

## **Elements of Rituality in Consumer Tribes: The Case of Crossfit**

**Short title: Elements of Rituality in Consumer Tribes**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study analyses the elements of rituality in consumer tribes. Data are drawn from a qualitative study on the Reebok CrossFit 33100 fitness community. According to previous research, rituality is a primary contributor to the existence, creation and recreation of consumer tribes. However, further research is needed on how rituality is constructed in consumption tribes. This study identifies three elements, namely linguistic, physical and emotional, that hold the tribe together and give form to its shared myth of transformation. By conducting a cultural analysis of focus group interviews and online data, we identified a key ritual, the 'workout of the day' (WOD), which we analysed for elements of rituality. According to our findings, participating in this ritual creates a shared myth of transformation for tribe members that permeates the entire tribal experience. This article contributes to literature on consumer tribes by deepening knowledge on how rituality is constructed, especially the emotional and embodied nature of the tribal experience. By identifying the shared myth that is created through rituality, companies can better understand and co-operate with consumer tribes.

Keywords: rituality, consumer tribes, emotion, linguistic, physical

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Academics agree that communal consumption is taking ever-increasing forms within the marketplace (Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013; Hamilton & Hower, 2010; Närvänen, Gummesson, & Kuusela, 2014; Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2013). The creation and attraction of such communities, called 'consumer tribes', are accelerated by mass media and no longer require the presence of commercial entities (Cova & Dalli, 2009, p. 485). The only connection between tribal members might be a shared feeling or emotional experience (Cova, 1997). According to Cova et al. (2007), tribes have a significant effect on conventional marketing dynamics. They transform a commercial monologue into a dialogue and curb consumer resistance with their playfulness and ephemerality. Cova, Kozinets and Shankar (2007) claim that, by making consumption a game with transparent rules, the creation of consumer tribes can avoid the duality of a consumer either giving in to the market or resisting it. Nevertheless, it can be argued that few companies offer comprehensive solutions to support tribes' consumption experience (Goulding et al., 2013). Ignoring communities of feeling can be a mistake, as the values, policies and feelings shared among the tribe can eventually become mainstream, offering new ways for companies to participate and engage with their customers (Goulding, Shankar, & Elliott, 2002).

Existing tribal studies focus on analysing the building blocks of consumption tribes and understanding their formation (Goulding et al., 2002; Goulding et al., 2013; Harwood & Garry 2009). An element of this tribal formation is rituality, as identified by Cova (1997), who built on Maffesoli's (1996) ideas of postmodern tribes. Rituality, characterized by repeated and coordinated activities that are meaningful for tribe members, is argued to be a driving force of the emotional experience within a consumption tribe (Goulding & Shankar, 2011). Therefore, it is

central to the survival of the tribe and, indeed, the whole tribe is likely to fall apart if the rituals holding it together are not sustained (Cova & Cova, 2002).

Consumption rituals have been widely studied within interpretive consumer research (Gainer, 1995; McCracken, 1986; Otnes & Lowrey, 2004; Rook, 1985; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). Yet, the literature on consumer tribes has not fully concentrated on rituals and especially the elements that construct rituality in a consumer tribe (for an exception, see Goulding & Shankar, 2011). This study aims to analyse in particular the linguistic, physical and emotional elements of rituality in a consumer tribe. By focusing on Reebok CrossFit 33100, a tribe that engages in extremely physical and sometimes even painful activity, we intend to provide new understanding about how and why tribes are brought into temporary existence and held together. The case tribe consists of amateur athletes united by their shared interest in functional training and communal spirit. The case context represents a contemporary phenomenon of 'branded fitness' (Powers & Greenwell, 2016) where participants invest a considerable amount of time, as well as financial and social resources, in exercise and membership. As the focus is on physical activity, this context allows us to explore the embodied and emotional nature of tribal rituals in more detail.

This article begins by reviewing the literature on tribes and their characteristics, as well as on rituals and rituality. Next, we describe the study's methodology. In the empirical section, we identify interconnected linguistic, physical and emotional elements of rituality in the Reebok CrossFit 33100 tribe. Finally, we draw the analysis together by presenting the shared myth of transformation that permeates the entire tribal experience. We conclude by reflecting on our findings and future research directions.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Leaning on postmodern sociology, especially the work of Michel Maffesoli (1996), Cova (1997) introduced the concept of 'consumption tribe', which has since become a key concept of marketplace cultures studies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Cova et al., 2007; Goulding et al., 2013). Maffesoli perceived postmodern society as consisting of various neo-tribes that have largely replaced modern community structures and address people's need to connect with each other in new ways. Traditional communities, such as churches and neighbourhoods, have lost significance as locales of symbolic connection, and tribes provide the basis for a new type of community (Cooper, McLoughling, & Keating, 2005; Rosenbaum, 2013). Tribes contain elements of romantic notions of premodern tribes, which add a certain nostalgia and provide an escape from individualism (Cova et al., 2007). The central characteristics of consumption tribes are their temporary and shifting nature, multiplicity, shared emotional connections, playfulness, entrepreneurialism and symbols and rituals (Cova & Cova, 2002; Cova & Pace, 2006; Cova et al., 2007; Goulding et al., 2013; Greenacre, Freeman & Donald, 2013).

