

# Religiosity in the Abandoned Apple Newton Brand Community

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This research explores the grassroots brand community centered on the Apple Newton, a product that was abandoned by the marketer. Supernatural, religious, and magical motifs are common in the narratives of the Newton community, including the miraculous performance and survival of the brand, as well as the return of the brand creator. These motifs invest the brand with powerful meanings and perpetuate the brand and the community, its values, and its beliefs. These motifs also reflect and facilitate the many transformative and emancipatory aspects of consuming this brand. Our findings reveal important properties of brand communities and, at a deeper level, speak to the communal nature of religion and the enduring human need for religious affiliation.

Religion is one of humanity's most enduring creations. It has survived plagues, scientism, what Jung termed the "tyranny of reason" (Jung 1961/1977, 217), and modernity itself. Religion is fundamental to human existence. It endures. Also fundamental to human existence is the meaningfulness of material objects. There has never been a society in which material objects did not possess meaning beyond the utilitarian and necessary (Sahlins 1972). As Schudson (1984, 132) notes, "what people require are the elements to live a social life, the elements to be a person." Those elements are typically things, including things bought and sold in the marketplace (Schudson 1984). The intersection of the religious and material is neither unusual nor unimportant to understanding consumers and their consumption. Religious metanarratives are highly accessible and highly portable templates of human understanding. Religiously infused narratives help us make sense of the people, institutions, and things in our lives, including those found in the marketplace.

Many have noted that modernity is inescapably linked to its engine, market capitalism (Lasch 1991), and market capitalism's central icon, the brand (Marchand 1985). By the end of the twentieth century, the brand had become a much

accepted hallmark of contemporary society. Virtually everything is branded in this society, including water and dirt. Even religious organizations and sects have openly begun to brand (Jones 2003). The brand is therefore a critical element in the story of the relationship between religion and modernity.

Classic sociologists saw modernity as something of a paradoxical problem for religion and all things mystical. Weber (1922/1978) felt that modernity (as driven by market capitalism) fostered a loss of the sacred and the sense of connection between individuals and the world provided by myth, magic, and religion. Modernity, via the increased cultural emphasis on reason, disenchanted the world, disconnected the individual, and led to alienation (Ellul 1964; Freud 1930/1989). The asserted purity and communal nature of religion had, according to this classic view, been threatened by the forces of modernity. Yet, as others have suggested, the new stresses of modernity might actually underscore the longings that the disenchantment of the world had wrought (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Inglehart and Baker 2000). Modernity might force the religious and magical to emerge in different contexts, displacing rather than destroying them.

In this article we raise questions of gods and followers, meaning, and fundamental power relations in a brand community (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). We explore religiosity in a community by studying members' perceptions of authority, fellowship, who invents what, and who may or may not be coming back. We offer the story of an abandoned brand community, one in which the marketer-creator has left the scene. This is the story of the brand community centered on the Apple Newton, a product that was discontinued by Apple in 1998. Despite being discontinued, at least 20,000

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day-to-day Newton users remain (Kahney 2002), and, due to recent fundamental changes in mediated human communication, meaningful aggregations of these members still exist. Roughly two to three thousand Newton users are active participants in online forums. These consumers offer a wonderful opportunity to explore what happens when the secular creator abandons the flock. They offer intertwined threads of identity, commingled ideas of the supernatural and God, and the marketplace creator. They point to unanswered questions in consumer behavior with respect to the nascent brand community literature and traditional brand loyalty findings.

## BACKGROUND

Brand communities have powerful cultures, replete with complex rituals, traditions, and behavioral expectations (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). These cultures are host to a variety of powerful experiences. Recall the intensely communal encounters experienced by Jeep drivers at the Jeep Jamboree detailed by McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) or those of the Saab drivers chronicled by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), who tell of "eventful, sometimes harrowing, but always meaningful journey[s] in their Saabs" (423). Brand communities appear to be defined, in one sense, by their capacity for powerful and transformative experiences. Many of these experiences have religious and magical overtones. Magico-religious metaphors and imagery have been seen in brand communities centered on Macintosh (Belk and Tumbat 2002), Saab (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001), *Star Trek* (Kozinets 2001), *Star Wars* (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Schau and Muñiz 2004), and the *X-Files* (Kozinets 1997). Frequently, these metaphors and imagery are deployed in consumer narratives.

Narratives play a significant role in acts of consumption, allowing consumers to understand, structure, and share their consumption experiences. Stories can powerfully affect consumption, as when consumers share a tale of an exciting journey (Arnould and Price 1993), performance (Deighton 1992), or religious experience (O'Guinn and Belk 1989). In communal consumption settings, sharing stories reinforces both the bond between members (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001) and core community beliefs (Fine 1998; Thompson 2004). Consumers also manipulate and hybridize marketer-created brand narratives and work them into their lives. These hybridized narratives are then used to sacralize, individualize, and build community (Brown et al. 2003). Given the prominent role of narratives in this regard, we decided to focus our efforts on the narratives members of the Apple Newton brand community share with one another.

## METHOD

Our study has the following objectives: to examine how a grassroots brand community responds to the loss of the brand upon which it is centered and what this response reveals about

the relationship between brand communities, technology, and the magico-religious. This research was conducted using a netnographic method (Kozinets 1997) and includes data from a host of different sources, including observation, participant observation, and member interviews.

