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Consuming online communities : computer operating systems, identity and resistance

Gregory C. Stratton
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Consuming Online Communities: computer operating systems, identity and resistance

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

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ABSTRACT

A defining feature of the modern era of computer technologies has been a massive reliance upon the mass consumption of personal operating system software. Currently three products dominate how the world experiences computer operating system – Microsoft's Windows, Apple's Mac, and Linux. The near monopoly held by Windows has been a crucial enabler of the ICT revolution, while the small but significant markets held by Mac and Linux provide alternatives to Windows monoculture.

Aside from their technical differences each offers distinct examples of modern-day branding, with individuals forming communities in which members signify their allegiance with these products. This thesis presents these individuals as User-Fans – those who develop an affinity with the mundane products of modern culture. Adapted from the fan models forwarded by Thorne and Bruner (2006), and Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999), it is proposed that User-Fans are an acknowledgement of the extremes of devotion displayed by modern consumerism while also conveying an acceptance that consumerism is a form of discourse where strong allegiances can exist.

Central to this thesis is the idea that brand communities exist as a consumer response to the emerging influence of the consumer society. Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) brand community theory provides an apt description of the behaviour and bonds exhibited by the consumers central to this study. In outlining the convergence of individual and communal 'worship' of brands,

the brand community concept is adopted as both a form of communal interaction and the outcome of consumer devotion.

The emergence of brand communities and User-Fandom reflects wider shifts in a society enveloped within the rhetoric of consumerism and the influence of the consumer society. Central to this is the manner in which the relationship between producers and consumers has evolved. In noting this relationship it becomes important to determine whether individuals are active agents within this system or if they are passive to the hegemonic forces that surround them. For the purpose of this research the consumer perspective was focused upon.

It is the description of these converging forces that stands as the major theoretical contribution of this study. In performing netnographic research on the postings of operating systems users on online forums, the research identifies distinct forms of social interaction and consumer-product relationships. The broad concepts of community, identity, the consumer society and resistance have been brought together to establish a framework in an attempt to explain the sociality within this context. The analysis of the forums through the theoretical grounding allow for the concepts of brand communities, User-Fandom and resistance through consumerism to be explored.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

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GLOSSARY

Distribution:	Any version of operating system built upon the Linux kernel.
Flame:	An argument or hostile social interaction between individuals that occurs within an Internet forum.
FLOSS:	(Free, libre, or open source software) is software that is free of the norm of restrictive commercial licenses that allows users the rights to alter and distribute its code.
Handle:	The nickname or screen name of an individual in the context of an Internet forum.
Internet forum:	Is the online location for group discussion. It exists as a medium through which people create content, discuss specific topics of interest and participate in communal activity.
Kernel:	A kernel is the central component of the computer operating systems. It is a term used to describe the general similarities across the different versions of the Linux operating system.
L33t or 133t:	A derivative of elite that refers to the status and language of computer experts and enthusiasts.
Microserf:	The title of a Douglas Coupland novel. The term connotates the manner in which Microsoft controls the lives their employees and those who use their products.
Operating System:	Refers to the software that manages the functioning of a computer's hardware and allocation of its resources.
Post:	The message an individual submits online. Within forums a typical post will include the individual's details, their relationship to the community, the

message they wish to distribute, and a signature line.

Signature line:

Also termed a 'signature block'. Text that is automatically placed at the end of an e-mail message communication or forum post. For example, in the email form it is common for a signature line to consist of contact details.

Threads:

A collection of posts usually centred on a specific topic or theme often continued as a discussion between forum members.

Troll:

A troll is Internet slang for someone who provokes members within a forum by deliberately posting untoward, inflammatory or off-topic messages.

Unix:

Is a term describing computer operating systems of a particular architecture that is often developed by both commercial vendors and non-profit groups.

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Chapter One Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are often discussed in relation to their utilitarian function of assisting the creation, storage, exchange and dissemination of information (Roberts, 2000, p. 429). Acknowledging this Malone et. al. (1987, p. 488) propose the communication effect – whereby advances in ICT ensure that greater amounts of information will “be communicated in the same amount of time” and dramatically decreasing the costs of communication. In sustaining this effect, ICTs have been central in the creation and mediation of global networks of capital, production, and sociality (Castells 1996). Castells (1996) defines the results as the *network society*, one in which institutions, markets, social groups and identities are shaped through information networks. A consequence of the network society’s emphasis on global markets has seen the convergence of forces prompting consumerism as a repository of social and symbolic meanings which encompass individual identity and community formation.

In identifying the convergence of these arenas, one is presented with ample opportunity to study specific forms of consumer-based social interaction. One such example is the emergence of *brand communities* which exist as the intersection of ICTs, consumerism and community. As modern collectives they can be defined as networks of specialised, non-geographically defined, communities of brand admirers (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). As communities, they are facilitated by the fact that consumerism thrives in most parts of the world and ICTs aid in quelling potentially alienating devotion. The modern computer operating system - which is a focus of this thesis - is one product where *brand communities* have been discovered.

Until this point, the world of computing has relied upon operating system software. However, the importance of operating system software has been overlooked in an era where the study of networks, internet technologies and

online communications have been proclaimed as the tools which have enabled the steady growth of the global society. As the most fundamental component of computing, it is the operating system that allows for standard communication and operation throughout the world. As a fundamental software program, the operating system is responsible for the management, coordination and allocation of the computer's resources. While providing the resources to applications such as word processing and database software, operating systems also offer users a gateway to the online world, in particular the Internet. While a lack of utility beyond these primary functions, may see them generally overlooked as an important product in the modern consumer society the consumer choice in operating system has differentiated aspects of the computer experience depending on the brand of software used. Against the backdrop of constant innovation and emerging technologies, the sustained user-base of Microsoft's Windows operating system has been one of the most successful business stories of the last twenty-five years. Competing with this product has been a great many operating systems, of which Apple's Mac OS and various versions of Linux have garnered the greatest support.

As cultural artefacts of the consumer society, operating system softwares enter the social world as symbols that may be appropriated for purposes beyond their utilitarian value as software. When appropriated by consumers these products contain symbolic importance in the formation of identity and community. When modelled as symbols of identity they express to society an individual's preference and cultural assumptions while also confirming aspects of the individual's identity. In formation of communities, the expression of individual modes of consumption may represent cultural similarities or differences that are employed for the creation of community-like formations. For some, operating systems represent symbols of resistance or, particularly in the case of Windows, the status quo. Whichever manner they are employed the operating system can be as symbolically important as any consumer product. It is in this sense that Bourdieu (1984, p.

7) noted cultural consumption is “predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences”

There currently exists a significant gap in the study of operating systems and sociological understandings of their relationship to community, identity, consumption and resistance. Despite the oversight there exists thriving communities who have developed a devotion to their distinctive software and these influences. It is within these communities that communal experience intersects with consumerist desires. Considering this junction of cultural forces, the concept of brand communities – communities founded on the devotion to branded consumer products – and the consumer society become fundamental conceptual platforms from which to investigate these social phenomena.

Aside from the emergence and integration of ICTs through all facets of life, another concurrent, persuasive force has been rapidly developing. Both these forces align with the concept of modernity whereby we, as a society, facilitate such overwhelming change. One of them has been the similarly adaptive consumer marketplace that seems to dominate our senses. Sight, sound, taste, smell and touch are all seduced in an effort to encourage our participation through the marketplace. While succumbing to or simply involving ourselves in these markets, we become participants in one of modern culture’s defining acts – consumerism.

Consumerism entails a range of activities whereby individuals participate in marketplace activity whereby the market reciprocates individuals with goods through the act of exchange. This could be the extravagant or conspicuous consumption of purchasing a Rolls Royce. Similarly it could be the ritual of drinking champagne or sparkling wine at a wedding. It is in this sense that consumerism can fulfil not only basic needs, but also can address experiential and social requirements. In understanding that modernity’s technology and the market’s consumerism have become pillars through

which society is influenced, one can understand how computer operating systems provide an avenue through which consumers merge products with social spaces in which participants can interact through their common use of a particular operating system. This link between software and community is a logical continuation of social interaction through market consumption.

The dominance of the market and modern capitalism has encouraged the disintegration of barriers between the individual, the collective and the marketplace. As such the notion of resistance has also become associated with the marketplace. Where resistance to certain aspects of capitalism were once alternatives to the system itself, it has emerged that resistance now occurs within market economies by employing market-based resources. Both in the domain of the operating system market and communities the spectre of market dominance is no less discrete than in other aspects of life. However, unlike some markets where product diversity and 'difference' are non-existent, there exist three vastly different options for the individual to choose from, all of which offer the potential extremes of community and product positioning. The market leader, Microsoft Corporation's Windows, stands as the dominant platform. Apple Corporation's Mac OS stands as a market competitor but also the alternative or resistant product. Lastly, the Open-Source Linux platform offers a perspective from which it stands as a niche player and an often resistive community positioned against the norms of economic and cultural dominance.

Methodology

This research aims to analyse the symbolic significance of brands, market goods, and sociality that consumers establish through their preferred operating system. Thus, it was felt appropriate that a qualitative methodology was employed. The qualitative approach has its sociological roots in symbolic interactionism. In studying online communities, researchers are open to a range of interpretive positions as the interaction within online

communities exists only as symbols ready to be interpreted by a community. This sentiment emerges from Blumer's (1969, p. 79) argument that meaning "is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society." In identifying that individuals 'define' each other's actions instead of merely reacting to them, this interpretive approach understands that individuals manage these meanings to constitute their social reality (Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1995). Finally, in accepting that "the personal and the structural are mediated through the process of communication" (Denzin, 1995, p. 46), this approach allows for culture, social structure and identity to be analysed through its symbolic representation in text and language. For the purpose of continuity I will now present my research methodology through these guidelines.

Although in a broad sense such a study could incorporate all consumers of operating systems, clearly the most fertile arena in which the study of operating system sociality occurs is amongst the dedicated online communities. For this reason the qualitative research method *netnography* was chosen. An adaptation of traditional ethnographic research, netnography encompasses many of the techniques of its traditional counterpart but varies in accordance to the field of study. Offering an increased opportunity for the researcher to analyse an arena where readily available communities and subcultures already exist, netnography enables the study of meanings and symbols they transmit (Kozinets, 1998, 1999). In obtaining this publicly available material, data can be collected in a manner that is faster and less intrusive than traditional ethnographic methods.

Presenting his netnographic method, Kozinets establishes a set of procedures as to follow similar traditional ethnographic guidelines. These procedures include (1) making cultural entrée (2) gathering and analysing data (3) conducting ethical research, and (4) providing opportunities for cultural member feedback (Kozinets, 2002b).

In making a cultural entrée, Kozinets refers to the identification of the research aims and the online arena to be studied. This study intends to investigate the impact of consumerism, information technology and operating systems. In light of this, the research questions chosen for this study reflect the fact that operating systems have established user communities surrounding them and that common assumptions, both in popular cultural and academic research, surround the behaviour of these products. As such, the study asks two fundamental questions. These are:

1. *Given the formation of online communities how are user-identities expressed in the form of brand communities?*
2. *Does the state of the global market system influence the formation of brand communities?*

With the online world constantly expanding, the modes of interaction most suitable to answering these research questions had to be appropriately delimited. A distinct period of study was defined with the commercial life span of the Windows XP operating system (released 2001 through to the launch of Vista in 2007) selected as an arbitrary but distinct period of study. It was also imperative that the online arena remained an active and popular interaction through the entire period of the study. For this reason, the advent of social networking (such as Facebook or Twitter) did not enter wider public consciousness until after the research process was well under way. In addition to this, according to ethical constraints, any source of data was required to be publicly available which nullified the potential use of many chat-rooms. For other reasons including accessibility, size of membership and personal preference, web-forums or boards were chosen as the medium through which the aims of the research were to be best realised. Forums also provide an asynchronous, topic specific, 'free' form of written communication that can often provide insight into community interaction. Kozinets (2006, p. 130) describes forums/boards as "distinct online communities organised around interest-specific electronic bulletin boards...

where people post messages, others reply and over time these messages (despite frequent digressions) form a reasonably coherent, traceable, asynchronous, conversation thread.” When examined in this manner, forums are the subject of a form of archival research. Although an obvious choice, forums still present barriers and difficulties requiring certain selection criteria for adequate study.