The literature has investigated different aspects of consumption tribes, ranging from individuals' identity construction in the social context of the tribe (Bennett, 1999; Goulding et al., 2002; Goulding et al., 2013; Ryan, McLoughling, & Keating, 2006), to the sites and practices of tribes (Goulding et al., 2002; Hamilton & Hewer, 2010; Harwood & Garry, 2009; Moutinho, Dionisio, & Leal, 2007), to the sociological and societal implications of tribalization (Cova & Cova, 2002; Cova et al., 2007; Greenacre et al., 2013). In their study of clubbing, Goulding and Shankar (2011) focused on rituality and suggested that it contained components of 'mythology, formalism, sacredness, communitas and transformation'. This study builds on their work by looking in particular at the embodied and emotional elements of rituality.

Rituals and traditions have been identified as the central means through which any consumption community creates and shares meanings within and outside it (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Sherry & Kozinets, 2007; Rosenbaum, 2013). Specifically, it has been

argued that shared rituals creating emotional experiences are important for consumption tribes (Cova, 1997; Maffesoli, 1996). According to Rook (1985, p. 252), rituals are a symbolic act of representation that is habituated, logical and repetitive. In addition, rituals are scripted patterns of action characterized by formality, seriousness and intensity. For instance, there are family traditions that take advantage of nostalgia and myths (Belk & Costa, 1998, p. 219). Through rituals, affiliation and relational bonds are manifested in different contexts, including national holidays and family celebrations (Boyd Thomas & Peters, 2011; Fischer & Arnold, 1990; Gainer, 1995; Otnes & Lowrey, 2004; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991).

It has been argued that rituals form an important part of tribal activities (Cova & Cova, 2002, p. 609; Goulding & Shankar, 2011). From previous research, we know that tribal rituals include artefacts such as objects, dress and costumes, as well as ritualistic locations, language and persons who are important for the tribe (Cova & Cova, 2002, p. 608). The ritualistic experience is filled with fantasy and sacredness for individual members (Rook, 1985; Sherry & Kozinets, 2007). Even though rituals might not seem significant to outsiders, they have great importance for the tribe by sanctifying an event (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 422). The sacredness of a consumption experience, such as driving a Harley Davidson motorcycle (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) or skydiving (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1994), is maintained by incorporating elaborate rituals. These can include, for instance, maintaining and cleaning equipment, building shrines, collecting memorabilia and, perhaps most importantly, sharing the consumption experience with others. It is well established in the literature that participation in these rituals is part of member socialization and the development of personal and collective identity (e.g. Rosenbaum, 2013). Furthermore, rituals are connected with spirituality, as Sherry and Kozinets (2007, p. 124) presented in their study of the Burning Man festival where, through various rituals of radical self-expression, gift giving, bonding and performance, 'pilgrims are expected to participate actively in the construction of community that ... will facilitate the emergence of a transformed and renewed self'.

Through rituals, a certain sense of democratic participation in the tribe is achieved, which in anthropology is called 'communitas' (Turner, 1969; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). For instance, off-road Jeep enthusiasts generate solidarity and a sense of community by taking part in interaction ritual chains, which also 'solidified the symbolic goods used in their adventures as strong markers of group membership' (Rosenbaum, 2013, p. 649). In this sense, rituals ensure that members are able to transcend their everyday lives and enter a sacred tribal space (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989).

Although studies on consumer tribes have identified various kinds of rituals, they have not fully focused on the construction of rituality in consumer tribes. Furthermore, the focus has been more on analysing the symbolic features and effects of tribal rituals rather than their embodied and sensorial enactment through the consumer's body (cf. Valtonen & Närvänen, 2015). In the context of branded fitness such as CrossFit, the consumer's body and bodily movements are a major part of the tribal ritual, as well as the customer experience of the brand. The brand is thus manifested in what the body *does* rather than how it appears (Powers and Greenwell, 2015).

We argue that the linguistic, emotional and physical elements of rituality can be highlighted by studying a tribe that engages in extremely physical and sometimes even painful activities. We also follow O'Reilly (2012), who suggests that the emotional aspects of tribal experience have not been fully taken into account in consumer research. In their research, Hewer and Hamilton (2010) studied salsa dancing, which is also a very embodied and emotional experience. We intend to complement their study through our analysis of CrossFit, which constitutes another embodied experience, yet one that has very different emotions and activities.