### Netnographic Site

The Apple Newton was the first entrant into the personal digital assistants (PDAs) product category. The Newton was rushed to market in 1993 and was far from bug free (Tesler 2001). Its problems were widely reported (and lampooned) in the media and discouraged many potential adopters. As a result, the Newton never achieved critical mass. It did, however, engender a strong and fiercely loyal grassroots community with close to 200,000 users at the height of its popularity (Cooper 1998). These users interacted and assisted one another on a variety of online forums and in face-to-face user groups. Despite this active and loyal user base, the Newton lost its lead in the emerging PDA category to the newly introduced Palm Pilot in 1996 and was officially discontinued by Apple in February of 1998.

The Newton community is in a perilous position. This is a widespread perception among members. A signature file of one member reads, "Would the last person to leave the platform, please turn off the backlight," underscoring the precarious nature of the community. Service, assistance, and new applications are difficult to obtain. Most of these tasks are performed by members. In the case of developing new applications, the more skilled members of the community can be counted on to solve the most pressing problems, but their efforts cannot be as complete as a full marketplace of developers. Members are burdened with additional challenges, ranging from getting the device to work with newer desktop operating systems to the prodding of friends, family, and colleagues to adopt newer devices. In addition, the more time that passes since the Newton was discontinued, the more members will be lost due to the physical failure of the device. These challenges lend significant urgency and tension to the community.

### Netnographic Procedures

A large part of the data for this study includes the messages members post to one another via two community discussion forums (both pseudonymously disguised): the alt.fan.newton Usenet newsgroup and the NewtChat Listserv. These two forums are the primary means by which members of the geographically dispersed Newton community interact. User-created Web pages were also examined for relevant narrative themes (Schau and Gilly 2003). Interviews were conducted with members of the Newton community. To recruit volunteers, we used a research Web page that we announced via postings to the two community forums. Eighty people responded to our initial set of questions. After reading these responses, we contacted individual members of the community with follow-up questions and began an ongoing dialogue with several members of the community. Some of

these evolved into extended e-mail discussions, with telephone and face-to-face interviews as well. Table 1 provides a summary of the data.

The lead author engaged in participant observation. After several months of observation, the lead author bought a Newton 2100 and used it for a variety of tasks, including editing large portions of this article. After using a Newton for several weeks, it was readily apparent how important the community was in keeping these complex devices operating. This author's brand community membership was advantageous as it provided an important and unique perspective, as well as empathy with the community and its plight. The second author was a nonparticipant observer. These two perspectives provided interpretive perspective and tension (Denzin 1998). Analysis began during the initial observation period and followed the constant-comparative method. As our thinking progressed, we downloaded additional threads from the forums to look for counterexamples to challenge our interpretations. Member checks were conducted. We placed our interpretations on our research page and invited members to comment on them. After several iterations, we were satisfied that we had achieved sufficient interpretive convergence.

## FINDINGS

Supernatural, religious, and magical motifs are common in the narratives of the Newton community. There are strong elements of survival, the miraculous, and the return of the creator. We propose that these themes are, first, a product of the context in which this community operates and, second, indicative of the very clear and resilient need humans have to believe in something or someone outside mundane reality. Belk and Tumbat (2002) and Kahney (2004) detail the ways in which the Apple Macintosh brand community resembled a cult. The Newton community was part of this larger, more powerful denomination when the Newton was being produced by Apple. However, this connection was severed when Apple discontinued it. Since being abandoned, the Newton brand community could be said to resemble what Durkheim (1915/1965) called a "cult in a disintegrated condition" (57). It is operating in a threatened state. The Newton community and the stories, rites, and beliefs surrounding it are in danger of disappearing. This appears to be the most powerful force driving the narrative production that we see here. The Newton community is responding to the context in which it operates by adopting religious and mythic motifs as a central narrative structure. These motifs invest the brand with powerful meanings and perpetuate the brand and the community, its values, and its beliefs. They also serve to reenchant the world these consumers inhabit. In the following we discuss five major themes in the narratives Newton users share with one another: (1) tales of persecution, (2) tales of faith being rewarded, (3) survival tales, (4) tales of miraculous recovery, and (5) tales of resurrection. We also explore the underlying ethos of the brand community and its relationship to these themes.

TABLE 1

### DATA SUMMARY

Data	N
Observation of online community (years)	3
Participant observation of online community (years)	1
Initial electronic member interviews (unique)	82
Follow-up electronic member interviews (of initial)	48
Extended researcher-member electronic exchanges (>3)	20
Telephone member interviews	7
Face-to-face member interviews	5
Member Web sites	16

## Tales of Persecution

Newton users feel that they are persecuted. The public failed to understand the Newton, so the product did not sell. Then the manufacturer abandoned the loyal community. Many members are still sensitive about these issues. While soliciting responses from the community, we posed the following question: What caused the Newton to fail in the marketplace? Many users took issue with this question (some quite emphatically) and suggested that the Newton had not failed. Rather, these users asserted that it had been discontinued after Apple failed to market it properly and consumers failed to "get it." Members also feel that there is a stigma attached to their devotion to the Newton. Consider the comments of Frank, a 25-yr.-old MBA student who has been using a Newton since 1995: "I'm the only Mac user in [my] MBA program. I get a hard enough time about that. My classmates are relentless when it comes to my Newton." His comments are not atypical. As a result of this perceived persecution and stigma, two things happen. First, members are cautious when describing their devotion to outsiders. Second, members work to clear up what they see as misconceptions surrounding the Newton.