The selection criteria crucial to the study include accessibility, frequency, specificity and size. Accessibility refers to the ability for any interested party (user, fan, or researcher) to access the forum. To address accessibility the world’s most popular search engine (Google) was employed as a measuring tool. Defining accessibility through Google rank not only identifies the most popular websites but also the most readily available to potential community members. As such, these are popular forums, but ones that may not represent the entire range of brand community populations. Another, limitation of this method is that potential sites of research are defined by the search terms but this is offset by the opportunities it provides.

To alleviate these concerns selection criteria were set in place to limit the potential problems faced during the selection process. The criteria of frequency, specificity and size all relate to the ability of a forum to sustain a functioning community. Frequency refers to the regularity of posts made on the website. To address this, purposeful sampling was undertaken to ensure that the forums met criteria. Along with those already mentioned it was deemed important that at a minimum there were daily conversations taking place. Similar to frequency, size is an important criterion in determining the activity amongst a community. For this study a minimum of five hundred community members were required to be accepted under the criteria. This number was arbitrary but ensured that there was enough diversity of members to study. Specificity relates to the ‘first impression’ one receives from the forum. That is to say, it is clearly identifiable as an operating system

specific website. This is attained through URL (for example MaCNN.com) or page set-up information.

In order to expand the range of the study, each operating system was assigned two pre-existing public website forums, one 'technical' and one 'opinion'. 'Technical' forums refer to those that have been specifically designed to provide a community of users with help, how-to and advice regarding their specific operating system. 'Opinion' forums differ from the 'technical' insofar that they announce their intention to sustain for a multitude of topics. It must be highlighted that while both formats contain common aspects, the focus of each allows for a greater cross-section of the three operating system's users and their respective communities. Some of these forums are run by trade and magazine websites but their postings can be understood as free and openly available public conversations.

Despite being the most popular operating system, Microsoft Windows was surprisingly the most difficult of the operating systems to find forums that fit the selection criteria for this study. Part of the problem in finding these could be a result of the 'hijacking' of the term PC to mean Windows-computer. Following this, it may also be a reflection of its near-monopolistic presence that people do not discuss Windows in specific terms. However, in attempting to take this into account many of the PC or computing forums held a general interest in ICT rather than Windows specific issues. To avoid any confusion, forums such as these were excluded from the study because they represent more general populations. Instead only forums that express Windows allegiance were considered. The two forums fitting the criteria, *Neowin* (www.neowin.net/forum) and *WinXPcentral* (<http://www.winxpcentral.com/>) both adhered to this criterion. *Neowin* exists as a general Windows forum, whereas *WinXPcentral* features technical discussion of the operating system.

Neowin itself did not announce that it is Windows specific, but from its content and name (*win*) it becomes clear to any potential community members that Windows is its primary focus. In addition to its forums, *Neowin* is connected to a Windows news website that allows threads to relate to specific changes in product or circumstance. Members are assigned titles of rank in accordance to their importance or time spent within the community. These include: *Administrator*, *Supervisor*, *Public Relations*, *Global Moderator*, *Veteran* and *+Subscriber*.

The forum itself contained eight separate sections where users discuss topics specific to the operating system. These titles included *Customizing Windows*, *Windows Support* (technical), *General and Off Topic*, and *Neowin Related Discussion*. The area for *Customizing Windows* section contains posts (sometimes pictures) of members' customisations of Windows intended for the critique by and adulation of other members. The *General and Off Topic* focused entirely on Windows PCs and compatible software and hardware. The *Neowin* related discussion allowed for members' reactions towards other happenings on the entire *Neowin* website. The banner *Windows Support* also contained arenas of general discussion where members discuss specific interests and problems they have with their operating system.

Like *Neowin*, *WinXPCentral* was also an extension of a website but differed from *Neowin* in that the community's focus was almost entirely upon software problems, technical information and code. The *WinXPCentral* forum was similarly segmented with the self-explanatory headings of *Windows Registry Discussions*, *Windows Security Discussions*, *Windows operating system Discussions*, *Windows Software Discussions*, *Hardware and Driver Discussions*, and *Windows Programming Discussions*. Although designed as a 'guide' to Windows problems, there also exists a general software discussion area in the Windows Software Discussion. It must be noted that

this forum was the least active of all the forums in the study – and was dissolved in January 2010.

Although a distant second in the operating system market, Apple's Mac OS is the focus of a wide variety of web forums. This may be in part a reflection on user's devotion to the product but also may be a reflection on the cultural impact Apple has had with the iPod and its other products. The forums meeting the criteria for the Mac OS were *MaCNN* (<http://forums.macnn.com>) and *Mac Fix It* (www.macfixitforums.com). Like *Neowin*, *MaCNN* is an extension of a news website (hence the 'CNN') that addresses a broad array of specific operating system issues with more focus upon comment and community rather than troubleshooting and technical problems. Despite this, it remains an arena where members share information, knowledge, rumours, and their grievances with Mac OS. Segments of discussion included *Hardware*, *Software*, *Other Topics*, *Community* and *Archives*. Each forum member is granted a title within the community signifying their rank, including *addicted to Mac*, *veteran member*, and *senior member*.

As the name would suggest *Mac Fix It* was created as a technical and troubleshooting forum. Segments in the forums included *Mac OS X Troubleshooting*, *Multimedia Troubleshooting (Any OS)*, *Internet or Cross-Platform Troubleshooting (Any OS)*, *Mac OS Troubleshooting*, *Software Troubleshooting (Pre-OS X)* and *Discussions*. Although the *Multimedia Troubleshooting* and *Internet or Cross-Platform Troubleshooting* state they are for any operating systems postings, in both sections they are almost completely Mac oriented. Despite almost being solely a troubleshooting forum, the area titled *Discussions* was for other 'non-tech' discussions to take place, these are however almost exclusively Mac orientated. Just as in *MaCNN*, members are also ranked in importance or level of knowledge. These include *newbie*, *macwriter*, *macwizard* and *macguru*.

Unlike Windows and Mac OS, Linux is created and distributed by an array of different developers. This has led to a number of developers creating their own specific technical forums. These forums were not considered as they have a limited number and diversity of community members when compared to forums that focus on Linux as a whole and not brand specific distributions. This was only a minor obstacle in choosing forums for the study of Linux users as there were two clear options meeting the selection criteria. The forums selected were *Linux Forums* (www.linuxforums.org/forum) and *Linux Questions* (www.linuxquestions.org).

Linux Forums was a website that has been established with the sole purpose of being a forum site with no allegiances to magazines or other products. The first segment *Your Distro* illustrates the diversity amongst the forum community as it separated into individual distributions Linux (for example Redhat, Mandrake, Ubuntu) to discuss their operating systems. The other segments include titled *Linux Resources* (technical queries), *GNU Linux Zone* (Linux related discussions) and *The Community* (an area for non-Linux related general community interaction). Interestingly in the technical areas members are instructed not to post queries on which distribution is best to use. Other notices of this kind include *Linux is NOT Microsoft Windows, explained* and *asking good questions*. All of these postings seem to have intentions of limiting multiple and 'stupid' questions.

Similar to *Linux Forums*, *LinuxQuestions.org* was presented as a forum where Linux users across a range of experience from new adopters through to experts can offer advice or ask questions of the community. The forum homepage was divided into five specific areas. The first area titled *LinuxQuestions.org* was focused on the functional aspects of forum with news, suggestions and feedback provided to forum participants. Following this was a section titled *Linux* where Linux specific issues and questions were addressed. Within this section the subheadings focused on the area or

component of the Linux user's experience that encountered an issue. These included *Linux - Software*, *Linux - Hardware*, *Linux - Laptop and Handheld*, *Linux - Security* and *Linux - Networking*. Associated with this, but necessitating a separate section, was *Enterprise Linux*. Finally, the forum homepage contained separate areas for *Other Nix Forums* and *Non- *Nix Forums* (which contains a 'general' discussion area).

The procedure of gathering and analysing data aims to identify the means and manner through which the acts of communication are explained. For this study an *observational netnographic* approach was considered the most appropriate. Robert Kozinets (2006, p. 134) defines *observational netnography* as a form of netnography in which the researcher remains invisible to the internet community "almost as [if] hiding behind the primate anthropologist's traditional screen, the researcher remains present yet distant from the community and its interaction." However, Kozinets regards this form of research problematic because in his words the researcher has "fewer opportunities to learn about the community through lived complexity of actual interactions with the community" (Kozinets, 2006). In response to Kozinets's concerns, proponents of observational netnography Langer and Beckman (2005, p. 200) argue that research of this type should be the norm as it "enables the researcher in an unobtrusive and covert way to gain deeper insights into consumers' opinions, motives, worries and concerns."

By avoiding the additional interactions required in the Kozinets' methodology, this research purposefully avoids 'real world' engagement between researcher and the community. For one, it offers a participant observation of operating system communities as they stood during the period of research. In this sense, the research is not intended to be reflexive in the manner Kozinets proposes netnography to be, nor is it a thick description of this community. Instead, it aims for an independent study of online culture, community discourse and a theoretical development on new models of community.

By approaching the netnographic data with a *textual analysis*, the present study identifies the dominant subjects, ideas and sentiments community members express through the text which is the basis of their interactions. An open analysis enables the researcher to identify the dominant messages and signs expressed within a text. However, this freedom requires attentiveness and acuity on behalf of the researcher to contextually approach language rather than make generalisations or assumptions about the text.

This analysis adopted a grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which involved different stages of theoretical development. Charmaz (2001, p. 6396) notes the strength of this methodological approach, highlighting that it articulates:

- logical steps for handling data collection and analysis;
- a means of correcting errors and omissions and of refining analytic ideas;
- tools for studying basic social and social psychological processes in natural settings;
- and strategies for creating middle-range theories.

In the tradition of the constant comparative method, the texts (forums) were simultaneously collected and analysed for emergent themes through multiple readings. Based on the emersion required participant observation unpinning this study, online threads of text were explored and were selected based on an emerging typology from the data. A process of deductive coding was then implemented upon selected threads. These were then coded by hand, categorised and contextualised through further familiarity to establish threads of thought and topics. It is through this process that the open coding of threads was then concentrated with the selective coding of individual posts.

Hence, the research approach reflects an approach consistency with grounded theory where, based on these observations, researcher immersion a selective coding scheme was established which then led to the investigation of theoretical literature. Within this time, a constant effort of literature review, data collection, and analysis through constant comparative method culminated in data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Finally the results of this method saw a literature based theoretical model emerge to underpin this study (Glaser, 1992). To avoid the danger of theory attachment but also to promote theory testing, the forums were frequented over the course of the three-year collection period, daily within the first year, and thereafter on a periodical basis to assure quality of analysis.

The discussions within these forums are not intended as thick descriptions, instead they represent illustrations of the types of interactions I have observed, and affirm the theoretical development established throughout the thesis. By providing a 'thin' description of interaction this emergent description of events allows for the identification of community and how it is organised. Thus, the aim of the research methodology is to portray the forums and the individuals who inhabit them as an online space as a place influenced by modern consumerism and emergence of identity and community from this.

