Mac Culture

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Introduction

Since its release in the mid-1980s, the Macintosh computer system and its creator, Apple, Inc., have maintained a group of diehard supporters whose dedication to the platform goes beyond simple fandom, but seems to exhibit almost cult-like characteristics. From the start, Apple's marketing has supported the dedication and perceptions of these followers; that Apple is the underdog and its users are unique and creative. Macintosh has surpassed the status as a product or a brand, but as a lifestyle and culture. Apple, through a highly successful marketing strategy, has used the methods of emotional and cultural branding to encourage people to use their products.

Background

A brief history of Apple, Inc. and the Macintosh

Apple was cofounded in 1976 and incorporated in January 1977 by Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak, and Mike Markkula (Baca, & Rizzo, 2008).

The first products of the company, the Apple I, II, and III, were met with moderate success. After the failure of 1983's Lisa, the Macintosh was released in early 1984—with a now infamous commercial aired during the Super Bowl—as a revolutionary, affordable personal computer.

After Jobs resigned in 1986, the company went through a decade of difficulty, with a series of failed CEOs and unsuccessful products. Jobs returned to the position of CEO in mid-1997 and has remained in that position since (Baca, & Rizzo, 2008).

With the return of Jobs, Apple entered a period of tremendous commercial and technological growth that continues to this day, with the release of the incredibly successful iPod, iPad, iTunes store, iMac, and MacBook series. The corporation is now

the top-valued technological company in the world, with a market value of over $290 billion, compared to Microsoft's $230 billion (Helft, & Vance, 2010).

The importance of Macintosh

At the time of the release of the Macintosh (Mac) in 1984, computers weren't very user-friendly. No mouse or desktop, just a keyboard and required knowledge of DOS commands--"another language...a very alien language" (Conan, 2004). The Mac, incredibly user-friendly, made the computer accessible to the average person.
In 1984, less than 10% of US households had a personal computer, but by 2003, over 60% of households had at least one computer at home (US Census Bureau, 2007).

The Mac was the first affordable personal computer to use a virtual desktop and mouse, thus making the system "far easier to use than any other system on the market" (Johnson, 1997). Dubbed "the computer for the rest of us," the system was designed "from the human interface out...what people needed and make it work that way," according to Jef Raskin, known as the father of the Mac (Conan, 2004).

A 1984 *Popular Mechanics* article describes the system as a great combination of "speed, power and almost unbelievable ease of use," then explains the simple task of using icons to save a document, noting that "you are now a Macintosh expert." It concludes with the advice "check out the Mac and see if it doesn't make computing fun" (Shapiro, 1984).

The product went on to be a tremendous success, and its desktop the standard on which computer platforms are based to this day. Personal computers, and the Internet by extension, have transformed the way modern society communicates, works, and

runs, both individually and in the world as a whole. The ease-of-use and affordability of the Mac paved the way for this transformation.

Branding – Lifestyle vs product

In her book *No Logo,* Naomi Klein describes the idea of "lifestyle branding," or the selling of an idea or lifestyle--"something way more profound"-- rather than a product. Companies stopped trying to market "the product itself but...what consumers were thinking and experiencing while they were consuming the product," (Jhally, & Alper, 2003).

Marketers determined that by marketing a brand as an idea, they would transcend the product. Users who want to associate themselves with an idea--such as individuality or uniqueness--will purchase that brand's products.

Apple's products have become associated with non-conformity and artistry. Its users pride themselves on their supposed unique, anti-commercial behavior. The quality of Apple products has become less important to these users because of this idea as uniqueness being associated with use of Apple products.

