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**Brand Tribalism and Self-Expressive Brands:  
social influences and brand outcomes**

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## **Brand tribalism and self-expressive brands: Social influences and brand outcomes**

### **Abstract:**

**Purpose:** This study examines the relationship between social influence and consumers' self-expression through brands. It considers susceptibility to interpersonal influence and social network influence on self-expressive brands and brand tribalism. The study examines whether self-expressive brands and brand tribalism influence brand loyalty and WOM.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A cross-sectional online survey was carried out with members of Generation Y in Ireland. Data from 675 complete responses was analysed using SPSS 20 and AMOS 20. A structural model tested nine hypothesised relationships.

**Findings:** Findings indicate that both online social network influence and susceptibility to interpersonal influence are antecedents of tribalism and self-expressive brands. Consumers of self-expressive brands are loyal and offer positive WOM. By contrast, those who seek tribal membership have less brand loyalty and offer less WOM than other consumers. Findings suggest that consumers may be loyal to tribes, rather than to brands. This informs our understanding of the role of tribes for consumers, and brand outcomes.

**Research limitations/implications:** This study is limited to Generation Y consumers within Ireland.

**Originality/value:** This is the first study to explore the effect of consumers' perceptions about online social network influence on brand tribalism. In addition, their views about the influence of the social network on self-expressive brand consumption, and brand outcomes, are identified. We highlight consumers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence on their brand choices, and brand tribalism. In addition, we show that brand loyalty and WOM are not always a consequence of tribal membership. By contrast, self-expressive brand consumption enhances brand WOM and brand loyalty.

## **Introduction**

Drawing on a sample of 675 Generation Y consumers, we explore the social influences and outcomes of self-expressive brands and brand tribalism. We consider two forms of influence: consumers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence (SUSCEP) and social network influence (SNI). We then examine whether self-expressive brand consumption and tribalism influence brand loyalty and word-of-mouth (WOM) outcomes.

It is long recognized that brands form an extension of the consumer's self-concept (Belk, 2013; 1988, Papista and Dimitriadis, 2012; Fournier, 1998), offering value as a method of self-expression and self-definition (Belk, 1988; Chernav *et al.*, 2011; Park *et al.*, 1986; Swaminathan and Dommer, 2012). Further, brands allow consumers to express group membership (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Grotts and Johnson, 2013; Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009), and tribes exist when members identify with each other, with 'collective social action' facilitated through brands (Goulding *et al.*, 2013 p.815). Brands offer consumers more than the simple utilitarian elements that are offered by a product (Park *et al.*, 1986), through their self-expressive value, and through the 'linking value' of brand consumption in connecting with others (Cova, 1997). We investigate brand loyalty and WOM as outcomes such self-expressive and tribal consumption.

Our exploration of brand loyalty and WOM in the context of self-expression and tribalism is grounded in calls for research from the extant literature (for example Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Tuškej *et al.*, 2013, Liu *et al.*, 2012), and the criticality of brand loyalty and WOM outcomes to brand success (Fournier, 1998). Carroll and Ahuvia (2006 p. 87) identify a relationship between self-expressive brands and positive WOM, but call for further study into the relationship between self-expressive brand consumption and 'desirable post consumption behavior', specifically WOM and brand loyalty. Liu *et al.* (2012) identify a positive relationship between the brand's role for the self and brand loyalty, within the context of luxury brands, and call for research to investigate other forms of self-expressive brands, and brand outcomes. Sirgy *et al.* (2008) suggest that brands that reflect the self enhance brand loyalty, and requested that further studies would explore the relationship between the role of the brand for the self, and consumers' purchase motivations. This study addresses this gap by testing the relationship between self-expressive brands and

brand loyalty and WOM.

Little is also known about brand outcomes when self-expressive brands are consumed to belong to tribes. Brand-supporting consumer tribes are identified as strategic resources for brand managers (Goulding *et al.*, 2013), but less is known about tribal outcomes such as loyalty and WOM. The literature calls for the movement of consumers from occasional brand users to members of brand tribes (Taute and Sierra, 2014). A tribe is defined as ‘a network of heterogeneous persons... who are interlinked by shared passion and emotion’ (Cova and Cova, 2002 p. 69). Tribes differ from communities as they are more loosely based, and may not necessarily be built around a brand, or around consumption (Cova and Shankar, 2012). Yet research suggests that such groups of empowered consumers elevate brand loyalty through the creation of barriers to exit (Goulding *et al.*, 2013; Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). However, because they are loose and somewhat transient, tribes may also be short lived and ultimately dissolve (Cova and Cova, 2002), therefore further exploration of brand loyalty as an outcome of tribalism is warranted.

We also consider WOM as an outcome of tribal membership. Brands that facilitate group membership benefit from positive WOM (Juristic and Azevedo, 2011; Taute and Sierra, 2014). The ‘linking value’ of tribes (Cova, 1997) suggests that tribal membership would enhance WOM, as sharing brand passion with others enhances relationships and information sharing (Greenacre *et al.*, 2013). Extant literature (for example Cova and Pace, 2006; Schau *et al.*, 2009) suggests that members of brand groups engage in evangelising the brand to others. Those who utilise the brand to express themselves do so, in part, by talking about the brand (Holt, 1997, 1998). Earlier research exploring WOM networks (Reingen, 1987) indicated that most WOM actors belong to groups, and most WOM dyads exist in groups. Although WOM outcomes for tribal members are as yet unknown, it is posited that a tribe’s linking value and structure would enhance WOM. Therefore, this study explores the extent to which tribal membership influences positive WOM.

When consumers purchase self-expressive brands, or adopt tribal consumption, they do so, at least in part, to belong to a group. This study considers the influence of others as antecedents to self-expressive brand behavior, and tribalism. It is long understood that reference groups influence consumers’ appropriation of the meaning of brands in self-identity construction (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Brand

meaning can be derived from the meanings reference groups hold for that brand (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). However it is less clear whether others' impact on consumption is greater when brands purchased are self-expressive brands. As tribalism is a relatively new concept, the role of the reference group in influencing tribal behavior towards brands is not fully understood. Further, there is a lack of understanding about the relationship between the consumption of brands that support the self-concept, and tribalism. This study addresses the gap in our understanding of the role of tribes in fostering positive brand outcomes.

To better understand self-expressive consumption and tribalism, we consider the variables that influence consumers' brand choices and tribalism. Specifically, we consider consumers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence, and the influence of their online social networks. Susceptibility to interpersonal influence (SUSCEP) (Clark and Goldsmith, 2005), refers to the influence other people may have on an individual's behaviour (Bearden *et al.*, 1989). Previous studies have shown that consumers seek brands to conform to the expectations of others (Bearden *et al.*, 1989; Clark and Goldsmith, 2005). Through self-expressive brands, consumers are rewarded with certain social benefits that allow them to enhance their self-concept, make a social impression and display the groups they (wish to) belong to, both online and offline (Belk, 2013; Doster, 2013; Kinley *et al.*, 2010; Orth and Kahle, 2008; Pagani *et al.*, 2011; Wilcox and Stephen, 2012). We question whether consumers who are more influenced by others' influence have a greater propensity to choose self-expressive brands, or seek tribal membership.