The process of coding these interactions was established through an open and emergent research design. Threads were explored and through a process of open coding were identified according to their typology (community interaction, consumer advice, and technical advice) and the level of engagement (demonstrated by the number of contributions to the thread). The open coding of threads during this period were supplemented with the development of concepts and research questions relative to the forums. Again, these were established with open-coding but specific displays by individuals would eventually be supplanted were selectively coded into four

core categories that emerged after the open coding of threads. A range of code categories emerged:

- Community – reference community through language, community attachment, communality, assistance to others, critique.
- Fandom – display of ownership (language), display of ownership (image), comment towards fellow member (+ pos; - neg), debate.
- Consumerism – choice, activity, new, consumption
- Resistance – discussion of ‘brand’ competitor, discussion of brand, cost, stability, design, and resistance.

During the period of initial coding, research into theoretical areas of interest began, with existing theories of brand community and resistance emerging as areas warranting research. The further emergence of unique fan-like behaviour led to the development of User-Fan theory.

The population of these forums was difficult to define. In one sense the research could define forum populations as all ‘signed up’ members. However, in doing so this sample would include temporary or ‘one-off’ members. An alternative would be to account for the members online at a particular interval. Again this is problematic in that the websites have peak and off-peak times. In response to this the community is to be defined as an asynchronous, fluid population of computer users. This is another reason for the qualitative analysis, as any attempt to quantify such populations is difficult due to the irregularities the medium encourages. In accounting for these problems, Kozinets (1999, p.254) suggests distinguishing between levels of community members. For this study this distinction will be clarified further in the chapter focusing on what I have deemed User-Fans.

As will be discussed later in more detail, the term User-Fan depicts the intersection between fandom and the seemingly mundane. My *User-Fan* framework has been primarily developed through the countless hours I have spent investigating the online communities created by Windows, Mac and Linux users in public online forums and analysing them using the fan models forwarded by Thomas and Bruner (2006), and Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999). The distinguishing features between these levels of fandom are the intensity of involvement, self-conceptualisation, motivation, and range of action.

As with any research, ethical challenges are presented to the Internet researcher in protecting the privacy of online participants (Markham & Baym, 2009). These issues are often based on the quandary of whether content is private (sensitive) or public (freely available). The specific source of debate for netnographic methodology concerns the active inclusion of community members within the research process. In response to this debate Kozinets (2002, p.65) presents four ethical guidelines for netnographic research. These include:

- the researcher should fully disclose his or her presence, affiliations, and intentions to online community members during any research;
- the researchers should ensure confidentiality and anonymity of informants;
- the researchers should seek and incorporate feedback from members of the online community being researched; and
- the researcher should take a cautious position on the private-versus-public medium issue.

Accordingly, Kozinets argues that this procedure requires the researcher to attempt to contact community members and obtain their permission

(informed consent) to use any specific postings that are to be directly quoted in the research.

However, for other researchers such as Langer and Berkman (2005), covert netnography does not cross any ethical boundaries. Contrasting Kozinets' self-defined extra cautious, 'high-road' ethical position, the counter argument treats the online community as a public journal, freely available for anyone to approach in any manner with consent assumed. In this sense the communities can be treated like letters to the editor within newspapers. For this research, the latter approach will be taken as it offers the greatest flexibility and an unobtrusive manner to studying the communities in a 'natural' state. However, confidentiality and anonymity for potentially sensitive data will be assured through name substitution in the form of pseudonyms, some of which are clearly already established by the users themselves. Furthermore, each forum accessed in the study required no registration to collect the data, further emphasising the open availability of this information.

To assure the ethical credentials of this research, the methods required for its completion were forwarded and subsequently passed by the Edith Cowan University (ECU) Ethics Committee. Under the committee's stipulations, the netnographic data collection was designated to take place between June 2005 and March 2007 but allowed for the retrospective investigation of data that was presented in the forums before this date to accommodate the product cycle of Windows XP. With a foundation in netnographic methodology and the additional approval of the ECU Ethics Committee the study has an established ethical foundation from which it can continue.

Finally, as this study employs a covert observational netnography, the provision of participant feedback – Kozinets' final procedure – was not relevant. This process has one potential drawback as it does not provide the research with an opportunity for participants to contextualise their activity.

Without their perceptions of these interactions there exists the possibility of the netnographic misinterpretation. However, this is tempered by the benefits of the covert method.

Background to operating systems

In accordance with the parameters established for this study, this historical account of all three operating systems only covered the period until the release of Windows Vista (January 2007). For this reason more recent advents related to the brands of operating systems are omitted from these discussions as they play no factor in shaping the User-Fan perceptions examined. These include advancements such as the public reception of Vista, the 'retirement' of Bill Gates, Steve Jobs' illness, the release of the iPhone and the increasing market-share held by both Mac and Linux.

Microsoft and Windows

The Microsoft Windows operating system has long been a domineering presence in the modern computing experience. By providing the necessary functions of an operating system, its market dominance has shaped how users view computers, software and to some extent technological innovation. By providing user access to the capabilities of the machine, a large portion of the world has only seen the computer through Windows. The company's omnipresence in the computer world has also extended beyond their original focus to where it now stands as one of the world's most recognizable corporate successes, and as such, is the focus of adoration (Antov, 1996) and detestation around the planet (Geer et al., 2003). Heilemann (2001, p. 3) highlights the success of Microsoft by claiming no corporation has ever, "attained such stature, power, or profitability in such a breathtakingly short span of time."

As an operating system, Windows XP was simply another step for a company which has increasingly dominated the computing landscape since its emergence in 1983 (Antov, 1996). From that point forth, the subsequent editions of Windows have altered the common perception of computers, and as a result, their use throughout the world. By 2002, Windows represented 94% of the consumer client operating system software sold in the United States, and its sales figures in the same year were comparable throughout the developed world (Geer et al., 2003).

Before the mass-adoption of Microsoft's Windows, debates and issues concerning speed, ease of use, and compatibility between computers and software fragmented the ICT industry (Ceruzzi, 2003). These factors all seemed to stall the wider acceptance of computers beyond large-scale business and small groups of hobbyists. While not the most powerful, graphically pleasing or application intensive systems, Microsoft's Windows and MS-DOS operating systems were adopted at a faster rate than any other software at the time, helping eliminate the problems of compatibility and interoperability between computer users whilst boosting Microsoft's power. An often-overlooked achievement of Microsoft by its critics has been the unification of software (or, as some cynical observers point out, the 'locking into' of software) into a standard compatible platform. In turn, there has also been much praise by many who have highlighted this success. For example, whilst discussing Microsoft's corporate achievement, Fukuyama (1999, p. 221) notes that Microsoft's success lay not in any technological or capability superiority but the software's "large, installed base (that) gave everyone an incentive to use it because they would be able to use and share more applications."

Today's installed base is the culmination of numerous innovative technical, marketing and business strategies, some of which altered the IT and computing landscape to where it stands today. The first of these was the regard the company, most notably Bill Gates, held towards the early hacker

culture. Gates was one of the first in that generation of backyard computer hobbyists who questioned the 'gift-culture' amongst enthusiasts. Angered at what he viewed as unsolicited and unpaid use of his programming, Gates took what, at the time, was an unusual stance. In what now is viewed as a part of computing folklore, Gates presented "*An Open Letter to Hobbyists*." The letter, specifically aimed at those within the hobbyist culture (including Apple founders Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak), called for the protection of program author's rights to profit from their creations. Gates also made the leap to label those who partake in the practice as thieves (Gates, 1976). This stance, while highlighting Gates' business savvy and intense drive for success, also marks the beginning of the Intellectual Property Age in computing and software - a stance that Linus Torvalds and the Linux operating system continue to resist.

Another innovation introduced by Microsoft which played to their favour was that, for a long time, it concentrated all its efforts on remaining solely a software company. Again in the early years of the computing revolution, the focus of many commercial entities was on both hardware and software, usually as a combined, all-in-one package. Microsoft took the then unorthodox approach of releasing a 'stand-alone' product that would become especially crucial as the company's MS-DOS and Windows operating system quickly became the standard (Ceruzzi, 2003). The ability to function across different hardware increased pressure on competitors, dissolving the market for most competing operating systems and forced hardware manufacturers to create computers that could run Microsoft's products. This meant the end for most of the all-in-one systems and in turn forced hardware manufactures to compete on the Microsoft platform, resulting in the birth of the 'Clone' PC. The evolution towards Microsoft compatible computers resulted in massive market gains for its products (MS-DOS and Windows), effectively ending real competition between operating systems.

A further contributor to Windows success were the numerous artificial disincentives established which restricted users from switching to different operating systems, thus creating “a high level of user-level lock-in” (Geer et al., 2003, p. 12). These disincentives evolved primarily due to the “inability of consumers to find alternatives to Microsoft products” because of the successful “tight integration between applications and operating systems” (Geer et al., 2003, p. 12). An example of this has been the close relationship between Windows and the Microsoft Office package. More recent occurrences include the bundling of Internet Explorer, Messenger and Outlook within the operating system package. This aspect of Microsoft’s market strategy has seen the company become the focus of numerous anti-competitive and anti-trust legal disputes. Yet, despite these problems, Windows continues to lead with a near monopoly of the operating system market.

A Microsoft operating system monopoly presents dangers that potentially affects the course of the economic, social and political spectrums beyond the realms of the ICT industry. The first danger is inherently a concern for the persuasiveness of modern market societies, in which competition is realised as the inherent requirement for a successful economy. Detailing the U.S. Statute of Monopolies, Nachbar (2005, p. 1371) argued that the original authors of the Statute were not only concerned with preventing economic problems, but also to avoid social displacement and to direct productive capacity for the good of the collective (to the exclusion of the individual). By allowing the creation and continuation of any monopoly (natural or not) these concerns are overlooked, consequently allowing for social displacement to occur and the individual good to benefit over the collective good (Nachbar, 2005). That is to say greater social and economic power can be potentially handed to Microsoft through its monopoly, which may not be in society’s best interest.

Further evidence of a monopoly's economic, social and political reach, can be examined through Microsoft's approach to Internet technologies and digital media formats. The first notable instance of this was the controversial battle with Netscape in the Internet browser market. With the boom in the Internet in the mid-1990s, Microsoft had seemingly missed an opportunity to expand its empire into an increasingly important segment of the ICT sector. The absence of established 'powers' like Microsoft or Apple allowed for a start-up to dominate the new market with the commercial release of Netscape Navigator 1.0 distributed on December 15, 1994. The Navigator web browser went on to capture more than 60% of the web-browser market after two months of its release and increasing to a peak market share around 85% (Yoffie & Cusumano, 1999). This success was accounted by Jim Barksdale in his direct testimony. He notes that "by the end of the second quarter of 1995, Netscape had collected over \$10 million in revenue generated by the browser alone. By the end of 1995, Netscape had collected approximately \$45 million in revenue from browsers" (Barksdale, 1998).

Microsoft, seemingly concerned with the increasing influence of a software competitor, took action. It is interesting to note that this concern was not necessarily in relation to a direct competitor but rather an emerging technology that potentially could supersede the importance of operating systems. According to Heilemann (2000, p. 6) Gates realized:

...that the browser was more than just another software application - it was potentially a rival platform that held out the possibility of turning Windows into a commodity, and, as Gates himself put it, an "all but irrelevant" commodity at that."