Tales of persecution detail the experiences of members as they use their Newtons in the face of a lack of physical and moral support from Apple, pervasive anti-Apple sentiment, and strange looks and snide comments from those around them. In many of these narratives, the Newton user attempts to confront the stigma by getting back at the person heckling them or by redeeming the device by demonstrating what it can do. Consider the following tale of retail persecution and revenge, posted under the subject heading "Guerilla Tactics":

My wife and I were out shopping and stopped by the electronics store to look at Palm Pilots. I happened to have my Newt. The sales guy asked what I was carrying, so when I showed him, his response was, "Oh, that thing's not compatible with anything." My response was to beam "I wish I was a Newton" to each of the demo units simultaneously. Heh heh. (Ty, Listserv, August 2000)

The themes of persecution and response are also common in the narratives Newton owners share with the researchers. Consider these comments from Alfred, who spoke about how he responds to those who try to get him to switch to a competing PDA:

I don't feel the need to change as I'm well aware of what the alternatives have to offer (or really not offer). If they really feel the need to "show off" the latest and greatest Palm/Clie/Visor/IPAQ/etc., I let them. When they are finished with the Dog and Pony thing, I give them a quick demo of the Newton. They are almost always blown away, especially when I tell them it's a few years old. (Alfred, male, 35, interview)

Noteworthy in Alfred's quote is the fact that the experience sounds so common. He frequently has to deal with this behavior and has a standard response to it. Most Newton users have endured multiple attempts at conversion, and most employ the same response: actively resist the doubters and try to impress them with what the Newton can do. In the stories told to the community, the doubters are always impressed.

Marginalized religions are often stigmatized. Members of the Newton community feel they are stigmatized for remaining devoutly loyal to a technology that failed in the marketplace. Given that the source of the stigma is a publicly consumed technology, members can be said to have a highly visible stigma symbol (Goffman 1963). Enduring this stigma is something else members have in common, much like it is for the devoted fans of Barry Manilow (O'Guinn 1991) or *Star Trek* (Kozinets 2001). As such, it is probably an important component of this community's consciousness of kind (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). Much like *Star Trek* fans (Kozinets 2001), members of the Newton community practice information-control techniques (Goffman 1963), though the techniques practiced by the Newton community are slightly more aggressive. Rather than simply disclosing their stigma to others via proud display of the stigma symbol (such as wearing a *Star Trek* uniform in public), members of the Newton community attempt to correct the poor reputation upon which the stigma is based through a process of contextualization. In their retaliatory product demonstrations, members are placing widely known details about the Newton into the correct context and are, in essence, "taming the facts" (Campion and Fine 1998, 92). In so doing, members create a more positive image for the Newton, reduce the stigma it carries, and preach to the unconverted. All of these activities serve to keep morale high among members.

These strategies appear to be quite effective in controlling the group's stigma. Consider the comments of one of the recognized leaders of the community. Kenneth is the moderator of the NewtChat Listserv and a longtime Newton owner. His expertise and knowledge of all things Newton are frequently sought out by members of the community. While discussing the strength of the Newton community, he explicitly connected morale with such demonstration stories:

*Researcher:* You talked about the morale at the anniversary and you were kind of marveling at it being 5 years out. Is morale a concern for the Newton community? Does the group kind of collectively ever start to get down?

*Kenneth:* I think morale is still pretty high. . . . I think it's the fact that we are all united. I think the unity is a big thing because the list is so big. The other thing is that whenever people, like someone from the outside, actually see what the Newton can do, they are impressed. Every story that I've ever read that someone [demonstrated] the system to some new person, it's like, "Hey, wow, what's that? You can do that on this? Where can I buy one of those?" . . . So everyone is still amazed that the product has been going for so long. (Kenneth, male, 21, interview)

The doubters are put in their place and see the error of their ways. Such is the way of the stories.

The telling of the stories in which members respond to the persecution by demonstrating the power of the product represents a form of consumer magic. Arnould, Price, and Otnes (1999), in their exploration of consumer magic in white-water river rafting, note that magical thinking can coexist with scientific thought in solving social problems. They note that many important inventions were produced in scientific settings with mystical and magical overtones, such as brewing, writing, and metallurgy (a by-product of alchemy). Hence the notion of magic existing in the supposedly rational realm of computers, which is quite extensive in this community, is not that far-fetched. Our findings suggest that consumer magic need not be limited to such intense experiences as white-water river rafting but can also manifest in the mundane world of everyday technological goods. This has been suggested elsewhere (Davis 1998; Noble 1999). Davis (1998) explored the long-standing relationship between religion and technology, or technomysticism. He notes, "Modern electronic technologies have been enchanted to some degree all along, and technopagan magic must be seen in the larger and more ambivalent context of a widespread, if unacknowledged, technological animism" (197). Many technologies have their roots in things spiritual. Our findings demonstrate one way in which these magico-religious roots manifest themselves in modern information technologies: via brand community demonstrations of product power to those "from the outside." In responding to persecution by showing doubters what the Newton can do, members are using technopagan magic to demonstrate the Newton's powers. Certainly the combination of vivid imagery, formulaic language, and narrative conventions present in these stories creates a "metaphorical order" that conforms to the aspirations of the community (Arnould et al. 1999, 51). These stories reflect how this community wants the world to operate: with the Newton surviving and triumphing over competing technologies, converting the unbelievers and naysayers.