## **METHODOLOGY**



The dynamics of a consumer tribe can be seen as too fragile to be subjected to traditional market analysis (Cova & Cova, 2002, p. 604). Following other researchers who have studied tribes, we believe that tribes should be understood using a cultural framework to identify the various shades of this subtle phenomenon. In cultural consumer research, the data are conceptualized as cultural texts comprising naturally occurring talk and visual materials. This empirical analysis is based on an interpretation of texts (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). In our study, we generated cultural data through observations and focus groups.

The generated data are centred on a tribe of amateur athletes, Reebok CrossFit 33100, who share a common passion for CrossFit. CrossFit is the registered trademark and fitness form developed by Greg Glassman (Powers & Greenwell, 2016). Its core purpose is to improve an individual's overall fitness and performance through versatile practices. In recent years, CrossFit has grown to become an international phenomenon. The number of CrossFit centres around the world has skyrocketed, and affiliate gyms, Reebok CrossFit 33100 included, aim to differentiate themselves from traditional gyms by offering a genuine community experience and an alternative means of physical training.

For the first step in the data generation process, we conducted two focus group interviews with a total of six tribe members. Focus group interviews can be used as a tool to generate cultural talk, particularly if one is analysing cultural practices and forms of social interactions (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Therefore, the social impacts of group discussions and the complexity of the method were acknowledged. The purpose of the focus group interviews was to encourage participants to express their priorities on relevant aspects of the CrossFit tribe and to gain an understanding of their inner worlds. To deepen the data generated, we also conducted participant observations. The first author herself participated in an invited CrossFit workout at the gym.

Further, we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through naturally occurring textual materials. Community members produce various types of textual materials and

their culture is documented in forms that can be easily accessed and analysed. Media is part of this process. Therefore, in our research, we identified naturally occurring cultural texts on the Internet and social media platforms. We observed the tribe's communications on Facebook and existing sources of data on CrossFit's official website (crossfit.com). Additionally, we broadened our perspective by reading online critiques of CrossFit. All material extracted from the Internet was publicly available and permission for observation was obtained from the company's Facebook's site administrators. Online observation was conducted for a period of four months (January–April, 2014). As Kozinets (2010, p. 64) noted, online communication is essential to gain an understanding of tribal experiences.

Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 244) described how, in social reality, all types of information are produced through language and its discourses. Thus, we were interested in how people as individuals or group members interpret the elements around them. We adapted elements from discursive analysis that treats language as a constructor of social action (Sitz, 2008, p. 178) to identify interrelations of cultural practices within the language (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p. 51). We acknowledge the constraints of textual forms of language. With physical exercise, such as CrossFit, language is used to describe a physical experience. As Hewer and Hamilton stated (2010, p. 117), physical movement escapes analysis and thus can only be subjected to analysis through the interpretation of texts. However, we feel that we were able to capture the essence of the phenomenon by using multiple forms of data generation, including interviews and the participant observation conducted by the first author.

## **FINDINGS**

*Linguistic elements of rituality in the Reebok CrossFit 33100 tribe*

Our journey towards identifying the essence of Reebok CrossFit 33100 tribe began with an exploration of its key ritual, 'workout of the day' (WOD). This is a rigorous script describing a set of physical activities combined in a way that the tribe feels is unique to CrossFit. Enacting the WOD is the formulistic characteristic of tribal rituality (Goulding & Shankar 2011); the procedure has phases of initiation, anticipation and preparation, and it relies on members coordinating and cooperating to move their bodies together. The description of WOD is shared daily on the official CrossFit website, and it is replete with coded tribal vocabulary. Language is a way of transferring and producing meanings within a tribe, and the use of ritual language helps construct the tribe. Wenger (2000, p. 229) found that language contains not only words but also resources. Language plays an important role in a tribe's defining of boundaries in relation to outsiders. Ritual scripts consist of verbal language but offer access to physical activities (cf. Rook, 1985). However, they are only accessible to those who master the language. Schau, Muniz and Arnould (2009, p. 38) described language as a set of codes that is difficult for an outsider to comprehend. Tribal language offers an endless source of jargon and ways of using the language, separating tribe members from outsiders. Using a tribal language correctly means exhibiting important knowledge and social status within a tribe (Schau et al. 2009; Närvänen, Kartastenpää, & Kuusela, 2013).

Through the description of the WOD, the tribe is able to execute the physical activities presented in the script. The duration of the WOD varies from 30 to 60 minutes, thus varying the intensity and experienced efficiency of the workout. The mixture of workout methods in WOD is considered unique: it combines weightlifting, athletics and gymnastics to increase individuals' physical strength in the most efficient way possible.