Given the ubiquity of the online social network, we also explore consumers' use of social networking sites (SNS). Consumers' escalating use of SNS is due, in part, to their role as communication environments, as an intrinsic motivation for their usage is the opportunity they present for self-expression (Pagani *et al.*, 2011; Wilcox and Stephen, 2012). Social Network Influence (SNI) refers to the role of the social networking site in knowledge provision, communication, interaction, identity creation, and self-expression (Pagani *et al.*, 2011). To our knowledge, no study has examined whether SNI is associated with consumers' use of self-expressive brands, or their tribalism. Consequently, we explore the impact both SUSCEP and SNI have on consumers' self-expressive brand consumption and brand tribalism.

This paper begins with a comprehensive overview of the self-expressive brand and brand tribalism literature. The role of SUSCEP and SNI as antecedents to self-

expressive behaviours, namely self-expressive brand consumption and tribalism, are explored. We chart the influence of tribal membership and self-expressive brand consumption on brand outcomes, specifically brand loyalty and WOM. Findings from a study of 675 consumers are employed to test a structural model charting these relationships. Results are revealed and conclusions are drawn for theory and practice.

## **Literature Review**

### *The role of the brand for the Self*

Consumers engage in consumption behaviour in part to construct their self-concept (Belk, 1988; Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Brands allow consumers to express their identities by offering additional value through creating meaningful associations that extend beyond intrinsic product attributes (Chernav *et al.*, 2011; Fournier, 1998). Therefore, consumers buy brands not only for their utilitarian elements, but also for their symbolic meaning. Brand relationships add structure and meaning to consumers' lives, through expansion and reinforcement of their self-concept (Belk, 1988; Chernav *et al.*, 2011; Fournier, 1998; Jurisic and Azevedo, 2011; Schembri *et al.*, 2010). Thus, brands can be used to meet self-expressive needs (Escalas and Bettman, 2005), and this motivation to express oneself is often the stimulus that drives consumers to purchase brands (Sirgy, 1982).

'Self-expressive brand' refers to those brands consumers perceive enhance their social selves and/or reflects their inner selves (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Specifically, 'self-expressive brand' refers to the fit between the brand and the person, and is concerned with an individual's self-concept and how the brand allows them to express themselves to others (Loureiro *et al.*, 2012). Self-expressive brands also serve as important tools for social integration, as symbols of personal accomplishment, allowing consumers to differentiate themselves from others and express their individuality (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Schembri *et al.*, 2010). By consuming certain brands, consumers' can depict how their brand consumption is consistent with a group of consumers to which they (wish to) belong (Chernav *et al.*, 2011; Escalas and Bettman, 2005).

Brand tribalism (Cova, 1997) has relevance to a study of self-expressive brands, as tribalism considers the degree of connectedness between consumers and brands, and suggests self-expressive benefits from the shared experience of brand

consumption (Cova and Cova, 2002). Brand tribes refer to “a network of societal micro-groups in which individuals share strong emotional links, a common sub-culture and a vision of life” (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009, p. 316). The concept of brand tribalism is centered around the use of symbolism to demonstrate a member’s allegiance to the group (Cova, 1997). It is acknowledged that tribes are about shared passion, which can result in a “parallel social universe (subculture) with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabularly and hierarchy” (Cova and Pace, 2006 p.1089). In this paper, we contend that, in the act of consuming or wearing certain brands, tribes can express their shared passion, and the wearing of fashion becomes a demonstration of tribal values. In this way, consumers can create a social link that allows tribal members to signal their shared passion, and gain acceptance from the tribe (Cova 1997; Mitchell and Imrie, 2011; Moutinho *et al.*, 2007). This study considers that using the brand to express one’s self-concept, may form part of the signaling ritual of the brand tribe. For example in the context of fashion brands, consumers may share rituals about the type of brands worn by the tribe. As such brands are also socially visible, we query whether their consumption enhances their sense of tribal membership, and how this membership relates to the brand’s self-expressive function. We examine a) the extent to which consumers believe brands are self-expressive, and b) consumers’ perceptions about their brand tribalism.

Implied in the concept of self-expression is consumers’ cognisance of the appraisal of others on their brand choices. The literature recognises that an important determinant of an individual’s consumption behaviour is the influence of others (Bearden *et al.*, 1989; Kurt *et al.*, 2011). This study investigates the influence of others on consumers’ brand attitudes. Specifically, the study considers consumers’ susceptibility to interpersonal influence (SUSCEP) as an antecedent to self-expressive brand choices, and their brand tribalism. Further, the ubiquity and popularity of online social networking sites (SNS) offer unique opportunities for social self-expression through brands (Belk, 2013; Pagani *et al.*, 2011), and a means to display personal values and identity in order to engage with others (Pagani *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, the study examines whether SNI influences consumers’ self-expressive brand choices, and their tribalism. We next discuss the constructs SUSCEP and SNI in greater detail.



*SUSCEP and SNI as antecedents to consumer self-expression through brands*

Susceptibility to interpersonal influence (SUSCEP) is defined as “the need to identify or enhance one’s image with significant others through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions, and/or the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others and/or seeking information from others” (Bearden *et al.*, 1989 p. 474). The influence of other people plays a vital role in shaping consumers’ purchase decisions (Bagozzi, 2000; Bearden *et al.*, 1989; Kurt *et al.*, 2011; Murali *et al.*, 2005), and these social influences have a greater impact on consumer’s decisions when the brand is publicly consumed (Wakefield and Inman, 2003). Brands that are publically consumed are deemed to be particularly self-expressive as they are outwardly visible, and people form opinions about others based on their appearance and on the brands they see them use (Evans, 1989). Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

*H1: There is a positive relationship between Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence and Self-Expressive Brand.*

SUSCEP is especially evident when people adapt their behavior, attitudes or beliefs to align with others in the social system (Trusov *et al.*, 2010; Robins *et al.*, 2001). Extant literature suggests that consumers buy brands to conform to the expectations of others (Bearden *et al.*, 1989; Clark and Goldsmith, 2005) and also to signal the group of consumers to which they (wish to) belong (Chernav *et al.*, 2011; Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Therefore, through the influence of others, consumers buy certain brands that allow them to display their group membership. Earlier we noted that brand tribes are groups of consumers that form around the brand (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009), yet less is known about the factors that influence consumers’ tribal membership. Past research has shown that consumers buy brands to conform to the expectations of others (Bearden *et al.*, 1989; Clark and Goldsmith, 2005). In particular, studies suggest that consumers seek the approval and opinions of friends and peer groups when shopping for self-expressive items as they aim to consume brands consistent with the norm of the group they (wish to) belong to (Kinley *et al.*, 2010). Such personal relationships tend to be maintained through shared, regular consumption (Gainer, 1995; Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009), and when consumers are influenced to buy a brand through the relationships they have with others, they are

more likely to become, or align with, members of the brand tribe they (wish to) belong to. In this study, we investigate whether consumers who are more susceptible to the influence of others will have greater propensity to adopt tribal behaviour. Therefore, we hypothesise:

*H2: There is a positive relationship between Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence and Brand Tribalism*

Earlier we noted that the influence of others is not limited to the offline interpersonal environment. The soaring popularity of SNS, such as Facebook and Twitter, has allowed consumers to further extend their self-concept in a digital world. This trend has presented additional opportunities for self-expression (Belk, 2013; Chernav *et al.*, 2011). SNS refer to “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, create a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and navigate their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Pagani *et al.*, 2011 p. 443).