## Tales of Faith Being Rewarded

Faith is an important construct in the Newton community. Members remind one another via sloganistic message signatures to “keep the faith, keep the green” (the backlight on the Newton screen is green). Faith is important when one is committed to a discontinued technology, as one must believe that the device will continue to work. Faith is also important when one depends upon the continuing support provided by the community. Hence, a prominent narrative theme centers on faith being rewarded. This takes two forms. In one, an owner is able to overcome an obstacle to get a Newton to perform. In the other, a user is able to overcome broader challenges with their Newton. These tales frequently contain a clause in which the user was uncertain as to whether or not the Newton could perform the task, but has their faith rewarded when it does.

The types of incidents members share with one another vary quite wildly. Even minor victories in which faith is rewarded are cause for sharing a brief story with the community. The ability to use a wireless card with the Newton is an entirely community-driven innovation. Wireless cards were introduced after the Newton was discontinued and wireless cards did not come with Newton drivers. Members created them. In the following narrative, a neophyte member shares his experiences using wireless technology:

All, if you can read this, then LO! Rejoice with me: I have successfully sent an email via Eudora over my local coffee shop's public WAN. . . . Bless you, Newton! (Made and sent via ethernet on a Newton MP 2100::keep the green!) (Dan, Listserv, April 2003)

These stories typically produce hearty affirmations from other members. These affirmations let the contributor know that their experiences are important to the community, which encourages other members to share their experiences. Consider the following reaction to the story above:

Cool. . . . I am about to go wireless, and shamelessly ask that u post your Silver card setup, to add to the other success stories, and to help newbies like me to set up. (Geoff, Listserv, April 2003)

Note the explicit call for more details. The fact that one user managed to do it undoubtedly makes it less daunting a task for others. Moreover, the details from all such success stories contribute to a critical community knowledge base from which others can draw.

Advertising has been described as giving consumers “permission to believe the claims of the advertiser” (Wilkes 2001, S7). In the context of the Newton community, stories centered on faith being rewarded fill the void left by the lack of advertising for the Newton and remind members that their support of the Newton is still well placed. Faith, as Durkheim notes, creates a “predisposition to belief, which precedes proof, which leads the mind to overlook the in-

sufficiency of logical reasons” (Durkheim, 1915/1965, 403). As will be seen, the suspension of rational disbelief is important in consuming many of the magico-religious narratives of this community. Every time a member shares a story like this, other members are given permission to believe in the Newton's powers and are encouraged to accept the more fantastic of the Newton brand community narratives.

These stories also represent the sacralization of the Newton through quintessence (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Objects that possess the characteristic of quintessence have “a rare and mysterious capacity to be just exactly what they ought to be. The pleasure such things offer us is wonderful and illogical; it is very like the pure joy a child feels when he unexpectedly comes into the possession of something magically desirable” (Cornfeld and Edwards 1983, 2). Belk et al. (1989) and Cornfeld and Edwards (1983) note the many objects that have been cited as having quintessence. All are unique, with powerful images and histories. The Newton is also unique. By virtue of being a first mover in the PDA category, the Newton has design elements that were not included in subsequent market entrants. It is also an iconic brand (Holt 2004), particularly since it was originally produced by Apple. Moreover, since being abandoned by Apple, the Newton has moved away from the mainstream and “beyond mere commerce” (Belk et al. 1989, 23). It has achieved authenticity by virtue of being independent from the marketer and sustained by the user community. The mystique accorded to the product via this underground and unmarketed condition serves as a legitimizing principle by which many of the fantastic stories of the Newton community can be believed and the brand invested with powerful meanings. When a Newton is used to save the day by performing some task other PDAs cannot perform, it succeeds in having the magical quality of being exactly what the community thinks it should be.

## Survival Tales

In these stories, a Newton survives conditions that should have destroyed it. Consider the following, submitted with the subject heading “Testimony for the Newton”:

Over the past week, my Newton had a fun little trip. Here's the story (and the reason I haven't bought an iPaq). I was just getting out of work, Newton in hand and cell phone at my ear. I walked out to my car, and set the Newton 2000 on top of the roof, and apparently being distracted from the conversation on the phone, I left the Newton 2000 on the roof of the car. We traveled nearly 7 miles with the Newton sitting on the roof, its little feet gripping onto the car. Unfortunately, I took off really fast and the poor thing went flying off the roof onto the ground; a good 5 feet. In my rear view mirror, and to my horror, my Newton is flying all over the road. With the batteries and tray flying one way, the PC cards and lid the other way and the Newton just scraping across the ground, I almost died. I pulled over and ran back to the unit; I picked up all the pieces and attempted to put them back into the places they went. Surprisingly, everything

was okay. . . . [I] couldn't believe what I saw. The screen was perfect. The pen was active, and it recognized both cards in the slots. Mind you, the unit had just taken a 5 foot fall at nearly 40 mph. You show me one retail Pocket PC or Palm device that could do that. . . . Would I ever do it again? Hopefully not. But I'm sticking with this thing for life. It's almost like the Newton knew how important the stuff inside it was; It's still ticking! (David, newsgroup, January 2002)

This story is noteworthy for several reasons. The Newton is anthropomorphized, given human form ("its little feet gripping onto the car") and intentionality ("It's almost like the Newton knew how important the stuff inside it was"). The attribution of such characteristics to an inanimate object is consistent with the totemic practice of assigning "extraordinary virtues to insignificant objects" (Durkheim 1915/1965, 40). The Newton has taken on a life of its own and assumed the property of being indestructible. It has become a religious totem. Note how the subject heading for the posting suggests a religious revival, while the detail with which both the conditions endured and the owner's reactions are described border on melodramatic. The owner was truly amazed. Reactions to this story ranged from brief statements with supernatural overtones ("Nice story! The Newton Gods were watching over you") to lengthy stories of similar Newton experiences.