The most obvious of Microsoft's reactions was to bundle their Internet Explorer (IE) with their Windows operating system. This was a major step for the company, which had traditionally shipped a 'bare-bones' operating system influencing, and producing, further marketplace spending for application software. But more importantly, it illustrates the potential benefits of network effects and the lock-in Microsoft was able to obtain through the omnipresence of its operating system. It was famously labelled as Microsoft's

effort to “cut off Netscape's air supply” (Heilemann, 2000, p. 6). This saw the company accused of monopolistic practices. The U.S. courts found that “Microsoft early on recognized middleware as the Trojan horse that, once having, in effect, infiltrated the applications barrier, could enable rival operating systems to enter the market for Intel-compatible PC operating systems unimpeded. Simply put, middleware threatened to demolish Microsoft's coveted monopoly power” (*United States v. Microsoft Corp*, 2000). Jim Barksdale's testimony illustrated the impact of Microsoft's actions through the evidence that by October of 1998, Netscape's market share had dropped from the highs of 1995 to a significantly diminished market share between approximately 40% and 50% as Internet Explorer usage increased (Barksdale, 1998).

Without doubt Microsoft will be remembered as one of the late twentieth-century business success stories. One focus of this study is something many observers argue the company and software lacks. It is the intangible quality of customer devotion that the other operating system software revels in. Although the market leader by a great margin, Microsoft has not been able to gain the same levels of user evangelism that the competitors receive. In fact, it is arguably because of its market dominance that operating system producers have garnered such evangelistic fandom as part of hegemonic resistance. In exerting market dominance Microsoft displays the hallmarks of hegemonic power which engenders resistance cultures. By illustrating the history of Microsoft, one can see the symbolic significance of its power upon consumer attachment. This power is not only significant in the manner in which Microsoft's User-Fans appropriate it as a symbol of their relationship. It is also important in contextualising the history of Apple and Linux.

Apple and 'Mac'

Whilst Microsoft Windows may be the most recognisable and popular product in computing Apple is perhaps the most iconic. While Apple produces an operating system that competes with Windows (the current incarnation being Mac OSX), its iconism is not solely the result of its computer software. Ceruzzi (2003, p. 407) compares the company's success, noting that unlike Microsoft, "Apple is primarily a hardware company." However, he adds, "its software defines its identity as a company as much as, or more than, its hardware innovations, which are often quite advanced as well." Malone (1999, p. 71) highlights its improbability of its success claiming that it has occurred despite fitting "none of the modern investment templates." Through design (perhaps the result of previous errors) Apple has confined the use of their Mac OS to computers designed and sold by the company. These computers, known as 'Macs', have been some of the most stylised, reliable, and well designed computers since their inception. Apple founder and current CEO Steve Jobs (cited in Goodell, 2003b) highlights that the company has succeeded in these areas because its strengths lay in its industrial design, hardware and software design and its product integration. As Jobs highlights, the packaging together of software and hardware has separated 'Mac' from Microsoft and other operating systems.

Founded by two young high-school dropouts, Apple has played an important role in ICT for over thirty years, remaining one of the only remaining alternatives, and arguably strongest competitor to Microsoft. The first creation of the partnership between Jobs and Wozniak was their work for Atari with the game 'Breakout' (Wozniak & Smith, 2006). After this success, the two Steves expanded their expertise to include hardware along with software. Using the Altair computer as a design base, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak created the Apple I followed by the Apple II, the first successful personal computer in the marketplace (Castells, 1996, p. 44; Malone, 1999). In his study of the rise of Silicon Valley, Cringle (1992) identifies Apple as unique amongst computer and software developers, as they looked beyond making 'boxes' and profit, rather thinking of themselves as instigators in

changing the world, an important element that helped define the user-fan culture that developed around it.

Apple's most significant step, in regards to operating systems, was the release of their Macintosh computer system. Castells (1996, p. 44) views its launch in 1984 "as the first step towards user-friendly computing, with the introduction of icon based, user interface technology, originally developed by Xerox's Palo Alto Research Centre." Turkle (1997) notes the "introduction of the Macintosh's iconic style presented the public with simulations (icons of file folders, a trash can, a desktop) that did nothing to suggest how their underlying structure could be known. It seemed unavailable, visible only through its effects". Thus for those who used it, Apple 'Mac' was a step towards the WYSIWYG principle (What you see is what you get) most computer users now take for granted, a graphical interface hiding infinite lines of code offering ease of use for even the most novice users. This and subsequent innovations (such as hardware including the iMac and iPod; or in its software have continued the image of Apple as an innovator and alternative to Microsoft standard computing.

Although a traditional adversary of Microsoft, Apple never regained the market position in computer software or hardware it enjoyed during the 1980s. Apple claims 5% in the United States and 3% in the global market. Steve Jobs highlights that while Apple's market share seems to stay at around 3-5% (he says the same of BMW or Mercedes in the car industry) they remain desirable brands (Goodell, 2003a). He also notes that while it seems small, in the markets the company aims, in particular creative and design industries (a myth that will later be investigated), their market share shifts from between 10% to 60% (Goodell, 2003a).

Jobs has always claimed that the originality, design, and style that have made Apple iconic are central to the company's ethic. He also used this to criticise his main competition, Microsoft, claiming 'they' "have no taste...don't

think of original ideas and they don't bring much culture into their products" and "make really third-rate products" (cited in Malone, 1999, p. 557). This battle with Microsoft is something that seems to define Apple, and is an important aspect of its identity within the ICT sector. It is also an important aspect within this study.

It may seem that the timeline of competition between Microsoft and Apple has been a continuous battle, with both companies exchanging shots at each other for dominance in the computing world. This is true of Microsoft, whose continued rise is legend. Apple, on the other hand, has overcome numerous adversaries just to continue its existence, let alone remain a competitor in the field. The demise of Apple began in the early and mid-1990s and two factors behind this demise were Steve Jobs' withdrawal from the company and its change in focus from Mac computers and software to wider varieties of ICT products. A former chief technologist at Microsoft, Myhrovold (cited in Malone, 1999, p. 546), argued that at some point in the mid-1990s, Apple made this crucial mistake. He argued the problem during this era was that diverged from its 'core business' to focus on other projects (for example the Newton) and during this time its competitors "caught up". To this Myhrovold (cited in Malone, 1999, p. 546) claimed that Apple was dead.

The last decade, demonstrates that Myhrovold's prediction was incorrect and that the 'innovative' Apple would soon return. A major force behind this revitalisation of the company was the successful return of founder Steve Jobs. With Jobs back, Apple was able to survive this era of difficulty (ironically with a boost in funds from Microsoft), and by 1998 had re-established itself as an innovative company. The release of the uniquely designed iMac was a major instigator of this, and the subsequent releases in its Mac OS, the creation of the iBook, and the current boom in its iPod personal media player have all seen Apple again establish itself as an important player in ICT.

At least rhetorically, Apple has placed itself as the anti-Microsoft but despite its advertising and PR campaigns its business strategies remain closer to Microsoft's than one might suspect. With stringent ideals of hardware-software lock-in across multiple platforms, Apple's use of proprietary ownership and technical protection are not dissimilar to those which critics use to lambast its rival. The company's ethos permeates through all levels of software and hardware, from the Mac operating system and Apple-branded computer hardware, to the iTunes-iPod relationship, or even the restrictive nature of the iPhone and its inability to work beyond Apple's choice of telephony network. In the current climate where Apple's iPod/iTunes lock-in is a source of considerable debate (Tynan, 2009), Apple's continued protectionist stance has affected more than a small, committed community of brand devotees. The impact in this particular case is felt most by those who invest in the "regime of arrangement" (Gillespie, 2004) involving Microsoft's media formats. Just as is the case with Microsoft creating potential user lock-in in proprietary file format, so to it is with Apple. The one difference is that because Apple has, for so long, existed in the shadow of its rival questions of its business strategies and protection measures have often been overlooked in both scholarly and popular research.

Open-Source and Linux

Just as the discussions of Windows and Mac included important aspects of Microsoft and Apple culture, the Linux operating system arrives to this study with its own history and baggage, which helps explain the user fan culture that has emerged around it. This begins with its opposing view to the proprietary ownership of software ownership. The question that instigates this opposing view is that "if good software can be written and given away (for free), who needs Microsoft or companies like it?" (Moody, 2001, p. 2). This question has seen the rise of two basic movements: the Open-Source Software Movement and the Free Software Foundation.

Open-Source Software is a term credited to (and claimed) by Eric Raymond. Open-Source Software is developed through a process of shared code and work that promotes rapid creation of code and a knowledge base. Similar to the Open-Source movement is the Free Software Foundation. Both share an understanding of the lack of 'freedoms' available to software users with respect to standard commercial formats and support the notion of an alternative to the restrictions these place on computing cultures (Stallman, 1998, 2001). These lack of freedoms include the restrictions of use, alterations within the software, and redistribution of monetary and personal privileges (Stallman, 1998, 2001). Central to Free Software Foundation and Open-Source Software is the phenomenon of GNU.

The GNU project formally began in January 1984 when Richard Stallman started working on a replacement for an obscure programmer's tool called Yacc (Moody, 2001, p. 21). Today, the GNU General Public Licence is central to the alternative view of proprietary ownership. The preamble to the GNU General Public License begins with a statement that argues "the licenses for most software are designed to take away your freedom to share and change it" (Free Software Foundation, 1991). From this criticism the preamble states that the aim of GNU is to guarantee freedom in software; freedom to alter, share and use.

The many incarnations of the Linux kernel have adhered to the GNU license. Intended as an improvement to an existing UNIX system, the Linux operating system was created as a self-produced project by Linus Torvalds. Torvalds began work on Linux in 1991 when he released version 0.02 (2001). It was not until three years later in 1994 that the full version (1.0) of the kernel was released (Linux Online, 1994-2003). Linux, however, was not a completely innovative design. Torvalds' creation was not created from the ground up. Instead, as Raymond (1999) notes in *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* "he started by reusing code and ideas from Minix, a tiny Unix-like operating system for PC clones. Eventually all the Minix code went away or was

completely rewritten—but while it was there, it provided scaffolding for the infant that would eventually become Linux.”

From its first incarnation, Torvalds designated that Linux was to be a system that would be designed, produced and distributed under the GNU General Public License. Although often dismissed as an unstable and unworkable for the general public’s computing needs, Linux operating systems have slowly established a significant position in the world’s computer server and operating system markets, by providing low or no cost solutions compared to the proprietary products that have been most popular in the ICT sector.

The current strength of Linux in the operating system market has much to do with improvements in technology as much as it has to do with an alternative philosophy. Glyn Moody (2001, p. 4) notes that with the recent “advent of relatively low-cost but powerful PCs and the global wiring of the Net, the new hackers are immeasurably more numerous, more productive, and more united than their forebears.” Without the Internet, the communal effort in contributing to code development that has been a significant factor in the success of Linux as a widely used operating system would not have taken place. ICT advances helped eliminate the barriers of distance and time between hackers. Importantly for this study, it also increased their ability to create communities of like-minded people to solve the problems encountered within their programming.

In *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age* (2001), Pekka Himanen argues that the communal Internet creation of Linux by hackers has not only led to a challenge to ‘proprietary’ ownership but also to the way society functions. Himanen (2001) notes that the hackers who have helped create Linux are members of a wider social phenomenon that challenges Weber’s ‘Protestant Ethic’. The phenomenon is a work ethic that challenges the continuation of the Protestant ethic from the Industrial age into the electronic age. Himanen calls it the ‘Hacker Ethic’. According to Himanen

(2001), the main features of the new ethic include a passion and enjoyment for the work, a greater level of social worth, openness with the community, and being active in and caring about their community. Although these are all important factors to the hacker ethic, in the context of operating systems and proprietary ownership one aspect is most worthy of discussion, the challenge to the *money ethic*. The work hard, 'money as motive', pursuit of wealth ideal that is prevalent in the Protestant work ethic is disregarded by the hacker, for whom money is no incentive. Instead, passion and recognition are the incentives of the hacker. Put simply, in a world where economic gain seems to be the overbearing aim of society, hackers have created a community in which the central aim is the passionate improvement of their community. This is part of the resistance which will be discussed later.