Generally, the WOD is present in every CrossFit33100 tribal situation. It is the core event around which the tribe congregates. Even if the tribe gathers around a theme other than everyday workouts (such as holidays or summer season opening), it will always include a WOD suitable for the moment.

*For New Year Eve celebrations there was this new thing.... We had a WOD starting at 11 p.m. and ending at midnight.... And then you were like 'Happy New Year!' (B1)*

The tribe finds significance and a standard of perfection in the experienced naturalness and simplicity of CrossFit and WOD. Previous research has identified mythology as one component of tribal rituals (Goulding & Shankar, 2011). Myths in Reebok CrossFit 33100 tribe are related to romantic traditions. As Thompson (2004, p. 164) described it, romantic traditions are related to mankind's longing for unspoiled nature. Myths carrying ritualistic meanings communicate sacredness to a tribe (Belk et al., 1989, p. 7) and maintain it by intertwining them with the tribe's shared feeling (Muñiz & Schau, 2005, p. 745). Myths can also transform things that might otherwise be profane, such as physical training. In the case of CrossFit, some tribe members refer to the Ancient Greeks and the original Olympic games and make these notions a physical reality as they become part of WODs.

Some stories drawing on romantic traditions become more significant than others. Stories posted on the CrossFit website, such as 'World-Class Fitness in 100 Words', which is a short description of CrossFit, contain subtle implications and models of romantic values, and they even possess evangelistic characteristics, which then circulate among tribe members, becoming part of their language and manifesting in the physical universe. As the example above shows, crossfit.com is the main source of information related to CrossFit and builds mythical stories around the tribe (see also Powers & Greenwell, 2016). Some key people, such as trainers, then channel these stories towards the tribe, where they circulate and fortify the collective feeling and, again, manifest in physical performance. The stories strengthen the collective values and beliefs and sometimes contain religious elements, such as sacrifice or heroism (Muniz & Schau, 2005, p. 745).

As mentioned by Muniz and Schau (2005, p. 745), empowering, heroic stories are part of the mythology that serves tribal intentions and ideological interests (Thompson, 2004, p. 163). In CrossFit, heroic stories often contain tales of struggles in life outside the tribe and, thus, can serve

to strengthen tribal members' commitment. When tribe members hear such stories, their personal commitment to the tribe and the meanings produced by the tribal experience are reinforced.

*I've been thinking a lot about whether if it's really impossible to combine.... It feels so wretched to give up your passion for work or children, and here you see people with families who have different systems to work it through and so on, and I hope I could do the same. Like not to give up things that matter to me because money would be more important or... something like that. (A1)*

Heroic stories increase the sacredness of the experience and help tribe members resist social stigmas (Kozinets, 2001, p. 78). Once the experience is considered sacred, it is unlikely that the tribe members will choose an alternative experience.

In addition to myths and heroic struggles, competition is also a strong part of the tribal experience in the Reebok CrossFit 33100 tribe. It is embedded in the linguistic codes of their talk. Tribe members use certain vocabulary to identify a speaker's or subject's status in the tribe and to make constant comparisons. For instance, tribe members use the word 'Fran' (a term for workout) to estimate an individual's progress in the tribe. The faster you go through a Fran, the higher your status will be in the tribe. The tribe members pursue the tribe's respect and thus are in constant competition with themselves as well as other tribe members. In a study on Black Friday shopping rituals (Boyd Thomas & Peters, 2011), the theme of competition—racing and trying to beat other consumers—was likewise identified as a factor adding to the excitement and challenges of the ritualistic experience. For the CrossFit tribe, the element of competition relates very strongly to the idea of constant improvement.

*Competition is a positive power. During the WODs, you work as hard as you can. The bigger the crew, the faster you have to go.... You always want to beat the person next to you. (B1)*

*Nothing is given for free. (C1)*

The element of competition and inner rivalry is coloured with sarcastic humour. When the members are committed, the atmosphere allows tribe members to use contradictory rhetorical devices, such as sarcasm, without arousing conflict. Sarcasm is a means through which tribe members are encouraged and triggered to seek deeper commitment.

*It's like 'do you even lift'. Kinda f\*\*\*\*ing with each other in a constructive way. (B1)*

#### *Physical elements of rituality in the Reebok CrossFit 33100 tribe*

To enact a ritual, a tribe needs a physical or sacred meeting place; these physical spaces offer the tribe a temporary home (Cova & Cova, 2002). The enactment of rituals in these spaces is what makes such places sacred for members (Belk et al., 1989). For the case tribe, the physical meeting place is their gym or, as they prefer to call, 'the box'. Interpretation of tribe members' descriptions of the site reveals that the box is a significant ritual locus. Belk et al. (1989, p. 10) pointed out that practicing ritualistic behaviours in a certain place makes it sanctum. Therefore, through WOD, the box becomes a sacred place for the Reebok CrossFit 33100 tribe. However, the ritual script does not bind the tribe to execute rituals in a certain place or time in this particular tribe. Through information banks, such as crossfit.com, rituals can be transferred outside the box; moreover, the act of performing the ritual in a particular place in itself makes it sanctum.