Stories like this allow the community to symbolically manage the risk associated with relying on an old and potentially obsolete device. Just as mushroom hunters use humor as a way of managing the risks of dying from eating poisonous mushrooms (Fine 1998), members of the Newton community use stories of survival to magically transcend the risk of the device failing. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) witnessed the ritualistic telling and retelling of brand consumption stories among members of the Saab brand community, in particular, stories noting the aircraft origins of Saab. Just as members of the Saab community share such stories to invest their cars with the properties of fighter jets, members of the Newton brand community tell Newton survival stories to invest their Newtons with the property of being indestructible. These stories then sacralize the Newtons of those reading the message via a mimetic health rite, the ritual association of ideas by contiguity (Durkheim 1915/1965). By sharing these stories, members are transmitting these indestructible properties from their own Newtons to those of the other members of the community. Community reactions to such stories lend support to this interpretation. The response is typically strong and sustained, as other members offer similar tales to testify to the veracity of the claims. Such testimonials also reinforce an important community behavioral expectation regarding reacting to such stories: share your affirmations.

### Tales of Miraculous Recovery

These narratives involve the recovery of data or functionality once thought lost. The most frequently occurring

concerns dead Newton batteries magically brought back to life. Newton batteries are a powerful metaphor for the survival of the device. When batteries stop working, it is a bad omen. They can be replaced, but it can be a complicated and expensive process. Consider the following story, posted under the heading "Another Battery Miracle":

The battery that came with the 2100 that I just received seemed dead. While I read the rest of the recent battery postings, my story is a little different. . . . I figured that the battery was fried and I have nothing to lose. While "charging," I unplugged the adapter until the indicator said it was running on batteries again, and then plugged it back in until it said "charging" . . . after a few times, the battery charge indicator started moving from the left to right and was full within 10 minutes! I thought something was fishy, so when it reported a full charge, I unplugged it and used the Newt for a few minutes until it ran out of power again. After a few cycles . . . it is still only taking 10 minutes to charge to full . . . but on the last charge, I've been using the Newt for about 4 hours straight without any problems. Strange. It looks like there has been yet another Newton battery miracle! :-) Keep the faith. (Henry, Listserv, February 2002)

The message is noteworthy because the member references numerous prior postings on batteries. This suggests an awareness of the importance of batteries to the community and recognition that there is a communal search for knowledge on this topic. The member attempts to add to this knowledge by contributing a different method. Second, the member makes an allusion to the magico-religious. The fact that it is "yet another Newton battery miracle" suggests a shared understanding of this category of miracle. His suggestion to "keep the faith" serves as an important reminder that things that go wrong with the Newton can be overcome. Several members who successfully used this approach to restore a dead battery replied with religious affirmations ("Yes, folks, it's Alive! Hallelujah, I believe!").

Once again, the role of magic in technological innovation and invention is evident (Arnould et al. 1999; Davis 1998). Narrative threads such as these contribute to the culture of innovation (Zien and Buckler 1997) necessary for this community to continue to produce new information. Members are sorting through alternative approaches that can be used to restore dead batteries, including those haphazardly discovered. Every time another user responds with support for such an approach, it is validated in the eyes of the community. By reinforcing such magico-religious interpretations ("Hallelujah, I believe"), members are given permission to believe that anything is possible with regard to the longevity of their Newtons.

Such regimented plugging in and unplugging represents the nascent form of a consumer ritual (Rook 1985), in this case a consumer healing ritual. This ritual is an example of what van Gennep (1960) called a direct rite, affecting the focal object "much like a curse or spell would" (8). The

Newton would be magically restored and revitalized at the hands of the user. If this behavior becomes fully ritualized, it will become a standard response for dealing with a dead Newton battery. Such behaviors also serve as a platform by which members can demonstrate their commitment to the device via sacrifice. After all, who but a true devotee would spend hours meticulously plugging in and unplugging their Newton in order to restore the battery? Durkheim (1915/1965) connected religious rituals to social order and the production of the basic building blocks of knowledge. Both are evident here. This ritual is developing new knowledge in response to a fundamental problem Newton owners face (restoring dead batteries) and is a way for members to assert their devotion to the brand and the community.

### Tales of Resurrection

Another recurring theme is that the Newton will one day return. This theme manifests in a wide variety of stories, including stories about aspects of the Newton technology and operating system that could be used in other products, calls for the community to create a new Newton on their own, and predictions of the reintroduction of the Newton by Apple. Of these, the most interesting and frequently occurring stories are those of the Newton's reintroduction by Apple. Most frequently these take the form of rumor, though speculative stories along the lines of "what if" are not uncommon. The rumors of the reintroduction of the Newton by Apple are a recurring narrative phenomenon within the community. The persistence of such rumors and the wide-ranging participation by members in these discussions suggest that they reflect a very important aspect of the community culture.