Emotional branding and brand loyalty

Heath, Brandt, and Nairn (2006) conducted a study on brand relationships determined that advertisements that place an emphasis on emotional advertising are more effective than those that rely on logic:

> Certainly it seems to be the case that those who want their advertising to build strong relationships between the consumer and the brand would be well advised to focus more attention on the emotional

> metacommunication--the creativity--in their advertisements, than they do on the rational message communication. (p. 416)

A 2005 study on brand parity, or "the overall perception held by the consumer that the differences between the major brand alternatives in a product category are small" (Iyer, & Muncy, 2005, p. 222), determined that a company needs to emphasize any perceived differences--a perceived superiority--between two competing products in a category to develop a brand loyalty for that company. Additionally, if a customer is satisfied with his product and the perceived brand parity is low (that is, his product is superior), that satisfaction is attributed to the brand rather than the product.

Iyer and Muncy (2005) advise that:

> Firms must find ways to develop unique product attributes and/or help buyers understand why all product choices are not alike. In either case, a strong advertising campaign may be needed to battle brand parity before building loyalty. (p. 226)

Emotional branding and low perceived parity both lead to brand loyalty, which has numerous benefits.

First, loyal customers may be more willing to pay higher prices for a brand's product because of a perceived superiority of quality of that brand.

Loyal customers of a brand may purchase products from the brand in a greater quantity, or "may like using the brand or identify with its image" (Chaudhuri, & Holbrook, 2001). Marketing benefits include more new customers, "favorable word of mouth, and greater resistance among loyal consumers to competitive strategies" (Chaudhuri, & Holbrook, 2001).

Apple's marketing strategy has used the tactics of emotional branding and brand parity shifts to create brand loyalty among its users, which will be discussed in greater detail later.

Brand Communities

A brand community is characterized as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationship among admirers of a brand," (Muniz, & O'Guinn, 2001, 412). Members of brand communities feel connections both toward the brand and toward each other--a "consciousness of kind" (Muniz, & O'Guinn, 2001, 418). Users share their stories with other community members and encourage expansion to other members of the community-at-large (Muniz, & O'Guinn, 2001).

Apple is seen as a prototypical brand community both because of the strong connection and awareness its members have, but because of the "oppositional loyalty" they share towards Microsoft and PCs--members are connected not only by their love of Apple but by their hatred of Microsoft.

Apple, Inc's advertising

Apple marketing and evangelism

Apple has had longstanding recognition as a very successfully-marketed company and product line. A 2010 Pew Research Center study found that Apple was the top-reported tech company, with 15.1% of all technology-related articles published by mainstream sources focused on the company.

But very little of the talk comes from the company itself; Apple is notoriously secretive, with big releases of new products and information coming during company-sponsored MacWorld Expos, led primarily by the enigmatic CEO Steve Jobs.

Early marketers of Apple products were known as evangelists. Guy Kawasaki, hired by Apple in the mid-1980s, developed the strategy of corporate evangelism, which he describes as using "ferver, zeal, and anything else to convince software developers to create Macintosh products" (Levy, 2000, p. 162).

Kawasaki (1990) describes the process of evangelism:

> When you sell your product, people use it. When you evangelize people, they get infected, carry the torch for you, share your heartbeat, and defend you against your enemies. When you look in their eyes, you see your logo. (p.99)

This idea of Mac evangelism has continued and spread. Diehard Mac fans do indeed "defend" Mac against its perceived enemies: Microsoft and IBM in particular.

Apple advertisements

Apple has been lauded for its unique and effective advertising campaigns, from its "1984" Mac introduction commercial to its most recent "Get a Mac" ads.

Apple's *1984* ad, originally aired to 96 million viewers during the Super Bowl, used the idea of a dystopian society demonstrated in George Orwell's *1984*. The ad shows mindless drones listening to and following a Big Brother character as a woman dressed in orange shorts and a tee-shirt with a Mac logo breaks in, destroys the projection of the leader, and "showers" the followers with the idea of Macintosh. A

voiceover concludes the commercial with "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like *1984*."

Ted Friedman (2005) explains the idea behind this ad:

> It turned the confusing complexity of the Information Age...into a battle of good versus evil. There's the bad technology – centralized, authoritarian – which crushes the human spirit and controls people's minds. Read, IBM. But we can be liberated from that bad technology by the good technology – independent, individualized – of the Mac. (ch. 5)

The ad used a "pronounced countercultural tone," to denote a "shift from engineering to artistry" (Johnson, 1997), and has been regarded as one of the top commercials of all time, and marks the consistent idea of Mac users being individuals and part of a counterculture.