*The main site has brought me the idea that I can do workouts without any equipment. I broaden the view, like I no longer need the bench to exercise my pecs.... And it has, kinda been lost in the hype that CrossFit gym would be the only place to do CrossFit and so on.... (C1)*

As this interviewee's quote illustrates, the tribe members have also learnt that their own bodies can serve as the best instrument for training. In fact, the body plays a significant role in the tribal rituals of CrossFit. Central to the physical aspect of rituality in the case tribe is the notion that tribe members are in constant battle with the limitations of their own bodies. They use other tribe members to urge themselves on and push the boundaries of their physical existence.

*The end of progress lies in satisfaction. (C1)*

The constant comparison between 'rounds' of a certain exercise reflects this aspect of competition. Competition as part of the tribe's ritualistic behaviour is a positive, progressive force and an element of ritual care (Belk et al., 1989). It also shows respect for the ritual:

*When the WOD is on going, nobody will start telling jokes or anything like that; then it is really about the thing ... to really go at it with no limits. (A1)*

Hence, during the ritual, the physical and embodied elements of rituality are emphasized as each tribe member concentrates on the physical movement of their body and battles against its limits. It is only after the WOD has ended that the members are able to share their emotions and talk with each other about the experience. Furthermore, the embodied experience of WOD results in self-renewal and a concrete sense of energy:

*It's a good example when people come to train in the morning like 6.30 or 7ish ... everybody is so freakin' tired, you know, they have a zombie-face on ... and then we start warming up together and do the workout, and then you look at their faces when they leave ... they are like, YES! I'M READY for the day at work. So it is incredible what happens in one hour compared to if you had spent the hour making breakfast at home, reading the morning paper; ... the increase in your energy level is something that amazes me every time. (A2)*

Our findings on the significance of the body in the WOD ritual can be compared with those by Pentina and Spears' (2011) in their study of tattooing. The body can be seen as an important object for communicating self-identity. It is perceived as 'a means to achieve various social goals, and convey a meaningful message of values, beliefs and lifestyle' (Pentina & Spears, 2011, p. 75). In their findings, they claim that tattooing can be interpreted as a consumer's search for a permanent identity and control over it (p. 91). Taking control over one's own body through CrossFit can be seen as a similar type of act.

#### *Emotional elements of rituality in the Reebok CrossFit 33100 tribe*

Through the WOD ritual, the tribe members also feel a range of emotions, both positive and negative, as they struggle against the profane and compete against the limitations of the body with other tribe members. Hence, the experience of the ritual is at the same time embodied and affective (Valtonen & Närvänen, 2015). Combat against the commonplace is reflected when tribe members refer to home, and especially sitting on the couch, as something mundane and passive that should be avoided:

*I can tell you that it sure feels tough, like, it feels hard at that moment; you feel like staying home and just be like PHhhhh, not to do anything, but afterwards, when you leave the box, you feel so much better EVERY TIME. I never regret leaving home. (C1)*

*Other people keep asking me how I can have the energy and the time, and isn't it so painstaking and time-consuming. I only wonder what those people DO after work.... Like, what are they actually doing when they stay at home? (B1)*

The ritual is about endurance and overcoming obstacles, sometimes through pain. The emotional elements expressed verbally give the tribe members strength to execute the ritual together. Moreover, the second quote above illustrates the boundary between tribe insiders and an outside



world that does not completely understand them. The fact that the WOD ritual is partly incomprehensible to outsiders and hence, partly secret unless you are a tribe member, is seen to testify to the vitality of the community. Maffesoli (1996) called this the 'law of secrecy', a 'protective mechanism with respect to the outside world'. Furthermore, the quotations above reflect a sense of Maffesolian 'elective sociality'; tribe members choose to leave their private homes and join others in an intense physical and social experience of being together (cf. O'Reilly, 2012, p. 343). Those individuals who cannot or do not want to experience the emotions involved in the ritual are cast out of the tribe.