The popularity of SNS is due, in part, to their role as communication environments and their ability to present an extended self (Belk, 2013). SNS not only allow users to socialise and interact with others (Dennis *et al.*, 2010), they also allow members to use objects they include on their networks to enhance self-expression and self-presentation (Ruane and Wallace, 2013; Wilcox and Stephen, 2012). Such virtual objects can lie outside of the consumer’s material reality (Schau and Gilly, 2003), and yet offer status and an enhanced sense of self (Belk, 2013). For example, if a consumer ‘Likes’ a brand, the brand appears on their Facebook page and contributes to their online profile. Similarly, if a consumer is photographed wearing a brand and that photograph is tagged on Facebook, the brand’s image may offer a reflection of the consumer’s personality, supporting their self-expression.

These SNS therefore offer multiple users greater opportunities for self-enhancement (Chernav *et al.*, 2011; Doster, 2013; Schau and Gilly, 2003; Wilcox and Stephens, 2012). On SNS, consumers are often ‘carefully crafting self images with words, imagery and media in order to manage the impression that others have of them’ (Doster, 2013 p. 269). One of the tools to achieve such enhancement is self-expression through brands. As noted earlier, self-expressive brands are ‘the consumer’s perception of the degree to which the specific brand enhances one’s social

self and/or reflects one's inner self" (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006, p.82). Recent literature suggests that some consumers use SNS to display their own values and identity, and to communicate with, and engage others (Pagani *et al.*, 2011; Wilcox and Stephen, 2013). To investigate the relationship between self-expression on networks, and self-expressive brands, we posit that consumers who have greater social network influence (that is, consumers who are expressive on their SNS, and who use SNS to engage with others) (Pagani *et al.*, 2011) may also be more likely to self-express through their brand choices. We therefore hypothesise:

*H3: There is a positive relationship between (Online) Social Network Influence and Self-Expressive Brand*

In addition, Belk (2013) asserts that the increasing use of SNS has led to a greater importance being placed on group-level identification. Two prevalent reasons for this use of SNS is their ability to allow individuals to feel part of a community and to gain social acceptance (Bolton *et al.*, 2013; Valkenburg, 2006). Individuals convey their group allegiance by consuming symbols (or brands) that conform to the group norm (Cova 1997). Moreover, such symbolic consumption allows brand tribes to thrive by constructing a social link that expresses the consumer's self-identity (Cova 1997; Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). Previous research suggests that it is the ability to express one's self-identity that is a key reason for involvement with a brand tribe (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). In the same way, a core reason for the use of SNS is their ability for enhanced self-expression and self-presentation (Pagani *et al.*, 2011). As SNS are communication environments that allow for self-expression (Doster, 2013; Pagani *et al.*, 2011; Wilcox and Stephen, 2012), they provide an additional method for consumers to create a social link that depicts their membership and devotion to the brand tribe. Therefore, based on the limited extant literature, it is likely that those who are influenced by others' content on SNS are more likely to seek tribal membership. Consequently, we hypothesise that:

*H4: There is a positive relationship between (Online) Social Network Influence and Brand Tribalism*

### *Self-expressive brand and brand tribalism*

As previously noted, consumers use brands to express and validate their identities (Aaker, 1997; Chernav *et al.*, 2011; Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Brands are visually consumed and serve as external signals that communicate to others (Chernav *et al.*, 2011; Liu *et al.*, 2012). As such, brands can establish and confirm a consumer's self-concept (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998). Moreover, consumers can show the groups they (wish to) belong to by adopting brands that conform to the group's social norm (Banister and Hogg, 2004; Khare *et al.*, 2012). Through consuming brands, consumers can display their membership to certain brand groups.

Additionally, self-expressive brand consumption can create a social link that allows tribal members to gain group acceptance (Cova, 1997; Mitchell and Imrie, 2011; Moutinho *et al.*, 2007). Brand tribes exist around the use of symbolism to show allegiance to a group, this symbolic consumption creates a social link that expresses the consumer's self-identity (Cova, 1997; Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). The ability to express one's self-identity has been described as a core reason for involvement with a brand tribe (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). In fact, Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) assert that brand tribes are the result of a consumers socialised expressions. By consuming specific brands and adopting accepted brand community behaviors, consumers can signify and express their group membership (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Schau *et al.*, 2009). Khare *et al.* (2012) also state that consumers adopt certain brands to display their group membership. Based on this literature it is reasonable to suggest that those consumers who seek self-expressive brands do so because they allow them to display their tribal membership and achieve a sense of belonging. Consequently, we hypothesise:

*H5: There is a positive relationship between Self-Expressive Brand and Brand Tribalism*

Our conceptual framework also considers the relationship between the self-expressive value provided by the brand and consumers' brand behaviour. Prior research has suggested that the value gained through consuming branded goods results in a loyalty to the brand and the consumers willingness to engage in spreading favourable WOM (Taute and Sierra, 2014). Additional research suggests that consuming self-expressive brands has a positive effect on brand loyalty (Liu *et al.*, 2012; Sirgy *et al.*,

2008) and word-of-mouth (WOM) (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Further, extant literature exploring brand tribalism show that brand membership results in both brand loyalty and WOM (Taute and Sierra, 2014). Therefore, brand loyalty and WOM have relevance in for a study of outcomes of self-expressive brands and brand tribalism. We discuss these outcomes next.

### *Outcomes of self-expression and brand tribalism*

#### *Brand Loyalty*

As previously outlined, consumers purchase brands that act as an external signal and a vehicle to express their identity (Aaker, 1996; Cătălin and Andreea, 2014; Kressmann *et al.*, 2006). A consumer's preference for certain brands is motivated by their need for self-expression and by their interactions with others (Cătălin and Andreea, 2014; Fournier, 1998). Therefore, consumers use brands to both form and sustain their self-concept (Liu *et al.*, 2012), as visually consumed brands (i.e. self-expressive brands) provide 'self-expressive' benefits to the consumer that allow them to display the type of person they are to others (Aaker, 1996; Liu *et al.*, 2012). Previous research indicates that when consumers view brands as being consistent with their perceived self-image, this enhances their loyalty (Liu *et al.*, 2012; Sirgy *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, it is expected that those who consume self-expressive brands are more likely to be loyal to those brands. Consequently, it is hypothesised that:

*H6: There is a positive relationship between Self-Expressive Brand and Brand Loyalty*

The study also investigates the relationship between tribalism and brand loyalty. Previous literature suggests that feeling part of a group through brand consumption offers value to both the brand and the consumer (Schau *et al.*, 2009). This value is demonstrated through loyalty to the brand (Taute and Sierra, 2014). In 2009, Veloutsou and Moutinho stated the need for additional research to explore the relationship between brand tribalism and brand loyalty. A recent study focusing on brand communities, found that brand loyalty is predominantly influenced by identification with the brand community (Marzocchi *et al.*, 2013). However, there are a number of distinctions between brand communities and brand tribes that suggest further exploration of brand tribal outcomes is warranted. Brand communities form

for longer periods of time than brand tribes and do not interact with other groups (Goulding *et al.*, 2013), which could influence loyalty behaviours. By contrast, interaction with others is an important characteristic of brand tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002). Further, unlike brand communities, tribes do not dominate consumers lives and membership to one tribe does not mean these consumers cannot be members of others (Goulding *et al.*, 2013). Therefore it is possible that tribal consumers may be more fickle. Brand tribes are also described as being “playful” and “loose” (Goulding *et al.*, 2013; Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009), as unlike brand communities, brand tribalism does not require that the consumer remains tied to one brand for a long period of time (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005). Additionally, in contrast to brand communities which form for long time periods (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001), brand tribes are transient, and form around a shared interest for a short period of time before dispersing when this interest alters (Goulding *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, it is possible that consumers’ interest in brands wanes when the tribe disperses.