The late 1990s saw the return of Steve Jobs, excellent marketing, and the "Think Different" campaign, which took images and videos of famous revolutionaries--including Albert Einstein, Bob Dylan, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lennon (with Yoko Ono), Mahatma Gandhi, Amelia Earhart, Alfred Hitchcock, Martha Graham, Jim Henson (with Kermit the Frog), Frank Lloyd Wright and Pablo Picasso--and placed them in conjunction with the phrase "Think Different" and Apple logo, thus implying that those revolutionary figures would have used Mac computers, or conversely, that one could become a revolutionary by using a Mac computer.

The commercial combined the images with a free-verse poem, "Here's to the Crazy Ones," read by Richard dreyfuss:

> Here's to the crazy ones. The rebels. The troublemakers. The ones who see things differently. While some may see them as the crazy ones, we see

> genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.

The most recent set of Apple ads, the "Get a Mac" campaign, ran from mid 2006 to late 2009. The campaign was the most overtly anti-PC Apple campaign to date, using personified characters of the "Mac" and "PC" (who we are led to assume is Microsoft) and making comparisons between the two operating systems. The Mac is seen as a young, hip guy and the PC as an old, stodgy businessman. The ads have the two characters acting out a brief vignette discussing and comparing the attributes of Macs and Microsoft PCs--or pointing out the flaws of PC systems and strengths of Mac computers.

Throughout its history, Apple has continued the use of brand parity shifts and emotional branding to both strengthen the dedication of its followers and encourage new followers to the products, a task made much easier by both increased sales and by product placement.

Product placement

Apple has seen a tremendous amount of product placement in the media, reportedly with little or no financial prompting from the company. From the world-saving computer virus in *Independence Day* to Carrie Bradshaw's electronic diary in *Sex and the City*, to the style of Eve in Pixar's WALL-E, the Apple logo and influence can be spotted everywhere. This is essentially free advertising for the company. In a 2004 radio interview, Steven Levy describes the cause and effect of Apple product placements:

> It's two things. First of all, Apple has for a long time had people whose job it is to make sure that you see a lot of Macintoshes in those TV shows, and

> there is a conscious attempt to seed producers in Hollywood studios with those. It's my impression that generally that they don't pay for the product placement, but the people are happy to have Macintoshes. They like Apple as a company, and they connect with the creativity, so it's a relationship that both sides are pretty happy with. (Conan, 2004)

Consumers see Apple as a cool product used by famous characters in media—from television and music, to movies and books—and decide to purchase an Apple product to be cool as well. As Apple defines itself as a cool, hip product, set directors will want to use Apple products to portray a character or scene as coinciding with the young, cool idea Apple implies.

What the advertisements sell

From the first advertisements of the Macintosh in 1984, Apple has used the ideas of individuality and uniqueness to market their products.

Steven Johnson (1997) describes the lifestyle branding of the Mac:

> The first interface wars were basically cultural in nature, more about "lifestyle choices" than anything else. PCs, with their arcane codes and hideous green-on-black monitors, belonged to the suits, to Organization Man. The Mac's playful interface spoke to a different demographic: jazzier, creative types, new thinkers and iconoclasts. Buying a Mac was an expression of individual identity, like Steve Jobs wearing t-shirts to board meetings. (p. 51)

Naomi Klein (Jhally, & Alper, 2003) describes one of Apple's marketing strategies:

> Apple has used revolutionary icons like Martin Luther King and Gandhi after their deaths, long after their deaths, as pitchmen for Apple. Because allegedly the Apple brand stands for doing things differently and these men did things differently.
>
> *" Because it is the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do."* (8:45-9:14)

The Get a Mac ad campaign uses the idea of lifestyle branding as well as the parity strategy. The Mac is seen as young and stylish compared to the older, uncool PC, thus implying that a Mac is a stylish, slightly aloof computer for stylish, slightly aloof users. Additionally, the supposed downfalls of Apple's primary competition, the PC (and Microsoft), are highlighted, reducing product parity and encouraging users to purchase the claimed higher-quality Mac systems.