Community observation had been under way for 18 mo. when a rumor began circulating that Apple was going to reintroduce the Newton. Since we were in the field when this rumor broke, we were able to witness the entire cycle. This rumor generated considerable excitement and discussion. Lively debates in the two forums emerged as members debated the merits of the reintroduction possibility, the potential impact the reintroduction might have on current users, and the features that might be included on a new Newton. As a demonstration of the power of these discussions as well as our immersion in the community, both researchers were caught up in the mania and anxiously read all the messages while awaiting the announcement from Apple. It was during investigation of this rumor that the role of narrative in this community and the occurrence of magico-religious themes within these narratives became apparent.

A hopeful tone pervades these discussions as members look for reasons that they could be true. Consider the following message from a rumor discussion:

This would appear to be the next "Newton" that Apple promised back in early 1998 when they killed the whole product line after Jobs took his \$160 million in hush money from Sata, err . . . Gates. I was so pissed off at him for killing Newton (some of you may remember me as a heavy poster

in this group) that I swore he would never get another cent out of me. (Tom, newsgroup, January 2002)

The idea that another Newton had been promised by Steve Jobs when he discontinued the first one is a common belief. Such notions add credibility to the rumor and lend these discussions a second-coming motif. This motif is amplified by the way members deify the people thought to be most involved in the death of the Newton: Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. The second-coming motif is also evident when members reference the long wait and suffering they have endured. Most members firmly believe that they "deserve" a new Newton for the faith and commitment they have demonstrated. The absurdist theater of Samuel Beckett tells of the infinitely long wait for Godot (Beckett 1954). In a similar manner, members of the Newton brand community appear to wait in vain for the return of an indifferent creator.

During resurrection discussions, members can relate seemingly unrelated personal experiences and observations to the speculation. They can be quite skillful in finding support for the existence of a new Newton in unrelated events. For example, while discussing the evidence during the January 2002 reintroduction rumor, one member notes that he had seen a recent flood of cheap used Newtons on eBay in the past few weeks and suggests that this trend might be explained by people in the know selling off their old Newtons in anticipation of buying new ones. This piece of reasoning appears to resonate with other members, as it is noted in several subsequent messages. In the following, a poster submits his observation, incorporating the prior data on cheap Newtons on eBay with his own observation during a trip to Disneyland:

I dunno. I saw \*something\* at Disneyland out here in California. It wasn't a newton, and they usually used newtons for taking surveys and things. It was a color device with an apple logo. This was months ago. I know I should have kicked his ass and ran out of the park with the device, but going to jail is not one of my "cool" things to do on my weekends :). All I know is that there is something going on. What with all the spare newtons on ebay, (could be a sign that apple is about to drop some cool sh\*\*) it will make sense. (Mick, Listserv, January 2002)

A subsequent posting supports this observation by speculating on a close relationship between Apple and Disney, stemming from Disney allegedly using Apple technology to create such films as *A Bug's Life* (it was Steve Jobs's Pixar Corporation, not Apple, that did the animation for *A Bug's Life*). That members are able to tie what are ostensibly unrelated events to the likelihood of a new Newton introduction is important because it suggests the degree to which community members want to believe in such a possibility. Shepherd (1987) noted similar behavior among residents of a small town in Arkansas who desperately wanted to believe a religious prophecy concerning a miracle that was to take place in the town.

Not all members believe these rumors. More seasoned members chalk them up to wishful thinking and pointedly note that they have “seen it all, heard it all and read it all” before. However, even those who most stridently distrust these rumors admit that they would certainly buy a new Newton if the rumors somehow came true. As one informant stated:

Wishful thinking. . . . We keep hoping against hope that Apple will realize what it threw away, and come back to the market they created. The core of Newton greatness has long left Apple. I would be lying if I said I didn’t wish for an updated Newton (color, wireless connectivity, built in cellular, video, etc.) to somehow appear but I’m too much of a realist and have seen too many rumors over the last few years to put much stock in them. However, I would be the first in line to get one if they magically appeared. (Morty, male, 18, interview)

This member dismisses such rumors, while still revealing the ideal, magical outcome as preferable. Permission to believe in the possibility of reintroduction seems to be an important part of the community culture. A recent rumor outbreak ended with an amendment to the community FAQ concerning such rumors. Members of the community had noted the frequency of such rumors and suggested that an entry in the FAQ could go a long way toward dispelling them. However, the resulting entry is far from definitive:

I heard a rumor that Apple is making a new Newton. Is this true?

That’s very probably just a rumor based on the interest of Apple for Palm devices. (Newton Community FAQ, <http://www.chuma.org/newton/faq/>).

Even here, the desire to allow for the possibility that another Newton will get introduced is present. This entry allows some hope for the future of the Newton brand and community.

Given that religious and supernatural themes are pervasive in this community, it is not surprising that the community has created a return-of-the-creator myth. Such a doctrine is not uncommon among religious groups. It is important for members to believe that the essence of their object of devotion can live on. In the Newton community, it allows for hope that a device with the same characteristics and embodying the same values will reappear. This behavior is much like that displayed by “X-philes” (Kozinets 1997). Just as X-philes want to believe in the paranormal and UFO-filled world portrayed in the television series *The X-Files*, members of the Newton brand community want desperately to believe in the existence of a new Newton device despite the low likelihood of such an occurrence. The possibility that the Newton will be reincarnated is an important source of optimism. To collectively believe anything else would be a blow to the community, the brand, and the values they embody.