Yet, brand tribes hold strong meaning and relevance for their members (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). This contrasts with the clearly commercial nature of brand communities, which are often facilitated by the company itself and are established around supporting a particular brand or product (Brownlie *et al.*, 2007; Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). It is this strong customer passion and involvement with the brand that suggests that loyalty may, in fact, exist among tribes. In a recent study among smart phone users, Taute and Sierra (2014) discovered a positive relationship between tribalism and loyalty. However, there remains a dearth of research on this important topic. Therefore, this study seeks to identify whether loyalty, an outcome of brand community membership, is also relevant for brand tribes. We hypothesise:

*H7: There is a positive relationship between Brand Tribalism and Brand Loyalty*

#### *Word-of-Mouth*

As previously outlined, the second brand outcome considered is word-of-mouth (WOM). WOM is defined as “the informal communication that occurs between private parties when there are evaluations of goods and services” (Anderson, 1998 p. 6). WOM is of importance for this study as previous research shows that consumers

like to discuss and exchange information about the brands they consume (Gabrielli *et al.*, 2013; Saenger *et al.*, 2013; Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). In particular, talking about brands with others helps consumers both express and construct their self-concept (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006).

Therefore, while WOM is in part motivated by a desire to impress others, its other function is to satisfy the needs of the self (Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013; Lovett *et al.*, 2013). However, although numerous prior studies demonstrate how consumers use brands to communicate the type of person they are to others (e.g. Belk, 1988; Moutinho *et al.*, 2007; O’Cass, 2000), there is a dearth of research investigating whether the desire for self-expressive brands may serve as a motivation to spread WOM (Saenger *et al.*, 2013). A study of brand love has suggested a positive relationship between self-expressive brands and WOM (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), but this relationship has remained largely unexplored in the academic literature. Given the importance of understanding WOM behaviour, and consistent with the limited previous research on self-expressive brands (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), we posit that those who consume self-expressive brands are more likely to talk to others about the brand. We hypothesise:

*H8: There is a positive relationship between Self-Expressive Brand and Word-of-Mouth*

Brand consumption can offer additional value to the brand and the consumer (Schau *et al.*, 2009). Although the literature on brand tribalism is limited, previous studies suggest one way that this additional value can be demonstrated is through consumers spreading favourable WOM about the brand (Juristic and Azevedo, 2011; Taute and Sierra, 2014). Specifically, Juristic and Azevedo (2011) suggest that when people have a need to belong to a group, brand tribalism emerges and as a result the power of WOM is enhanced. Within this group setting, these consumers express their knowledge of the brand and establish themselves within the brand tribe by engaging in WOM (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). A recent study by Taute and Sierra (2014) has shown that those who are members of a brand tribe are more likely to talk positively about the brand to others. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

*H9: There is a positive relationship between Brand Tribalism and Word-of-Mouth*

*Figure 1 Conceptual Framework*

*<Insert Figure 1 here>*

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for this study. We next set out the method used to test our research hypotheses.

### **Method**

The population of interest to this study is Generation Y. Generation Y refers to those people born between 1977 and 1994 (Noble *et al.*, 2009). The Generation Y age cohort is of particular interest to marketers due to its vast size and spending power (Kim *et al.*, 2010; Morton, 2002). In the US alone, it was estimated that Generation Y would comprise over 50% of the population by 2014 (Bolton *et al.*, 2013). These consumers are brand conscious and actively seek self-expressive brands (Bartlett, 2004; Grotts and Johnson, 2013), and specifically aim to express and define themselves through choosing certain brands (Grotts and Johnson, 2013). Extant literature suggests that the consumption of brands among Generation Y consumers is strongly motivated by their need to gain social acceptance and to allow self-expression (Grotts and Johnson, 2013; Martin and Turley, 2004). Generation Y consumers are ‘digital natives’ who have grown up with computers and mastered the use of technology for many aspects of their lives (Bolton *et al.*, 2013). These consumers also use the Internet for self-expression and to gain the acceptance of their peers (Ruane and Wallace, 2013). Therefore, Generation Y consumers are particularly informative in a study exploring SNI.

To obtain the data necessary to test our hypotheses we conducted two large-scale surveys of Generation Y consumers in Ireland. Generation Y comprises over 1.3 million people in Ireland, or 28% of the population (CSO, 2011; Mintel, 2013). Therefore, they constitute a considerable market, spending two thirds of their money on clothing (Bakewell *et al.*, 2006). As Generation Y consumers span a wide range of ages and life cycle stages (Liu *et al.*, 2012; Noble *et al.*, 2009), our study incorporated students and non-students, aged between 18 and 35. Following a pretest and pilot



test, our web-based survey was distributed via an email link to the SurveyMonkey online survey-hosting site. Student Generation Y members were contacted with the survey link via an email from an Irish University's Students' Union. Non-student Generation Y members were contacted with the survey link via a LinkedIn page for University graduates.

Although all participants were University educated, this sample profile is representative of the Generation Y population in Ireland, as population statistics confirm that over 70% of those aged between 18 and 20 are in full-time education (CSO, 2011). Over 50% of the Irish Generation Y population holds a masters or postgraduate degree, and large numbers of Generation Y consumers opt to continue in third-level education (Deloitte and Touche, 2011). Further statistics reveal that those students over the age of 23 in third-level education in Ireland is at an all time high (Irish Independent, 2011). Therefore, eliciting the views of University students and graduates is appropriate for the study of Generation Y in Ireland. To encourage responses, three €50 shopping vouchers were offered as an incentive for participation in both studies. Responses were screened through the question '*What is your age?*' Only those respondents whose age matched the Generation Y age profile were permitted to progress with the survey. Other respondents were exited from the survey at this point and thanked for their time.

Fashion brands were selected for this study as previous studies suggest these brands provide a strong method for expressing the self-concept (Carroll, 2009; Goldsmith *et al.*, 1999; Evans, 1989). As the study investigated self-expressive brands and tribalism, the context of fashion was considered appropriate. Further, Generation Y's involvement with fashion clothing in particular has been highlighted, such as perceptions of brand status and resulting willingness to pay brand premiums (O'Cass and Choy, 2008). Therefore, fashion was deemed an appropriate context for the investigation of brand use by Generation Y.