*CrossFitters are more prepared to tolerate discomfort, and they go outside their comfort zone. And those who can't do it kind of automatically fall off. Like, if you prefer easy walks in nature, I wouldn't recommend this to you.... (B2)*

Rituals enforce the communal feeling, *communitas* (Belk et al., 1989, p. 7; Turner, 1969). *Communitas* manifests itself when individuals temporarily feel as one, with feelings and actions aligned and success collectively celebrated. This is the kernel of the ritual's appeal and meaningfulness. Even though the atmosphere within the case tribe is relaxed, the ritual situation is itself serious. The WOD embodies the ritual characteristics of formality, seriousness and intensity (Rook, 1985, p. 252), and it is consistent and recurring. It is a significant part of tribe's historical continuum. However, the WOD remains a well-kept secret until the moment of execution. This adds an element of surprise to the experience.

As mentioned above, even though the ritual itself is serious and intense, elements of tribal playfulness and humour can be seen in the ritual's execution. In the intensity of the experience lies the seed of the tribal 'linking value' or shared feeling (Cova, 1997). When the execution of ritual is over, the atmosphere bursts with endorphins, making tribe members laugh, play, joke, hug each other and express the communal feeling they've reached together. This feeling,

however, starts to fade away immediately after climaxing. This is the moment when the transient quality of the tribe almost materializes.

Arnould and Price (1993, p. 39) examined river rafters and found that a feeling of *communitas* was created by escaping from civilization and connecting with the wild. In our case tribe, the *communitas* feeling is created through the escape from the everyday, collectively pushing individual boundaries and overcoming daily obstacles. The following notion exemplifies a situation wherein *communitas* is born.

*The sense of community becomes strongly involved when there's this 3-2-1 go and the workout starts. Then, if it takes, for example, ten minutes, and you have people from different levels, from different stages physically, who have participated in the workout, and the trainer has chosen the weights and reps accordingly and in ten minutes its all over, and then you're a total wreck rolling in a pond of your own sweat, and you glimpse to your side and there's your friend or a total stranger who knows exactly how you feel. I mean then you feel like 'YES!' we've both gone through the same thing. (B2)*

The interviewee describes the experience in very physical and embodied way, such as 'rolling in a pond of your own sweat', for instance. Hewer and Hamilton (2010) have described the bodywork of salsa dance as an important form of shared emotionality and community. However, participating in CrossFit rituals includes not only positive but also negative emotions. While the salsa dancers described their experience in 'impassioned, ardent, beautiful and metaphorical' language (Hewer & Hamilton, 2010, p. 118), the CrossFit tribe members use words denoting extreme physical effort and even pain. The presence of (good) pain in a ritualistic context has also been identified in the case of tattooing (Pentina & Spears, 2011).

Many studies on family rituals and holiday celebrations have emphasized that participation in rituals is reserved for family members and close friends, which helps to sustain those intimate

relationships (Boyd Thomas & Peters, 2011; Fischer & Arnold, 1990; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). Notably, the interviewee does not differentiate between a 'friend' and 'total stranger'. Instead, everybody participating in the ritual feels a sense of belonging with the intense physical experience together.

*The shared myth of transformation permeating the tribal experience*

The 'communitas' created through WOD holds the tribe together (cf. Goulding & Shankar, 2011). In their descriptions of the tribal experience, tribe members stated that attending WOD helped them fight daily tiredness and bad moods. In another study of consumption rituals, students engaged in binge drinking to transcend their stressful everyday lives (Wolburg & Treise, 2004). Similarly, the informants in our study felt that Reebok CrossFit 33100's WOD was a transformative experience. For them the ritual had extending healing powers that could dissolve negative feelings and empower tribe members.

*I DO feel, I mean I must say that I do feel somewhat ... I guess more powerful when I come here. Somehow I just feel that I know, like even if I would have a sh\*\*\*y day, I mean really sh\*\*\*y day, but when I come here this is the comfort zone, so to speak, that here you know the people pretty well, you know the training method in a way, that you will feel good and you will feel powerful, in a way. Yeah I guess you can truly talk about something empowering. (C1)*

In academia, the essence of tribal literature lies in the concept of 'linking value' (Cova, 1997) or shared feeling. Through our analysis of the key WOD ritual and its linguistic, physical and emotional aspects, we were able to identify the linking value unique to this tribe. As the example above already hints, these particular tribe members are united through a shared myth of transformation that permeates the experience.