## The Newton Brand and Community Ethos

Brown et al. (2003) note that “brands can be considered complex stories [with] ‘morallegorical’ qualities” (30). That is, they can reflect deeper, symbolic, sometimes spiritual meanings. Members of the Newton brand community believe that in their consumption and perpetuation of the Newton they are making a bigger statement: they are challenging shortcomings in the markets for computers and PDAs. Such beliefs are a large part of the Newton brand experience. Members recognize that by continuing to use an abandoned (and, by category definitions, old) technology they are acting in a way that defies consumer and marketplace norms. Indeed, this violation is probably a source of the stigma and persecution they perceive. Members justify their defiance in pragmatic and symbolic terms. In a pragmatic sense, they see themselves as supporting the best choice for their needs. However, members also feel that by keeping the Newton viable, they are rejecting a system that caters to the lowest common denominator and perpetuates a short life cycle in the name of incremental innovation and planned obsolescence. They blame this system for the failure of the original Newton and see it as one reason it could never be reintroduced. It is in this stigmatized realm that members seem to experience what O’Guinn (1991, 108) called “martyrdom related satisfaction”—the enjoyment of suffering for the dramatic public statement it makes.

The following two quotes, taken from a discussion of the merits of old technologies, express many of these market defiant and individualistic sentiments:

The fact that I am using a Newton should tell you that I am not prepared to get ready for a future in which the new stuff doesn’t live up to the quality standards set by older stuff. I will continue to use the old stuff for as long as possible. (George, Listserv, January 2002)

Another user builds on this sentiment and adds:

I would have to disagree that a 128k is old and lame when compared to current Macs (or any other “modern” operating system). I would argue that the original Mac user interface is cleaner, easier to use, and quite frankly, minimalistically elegant compared to many current GUIs including OS X. Antiquity and lameness are really relative to the perceived (and original) function of the device. . . . Maybe I’m rambling, but I really object to any out of vogue technology being referred to as “old and lame.” That’s just bowing out to the overactive hype of the corporate marketing machine, the whole concept of the throw-away society, and the instant consumer-based economy. (Mark, Listserv, January 2002)

Mark’s comments imply an emancipatory aspect of using an older technology. Moreover, they do so via the context of the Newton brand community, from a position that is betwixt and between the market and idealized consumer communities (Brown et al. 2003). Recognizing and appre-



ciating the elegant simplicity of an older technology, particularly one sustained by a community in defiance of the marketer, offers him salvation from an imperfect market.

Microsoft (MS) is frequently seen as being emblematic of this market, its mentality, and its totalizing influence, much like it is in the Macintosh brand community (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). Those who use Microsoft products are seen as supporting this very flawed system. Consider the following, taken from a lengthy discussion of computers and operating systems:

In an interview Bill Gates said something like all Windoze users love their PCs and that there was nobody using a Windoze machine who didn't love it. ;-). (Carter, Listserv, February 2002)

Here, the user criticizes Microsoft and the consumers who passively accept what MS has to offer (hence the creative spelling of Windows to emphasize sleeping "Windoze"). Evident in the entire thread is the idea that being "happy to be using 'the same thing everyone else uses'" is tantamount to blindly following the herd. Newton users feel that they are above such behavior. Such sentiments are consistent with those reported among the emancipation-seeking participants of the Burning Man festival, in which typical consumers were conceptualized as "dehumanized, atomized dupes" (Kozinets 2002, 25). Such individualistic sentiments are also a prominent part of the larger cyberculture (Davis 1998) in which the Newton community exists.

Durkheim (1915/1965) felt that rituals renew collective beliefs and sentiments. This is what we are witnessing here. Through the invocation of magico-religious narratives and complex consumer sacralization rituals, this community is renewing and reinforcing beliefs about the brand, the relationship to the market it implies, and their support of it. As Durkheim notes, "the god of the clan, the totemic principle, can be nothing less than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem" (1915/1965, 206). In celebrating this brand as a totemic device, members of the Newton community are celebrating what the brand stands for. The magic and religious themes contained in these stories are intended to reflect a larger ideology that represents a stance, or even a gesture, to the market. The invocation of the religious and mythic themes in the Newton community is an attempt to frame, energize, and understand these emancipative yet stigmatized behaviors for members, as well as an attempt to legitimize them to outsiders.

## DISCUSSION

This research explores how an abandoned brand community operates after the brand on which it is centered is discontinued. The consumers of the forsaken Apple Newton brand are now charged with the responsibility for the entire brand-sustaining experience: modifying, repairing, and innovating the product; writing brand promotions; and per-

forming the brand experience. As part of this brand performance, they engage in consumer-to-consumer narrative interactions that bind the community together and reify its values and beliefs. Supernatural, religious, and magical motifs are common in these stories, including the miraculous performance and survival of the brand, as well as the return of the brand creator. We see traditional religious stories, players, and parts played out in the marketplace.

At one level, the Newton brand community is invoking these themes and motifs in order to perpetuate and revitalize a threatened brand and all the values it embodies. As such, our research reveals important properties of brand communities. At a deeper level, the invocation of these themes speaks to the communal nature of religion and the human need for community and religious affiliation. These communal consumers apply religious language, narrative, and philosophy to what is clearly a secular situation. The fact that they do this, and the fact that they do this so naturally, attests to the continued presence, vitality, and relevance of religious connections.