Vocal Open-Source Software advocate Eric Raymond notes the general hacker spirit in describing the philosophy of UNIX (Linux) hackers. He argues that the development and enjoyment of software should be "a joyous art, and a kind of high level of play" (Raymond, 1999) . He continues this point by offering a theory on how to 'do' software design right. Raymond (1999) states that "to do the UNIX philosophy right, you need to have (or recover) that attitude. You need to care. You need to play. You need to be willing to explore." In adopting this attitude Linux and Open-Source software does not develop the symptoms of what Raymond deems 'Windowsitis'. According to Raymond (1999), programs suffering from Windowsitis are:

...rigid, clunky, bug-prone monstrosities that are all gloss surface with a hollow interior. Programs built this way look user-friendly at first sight, but turn out to be huge time- and energy-sinks in the longer term. They can only be sustained by carpet-bomb marketing, the main purpose of which is to delude users into believing that (a) bugs are features, or that (b) all bugs are really the stupid user's fault, or that (c) all bugs will be abolished if the user bends over for the next upgrade.

Through its creation within the *bazaar* with the help of individuals inspired by the *hacker ethic*, Linux avoids Windowsitis and claims a unique position in the current world of information technology.

As symbolic customers or citizens of the *bazaar*, Linux User-Fans are accessories to the *hacker ethic*. However, despite this distinction they demonstrate solidarity with the movement through symbolic engagement with its philosophies. By engaging with Linux, User-Fans appropriate a connection with the underlying principles thus connecting with the culture and history contextualised in its use.

As products of globalised distribution networks, both corporate and community based, operating systems can potentially be investigated from a range of perspectives. For social and cultural analysts, the impact of these products on identity and sociality is of great interest. It is through attachment and distinct displays of devotion of consumers towards operating system that one can identify the symbolic power of products on the consciousness of consumers.

An understanding of the historical underpinnings of each operating system paves the way for the investigation into the symbolic engagement between society, operating system products and individuals. The history of Microsoft demonstrates its ascent to become a hegemonic power within society as a whole. Apple's history illustrates a combative, competitive corporate entity with great cultural but little ideological significance. Finally, the emergence of Linux highlights a significant break from the market ideology and corporate ownership that has dominated the social and economic landscape for much the last century. These histories are more influential than they might at first seem.

Chapter Overview

This introductory chapter has incorporated the scope of the research undertaking in formulating this thesis. It highlights the centrality of consumerism and community in everyday lives and the responses of Internet users and brand consumers to persuasiveness. Critically, the introduction of brand community theory developed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) acts as the initial theoretical bridging point between the communities that exist on the basis of fandom and a society centred on consumerism. This chapter also identifies Internet forums as the medium through which these interactions can be studied through Kozinets' netnographic methodology.

Presenting an overview of modern society, Chapter Two will argue that the concept of the consumer society is the dominant ideological force that shapes our everyday lives. The chapter reviews studies ranging from sociological investigations to marketing research that link consumption, identity and community aspects that are so critical to operating system users. In doing so, this study presents a view of society immersed within the logic of the commodity and consumerism.

Chapter Three introduces the concept of the User-Fan. Differentiating between the average user or consumer of the operating system softwares and those who regularly participate in arenas such as these forums, a hierarchy of fandom based on intensity and devotion can be determined. Central to the thesis, User-Fandom is essentially defined as those individuals who display the hallmarks of modern fandom towards everyday and mundane consumer products. With fandom established as an appropriate catalyst for further investigation, the chapter then defines how the participants (User-Fans) in this study can be situated within pre-existing fandom theory. The chapter proposes a User-Fan hierarchy that distinguishes common and accepted forms of fandom (sports, media, and personality) with the connection individuals' display towards products in the

consumer society. In light of this, the chapter acts as an introduction to the levels of intensity displayed by the members of the Internet forums towards the operating systems they use.

Chapter Four demonstrates the relevance of the consumer society by detailing how operating system User-Fans are firmly entrenched within its rhetoric. As the creations of corporate entities, it demonstrates how User-Fans of operating system softwares must also be understood as products that continue the ideology of the consumer society. It argues that under the regime of the consumer society, users are no longer simply fulfilling their software requirements but are also seen fulfilling consumer desires that can be sustained through market participation. As a consequence, users of operating systems can be studied as fan, users and consumers.

Following this, Chapter Five clarifies a theoretical framework through which the concept of community can be placed in the modern consumer-dominated society. Central to this are concepts of traditional and virtual communities, and the manner in which they are comparable with Muniz and O'Guinn's brand community theory. The chapter develops the argument that brand communities represent a form of symbolic community where the shared control and ownership of symbols defines sociality. Through this it is argued that symbolism and boundary creation are central elements of the emergence of not only brand communities but all communities.

With brand community, established Chapter Six identifies those communities that emerge in response to the operating system market and the User-Fans who consume the products. Importantly it places the User-Fan as an inhabitant of the brand community. The notions of the symbolic community are employed to illustrate how the concept of User-Fandom is coherent within brand community theory.

Chapter Seven provides a historical account of three leading consumer operating system brands, their history and the involvement of charismatic founders who influence them. It provides an analysis of the differences offered by Microsoft's Windows XP, Apple's Mac OSX and Linux to the market, both literal and symbolic. Furthermore, the chapter presents an argument that the history of each brand is of symbolic importance to their consumers. In doing so, the chapter provides substance to the notion that User-Fan theory can be linked with operating system consumers. Presenting the notion of the 'public face' as a concept referring to the individuals who act as human symbols of the corporate, governmental or other organizations in modern society, the chapter situates Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Linus Torvalds as unique leaders in the modern consumer society. The example of the operating system market is a curious example, as during the era the research was undertaken, the 'public face' of each entity played a crucial role in the development of the software and User-Fan communities, yet all were in different stages of their careers. Furthermore, User-Fan reception of these individuals demonstrates the extent of the connection to brands that some consumers form.

Reflecting the manner in which brand communities often represent modern forms of resistance, Chapter Eight investigates how the consumer society has influenced definitions of resistance. The autonomy of the consumer choice frames these consumers as symbolic engineers rather than shallow, passive consumers. It is in this sense that the chapter supports the notion of consumer resistance which operates within the boundaries of the consumer society.

Chapter Nine investigates the relationships between the emergence of User-Fandom, the formation of brand communities, and modern modes of resistance. Following this, resistance emerges as a central feature of both the Mac and Linux brand communities where User-Fans appropriate the consumption of products as a means of demonstrating their position against Microsoft hegemony. Central to this chapter is the notion of consuming

differently as a mode of resistance to Microsoft influence and its hegemonic power.

The final chapter recaptures the theoretical notions of brand community, User-Fandom, and resistance in relation to wider shifts in a society enveloped within the rhetoric of consumerism and the influence of the consumer society. In doing so, it highlights the main advances and contributions provided by this study. By focusing on the social response of operating system consumers, this study reflects both the shift towards a consumer society and the notion of active consumerism in markets where products are associated with passive consumption.

Chapter Two The Consumer Society

For many, it has become apparent that within our consumer society identity and consumption hold a strong relationship. For Munro and Lee (2001, p. 6) “it is through their engagement with goods, artefacts and symbols, that people create social realities and display their identity or express their sense of belonging.” This is a sense of belonging that Latimer (2001, p. 162) also proposes, one which enables consumption to “emerge as creative acts, conditioned by and helped to accomplish particular and normative notions of social order.” Douglas (1979, p. 57) took this understanding a step further viewing consumption as “the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape.”

From this, it can be argued that the line between the economic realm and other aspects of social life have been dissolved (or never actually existed), to create the cyclical effect whereby economic pressures dominate all other aspects and vice versa. As such the consumption of goods and services has come to not only signify an identity, but individual identity also becomes more a function of consumption, and alternative to traditional understandings (Slater, 1997, p. 30). Consequently, the regulation of identity is undertaken by the process of consumption, affecting the “way in which we make up our social appearance, our social networks (lifestyle, status group etc.), our structures of social value” (Slater, 1997, p. 30). In identifying such processes, the lines between economics, culture, community and identity dissolve and converge into one arena (Firat, 1996, p.112). In this arena, culture is formed through a system of signs that can be acquired within the dominant sphere of the marketplace, signs that an individual can employ to change identities just as he or she alters his or her external image through superficial enhancements.

The process discussed above can be described as the commodification of three pillars of social existence, namely identity, community and culture. Zukin and Maguire (2004, p.182) argue:

...the commodification of culture has intensified, attention to design has become a normal part of the production process, and design aesthetics have converged such that the same 'look' is sold across price categories, making it more difficult to draw a distinct line between a (working class) taste for material function and a (bourgeois) taste for symbolic form.

The 'commodification' of our identities has impacted upon the means through which we define external elements such as style. Tomlinson (1990) emphasises the notion of style as an important aspect in the relationship between consumption and identity. For him consumption has become so firmly entrenched in our lives that many personal identities are "created by others and marketed aggressively and seductively" (Tomlinson, 1990, p. 13). For example, this emergence of 'commodified' identity is recognisable in the clothing available through the market, where the fashion industry has become a dominant institution by influencing personal identity through ownership of garments, shoes, perfumes and jewellery amongst others. Tomlinson (1990, p. 13) warns the "individualized sense of self-hood and well-being" this consumption evokes impinges upon our notion of free choice. He argues: "if we think we are free when our choices have in fact been consciously constructed for us, then this is a dangerous illusion of freedom." This illusion of freedom manifests itself throughout society and is illustrated in numerous forms of consumption.

Bourdieu (1984, p. 1) explains in his introduction to *Distinction* that "sociology endeavours to establish the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods, and their taste for them, are produced", while at the same time aims to describe "the different ways of appropriating such of these objects as are regarded at a particular moment a work of art, and the social conditions of the constitution of the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate." In the deconstruction of much of the difference between cultural and material goods, Boudieu claims that consumption is "a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 2). In this

definition we begin to see the differences and difficulties between the material, economic and social influence of the consumer society.

The changing influence of consumerism within contemporary capitalist societies was the focus in the early writings of Baudrillard. Of primary concern to Baudrillard in these works was the societal shift in importance from modes of production to modes of consumption. In many respects this had been instigated by the gradual shift from an economic reliance on 'old' industry toward 'new' service-based professions. He notes:

...work, leisure, nature and culture, all previously dispersed, separate, and more or less irreducible activities that produced anxiety and complexity in our real life have finally become mixed, massaged, climate-controlled, and domesticated into the simple activity of perpetual shopping. All these activities have finally become desexed into a single hermaphroditic ambience of style (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 34).

The 'ambience of style' Baudrillard refers to are the processes of consumption and consumerism. However, despite his insight, Baudrillard did not foresee an economy where the consumption of information would become an important platform for the success of economies and society's reliance on it. Furthermore, his hyper-reality of simulation was conceptualized as a replacement for production where everything would be reduced to the play of signs. Contrasting this thought is the reality of our time where the production of signs has become inseparable from the economy and material conditions that underpin people's lives.

