



YouTube Beauty Gurus and the emotional labour of tribal entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

Tribal entrepreneurship valorises emotional bonds between consumers and entrepreneurs, yet this emotional dimension is little understood. Drawing from a netnographic study of YouTube Beauty Gurus as tribal entrepreneurs, and uniting the concept of emotional labour with theories of moral emotions, we demonstrate the importance of emotional labour to tribal entrepreneurship's success. We observe novel forms of emotional labour performed by tribal entrepreneurs, relating to the expression of self-conscious and other-praising moral emotions, in addition to new technology-enabled forms of emotional censorship that silence the expression of other-condemning moral emotions in central tribal gathering spaces. Furthermore, we highlight the emotional labour performed by the broader tribe as their compassion for the entrepreneur stimulates tribal defense via the suppression of other-condemning emotions. We extend theories of tribal entrepreneurship by theorising the role and importance of emotional labour. Our findings also extend broader theories of emotions and contribute to discussions of immaterial labour.

1. Introduction

Online spaces facilitate the formation and congregation of consumer tribes surrounding various consumption-related practices and passions (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007; Hamilton & Hewer, 2010; Kozinets, 2007). Such tribes present opportunities not only for established commercial organisations (see Canniford, 2011; Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013; Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008), but also for entrepreneurial tribe members. Tribal entrepreneurship is theorised as the leverage of collective knowledge to introduce new products and services (Cova et al., 2007; Goulding & Saren, 2007; Guercini & Cova, 2015), emphasising the *intellectual* labour necessary for such undertakings. However, whilst research notes tensions between an individual's commitment to a tribe and their desire to profit from entrepreneurial ventures (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Langer, 2007), the complex *emotional* transactions required to translate tribal bonds into market exchange have been largely overlooked. We address this theoretical gap by considering the emotional labour that is integral to the success of tribal entrepreneurship. Specifically, we unite Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour with Haidt's (2003) work on moral emotions in order to theorise the emotional dynamics surrounding this unconventional form of entrepreneurship.

We present the findings of a netnographic study of the 'BeautyTube' tribe, an online consumer tribe centering around beauty-related vlogs (video blogs) on YouTube. Specifically, we document the emotional

dynamics surrounding the commercial activities of entrepreneurial 'Beauty Gurus' within the tribe. Our findings demonstrate that existing emotional bonds within the tribe introduce a moral dimension to tribal entrepreneurship, which may evoke negative tribal emotions if improperly managed. We find that successful tribal entrepreneurship consequently requires the performance of significant and novel forms of emotional labour by both the tribal entrepreneur and the broader tribe. We highlight the distinct risks and challenges presented by tribal entrepreneurship's emotional dimension, and the emerging strategies of emotion management that can contribute to its success.

2. Theoretical background

To contextualise our study we first review existing work on consumer tribes and tribal entrepreneurship, highlighting a limited emphasis on emotions, before introducing theories that may enable us to better understand tribal entrepreneurship's emotional dimension.

2.1. Consumer tribes and tribal entrepreneurs

Contemporary business research is punctuated with references to 'subcultures of consumption' (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), 'brand communities' (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and 'consumer tribes' (Cova et al., 2007). Collectively these studies acknowledge that a desire for belonging may be satisfied through social interaction surrounding

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products or services. Yet in drawing from Maffesoli's (1996) neo-tribalism discourse, literature on consumer tribes also highlights their unstable and transient nature, as they form, disperse, and reform over time (Cova et al., 2007; Cova & Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2013; Maffesoli, 1996). Tribes are bound together by “shared emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs and consumption practices” (Cova & Cova, 2001:67), rather than geography, and online platforms increasingly provide the anchoring locations through which tribe members experience a collective identity (Cova et al., 2007; Hamilton & Hewer, 2010; Kozinets, 1999, 2006).

Scholars have acknowledged the potential for tribe members to become entrepreneurs, leveraging their insider knowledge of their tribe's consumption rituals, related needs and desires, and the deficiencies of existing market offerings, in order to introduce new products and services (Cova et al., 2007; Goulding & Saren, 2007; Guercini & Cova, 2015; Martin & Schouten, 2014). Such instances of tribal entrepreneurship illustrate Toffler's (1981) notion of prosumption, as producer and consumer blur, and Goulding et al. (2013:816) propose that tribal entrepreneurship “alter[s] the power balance between marketers and consumers, as tribal members take the lead in dictating procedures of co-production.” However, these developments may produce tensions between the market and cultural purpose of a tribe. Bengtsson, Östberg, and Kjeldgaard's (2005) study of the tattooing subculture indicates that commercialisation may be resisted where there is a perceived boundary between the ‘sacred’, non-commercial sphere of the subculture, and the starkly contrasting ‘profane’ aspects of the market. Similarly, Langer (2007) proposes that marketers to the fetish community risk alienation if members lose feelings of exclusivity following commercialisation. However, prior research is limited by its focus on niche tribes that actively position themselves in opposition to mainstream markets (e.g. goths, tattoo enthusiasts, the fetish community, tabletop game players) (Bengtsson et al., 2005; Cova & White, 2010; Goulding & Saren, 2007; Langer, 2007), which might explain in part the observed resistance to commercialisation. Tribal entrepreneurship that emerges from more conventional markets (e.g. mainstream fashion and beauty products) has received less attention, and it is possible that such tensions may be less prominent in these markets, or may take different forms.