We also considered that a study of fashion brands would offer new insights into the proposed structural model. For example, fashion can be fickle, and extant literature suggests that tribes too may have the property of fluidity (Goulding *et al.*, 2013). We considered whether consumers thinking about fashion brands would therefore consider themselves as tribal, whether the shared passions, values and rituals of the tribe would have a normative role in influencing fashion brand consumption, and whether such tribes would result in loyalty or WOM. Additionally, young

consumers use fashion brands to conform to their peer groups and ensure that they do not feel left out (Carroll, 2009; Ross and Harradine, 2004). Social networks in particular offer unique opportunities for self-expression, for example through fashion, as brands displayed become part of the extended self (Schau and Gilly, 2003; Belk, 2013). These networks also offer new opportunities for sharing experiences, interacting and connecting, which create new opportunities for tribal formation. As the social network offers new mechanisms for self-expression (Schau and Gilly, 2003), and fashion brands are highly self-expressive (Papista and Dimitriadis, 2012), we assert that fashion brands offer unique insights in a study investigating the whether SUSCEP or SNI influence self-expressive brand consumption and tribalism.

The study did not limit respondents' perceptions about fashion. Instead, the questionnaire asked 'Fashion brands can be many different things to different people. When you think about fashion, what brand comes to mind?' Generation Y respondents were asked to answer the questionnaire thinking about their favourite fashion brand. Brands named encompassed four broad categories: clothing and accessory brands (such as Abercrombie and Fitch, Chanel, and Superdry); retail brands (such as ASOS, Primark, and Schuh); sporty brands (such as ADIDAS, Billabong, Converse, and Nike), and gadgets (singularly the Apple brand).

The inclusion of both student and non-student Generation Y respondents offers a contribution to the extant literature, as previous studies (e.g. Hill and Lee, 2012; Noble *et al.*, 2009) have focused solely on student samples. For data protection reasons, we were not provided with information about the number of students contacted via the students' union. We received 469 completed student responses. The LinkedIn email was issued to 2,200 non-students who were University alumni. We received 206 responses from this group, a response rate of over 10%. In total, we received 675 usable responses from the two surveys. A comparison of the means for all variables across both groups revealed no significant differences between the student and non-student Generation Y groups, across all variables in the study. Therefore, the two groups were considered as a single sample. The demographic profile of the total sample is provided in Table 1. A demographic profile of each sample is also provided in the Appendix, for more information.

*<Insert Table 1 here>*

## Measures

Scales used were drawn from the extant literature. Self-expressive brand was measured using scales from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Consistent with the existing literature, five-point Likert scales were used (1= 'strongly disagree'; 5 = 'strongly agree'). Four measures of inner self-expression and four measures of social self-expression were included. An example of an inner self-expression item is 'This brand is an extension of my inner self'. An example of a social self-expression item is 'This brand has a positive impact on what others think of me.' Brand tribalism was measured using the scale developed by Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009). In the literature, measures of tribalism incorporate five components (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). These components are: reference group acceptance, measured with items such as 'I achieve a sense of belonging by buying the same brand my friends buy'; degree of fit with lifestyle, measured with items such as 'this brand fits my image'; passion in life, measured with items such as 'this brand makes a contribution in life'; social visibility of the brand, measured with items such as 'I know of many people who own/use this brand'; and collective memory, measured with items such as 'when my friends buy this product they choose this brand'. In total, sixteen items were presented and respondents indicated their level of agreement on five point Likert scales (1 = 'strongly disagree'; 5 = 'strongly agree').

SUSCEP was measured using the 12-item scale by Bearden *et al.* (1989). The scale incorporates measures of normative and informational influence. Consistent with extant literature, respondents rated their level of agreement on 7-point Likert scales with anchors 1 = 'strongly disagree' and 7 = 'strongly agree.' An example of the scale's normative influence items is: 'It is important that others like the products and brands I buy'. Items measuring informational influence include 'To make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what others are buying and using'.

SNI was measured using the 14-item scale developed by Pagani *et al.* (2011). The scale measures vicarious innovativeness (acquiring knowledge through the social network) with items such as 'I am interested in social networks'; self-identity expressiveness (using SNS to display values and identity) with items including 'I use social networks to express who I want to be'; and social identity expressiveness (communicating while engaging others) with items including 'I often show the SN photos and messages to others'. For each item, respondents indicated their level of agreement on five-point Likert scales (1 = 'strongly disagree'; 5 = 'strongly agree').

Brand Loyalty was measured using three items from Yoo and Donthu (2001). Consistent with the literature, participants responded using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = 'strongly disagree'; 7 = 'strongly agree'. 'I consider myself to be loyal to this brand' is an example of the items in this scale.

Finally, WOM was measured using Carroll and Ahuvia's (2006) four-item measure. In this case, a 5-point Likert scale was used (1 = 'strongly disagree; 7 = 'strongly agree'). An example of the items used to measure WOM is: 'I have recommended this brand to lots of people'.

### **Scale Validation**

The variables included in this study were evaluated using exploratory techniques to provide reassurance of the reliability and dimensionality of the measures, using SPSS 20 (Hair *et al.*, 2006). This was followed by confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 20.

First we performed exploratory factor analysis using principal components analysis with Varimax rotation to examine the structure of the constructs self-expressive brand, brand tribalism, SUSCEP, SNI, brand loyalty and WOM. Results suggested deleting two items from the SNI scale and one item from the brand tribalism scale due to cross-loadings and low communalities. After this, two constructs (brand loyalty and WOM) provided a single factor structure and the remaining four constructs (SUSCEP, SNI, self-expressive brand and brand tribalism) were composed of more than one factor. Consistent with the extant literature, SUSCEP was composed of two factors - 'normative influence' and 'informational influence'; SNI was composed of three factors - 'vicarious innovativeness', 'self-identity expressiveness' and 'social identity expressiveness'; and self-expressive brand was composed of two factors - 'inner self' and 'social self'. The names of these constructs were consistent with the names adopted in the literature. Brand tribalism was composed of three factors - 'reference group acceptance', 'degree of fit with lifestyle' and 'social visibility of the brand'. Again, the construct names were adopted from the literature. The variance explained by the factors was 73% for self-expressive brand, 67% for brand tribalism, 68% for SUSCEP, 69% for SNI and brand loyalty, and 80% for WOM, respectively.

Cronbach's alpha for all factors was above 0.70, offering reassurance of the reliability of all scales. Table 2 contains descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables.

Confirmatory factor analysis using the robust maximum-likelihood estimation was performed to test the dimensionality, reliability and validity of all of the constructs in the model. An examination of the results suggested the deletion of three items from the self-expressive brand scale; nine items from the SUSCEP scale; five items from the SNI scale; and thirteen items from brand tribalism, as their standardised residuals were above 4 indicating problematic items (Hair *et al.*, 2006). Following these deletions just one factor from the brand tribalism scale remained. The items that remained represented the reference group acceptance (RGA) factor from the original measure. Therefore, brand tribalism was measured with a composite of the measure. The measurement model was a good fit: ( $\chi^2/df=2.344$ ;  $p=.000$ ; RMSEA= .045; CFI=.964; NNFI=.959;IFI=.964). The structural model is described in the next section where the results of the hypotheses tests are outlined.