For Baudrillard, consumption comprises not only the 'physical' or economic processes but also processes of signals and signs under which our lives are constantly involved. He argues that society is inundated with "marketing, purchasing, sales, the acquisition of differentiated commodities and object/signs - all of these presently constitute our language, a code in which our entire society communicates and speaks of and to itself" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 48). In effect society has shifted from (actual) use value to a sign value where communication, not production, is the key to consumption. In a

more literal sense than Baudrillard intended, this notion can be used in relation to the consumer society that is defined by the relationships between signals/signs and their 'value'.

A further aspect of the process of signification is our reliance on the commodity (and in turn consumption). Baudrillard reveals that society's reliance upon consumerism has seen it represent the entirety of culture rather than being an accessory of it. To justify this argument Baudrillard presents the epitome of the process of consumption – the shopping mall. He notes that the mall, by providing the wide range of shopping options and other services:

...practises an amalgamation of signs where all categories of goods are considered a partial field in the general consumerism of signs. The cultural centre becomes an integral part of the shopping mall. This is not to say that culture is here 'prostituted'; that is too simple. It is culturalised. Consequently, the commodity (clothing, food, restaurants etc.) is also culturalised, since it is transformed into a distinctive and idle substance, a luxury and an item, amongst other, in the general display of consumables (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 32).

In this sense, consumption has overpowered the consumer to a point where 'products' now provide the foundation for our social relationships and the pillars of our personal identities. From this Baudrillard summarises that consumption has enveloped our lives. He argues that "all activities are sequenced in the same combination mode; where the schedule of gratification is outlined in advance...; where the 'environment' is completely climatised, furnished and culturalised..."; and all culture is focused towards personal shopping (Baudrillard, 1988 pp.33-4).

The intersection of culture and consumption has an association with the introduction of consumerism as a focus of modern society. The theoretical argument that consumption is now the central mechanism of culture, community and identity is of great significance to this study and together these forces have given rise to the *consumer society*. Slater (1997, p.5) explains consumerism's centrality, arguing that:

many of our questions about the form we take as modern subjects, about how to understand the very relation between the everyday world and the public space, about our moral and social value, about our privacy and power of disposal over our lives, about who we are – many of these questions are taken up in relation to consumption and our social status as a rather new thing called ‘a consumer’: we see ourselves as people who choose, who are inescapably ‘free’ and self-managing, who make decisions about who we are or want to be and use purchased goods, services and experiences to carry out these identity projects.

Slater (1997, p. 2) further notes that the definition of “being a consumer is about knowing one’s needs and getting them satisfied: choosing buying, using and enjoying – or failing in these.” However, modern consumption can be seen to have evolved from this initial, rational function (Slater, 1997). It can be argued that many market economies have conceived consumerism as the primary propellant to “keep the economy rolling and productive resources employed” (Bowman, 1951, p. 1). In this sense the consumer society shifted in focus from its original function of supporting individual desires to the aid of continuing the market, thus creating the requirement for culture, community and identity for the successful incorporation of the consumerism within society.

When observing the communities surrounding operating systems, it becomes clear that the social apparatuses of culture, identity and consumerism converge as they do in the wider context of the consumer society. Beginning with the centrality of consumption amongst a social setting to Microsoft’s position as a default but near hegemonic power, or Apple’s assertions to ‘Think Different’ or Linux’s alternative approach to ownership, the study of these communities offer much for an investigator of the phenomenon of the consumer society. However, it is firstly my aim to identify the forces of the consumer society before investigating their presence amongst the smaller communities of operating system User-Fans. It is important for this study to engage with the macro formation of the consumer society as it contextualises

the micro process of community and identity formation within the macro (Sandvoss, 2005b, p. 835).

Studies in the emergence of a Consumer Society

Though the consumer society has manifested itself through a range of cultural practices, the most common of these is the humble act of shopping. It is in the act of shopping which helps to support a cultural acceptance of consumerism. Underhill (1999) emphasises this cultural dominance through the abundance of shopping opportunities. He argues that the second half of the twentieth century was defined by shopping, more “than has ever taken place anywhere at any time.” (Underhill, 1999, p. 31). For Underhill shopping represents a form of consumerism that has, through the activity of consumers and producers, essentially affected the basic foundations, institutions and ideologies of modern society. The importance of Underhill’s statement lay in the manner in which ‘society’ has been transformed through the processes of consumerism, critically, by the actions of both consumers and producers.

Lodziak (2002) identifies the ideology of consumerism and its resultant society where its members submit to it as a dominant ideology through constant consumption. For Lodziak (2002) a consumer population has been alienated from the process of production defining our excessive consumption, our employment and consequently our lives. Importantly, the form of consumerism that now defines us as individuals, has encapsulated us as a society. Participation within the consumer ideology is no longer to be understood as a choice, but rather as a prerequisite for citizenship. A similar argument is presented by Schiller (1989), who describes the power that the private economy (in particular corporate entities) has established. Schiller’s argument focuses on the pervasive nature of the products corporate powers create. This pervasiveness, he argues, stems from “a daily, if not hourly, diet of systemic values where individuals [are] not thought of as a society but rather [as] an audience or consumers” (Schiller, 1989, p. 33). This

institutionalized symbolic-production system adapts to the requirements of corporate power, not consumer power, through media production which in turn adopts the 'rules' and values of the market system. Under this system consumer agency is revealed as a function of the system provided by corporate governance.

An interesting example of the relationships between consumption, culture, and community can be found in the difference in cultural significance studied by Wu (1997) in McDonald's restaurants in the United States and Thailand. Wu (1997, p. 125) cites a study by anthropologist Conrad Kottak who "describes how family members go through the rituals of ordering and eating food; it is clear from their actions that Americans feel comfortable and safe in McDonald's. We can almost say that the Golden Arches offer the promise of security and safety – a kind of sanctuary, removed from the uncertainties of life outside." Similarly, in Thailand, it was discovered that restaurants were often treated as a home away from home, with one particular as a focus of study became "localised in that it plays a key role in the routines of everyday life for many people who live in the neighbourhood" (Wu, 1997, p. 126). In this sense, the consumption takes a backseat to the functioning cultures already in place within the wider society.

This shift towards a modern consumer society relates to a fundamental change in how we view the producer/consumer relationship. Helmreich (2001) contends that in "responding to inflexibilities in Fordist production (strong labour unions, costly commitments to limited product lines), post-Fordist production has been characterized by the flexible responses of capital to changes in international labour laws and markets, exchange rates, and patterns of consumption." As such "workers and consumers are no longer the same people; they may be thousands of miles, or many social strata, apart" (Helmreich, 2001, p. 493). This disconnect influences the consumer perception of goods and the investment that is placed within them by their creators. Bauman (1972, p. 62) believes that the modern dimensions of consumption emerged when consumption adopted a 'mass character', increasing the focus on the market. He notes modern modes of consumption

can be viewed as having a detrimental impact upon culture arguing “its acquisition of a ‘mass’ character... amounted to a disappearance of subcultures and their replacement by a universal culture, common to all the members of a society” (Bauman, 1972, p. 62). William Hipwell (2004, p. 368) labels this mass character as the result of the homogenising forces of *Industria*. For Hipwell (2004, p. 368) this:

...homogeneity is the result of the identitarian tendencies of *Industrian* power towards striation, order and domestication. It is evident in monoculture farming and (de)forestry, the decreasing distinguishability and ceaseless expansion of ‘world cities’, the disappearance of diverse human languages and cultures and the mass extinction of species currently underway.

However, views such as these are limited as they do not explain why levels of consumption have increased. Nor do they detail the increased importance of consumption in our lives, particularly in the way that it provides the means for differentiation, belonging and identity.

With shopping established as a fundamental process in the consumer society, Cohen (2003) investigated the history of modern consumerism and the emergence of the American consumer society. Cohen (2003) discovered the extent that consumerism has become embedded within the ‘American’ ideals of freedom and democracy. Central to the critique that Cohen establishes is the illusory assumption that freedom is to be equated with consumerism. Using the shopping mall as an example, Cohen notes its evolution from convenience to bastion of American consumer freedom. It is now so entrenched with the image of freedom that it now masks the true reality of the exclusivity required by consumer society (Cohen, 2003). In comparing the mall with activities that were once community-based activities (for example meetings, fundraisers), Cohen highlights the spectacle of the consumer experience in the post-war period, developmental stages of the mall and the appropriation of the consumer society by American citizen-consumers. However, as she details this history it becomes increasingly apparent that the mall (and in essence the consumer society it represents)

equates freedom with personal spending, only to continue the notion of consumption.

Schor (1998, 1999) also identifies the move from 'old' values to a new consumer society. She notes that new consumerism differs from 'keeping up with the Joneses' in that consumers adopt consumptive positions that are more "aggressive" than defensive, and also "more anonymous and less socially benign" (Schor, 1999, p. 43). Under this, consumers are more likely to aspire to the elites in a society rather than compare themselves with the old hierarchy of immediate class. With this more aggressive identity defining the consumer in the American middle class have begun to live in a culture of overspending, excessive credit and overwhelming debt (Schor, 1998). In its infancy, new consumerism overpowered traditional religious and moral constraints upon "ostentatious and luxurious spending" to a point where the virtues of saving and hard work give way to the new 'religion of consumerism' (Schor, 1999, p. 47).

Conceptualising consumption

It is important here to understand the concept of appropriation. In its broadest sense, it appropriation represents the incorporation of an initially 'alien' object into subjectivity via use (Lupton & Noble, 2002, p.8). In regards to the appropriation of market good, most accept the term to account for the processes that occur after a commodity is sold and "leaves the world of the commodity and the generalized system of equivalence and exchange, and is taken possession of by an individual or household and owned" (Silverstone, 1994, p.126). Thus, through the process of appropriation the product is 'singularized' to represent 'one's own' and given a 'social life' (Ilmonen, 2004, p.136). As Lupton and Noble (2002, p.8) suggest, appropriation occurs in:

...a sociocultural context that both shapes the meanings of artefacts and places limits on the extent to which such meanings can be transformed by consumers. In the process of appropriation, there are no clear boundaries between subjects and objects: only relations through which subjectivities and objects are formed and reformed.

In many forms, appropriation consists of a process of externalisation whereby a good is embedded with meaning above its functional purpose. Through this process goods serve the need of the individual by extending the concept of the self outwards in space, surrounds the body and is externalised as an aspect of their identity (Lupton & Noble, 2002, p.8).

According to Ilmonen (2004, p.138) this process can be understood as involving two steps - the recognition of goods external to our social lives; and their absorption emotionally into our personal lives. Here products may be deliberately manipulated by their owners to become “autobiographical in bearing the marks of an individual’s use, or acting as signifiers and mnemonics of personal events” (Lupton & Noble, 2002, p. 7). In doing so the process of appropriation represents ‘the ability to transcend the merely utilitarian aspect of [objects], such that they become something more like works of art, charged with personal expression’ (Gell, 1986, 114) .