## The Nature of Brand Communities

The Newton was originally an Apple product. At the time of its introduction, the Newton shared the image and ideology of the Apple brand and the strength of its brand community. Belk and Tumbat (2002) demonstrated the power of the Apple community by characterizing it as a cult with countercultural overtones. The Newton, by extension, was thus born unto a strongly communal brand that stressed uniqueness and non-conformity, particularly with regard to dominant market values. A powerful, inventive, and vocal grassroots community coalesced around the Newton, partially as a result of the thriving Macintosh community. The Newton community lost this powerful source of vitality and ideology when it was cut off from the larger Macintosh community. Since then, it has come to resemble what Durkheim (1915/1965) called a cult in a disintegrated condition. It is an independent, consumer-created community that has grown away from the marketer that fostered it and now exists in a threatened state, with both the focal object of the community and the worldview it represents in danger of disappearing.

Cults in a disintegrated condition are eventually survived only by their folklore and rites. Thus, the strong storytelling orientation of this community is not surprising. Members are attempting to create a mythology or folklore for the brand (Holt 2004; Thompson 2004). To create this mythology, members are tapping into long-standing leitmotif and cultural scripts, primarily those of the magical, mythic and religious, or gnostic, which have long been associated with technology (Davis 1998; Noble 1999). Members of the Apple Newton brand community use these themes to revitalize the brand because it is how they understand the brand and the technology upon which it is based. Invoking these religious themes and motifs legitimizes these understandings, invests the brand with powerful meanings, and revitalizes it.

The community ethos underlying much of this revitalizing behavior is a reaction to what is perceived to be an unfair

market. McLuhan and Fiore (1968, 18) suggested “we are all robots when uncritically involved with our technologies.” Members of the Newton brand community feel that they are quite critical of the technologies they use and the market that produces them. By using this brand and sustaining it themselves, they firmly believe that they are challenging the “branding mill” (Holt 2002, 89) and distancing themselves from prevailing market logics. The fact that the Newton is an officially dead, marginalized brand facilitates the process as it lends authenticity and tension to the struggle. Giesler and Pohlmann’s (2004) Napster users relied on that file-trading system to contest the influence of large, corporate record labels on music. Thompson’s (2004) informants used natural health approaches and narratives to contest mainstream medical practices and labels. In a similar way, the members of the Newton community use their support of the brand and the stories surrounding it to contest the marketplace ideologies surrounding technology and emancipate themselves from the market.

Our findings reveal something about the nature of the types of brands that foster brand communities. Clear examples of brand communities have been found in cars (Bronco, Jeep, Saab, Volkswagen), computers (Macintosh, Newton), and even fantasy and science fiction (*Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *X-Files*). All of these brand communities have been demonstrated to be capable of producing transformative experiences in their consumers and all have traces of magic, religion, or the supernatural. Taken together with the current findings, these data suggest that a common aspect of brand communities could be the potential for transcendent and magico-religious experiences. The capacity for magic and mysticism may be one factor that attracts people to form communities around these brands, as well as the quality that facilitates the transformative, liberatory, and emancipatory aspects of consumption sometimes enacted in them.

### Consumption, Brands, and Religiosity

This research speaks to what Weber called the “disenchantment of the world” (Weber 1922/1978, 177). The actions of the Newton brand community may represent another way in which consumers attempt to reenchant their world to counter the rationalizing effects of modernity (Arnould et al. 1999; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Inglehart and Baker 2000). Through the telling and communal consumption of these stories, the Newton brand community is creating magico-religious myths about a technology that has a central and defining place in their lives. The fact that this behavior takes place in the context of a community centered on two of the icons of modernity—technology and brands—is also telling. It points to the inevitable intermingling of God and goods, emancipation from the ever accelerating rush of technological “progress” and the need to celebrate the traditional. It suggests that Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) were right in their assertion that brand communities are simply one way in which consumers in late capitalism seek and create meaningful connections and affiliations with one another as they

attempt to satisfy their yearning for a “remystified community” (Barber 1995, 161).

Religion endures because it offers things that humans still need. People need religious affiliation and all of the things that such affiliation provides. Over the course of the twentieth century, organized religion in the United States experienced periods of waxing and waning, but no single precipitous decline (Inglehart and Baker 2000). Instead, it has adapted to accommodate the context in which it operates. In the 1920s, U.S. Christianity became more scientific, only to become more fundamental in the 1930s (Marty 1991). More recently, it has become laissez-faire (Schulman 2001) and more openly commercial (McDannell 1995; O’Guinn and Belk 1989). Religion appears to be quite adaptable in a consumer-centered world; it responds to social, cultural, and market forces. It adapts, but it leaves its explanatory mythologies in all sorts of places, including the marketplace and brands.

Some of what humans find in religion is community. Humans will find community where they will. In a consumer culture, they will find it in brands, particularly in the lowly underdog brands, those that are marginalized, stigmatized, and left behind. The strongest brand communities to date have been in (somewhat) marginalized, low-share brands (Macintosh, Newton, Saab). In many of these communities, members desire the marginal status and endeavor to create definitions of legitimacy (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001) that can discourage new adopters. They like being the underdog and enjoy the martyrdom. This suggests that some of the same forces that drive many religions may drive the religiosity of brand communities. The religious spills over and contaminates the branded, and vice versa. Sometimes these forces meet in the form of people and their marginalized brands.

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