*<Insert Table 2 here>*

All factor loadings were above 0.5 and were statistically significant, suggesting convergent validity of the factors. Composite Reliability (CR) exceeded the recommended minimum of .7 for all constructs with the exception of self-expressive brand with a CR of .667 (Hair *et al.*, 2006). Although, this value was below the acceptable 0.70 reliability level, Bagozzi and Yi (2012) assert that CR's somewhat below this value may be obtained when an overall CFA model fits satisfactorily. Moreover, Bagozzi and Yi (1988), argue that CR values should be between 0.60 and 0.80. Therefore, a CR of .667 was deemed to be acceptable. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was greater than the minimum of .5 for each construct. Discriminant validity was also assured. None of the confidence intervals around the correlation estimate between any two factors exceeded one (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). In addition, the variance extracted for any two constructs was greater than the correlation estimates (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

*<Insert Table 3 here>*

### **Results of Hypotheses Tests**

Structural equation modeling (SEM) using the maximum likelihood estimation method was used to test the hypotheses, with AMOS 20. The model fit indices show

the model provided a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2/df=2.399$ ;  $p=.000$ ;  $RMSEA=.046$ ;  $CFI=.962$ ;  $NNFI=.957$ ;  $IFI=.962$ ). Table 4 presents the results of the hypotheses tests.

<Insert Table 4 here>

The results show SUSCEP has a significant positive effect on self-expressive brand. Therefore, H1 was supported. The results suggest SUSCEP also has a positive significant effect on brand tribalism. Hence, H2 was supported. The construct SNI has a positive effect on both self-expressive brand and brand tribalism, supporting H3 and H4 respectively.

The results show self-expressive brand has a significant and positive impact on brand tribalism, brand loyalty and WOM. Thus, H5, H6 and H7 respectively were supported. Finally, the results suggest there is a significant relationships between brand tribalism and both brand loyalty and brand tribalism, however these significant relationships are negative and are not positive as hypothesised. Therefore, H8 and H9 were rejected. Table 4 presents the results of the hypotheses tests, which are discussed in detail in the following section.

## **Discussion**

This study offers a number of contributions to the literature. We explored SUSCEP and SNI as antecedents of self-expressive brands and brand tribalism. SUSCEP considers consumers' use of brands to enhance one's image with others, to conform to group brand choices, or to learn about products by observing others (Bearden *et al.*, 1989). As expected, we found that consumers who are more influenced by others' brand choices are likely to choose more self-expressive brands. This finding enhances our understanding of the self-expressive brand concept (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), as in our study, consumers' use of self-expressive brands is influenced by either a need for group acceptance, or for individualism. This is reinforced by the positive relationship between the perceived influence of others and tribalism, as we show that SUSCEP drives tribal membership. Consumers may join tribes because they are influenced by, and wish to impress others, by adopting the same rituals and values. Within the context of fashion brands, such values may be expressed through clothing.

As we also explored SNI, we show these findings are also supported in an online context, where brand consumption is virtual. Here, we find that those who seek to self-express and engage with others on SNS are likely to consume self-expressive brands, and are more likely to belong to tribes. We advocate that future research would investigate the relationship between consumers' views about the influence of others, and their use of self-expressive brands. Future research could investigate whether a typology of consumers can be revealed through their use of self-expressive brands, as findings suggest that consumers choose self-expressive brands to fit in, or to stand apart. Research that considers the influence of personality traits may provide insights into the role of the self-expressive brand for the consumer. Further research may also consider the moderating effect of self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974) on these relationships.

Our study provides new insights into brand tribalism. Earlier tribalism research (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009) suggested that consumers joined tribes to demonstrate and share their brand feelings and preferences with others. However, we find that consumers express greater brand tribalism when their motivation to self-express and to engage with others on SNS is also high. We suggest reasons for this finding. Cova and Pace (2006 p.1089) define tribes as a group of people with shared passion that develop a subculture 'with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy'. The social network offers a unique forum for those with shared passion to connect to like-minded others, and be influenced by others' brand choices. This may explain the relationship between SNI and tribalism. Offline, it is also possible that consumers use fashion brands to express tribal values, as well as to demonstrate tribal membership. Second, this study explored consumers' views in relation to fashion brands. We suggest that consumers who express their values and identity through fashion brands, make brand choices in order to fit in, rather than to stand out. Therefore, consumers may choose self-expressive brands that conform to a group trend, to achieve acceptance. This assertion is supported by the positive relationship between self-expressive brands and tribalism, revealed by this study. For some consumers, fashion brands allow them to achieve a sense of belonging. This finding supports Gabrielli *et al.* (2013) who asserted that, in the fashion context, consuming fashion allows people to feel that they belong to a group of similar individuals who are united because they all consume the same brand. We assert better understand the role of the tribe for the self-expressive brand, we advocate that further research would

investigate the tribal linking value provided by consumers' relationships with fashion brands, and for self-expressive brands in general.

However, our findings also reveal that such tribal membership does not result in positive outcomes for the fashion brand. It was anticipated that those who are members of a tribe would express more brand loyalty (Marzocchi *et al.*, 2013) and engage in greater WOM (Taute and Sierra, 2014). By contrast, this study revealed that tribe members were less likely to be loyal, or to offer WOM, than those who were not members. We offer an explanation for this finding. We suggest that, in fashion, consumers buy brands in order to belong to the group. Therefore, consumers may actually be loyal to the tribe, rather than the brand, and could potentially switch brand preferences if the tribe did. This finding extends the assertion by Cova (1997) that consumer-to-consumer linking value is more important than whatever is being consumed by the tribe, and suggests that this may be especially true when the brand is self-expressive. In our study, we are investigating the relationship between brand tribalism and loyalty and WOM for fashion brands. Perhaps consumers use fashion brands as a means to belong to, or to display belonging to the tribe, without any real relationship with the fashion brand. Therefore, the fashion brand facilitates tribal membership. In addition, if brand tribe preferences change, consumers' fashion brand choices may also change, in order to belong to the tribe. These findings offer a further contribution to our understanding the 'tribalism' construct, as we see that tribes are more than 'playfulness' (Goulding *et al.*, 2013). Instead, our findings suggest that brand tribes are normative, and brand consumption reflects a conformance to a tribal norm. We advocate further research to explore trends within brand tribes that may provide insights into patterns of loyalty within the tribe. In addition, research should identify factors that influence shifts in tribal loyalty towards or away from specific brands. These insights may help to identify 'critical control points' to prevent tribal defection from brands.

Our study also reveals that those consumers who choose self-expressive brands and do not seek tribal membership are brand loyal and offer WOM. We suggest that these individuals form true, lasting relationships with the brand, because these individuals consume self-expressive brands in order to differentiate themselves and stand out from others in a positive way. This use of brands is in direct contrast to the tribe, where the goal of consumption is reference group acceptance, and fitting in. As consuming these brands offer the self-expressive benefits these individualistic



consumers desire, they may return to the brand to meet their expressive needs, driving brand loyalty. Furthermore, these consumers spread positive WOM about the brand. We suggest that talking about the brand to others offers an additional method for these consumers to self-express and enhance their self-concept, by expressing their individuality. This finding is in line with Alexandrov *et al.* (2013) who state that consumers are motivated to engage in WOM by their need for self-enhancement and self-affirmation. A recent study by Wien and Olsen (2014), found that those who seek individualism are more likely to take part in WOM transmission because it provides an avenue for further self-enhancement. Therefore, engaging in WOM allows these consumers to further differentiate themselves, as they verbally communicate how their brand consumption sets them apart. We advocate that further research would investigate the relationship between individualism, loyalty and WOM. In addition, we suggest that research would consider the self-enhancing role of WOM for the individualistic consumer, as these consumers' motivations for offering WOM may stem from a desire to express their individuality, rather than from any altruistic motivation.