Despite the illusions, the aesthetic appeal of the consumer society remains strong and largely appealing not only in its birthplace (the United States) but also throughout the world. An example of how persuasive this dominant ideology of the consumer society can be is demonstrated through Disney’s presence in Hong Kong (Choi, 2006). Choi (2006, p. 54) notes that due to its “differentiated merchandise, its shifting aesthetic sense, and its adaptive application of contradictory popular discourse to local needs and desires – [Disney] has managed to insert itself into different Hong Kong families lives successfully.” This in a country with a broad range of cultural backgrounds, social standings, and openness to foreign influence. Like Cohen, Choi acknowledges the limits of the freedoms the consumer society bestows upon the individual. The research also identifies that in consuming Disney products “parents’ use of Disney products not only reinforce the existing power order, including local class difference and the pax Americana, but also an emerging China-based world order” (Choi, 2006, p. 54). Through this point, Choi illustrates the emergence of consumer society disguised as democracy in other regions of the world. Here, democracy does not refer to

political empowerment but rather the disintegration of all social barriers in order to define all as potential consuming citizens. For Choi, “children are seen as full-fledged consumers who have their own tastes and who deserve some freedom of choice” (Choi, 2006, p. 59). Freedom, within the rhetoric of the consumer society, is equally weighted as a consumer and democratic power. Whilst their consumptive ability is constrained by traditional restrictions such as family and finances, the idea of equality through consumption in the consumer society may explain some of its persuasiveness in politically fluid arenas. These illusions are equally possible within arenas such as brand communities where the consumption of the product is equated with power. Importantly to the context of this study, consumption can be appropriated as a form of expression towards control of dominant structures (for example Linux consumption in reaction to Microsoft hegemony).

Offering cumulative analysis of these trends is author and theorist Ritzer (1999, p. 8). For Ritzer, the modern world is currently engaged in an era where consumption has overtaken production as the defining aspect of American (Western) culture. Central to this has been a change of the ‘means of consumption’. He identifies shopping centers as ‘cathedrals of consumption’ supporting as a new ‘means of consumption’ that we have attached enchanted, quasi-religious, sometimes sacred character (Ritzer, 1999, p. x). They have become locales to which we make “‘pilgrimages’ in order to practice our consumer religion” (Ritzer, 2003). Ritzer's analysis offers an insight into the rise of an American consumer society and the way that it has become a repository of cultural meanings, however, it lacks recognition of the rise of an online consumer culture, fan and brand-based consumption. However, Ritzer seems content to only analyze the ‘concrete’ aspects of consumer society. When discussing emerging forms of online/electronic consumption, Ritzer focuses upon what he deems ‘large scale consumption sites’ such as Amazon.com, Wal-Mart.com and Expedia.com (2002, p. ix). Although important in a discussion of consumption, Ritzer misses an opportunity to illustrate new forms of consumption. Instead, he has justified forms of online consumption as part of the process of purchase or attainment. However, he overlooks the

consumption of signs such as the mp3 culture popularised by Napster and commercialised by iTunes. He misses the signification of consumption through fan sites, brand allegiances and popular social networking arenas such as community forums, Facebook and MySpace. While many of these have emerged after his writings, they must not be overlooked in the context of consumerism.

The arguments such as those presented by the likes of Cohen and Ritzer reveal much of the modern consumer society illusion. To fully justify a critique of the consumer society's impact within operating system communities it is apparent that an investigation of the 'means of consumption' is also required. For Ritzer the means of consumption is not a single, identifiable phenomenon. It involves a number of different processes that allow us to consume goods and services, including the process leading up to the act of purchasing (for example consumer research or choice of retailer). Furthermore, as this study will detail, the process *after* the act of purchasing is also integral to this understanding. This is especially true of day-to-day tools such as operating systems.

A central theme of this thesis is the similarity between experiences in the online and offline world. However, the online experience can be much more fluid, adaptable, and somewhat predisposed to quick shifts in culture. In the case of consumerism, I will argue it has become a 'cathedral' of hyper-consumption. It exists as an arena where consumerism is the assumed default and, as Baudrillard hypothesised, a place where the consumption of information and signs is infinitely more important than the consumption of 'concrete' products or services.

The symbolic importance of consumption is further reinforced when considering the addition of virtual and online consumption. As consumerism is no longer focused on objects but rather symbols and 'sign value' (Venkatesh, 1999), the physical difference between experience in online and physical consumption is reduced. For example though "advances in new media technologies enhanced the text-based communication on the internet

with voice and later with visual aspects, such as avatars, photos, videos,” consumers have gained the potential to manipulate signs and symbols in the same manner as in the ‘real’ world (Vicdan & Ulusoy, 2008, p. 3). Castells (2000, p. 13) explains that:

...because of the inclusiveness and flexibility of this system of symbolic exchange, most cultural expressions are enclosed in it, thus inducing the formation of what I call a culture of ‘real virtuality’. Our symbolic environment is, by and large, structured by this flexible, inclusive hypertext, in which many people surf each day. The virtuality of this text is in fact a fundamental dimension of reality, providing the symbols and icons from which we think and thus exist materials for an exploratory theory of the network society.

Differentiating between virtual and real consumer experience, does not imply that one is less real but rather that one is computer-mediated and the other is not (Lehdonvirta, Wilska, & Johnson, 2009). Lehdonvirta et al (2009) justify this arguing that “if there is an unreal air to how intangible objects can be worth lots of money, it is an observation regarding the nature of our consumer culture in general, of which virtual consumerism is only a naked example. In this sense, all consumption is virtual.”

Despite the symbolic nature of all consumer activity, consumer experience has also been detailed to demonstrate differences between the online and real worlds. Kozinets (1999) has argued that online consumers are both more active, and more communally influenced." Thus, online experience has generated new consumer cultures to experience. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007b) have presented an alternative, but parallel, consumer culture in response to corporate dominance, global markets which is generated by consumer experience and upheld by online networks. It will be later demonstrated that Apple and Linux consumers appropriate this consumer experience as a response to Microsoft hegemony.

Online culture has assisted in creating an arena where consumers of shared interest can detail their consumer experience (Kozinets, 1999; McAlexander et al., 2002). Furthermore, online consumers have been suggested to

“espouse stronger loyalty intentions to their virtual community sponsors, than would individuals operating under weak relational norms” (Mathwick, 2002, p. 45). despite this activity and attachment, the influence of online interactivity has also allowed for a fluid, anonymous experience whereby consumerism is the sole point of discussion. Part of this lay in the fact that the most commonly chosen social role online is that of the ‘lurker’ (Jones & Kucker, 2001, p. 220). Lurking represents those internet occurrences whereby individuals never disclose their identities, nor is their presence online known to others.

Conclusion

In studying the consumer society, it is clear that everyday life becomes more closely immersed within the logic of the commodity and consumerism. The ‘realness’ of consumption is often limited to the concrete objects (computers, communication networks) on which the transfer, objectification, and consumption of signs take place. These latter forms of consumption represent Baudrillard’s ‘symbolic exchange’ or ‘social presentation’. A central theme of this thesis is the justifiable equality between experiences in the online and offline world. However, as I have already identified, neither is identical with the online experience which can be much more fluid, adaptable, and somewhat predisposed to quick shifts in culture. It exists as an arena where consumerism is the assumed default and, as Baudrillard hypothesised, as an arena where the consumption of signs is infinitely more important than the consumption of ‘concrete’ products or services.

Importantly for this study, in a world where the consumption of signs is the accepted norm, the consumption of everyday products (and their signs) can be understood in relevance to culture and the consumer society. Operating systems and their users are simply one segment of an abundant eco-system of product/consumer relationships. Operating systems are consumed through the market in a one-off, unique experience. However, their everyday use continues the act of ‘being’ consumer well beyond the initial purchase.

In the consumer society, the individual produces and (re)consumes meanings beyond the simple transaction between manufacturer and customer. Instead, they can (and often do) begin symbolic exchanges between other consumers and in some cases lead to the creation of communities of consumers. Of course, such social interaction could only occur in a setting where consumerism dominates to such an extent that this opportunity becomes available.

Chapter Three User-Fandom and participation within forums

The first step in understanding operating systems and the symbolic importance of consumerism is to investigate the levels of intensity displayed by the individuals who participate in the Internet forums towards the operating systems they use. Where many who use operating systems only identify with their utilitarian value as a software tool, for others they represent an object of devotion. I will argue that fandom is a logical starting point for the study of these forms of consumer devotion due to its relevance to individual and community devotion to aspects of modern culture. With fandom established as an appropriate subject for further investigation, I examine how the participants in this study can be situated within pre-existing fandom theory.

This chapter differentiates between the average user/consumer of the operating system softwares and those who participate in arenas such as the forums, thus creating a hierarchy of fandom based on intensity and devotion. As will be highlighted throughout the chapter, I frame this devotion as a definition of User-Fans – essentially individuals who display the hallmarks of modern fandom towards everyday and mundane consumer products. This User-Fan hierarchy is central to the thesis as it distinguishes between common and accepted forms of fandom (such as sports, media, personality) and identifies the connection individuals forge with everyday products in the consumer society.

In most aspects of life a difference exists in the levels of attachment individuals' display to others, communities, objects and ideologies. The extent to which some display an attachment to operating systems is no different. One example of the varying levels of participation can be found in the presence of public Internet forums focusing on specific operating systems. Although each operating system attracts people aligned to a

multitude of cultures and activities, a general framework can be developed around the bonds they create. For the purpose of this study the word fan is employed as an all-encompassing term to define those people who develop close bonds with their choice of operating system, appropriate it as an object of devotion, participate in activities with other like-minded people, and in doing so develop ideologies and values surrounding the object. Once a Fan framework is explained, it will be applied to the users of each operating system.

When discussing fandom, communities are often intrinsically defined through the modes of participation (spectatorship). It is in this sense that individuals who display a devotion teams or players are distinguished as members of the fan community independent of their actual levels of social engagement. It is in this sense that brand community members are not only consumers but also represent fans that can be held in the same regard. From this position, brand communities can similarly be distinguished by the varying intensities of their members – or fans.

When discussing individual expressions of devotion, the use of the word *Fan* as a point of differentiation is at first a recognition of pre-existing thought based on individual and community support toward cultural artefacts. Matt Hills (2006, p. 53) supports this in his exploration of *Fan Cultures* explaining that:

Everybody knows what a 'fan' is. It's somebody who is obsessed with a particular star, celebrity, film, TV programme, band; somebody who can produce reams of information on their object of fandom, and can quote their favoured lines or lyrics, chapter and verse. Fans are often highly articulate. Fans interpret media texts in a variety of interesting, perhaps, unexpected ways. And fans participate in communal activities – they are not 'socially atomised' or isolated viewers/readers.

Although a number of terms exist that describe similar allegiances with people, places and objects (for example supporter, enthusiast and advocate)

for the purpose of this study *fan* and *fandom* categories the type of adulation expressed by operating system community members. Thorne and Bruner (1992, p. 208) define a fan as a “person with an overwhelming liking or interest in a particular person, group, trend, artwork or idea. [Their] behaviour is typically viewed by others as unusual or unconventional but does not violate prevailing social norms.” Consequently they view fandom as “a subculture composed of like-minded fans, typified by a feeling of closeness to others with the shared interest.” Fans shared interests are not as passive as one may think. Jenkins (1992, p. 208) best describes media fans as individuals who “are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate.” Built around this consumption, production, participation, and adulation is the development of a culture or community surrounding a central media object.

In his book *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 277-278), Jenkins reveals the nature of fans as consumers and their relationships to texts ranging from television series, movies and literature. Through the course of his study, Jenkins identifies a number of dimensions to the fan culture surrounding media products. The first is a “particular mode of reception” which includes “close and individual attention, with a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance” (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 277-278). This mode of reception is then translated into social interaction with like-minded fans. Within the fan’s reception/production process certain forms of interpretive practices are developed within the community. As Jenkins notes “this mode of interpretation draws them far beyond the information explicitly present and toward the construction of a meta-text that is larger, richer, more complex and interesting than the original” (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 277-278). Most importantly, Jenkins recognises that one of the most important dimensions of the fan is that it constitutes a base for consumer activism and alternative social community. He notes “fandom originates, at least in part, as a response to the relative powerlessness of the consumer in relation to powerful institutions of cultural production and circulation” (Hills, 2002, p. 108).

