)" (2013, p. 815).

For their part, Cova & Cova sentence that the "brand communities are explicitly commercial, whereas tribes are not" (Cova & Cova, 2002, p. 603), also supporting this idea. As for the moral responsibility that, according to Muñiz & O'Guinn, characterizes brand communities, it is another feature that distances this concept from that of consumer tribe. This moral responsibility responds to the sense of belonging that these communities manifest. As the authors note: "The sense of moral responsibility is what produces collective action and contributes to group cohesion. Moral responsibility need not be limited to punitive strictures concerning life and death matters, but rather every day, but nonetheless important, social commitments" (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 242).

Indeed, this responsibility refers to a certain degree of commitment that, in turn, allows the perpetuation and maintenance of the community. At the same time,

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consumer tribes express a lesser degree of involvement that, as Muñiz & O'Guinn
warn, differs from brand communities in that they are

> less ephemeral and their members as more committed than the ones
> [consumer tribes] described by Cova (1997) or Maffesoli (1996) [...] Brand
> communities can be relatively stable groupings, with relatively strong (but
> rarely extreme) degrees of commitment. Their moral responsibility may be a
> limited and subtle one, but it is a nontrivial one (Maffesoli1996) (Muñiz &
> O'Guinn, 2001, p. 415)

For their part, Bazaki & Veloutsou maintain that this ephemeral character that
tribes have seems to be a consequence of the social ties that mark their members. To
this end, the authors advance that

> Brand communities being more stable, centralized, hierarchical whose
> members exhibit relatively high levels of commitment whereas tribes rely on
> the emotional bond between their members rather than on centralized power
> [the brand] for their existence and therefore are more fluid, fuzzy and informal
> (2010 , p. 172).

So, contrary to what happens in brand communities, the delimitation of the urban
tribe has a more diffuse character that can even manifest itself in the multiple and
simultaneous membership of its members in other tribes. This is how Goulding,
Shankar & Canniford express it when they warn that "[…] membership of one kind
of tribe does not preclude membership from other tribes or communities" (Goulding,
Shankar & Canniford, 2013, p. 815), data that, as we have been commenting, does not
appear in belonging to brand communities.

It should be noted that the most recent research offers a perspective that seems to
open the way to a conception of the tribe adapted to scenarios that escape the
exclusivity of the brand, such as the business environment, where authors such as
Mamali, Nuttal & Shankar (2018) propose its hybrid character when it comes to
participating in the markets. Something that in turn is picked up by Biraghi,
Gambetti & Pace (2018) in the specific case of the online environment when they
argue that consumer tribes are considered social supports that make it possible to
improve the capabilities of consumers when undertaking business projects. In this
sense, they point out how the entrepreneurial character of the consumer manages to
benefit from a common tribal effort to obtain advantages in the markets.

In short, consumer tribes offer important implications regarding the brand, which,
following Cova, Kozinets and Shankar (2007), do not represent a new form of
organization, but a new way of thinking about the problems of the organization.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The business community has often focused on how to use consumers' social
interactions to achieve optimal marketing results. Specifically, the study of consumer
behavior from a social point of view is a task that, together with the study of

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branding, appears remarkably complex. Despite the fact that the academic interest in understanding the way in which consumers relate to a brand is a notable trend at present, it is appreciated that it is necessary to continue researching to provide demonstrable knowledge that rigorously describes the reality of the subjects.

The review of the academic literature carried out for this piece of research has allowed us to deduce that the concepts of brand community, subculture of consumption and consumer tribe are those that enjoy greater notoriety among academics when grouping consumers by groups, being, at the same time, terms that are conceptually distant from each other as can be seen in table 2.

Table 2. Differences between the concepts of subculture of consumption, brand community and consumer tribe.

SUBCULTURE OF CONSUMPTION	BRAND COMMUNITY	CONSUMER TRIBE
Commitment to a brand	Commitment to a brand	Non-commitment to a brand
Hierarchical structure	-	-
Marginal values	-	-
-	*Consciousness of a kind*	Ephemeral and multiple belonging

Source: self-made

The fundamental reasons that justify this conclusion are mainly based on the fact that, on the one hand, unlike the subculture of consumption, the consumer tribe and the brand community do not appear as marginal groups or separated from the dominant culture and with a marked subversive cut and, on the other hand and with respect to the brand community, members of consumer tribes and subcultures of consumption do not show evident brand loyalty. This perception questions the perspective of other authors we studied who, paradoxically, find certain conceptual similarities between these terms, something that, in effect, highlights the importance of this study and the need to expand it in subsequent research.

Regarding the specific implications concerning the brand, it is stated that the study of consumer behavior through groups facilitates the approach and application of effective branding strategies. The recognition of similar guidelines by consumers with respect to brands shows that it is indeed possible to implement concrete strategies in an efficient way. However, there are important consequences when it comes for the professional world to identify these groups. Although academics may not be able to accurately recognize the conceptual differences between the analyzed

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terms, it is true that brand managers may also encounter difficulties in recognizing the different characteristics and behaviors that these groups can develop.

Indeed, the possibility that marketing managers can approach a subculture of consumption as if it were a brand community can have dire consequences for issues such as the stability and loyalty of the brand itself. In the same way, it could happen that groups such as the consumer tribe were not served in the correct way, resulting in a loss of opportunities due to a potential myopia when it comes to recognizing the emotional bond that stands out and seems capital among its members. In short, it seems of inestimable importance for the application of branding strategies among professionals, distinguishing between different types of groups and recognizing the coexistence of the characteristics of the subjects that comprise them.

Likewise, it has been observed that the scientific community with respect to the study of collective consumer behavior and brands is a topic widely addressed by American and Anglo-Saxon magazines, something that, although being frequent in other subjects and for other areas, reveals the need for more work that provides alternative perspectives. In this line and as possible future lines of research, on the one hand, the possibility of conducting empirical studies that put into practice the application of these concepts in specific consumer groups is raised.

On the other hand, and given that this piece of research also warns about the importance that the study of these subjects could have for other disciplines such as psychology. Starting from the fact that membership in these groups is decisive in consumer behavior, future lines of research can be opened that link individuals' social behavior and their possible implications for marketing.

Ultimately, the power of communities in the market cannot be underestimated because the social ties between the subjects provide value and important resources that allow individuals to build their identity, as well as influence the consumption choices of the others.

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