Overall, our findings reveal that both self-expressive brand choices and tribalism are influenced by consumers' SUSCEP, and SNI. The self-expressive nature of brands allows consumers to either express their individuality, or their connectedness to those with similar brand preferences. We distinguish between those brand relationships that are individualistic, and those that are collective, as we show that only those who are individualistic in their brand consumption are brand loyal and offer WOM. Our findings provide fertile ideas for further study of self-expression, tribalism, and their influences and outcomes.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

As with all studies, there are limitations to this research. Firstly, this research was conducted solely in Ireland and with Irish consumers. Although Generation Y consumers have been found to carry similar characteristics cross-culturally (Erdogmus and Budeyri-Turan, 2012), perhaps these results may have differed if this research was carried out in a different culture.

For example, this study finds that 100% of respondents have a Facebook account on which they spend an average of 84 minutes each day. We suggest that further research would explore the influence of social networks where its use is lower

than in Ireland. Moreover, we note that in our study that respondents had an overall average income of €348.70, which may influence brand preferences, or perceptions about the role of brands in facilitating self-expression or tribal membership. It would be interesting to conduct the same study in another country where the disposable income of consumers is significantly greater or lower than the average Irish Generation Y consumers’.

In addition, this study focused solely on Generation Y consumers. It is possible that these consumers may be more influenced by SNI, may be more SUSCEP and are more tribal, and may also have different levels of loyalty than other consumer segments. Therefore, these results are not generalisable to all consumers. Future research could address this limitation by carrying out research that gathers insights from consumers of all ages.

We also note that, in our study, 74.4% of the total sample was comprised of female respondents. We advocate that further research would be conducted using our framework to explore whether there are any significant differences in these relationships across gender for Generation Y consumers.

Additionally, the respondents were asked to think about their favourite fashion brand when completing the survey questionnaire. Fashion brands are more hedonic than other brands and perhaps, if the brand of choice was less self-expressive or less socially visible, the results may be different. Future research would benefit from testing the model with brands that offer less hedonic value to the consumer, such as household cleanser (Batra and Ahtola, 1990).

Moreover, the study invited respondents to name their favourite fashion brand, and to respond to the questionnaire thinking about that brand. We note earlier in our paper that brands named revealed four broad categories: clothing and accessory brands, retail brands, sports brands and gadgets. We advocate further research to investigate whether different categories of fashion brands, result in different relationships between SUSCEP, SNI, self-expressive brands and brand tribalism, and the brand outcomes brand love and WOM.

Following our exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, brand tribalism comprised of only one construct – reference group acceptance. Therefore, in our discussion of results, tribalism is described as ‘reference group acceptance’. It is recognized that recent studies of marketplace cultures explore how consumers interact with products to establish relationships (Goulding et al., 2014). This goal of

relationship formation may, in part, explain the emergence of reference group acceptance as the dominant factor in our analysis of the tribalism construct. The result of our study, where we explore the influence of others (SNI and SUSCEP), within the context of fashion consumption, suggests that tribes are primarily constructed for the acceptance of others. We advocate that further research exploring the interrelationship between influence (social network influence or offline) and tribalism, would consider the 'linking value' provided by brands or product categories, that may enhance reference group acceptance and strengthen brand tribes. Moreover, we suggest that further research would consider how such reference group acceptance could be harnessed to foster positive brand outcomes, such as increased loyalty or WOM. In addition, we advocate future research exploring how the tribalism measure performs with less self-expressive product categories.

It is, however, acknowledged that tribalism is a broader construct than reference group acceptance. We recommend further research to investigate whether the measure of brand tribalism (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009) incorporating reference group acceptance, degree of fit with lifestyle, passion in life, social visibility of brand, and collective memory, has a different factor structure in other research contexts. Furthermore, extant research calls for an extension of the brand tribalism construct. For example, recent literature has advocated that research on brand tribes would incorporate the concept of neo tribes (Maffesoli, 1996; O'Reilly, 2012). While outside of the scope of the current research, we suggest that further study might consider neo tribes in future research on brand tribalism.

Further research is needed to explore the relationship between brand tribalism, brand loyalty and WOM. In our study we found, unexpectedly, that the relationship between tribalism and brand loyalty, and between tribalism and WOM was negative. This means that when consumers join brand tribes, they are less likely to offer WOM, and less likely to become brand loyal. Earlier we noted that this may be due to consumers' use of brands to become loyal to a group, rather than to the brand. This means that the consumer is not joining the tribe because they are loyal to the brand, rather, the consumer is loyal to the tribe and consumes the brand to belong to the tribe. This has implications for our understanding of the role of tribes in fostering positive brand outcomes. We advocate both qualitative and quantitative research to further explore the role of tribes for the consumer, and to investigate how brand tribes could be harnessed to encourage brand loyalty and positive WOM. We suggest that

the role of SUSCEP and SNI in encouraging tribal membership would be further investigated. Moreover, we advocate research that explores why brand tribes might offer less (rather than more) WOM, and examines how loyalty to the tribe might be transferred to the brand.

### **Managerial Implications**

The study offers a number of implications for managers. We identify SUSCEP and SNI as antecedents of self-expressive brand consumption and brand tribalism. Managers of self-expressive brands (such as fashion brands) should consider the influence of other consumers on an individual's purchase decisions. For example, managers should be aware that consumers would be motivated to consume their brand if it allows them to express themselves and engage with others on the social network. Social media campaigns with messages about impressing others, or sharing with others, may be effective in encouraging consumption for such brands. Further, managers of self-expressive brands should encourage consumers' 'likes' and 'shares', to enhance social identity expressiveness on the network, as this may also enhance offline consumption.

The role of the offline reference group in encouraging consumption of self-expressive brands and tribalism can be harnessed by marketing managers. For example, managers may harness the role of social influence by adopting media campaigns that suggest a consumer can 'connect' with others, through their brand consumption.

Our study suggests that consumers may express loyalty to a tribe, rather than to brands. Fashion brand managers should be vigilant, as customer segments may choose to switch brands, all at the same time, if the tribe changes brand preferences. Therefore, managers should seek to capture the views of tribal leaders, for example known market mavens, to determine their views about the brand and their motivations for brand choice. Moreover, managers seeking to enhance loyalty and WOM should consider harnessing brand endorsers to facilitate the development and longevity of a brand tribe.

Fashion brand managers should be aware of the importance of the self-expressive nature of the brand, and of its role in allowing consumers to communicate a certain brand message. It is essential that managers can distinguish between those consumers who use their brand to belong to a group, from those who use the brand as

a form of differentiation, if they are to successfully target these consumers. Managers can identify the presence of brand tribes by eliciting consumers' views about their reference groups, and their groups' brand use. If managers have Facebook pages, for example, tribes may be evident in the number of comments, likes and shares the brand receives among specific groups of brand fans. Where tribes are present, marketing communication messages regarding group acceptance may have greater influence, and may attract other consumers. By contrast, where there are no discernable tribes, managers may have greater success with marketing communications messages that emphasise the individualism of its consumers, and that challenge consumers to 'stand out', through brand use.