Earlier Mac ads use emotional branding of ideas—the idea that a person will be perceived as more creative and unique if he uses an Apple product. These ideas have created and perpetuated the idea of a supposed Mac lifestyle.

The Mac lifestyle

What is the Mac lifestyle?

A 2008 Mindset Media study found that Mac users tend to be “more liberal, less modest, and more assured of their own superiority than the population at large,” and that those who consider themselves “highly open-minded are 60 percent more likely than people in the general population to have purchased a Mac” (Block, 2008). Mac users also tend to be more eco-minded.

The idea of the typical Mac user is demonstrated with Justin Long's character of the Mac in the "Get a Mac" ads. Long is young, casual, and creative. He refers to his photos, videos, music, blogs and other creative projects.

Further, past Apple ads suggest that a Mac user is a non-conformist. He is unique and willing to try something new or unusual. He is creative or artistic. He is revolutionary and a free-thinker.

Mac users revel in the idea of Apple as "outlaws, anti-corporate, and rebellious spirits," (Belk, & Tumbat, 2005).

How Apple furthers the lifestyle idea

The idea of the Mac user as a non-conformist and an artist began with the "1984" ad and has been reinforced in subsequent advertising campaigns; both "Think Different" and "Get a Mac" support the theme. Users who consider themselves non-conformists have always gravitated towards the products, and Apple has wisely responded to that idea by continuing and fostering the artistic community with their advertising campaigns and aesthetically-pleasing, minimalist products.

Even Steve Jobs, Apple's CEO, can be seen as a typical Mac user. Consistently seen in a black tee-shirt and jeans, he is seen as a casual, cool technophile in comparison to Bill Gates, his nerdier Microsoft counterpart.

The Mac cult

Dedication to Apple

In a 2004 episode of "Talk of the Nation", Steven Levy describes the nature of the Mac audience as "generally fanatical about their computer and they're more likely to be

thinking of it as a relationship than with people who use the tool called the PC," adding that the decision to get a Mac is one users "make with their hearts." Lance Ulanoff adds that "Mac users have an emotional attachment to their hardware that PC users do not," (Conan, 2004). Many diehard Apple fans, some from the early days of Mac in the 1980s and some more recent, come for the brand's sense of community and anti-corporate idealism.

The Mac community

Early Mac users relied heavily on the idea of community, built on the hope of discovering a powerful tool together (Shely, 2009). Mac User Groups (or MUGs) met to discuss the system and collaborate to create software. This community of diehard fans is what held the company together in the 1990s when it seemed doomed to fail, at a time where Mac users were seen as a "revolutionary force, fighting against the empire," (Shely, 2009, 14:14). One Mac user describes her return to Apple after a decade using Microsoft products by saying she'd come home--come home to a community of Apple fanatics, of people like her (Shely, 2009, 34:45).

Apple has used the early community to its advantage and is built largely around that idea of a community, using emotions to strengthen the bond between the company and its users. "Apple's design is people driven," says Marc Gobe (Kahney, 2004). Apple products have always been designed to be user-friendly and cater to the needs of the user. Numerous Apple users cite the "instant friends" gained by recognizing fellow Apple users--that they seem to have something tremendous in common simply by using the same operating system. Apple users feel a sense of camaraderie and community

within its product base. However, early adopters are concerned that "it's become more of a brand and less than a community," (Shely, 2009, 45:20).

Steve Jobs

One Mac fan proclaims that "only Steve knows. Only Steve knows what we want." Another says that "Steve is Apple." (Shely, 2009) This Steve is, of course, cofounder Steve Jobs. Jobs is seen as the mastermind of Apple and its products, and the success of the company is dependent on Jobs. Many feel that "Steve Jobs is their best friend" who makes products "just for them," (Shely, 2009, 19:40). Steve is seen as more than a company head, but as a supposed friend and colleague who has the best interest of his users at heart.