Next, we describe this shared myth in further detail. First, members describe how they are able to gain strength and overcome their mundane everyday lives, as well as counteract negative marketplace ideologies, by participating in WOD:

*...I have heard this from many of my female friends that this [CrossFit] is really good for your self-esteem. I mean that you do not have to have any kind of special appearance or conform to any kind of model that people would expect you to fit in, but I argue that here, the way you look on the outside does not make a difference, but what you do and how hard you try. (A1)*

Hence, it seems that participating in the CrossFit tribe at least partly attenuates the pressure to conform to certain appearance and desirability ideals that can motivate participation in branded fitness (Powers & Greenwell, 2016). Trying hard, as CrossFit members see it, makes them stronger. The shared purpose of the tribe is to strive for bodily well-being and a body that is strong and capable. This powerful body gained by participating in the rituals is contrasted with the bodies of those who are not interested in their health and restricted to working in the office and sitting passively all day long. As one informant describes: 'I think it is a certain mind-set that you like to challenge yourself and take your own body to the limits' (C1). However, for tribe members, being part of the tribe is 'more than just training'; it is a sacred experience (B2). Maffesoli (1996) already made the link between religion and emotionality in the tribal experience, which he termed 'the religious model'. Hence, a religious sense of 'reliance' on the sacredness of social relations is involved in the tribe. Rituality is also historically connected to tribal religious ceremonies performed by shamans and healers (Goulding & Shankar, 2011). In Goulding and Shankar's study of clubbing, the sacredness of the experience was described by participants as pseudo-religious and transformative. They also described the DJ's role in clubbing as being central like a leader or shaman. In CrossFit, the group effort seems to be most important. Without the others participating in the same experience at the same time, the ritual would clearly not be as powerful. Also,

comparing our findings to clubbing (Goulding & Shankar 2011), the transformation process is likewise embodied, but while clubbing involves hedonic pleasure, CrossFit is more about taking the body to its limits and even beyond through extreme physical strain.

The concept of shared transformation is apparent in the tribal language, that is, when members use sarcasm and competitive language to emphasize their collective striving for a more powerful self. As one of the informants recounts, 'I think a certain gentle kind of teasing belongs to [CrossFit] somehow; it makes you push harder' (C1). Hence, tribe members discursively create both the member's individual and the tribe's collective transformation.

When describing the ritual behaviour, tribe members express that the box holds the same healing power as WODs do. The box symbolizes the meaning created through ritual behaviour, and by simply entering this sanctum, meaning creation is triggered. Thus, the permeating effect of transformation is also contained in the physical space. However, the physical space is not required to momentarily grasp the shared myth. As mentioned earlier, the ritual script is always retrievable from the Internet. The skills and meanings created through the communal action can be retrieved at any point in time even outside the tribal environment. This means that ritual meanings can be sustained outside communal experiences and built with the support of the online environment, without attachments to the physical environment.

The ritual experience in its entirety is impossible to retrieve once the ritual is over. However, according to Belk et al. (1989, p. 29), consumers try to preserve in numerous ways, for example, by photographing and saving the moments through social media. The case tribe used Facebook to ritually document their experiences through photos and status updates and, specifically, by capturing meaningful moments such as extremely physical WODs, holiday WODs and specific achievements.

*Yo yo! We really gave a ride to clean personal records today. Awesome lifts, inspiration, frustration and tantrums.... A whole range of feelings experienced at the box today—It was a good day. (Status update on Facebook, 17.3.2014)*

Ritually documenting experiences is an appropriate way to build the tribe and maintain the shared myth. The tribe is thus trying to fight a very natural part of the tribal experience: its transiency.

The shared myth of transformation plays a part in tribal consumption. Cova et al. (2007, p. 8) described tribal consumption as a game with rules that tribe members are familiar with. Their stand towards consumption is light-hearted play with symbols such as branded clothes and sports gear. In the case tribe, members feel that commercialization can be seen in the prices of products offered by companies, but see no need to resist them extensively. Quite the contrary, they refer to companies such as Reebok as visionaries that offer products to facilitate tribal rituality. As long as the products relate to the shared feeling of powerfulness, the tribe members accept them. Even though commercial entities do not always intend to participate in fortification of the shared feeling, tribe members bend the meanings of commercial products to correspond to the meanings included in the tribal experience. The key purpose of commercial objects is to facilitate the execution of rituals and build social reality, apart from which members have no significance, per se. Moreover, members themselves decide the extent to which they wish to participate in the commercialization surrounding tribal activities.

The shared feeling and sacredness of the experience acts as means through which the tribe can resist unauthentic commercial offerings in the game it plays with consumption:

*The greedy people that do not see anything but a way of making money ... no other motivation. They do not see that they should offer customers good instruction and facilities that work and everything else, because CrossFit is not just about training hard. (B1)*

The shared myth of transformation exceeds all commitments made to the commercial world. This is indeed in the heart of the tribalism of this particular community. Even if it were stripped of all its commercial elements, the tribe would still cohere and diffuse in the playful way so distinctive to consumer tribes:

*I mean, CrossFit is great, but I believe if we would change the name of our gym to be 'Our Garage Gym' without the crossfit.com it wouldn't change anything; the people would still come even though the name is no longer the same.... It might lure new people, but when they get wind of it, it doesn't matter anymore what it's called. (A2)*