From these findings, a question arises regarding the relevance of the brand tribe for the marketing manager. If tribes have little loyalty, offer less WOM than other consumers, and are merely 'joining in' for a sense of belonging, how then does the tribe offer value? Perhaps studies of brand tribes offer greater insights into knowledge consumers share about brands, and the roles and rituals consumers develop when consuming those brands in groups. Such insights can inform managers' understanding about why consumers engage with their brands, and the social practices involved in brand consumption, supporting effective brand strategy.

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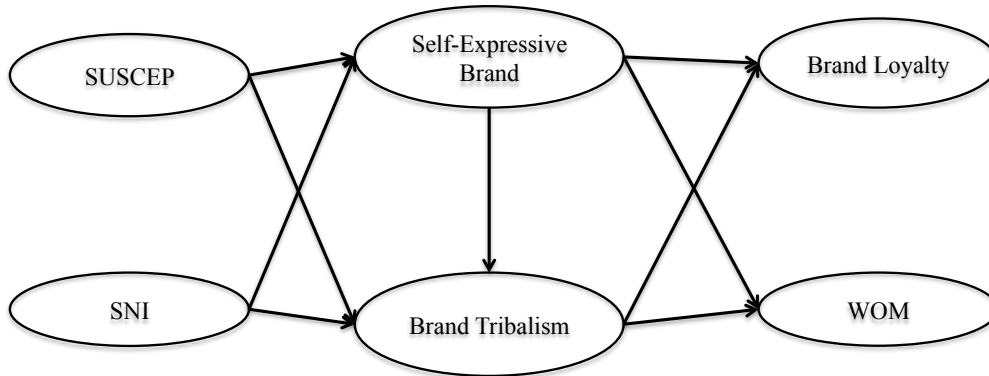
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**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**



\*SUSCEP=Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence; SNI=(Online) Social Network Influence; WOM=Word-of-Mouth

Table 1: Profile of Survey Respondents

	Sample (N = 675)
<b>Gender:</b>	
Male	25.6%
Female	74.4%
<b>Age:</b>	
Mean:	Mean: 22.76 years
SD	SD: 4 years
<b>Marital Status:</b>	84% single 14.4% living with partner
<b>Children:</b>	98.1% 'No'
<b>Employment:</b>	Student in employment: 27% Student not in employment: 44% Non-student in employment: 26% Non-student unemployed/employed unpaid: 3%
<b>Monthly income (Euro):</b>	Mean: 348.70 (Student); 2,043.74 (Non-Student) SD: 260 (Student); 2,000 (Non-Student)
<b>Nationality:</b>	98.7% Irish
<b>SNS use:</b> Do they use social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook?	100% 'Yes'
<b>SNS frequency:</b> How many minutes each day do they spend on SNS?	Mean: 84.75 minutes

Notes:

\*Many students were in employment, and some non-students were unemployed/unpaid.

\*\*Mean income levels are presented separately to reflect different average income levels of students and non-students.

Table 2: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Scale	Factor	Item	Standardised Factor Loading	CR	AVE
<b>Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence</b>	Normative Influence	SUSCEP8	.807	.907	.766
		SUSCEP11	.906		
		SUSCEP12	.908		
<b>Social Network Influence</b>	Vicarious Innovation	SNI3	.600	.786	.550
		SNI4	.618		
		SNI6	.817		
		SNI7	.803		
		SNI8	.647		
	Self-Identity Expressiveness	SNI13	.899		
	SNI14	.882			
Social-Identity Expressiveness	SNI9	.873			
	SNI10	.660			
<b>Self-Expressive Brand</b>	Inner Self	IS1	.792	.667	.501
		IS3	.926		
		IS4	.926		
	Social Self	SS3	.889		
		SS4	.836		
<b>Brand Tribalism</b>	Reference Group Acceptance	BT8	.825	.907	.765
		BT9	.887		
		BT10	.909		
<b>Brand Loyalty</b>	Brand Loyalty	BLoy1	.826	.785	.553
		BLoy2	.776		
		BLoy3	.611		
<b>Word-of-Mouth</b>	Word-of-Mouth	WOM1	.767	.916	.733
		WOM2	.866		
		WOM3	.904		
		WOM4	.881		

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

	Mean	SD	SNI	WOM	SEB	BLoy	SUSCEP	BTribe
<b>SNI</b>	2.94	0.79	0.742					
<b>WOM</b>	3.34	0.97	0.231	0.856				
<b>Self Expressive Brand</b>	2.89	0.82	0.428	0.660	0.708			
<b>Brand Loyalty</b>	3.22	0.99	0.152	0.610	0.639	0.743		
<b>SUSCEP</b>	2.93	1.41	0.413	0.165	0.418	0.216	0.875	
<b>Brand Tribalism</b>	2.09	0.94	0.448	0.201	0.448	0.258	0.755	0.874

\* SD=Standard Deviation; SNI = Social Network Influence; WOM=Word-of-Mouth; SEB=Self-Expressive Brand; BLoy=Brand Loyalty; SUSCEP=Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence; BTribe=Brand Tribalism.

Table 4: Results of the Hypotheses Tests

	Direction	Estimate	P-Value
<b>Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence</b>			
<b>H1 SUSCEP → Brand Tribalism</b>	+	<b>.631</b>	<b>***</b>
<b>H2 SUSCEP → Self-Expressive Brand</b>	+	<b>.306</b>	<b>***</b>
<b>Social Network Influence</b>			
<b>H3 SNI → Brand Tribalism</b>	+	<b>.120</b>	<b>.003</b>
<b>H4 SNI → Self-Expressive Brand</b>	+	<b>.255</b>	<b>***</b>
<b>Self-Expressive Brand</b>			
<b>H5 Self-Expressive Brand → Brand Loyalty</b>	+	<b>.797</b>	<b>***</b>
<b>H6 Self-Expressive Brand → WOM</b>	+	<b>.853</b>	<b>***</b>
<b>H7 Self-Expressive Brand → Brand Tribalism</b>	+	<b>.183</b>	<b>***</b>
<b>Brand Tribalism</b>			
H8 Brand Tribalism → Brand Loyalty	+	-.136	.011
H9 Brand Tribalism → WOM	+	-.219	***

\*Supported hypothesis are in **bold** font;

\*SUSCEP=Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence; SNI=Social Network Influence; WOM=Word-of-Mouth.



## Appendix: Profile of Survey Respondents

	Student sample (N = 469)	Non-Student sample (N = 206)
<b>Gender:</b>		
Male	22%	34%
Female	78%	67%
<b>Age:</b>		
Mean:	Mean: 21 years	Mean: 26 years
SD	SD: 3.5 years	SD: 25 years
<b>Marital Status:</b>	90% single 9% living with partner	70% single 27% living with partner
<b>Children:</b>	98% 'No'	98% 'No'
<b>Employment</b>	Additional employment: 36% No additional employment: 63%	Employed full-time: 85% Unemployed: 6%
<b>Monthly income (Euro):</b>	Mean: 348.70 SD: 260	Mean: 2,043.74 SD: 2,000
<b>Nationality:</b>	93% Irish	97% Irish
<b>SNS use:</b> Do they use social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook?	100% 'Yes'	100% 'Yes'
<b>SNS frequency:</b> How many minutes each day do they spend on SNS?	Mean: 91 minutes	Mean: 71 minutes

*\* Employment percentages do not add up to 100% due to additional categories (e.g. 'Employed unpaid') that are excluded from this table.*