Whilst prior work acknowledges broader tensions between consumer tribes and commercial activities, the complex *emotional* dimension of tribal entrepreneurship has been largely overlooked. Whilst entrepreneurship itself is acknowledged to be an emotional ‘journey’ (Cardon, Foo, Shepherd, & Wiklund, 2012), tribal entrepreneurship is unconventional in that it stems from *existing* emotional bonds between consumers and entrepreneurs. Tribal entrepreneurs must find ways to maintain their emotional bonds with the tribe whilst simultaneously finding ways to commercialise them. Despite acknowledgement of the importance of emotional bonds within consumer tribes (e.g. Cova & Cova, 2002; Hamilton & Hewer, 2010), prior research lacks an explicit examination of the emotions that surround tribal entrepreneurship. For instance, whilst Kozinets et al. (2010) observe communal-commercial tensions experienced by bloggers involved in a product seeding campaign, their analysis focuses on the bloggers' narratives, rather than emotional exchanges between the actors involved. We address this theoretical gap by exploring the complex and dynamic emotional interplays surrounding tribal entrepreneurship. In order to enrich our understanding of these emotional dynamics, we draw from established theories of emotion in sociology and social psychology.

2.2. Emotional labour and moral emotions

First, we draw from the concept of emotional labour. According to Hochschild (1983) we all engage in *emotion work*, managing and regulating our feelings in order to enrich our interpersonal relationships. However, she proposes that feelings have long been commodified as *emotional labour*. Employees are encouraged to display emotions

according to integrative display rules that suit the particular market task, under- or over-performing emotions to make customers feel a certain way (Hochschild, 1983; Wharton & Erickson, 1993). Flight attendants, for instance, are expected to ‘wear a smile’ and be ‘happy to help’ regardless of how they feel about passengers, managing their emotions so that customers feel cared for and valued (Hochschild, 1983). The extent to which emotions are actually felt by the employee may vary, however Diefendorff and Gosserand (2003) argue that emotional labour involves the monitoring and self-regulation of emotions that may be deeply felt and not simply for display. Thus, emotional labour is not merely a mask to maintain happy customers, but the regulation and experience of emotion for profit.

The emotional labour of tribal entrepreneurship has not been studied. However tribal entrepreneurs' existing emotional bonds to the tribe introduce an interesting moral dimension. Prior research indicates that tribal entrepreneurship, which aims to capitalise on existing tribal bonds, may be seen as morally transgressive by the tribe (e.g. Kozinets et al., 2010; Langer, 2007). In order to better understand the moral dimension of emotional labour we also draw from Haidt's (2003) theory of moral emotions. In contrast to Hochschild's (1983) own classification of emotions, Haidt's work specifically considers the moral aspects of emotions directed toward others. According to Haidt (2001, 2003, 2007) moral emotions are instinctively felt when something is perceived as good or bad, indicating when acts violate accepted norms, or are worthy of praise and emulation. We perceive value in uniting Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour with Haidt's (2003) theory of moral emotions in order to better understand how moral emotions are laboured upon in the context of tribal entrepreneurship, where deep emotional bonds are coupled with moral tensions surrounding commercialisation.

Haidt (2003) discusses four families of moral emotions: the other-condemning family, the self-conscious family, the other-suffering family, and the other-praising family, each containing closely related emotions (summarised in Table 1). *Anger*, *disgust* and *contempt* are *other-condemning* emotions, involving negative feelings about the actions or character of others who violate moral codes. *Shame*, *embarrassment*, and *guilt* - the *self-conscious* emotions - are an adaptive response to other-condemning emotions and stem from a need to fit within a social group, provoking individuals to hide/escape, change their behaviours, or apologise and make amends. *Compassion* and *sympathy* are *other-suffering* emotions, related to humans' tendency to feel bad when others suffer and their desire to alleviate that suffering. Finally, *gratitude*, *awe* and *elevation*, the *other-praising* emotions, drive pro-social behaviour; observing good deeds encourages emulation and reciprocation.

As illustrated by Table 1, moral emotions have been explored in a range of business contexts (e.g. Choi & Lin, 2009; Grappi et al., 2013; Lwin & Phau, 2014; Romani et al., 2013). However, these studies typically focus on the measurement of one or a small number of discrete emotions, and the correlation of these emotions with specific outcomes. In contrast, we explore the *interrelation* of moral emotions in order to identify recurring emotional dynamics surrounding the commercial activity of tribal entrepreneurs. Since we are concerned with the emotional labour surrounding tribal entrepreneurship our interest is the way in which the expression of certain moral emotions may elicit moral emotions in others, and the implications of these emotional dynamics for entrepreneurs' commercial ventures. How do tribal entrepreneurs, and the broader tribe, labour upon moral emotions in ways that influence the success of tribal entrepreneurship?

3. Research context: YouTube Beauty Gurus & the BeautyTube tribe

To address this question we draw from a netnographic study of the BeautyTube tribe, an online consumer tribe centering around beauty-related YouTube vlogs. Some BeautyTube tribe members produce and upload regular vlogs (typically reviews and tutorials), whilst a larger

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