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This study identified elements of rituality in a consumer tribe. By analysing the key ritual, we were able to observe the intertwined linguistic, physical and emotional elements and identify the shared myth of transformation that permeates the tribal experience in the Reebok CrossFit 33100 tribe. Hence, our findings contribute to the stream of studies focusing on consumption tribes as part of today's marketplace. By combining academic tribal research and emphasizing rituality, this research draws on Maffesoli's essential ideas of the central feeling and sacredness of communality, which were also taken up by O'Reilly (2012, p. 343). In particular, we paid attention to the features of 'the religious model', 'elective sociality' and 'the law of secrecy' (Maffesoli 1996). According to O'Reilly (2012), these features have not been fully explored in marketing and consumer research on tribes.

Overall, the findings add to previous knowledge on tribal rituals by highlighting how they are constructed from three kinds of elements, linguistic, emotional and physical, that work together to create the tribal experience and the shared myth of transformation. In terms of linguistic elements,

our findings largely support earlier research on consumption tribes (e.g. Goulding & Shankar 2011; Schau et al., 2009) by emphasizing the role of ritual language and myths in the tribal experience. Furthermore, we found out that the online site of CrossFit operated as a bank of rituals for each member and tribe to follow and use. Hence, the online site facilitates accessing tribal experiences even outside the gym. Regarding emotional elements, our findings emphasized that the tribal experience is always both embodied and affective (Valtonen & Närvänen, 2015). We showed how the intensity of the physical experience is counterbalanced with humour and sarcasm. Furthermore, we highlighted the emotional aspects of competition and inner rivalry as crucial parts of the tribal experience complementing the focus on *communitas* and sacredness as evidenced in previous research (Arnould & Price, 1993; Hewer & Hamilton 2010). Finally, regarding the physical elements, we paid special attention to the tribe members' bodies an important ritual locus, in addition to the "box" (i.e. the gym).

In particular, our findings shed light on the embodied and emotional aspects of tribal rituality that have not previously been fully developed in the literature. In their study on salsa dancing, Hewer and Hamilton (2010) argued that the body and bodily interaction take a central stage. Similarly in CrossFit, the body and bodily sensations are important elements. Like salsa dancers, CrossFit tribe members find 'temporary escape from the mundane, relief from the stresses, tensions and contradictions of everyday life' (Hewer & Hamilton, 2010, p. 119). However, our findings have also highlighted other elements necessary to achieve the CrossFit tribal experience: struggling against the limits of the body, competition and even discomfort. Powers and Greenwell (2016) argued that branded sensibilities have thoroughly permeated everyday life through using the body as a medium. However, our informants did not uniformly act as brand promoters for Reebok, but instead expressed a playful attitude toward Reebok and other related brands and commercial entities around their tribe. Even if the brand of CrossFit was important to them, being a member of the tribe was the primary motivator.



Staying fit is an important motivation in consumers' everyday lives. The fitness industry is generating significant revenues and fitness club memberships are growing, for instance in Europe by 4.4 per cent in 2016 (Sky.ry, 2017). Furthermore, there is pressure from low-cost gyms. Companies in the fitness industry need to look for new competitive advantages, and branded fitness such as CrossFit has become successful in this pursuit. However, according to our study, participating in tribal rituals and being part of a community is more important for CrossFit consumers than the brand itself. Hence, for companies in the fitness industry, understanding the elements of rituality from the tribe members' viewpoint is important. By identifying the shared myth, companies can tailor their offerings and interaction with the tribe to reinforce it. For any company that is involved in tribal consumption, it is important to perceive customers as active tribe members involved in developing their own tribal experiences and rituals rather than as passive targets of marketing efforts.

Finally, although the significance of rituality has previously been acknowledged, more profound examination is still needed. Thus, future researchers should conduct more in-depth analysis of rituality in different consumption tribes to determine whether the three kinds of elements identified here equally apply. While the technology-inspired level of interaction between consumers on social media and the CrossFit site is an important part of the CrossFit phenomenon, this study did not focus on it in detail. Future research could more fully explore how tribal rituals are represented, maintained and developed online.

In addition, the corporeal and material nature of tribal rituality could be explored further by using different kinds of theoretical frames and methodological tools. Recent research in the area of physical cultural studies could be very useful in this pursuit. These transdisciplinary studies share an interest in the sites, forms and expressions of physical culture and their organization, specifically in relation to social power (Silk, Andrews, & Thorpe, 2017). In addition, drawing from body studies, feminism and gender studies, as well as cultural studies, focus on the practices and

processes of embodiment and the body as an affecting and affective material entity could also enrich the marketing and consumer research perspective (see e.g. Valtonen, 2013; Valtonen & Närvänen, 2015).

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