Mac as religion

The fanaticism many fans have towards the Mac has often been compared to a religious belief.

Belk and Tumbat (2005) draw the Mac community into the idea of a religion:

> This religion is based on an origin myth for Apple Computer, heroic and savior legends surrounding its co-founder and current CEO Steve Jobs, the devout faith of its follower congregation, their belief in the righteousness of the Macintosh, the existence of one or more Satanic opponents, Mac believers proselytizing and converting non-believers, and the hope among cult members that salvation can be achieved by transcending corporate capitalism. (pp. 207-208)

Belk and Tumbat note the Apple logo—an apple with a bite taken out—and its comparison to the creation myth of Christianity with Adam and Eve and the partaking of the fruit.

Steve Jobs, cofounder and CEO of Apple, is perceived as an almost deity, using the classic heroic myth to draw this comparison:

1. *The call to adventure*, or the beginnings of Jobs' interest in computers.
2. *A helper*, or cofounder Steve Wozniak.
3. A *wonderous journey*, or the founding and early success of Apple.
4. *Trials*, or the flops of Apple III and Lisa and the competition with IBM and Windows.
5. *More helpers*; early Apple employees.
6. *Apotheosis*; Jobs' rise to become a legend in the computer world.
7. *Flight*; Jobs leaving Apple in the mid-1980s.
8. *Resurrection*; Jobs' return to his position as CEO in 1997.
9. *The boon that restores the world*; the subsequent success of Apple.

Microsoft, its founder Bill Gates, and IBM are seen as Satanic opponents for Mac followers, as the personification of the Big Brother figure and company in the "1984" ad, therefore as the "evil" corporations and Gates as the "antichrist" to Jobs' "Christ" (Belk, & Tumbat, 2005, pp. 207-210).

Further, the previously-mentioned idea of evangelism comes into play. Mac followers--those who are believed to have chosen the correct path--have a desire to convert the masses to the way of the Mac. Mac users believe they can reach salvation by "transcending corporate capitalism," a goal they believe is being sought by Apple:

> Unlike arch-rival Microsoft, members of the cult of Macintosh believe that Apple is not so much motivated by the desire to make money as it is by the desire to bring about the hierophany of offering the world truly "neat stuff." (Belk, & Tumbat, 2005, pp. 212-213)

Another important aspect of the idea of Mac as religion is the community-like nature of religions in general and of the Mac "religion" in particular. Mac users congregate in MUGs--church meetings for Mac users. Mac users are able to find companionship with the simple notion of having the same computer preference. This product community is deemed important by many of its users, which strengthens the dedication--and beliefs--of its users, much like a sense of community with a religion strengthens faith in that religion.

Mac as underdog?

Throughout the 1990s, Apple was near extinction; perceived as the serious underdog. However, the market share for Mac computers is steadily growing and Apple's net worth has passed that of Microsoft. The question arises: is Mac still the "underdog"? The non-conformist? The revolutionary?

Apple dominates the mp3 and music downloading market with the iPod—which has almost become synonymous with mp3 player--and has a great share in the smart phone market with the iPhone. The imagery of white earbuds and the white Apple logo are seen as status symbols. The small, dedicated group of Mac users has become huge.

Yet the idea of Mac users as young revolutionaries remains. As time passes and the prototypical Apple user ages, will the Mac computer and Apple be seen as the "norm"? Will Apple continue to flourish in the future under this idea of non-conformity?

Or will the eventual inevitable end of Steve Jobs' reign as CEO and idea-man for Apple end the technological dominance the company has in the market?

Conclusion

Apple, Inc, and the Macintosh have developed a group of followers who have formed an emotional bond with the company and with each other, creating a brand community. Apple has helped further this emotional bond by using clever marketing techniques to foster admiration of the brand and animosity towards its chief competition (Microsoft). This brand community has extended beyond a simple following, but to something that resembles a cult or even a religion.

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