Fan cultures are created around cultural artefacts when formed around texts, objects or the like and function as defining aspects of the biography of a number of individuals who remain attached to these artefacts “by virtue of the fact that it continued to exist as an element of their cultural experience” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 8). In discussing contemporary science fiction fan culture, Jenkins (2004, p. 291) notes that:

...contemporary popular culture has absorbed many aspects of ‘fan culture’ which would have seemed marginal a decade ago. Media producers are consciously building in their texts opportunities for fan elaboration and collaboration – codes to be deciphered, enigmas to be resolved, loose ends to be woven together, teasers and spoilers for upcoming developments – and they leak information to the media which sparks controversy and speculation.

Through fans’ attachment to a specific media text one can observe its centrality to individual and collective identity as fans find empowerment in the fluid dynamic in fan and text. In *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, Sandvoss identifies many components in the definition of modern fandom for which he defines as “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 9). Importantly, at the level of the individual, fans represent individuals who participate in a form of “sustained, affective consumption”, placing them within a context informed by their consumption while understanding the consequences the process holds in regards to fans’ immediate social and cultural conditions (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 9).

Sandvoss identifies that objects of fandom are assessed in terms of the varying degrees of intensity and ideological reference. Whereas Jenkins (1992) views the process of fandom involving the poaching or borrowing of texts and media for the purpose of identity formation and experience, Sandvoss views media texts as open to interpretation. In this sense objects (texts) are to be understood as possessing fluid ideological and signification boundaries that are determined by individual fans not their original creators

(Sandvoss, 2003). These boundaries are formed through the meanings that are derived from the fans' reading of the object, often in the form of self-reflection.

Sandvoss downplays the role of ideological influences and hegemonic power by instead focusing on the fandom-text/object relationship within a micro level of contextualisation (Sandvoss, 2005b, pp. 834-835). He argues "the true ideological impact of mediated text derives from their near-total loss of signification value" (Sandvoss, 2005b, p. 828). While this may be true of many 'traditional' fan texts, the study of operating systems offers a more complex arena of investigation. Throughout this thesis I will argue the relationship between fans and product must be contextualised within a macro level due to the inherent notions of ideology and hegemonic power that is sought by the producers and the consumers themselves. In this sense I agree with Sandvoss (2005b, p. 835) in that in the study of fandom we need to move beyond the assumption of "a bipolarity of power between media producers and consumers... by raising the broader questions of the role of (popular) culture and communication in the formation of modern self". This is common to the effects of the Gramscian definition of cultural hegemony which refer to the:

...spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12).

Under hegemonic power the public exert influence on the shared conception of the world but create their perception of reality through the ideological beliefs and values of dominant institutions (or class). In the context of a mass-mediated society, hegemony as dominance opens understandings of the impact that persuasion and legitimacy have on public consciousness and vice versa.

Such an appropriation of fan cultures place greater importance on the agency of the fan that they are often credited outside the study of fandom. This 'blank slate' approach to fandom avails the researcher to approach fans openly and divulge fan readings that are more appropriate to the fluid environment where fandom occurs. Importantly, Sandvoss identifies that amongst the (near) unlimited interpretation of fan objects there remain ideological signifiers embedded in these objects that, when fully informed, fans cannot escape these boundaries. It is Sandvoss's notion of the fan as the active, empowered participant-creator (although restrained by ideological signifiers) that I wish to expand upon within this study, one which facilitates and empowers the individual rather than the object that determines the cultural value of certain objects.

Moving beyond the confines of fan definition, the next step in a theoretical grounding of modern fandom is to develop an understanding of the devotion and intensity displayed throughout fan cultures. Just as Bourdieu (2000) describes legitimate culture as hierarchical, many fan cultures also develop their own hierarchy of members through ownership, participation, and activity. In returning to the work of Sandvoss, one can also discover that power relations in fan communities are subjectively constituted and maintained through the cultural capital fans place within the texts, media and objects which are appropriated with importance (Sandvoss, 2005, pp. 40-42). These hierarchies are most often articulated in the form of the intensity that individual's devote to their fandom.

Although, *fandom* and fanaticism are conceptually different, there exist similarities between the two, one of which is the varying intensity displayed by those expressing adulation. Intensity here can refer to "the degree of energy with which one lives, feels, thinks, wills, works, and in general confronts the objective world" in pursuit of one's goals (Rudin, 1969, p.19). Rudin suggests intensity manifests in three characteristics that slightly

overlap: excitement, passion and rage of will. Depending on the levels of these, the intensity of the fan's devotion can be determined. As Eckman (1997, p. 69) suggests, "fanaticism can be considered a problem of degree, not of kind. In other words, everyone has certain rigidities which make him or her something of a fanatic." Although Eckman may be correct in his analysis of differing intensities of the *religious* fanatic, those of the *fan* differ slightly in terms of their focus, externalisation of their connection and influence on the lives of the individual and those who surround them.

When discussing measures of fan intensity, many studies undertaken in the field of marketing research have focused on the intensity of fan behaviour towards their adulation of consumer goods, sporting teams and media. Specifically, I have chosen the work of Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999), Redden and Steiner (2000), and Thorne and Bruner (2006) to highlight the varying degrees of intensity fans present towards products in a variety of markets. Redden and Steiner (2000) note the varying degrees of intensity but compare the two ends of the spectrum - the normal and the fanatical. Of interest here are the fanatical consumers who present more intense versions of the *normal* practices and display stronger externalisation of their passion, focus, disdain, rage of will, personal view of the world and resistance to change. Hunt et. al. (1999) contend the existence of five categories of sports fans: the temporary, local, devoted, fanatical, and dysfunctional. Similarly, Thorne and Bruner (2006) also develop a hierarchical fan framework containing four levels; the *dilettante*, *dedicated*, *devoted* and *dysfunctional*. Although both focus on fan support of teams/players and the consequential consumption of associated products, the framework exhibits aspects that can be implemented in any field of fandom.

Hunt et. al. (1999) describe the first category as the temporary fan, which Thorne and Bruner refer to as the *dilettante* level, whereby the fan displays a casual interest towards a team/player/source material with their intensity of their devotion constrained by time. That is "after the phenomenon of interest

is over (for example, the game), the fan is no longer motivated to exhibit behaviour related to the sports object, but rather returns to normal behavioural patterns” (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999, p. 443). This can be characterised by casual television viewing, article reading, and increased enthusiasm when others are also enthused (Thorne & Bruner, 2006, p. 58).

In the second level of fan categorization, *local* fans have their intensity limited due to geographic barriers (for example, supporting the local team) (Hunt et. al., 1999). Rather than time constraining their behaviour, *local* fans only associate with fandom practices (and teams/players) that accommodate their requirement for attendance or participation in fan cultures. Similarly, Thorne and Bruner’s (2006, p. 58) *dedicated* fan “actively adjusts his/her lifestyle to watch a program, collects items related to the area of interest or attends conventions devoted to the topic” to the extent that their lifestyle permits. At this intensity level, the fan often actively seeks interaction with others of the same interest.

Both Hunt et. al. and Thorne and Bruner’s next category consists of the *devoted* fans who attach themselves to a particular team with an intensity that involves the appropriation of the team/player to maintain his or her self-concept. *Devoted* fans increase the intensity of their fandom by undertaking major lifestyle changes in order to actively pursue the area of interest (Thorne & Bruner, 2006, p. 58). The *devoted* fan spends much of their free time engaging in their area of interest, even devoting sections of their homes to showcasing the object of fascination, attending conventions on the subject, and ultimately endeavour to become recognized as an expert on the area of involvement (Bacon-Smith, 1992, pp. 13-14 cited in Thorne and Bruner, 2006, p.58). Under this concept, *devoted* fans represent those who attach themselves to a particular team/player with an intensity that involves the appropriation of the team/player to maintain his or her self-concept. In other words, the devoted fan becomes attached to their interest that becomes central to their self and social identification. However, unlike

Thorne and Bruner, Hunt et. al. (1999) present an additional level introducing the notion of the *fanatical* fan, who like the *devoted* fan, incorporate an object of consumerism to form a central aspect of self-identification. The difference is the extent to which their behaviour towards their area of interest alters in intensity and type.

At the highest level of fan behaviour is the *dysfunctional* fan (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999; Thorne & Bruner, 2006). Unlike the other categories, “the dysfunctional fan uses being a fan as their primary method of self-identification” (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999, p. 446). Representing the most intense and smallest percentage of the fan population, the *dysfunctional* fan becomes so involved in their interest that they engage in antisocial activities including violence and stalking (Thorne & Bruner, 2006, p. 58). Thus, the category is defined by the individual’s dysfunctional intensity towards the consumptive object.

Through theoretical frameworks such as these one can view similarities in the hierarchical categorisation of fandom and in using these as a starting point, a unique fan-framework for this study can be implemented. While these frameworks are adequate, they tend to focus on the act of consumption and the means through which we can predict these acts by classifying members within a fan community. Hierarchy for this research is not developed with the prediction of behaviour in mind but rather is to be descriptive of the ‘emic’ categories employed by operating system consumers themselves. By employing the forum members’ emic perspective, the research presents their ‘construction’ of their cultural context assisting in the ethnographic (netnographic) translation and interpretation of it (Geertz, 1973).

Users and User-Fans

One downside of netnographic research is that those who do not participate in online forums are omitted from investigation. To acknowledge their existence these people will be labelled *users* whereas those who display an intensity of devotion through their participation in the online forums will be labelled *user-fans*. This is not to imply that user-fans do not exist outside of these forums, but within the boundaries of this research they cannot be identified as belonging to the User-Fan framework, nor can they be placed in a category defined by intensity and display of devotion.

Users

As the representative of the non-fan, users are to be distinguished as those people who are consumers of the operating system but do not appropriate them as a point of community or identity formation. By definition, these people do not display the intense devotion towards the products in 'fan' communities and are not included in any analysis of the online communities. In representing the majority of operating system consumers, they are, however, an important group to be acknowledged as they are who User-Fans can be distinguished. Users can be divided into three separate sub-groups - *default*, *work*, and *informed*. The *default* grouping refers to those who use an operating system for the only reason that they know no other option. Specifically, most in the *default* group have the market-dominating Microsoft Windows as their operating system for the fact that it is the default standard for the majority of the population.

The *work* user group refers to operating system users who have their (primary) computer software forced upon them by their workplace. These people primarily have no choice in the system that is used in their line of work and in turn are often forced to learn and become familiar with those softwares. These pressures occur in regards to all three systems, with Windows a default system for most workplaces, whereas Mac OS is often the default of many workplaces where there is a perceived ability of Macs to

perform required tasks (i.e. graphical, video and audio) more efficiently than others. Linux is also a workplace platform for a small but increasing number of businesses requiring server software or limited licensing fees. Those who represent the *informed* category are individuals who display many of the characteristics of fans but do not display the attachments, nor the sentiments or tendencies towards community involvement of these groups. They often present the hallmarks of the *User-Fans*, yet their lack of presence in the online forums negates any potential involvement in this study. In essence, users can be characterised as those who consume the product but not the culture of fandom that can surround it.

User-Fans

The User-Fan accounts for the intersection between everyday consumer items and fandom. The framework of User-Fandom has been primarily developed through the investigation of the online communities created by Windows, Mac and Linux users in public online forums and analysing them using the fan models forwarded by Thomas and Bruner (2006), and Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999). The distinguishing features between the pre-existing categories of fandom are the intensity of involvement, self-conceptualisation, motivation, and range of action. This hierarchical categorisation is a collective understanding well known in the forums themselves.

Although Thomas and Bruner's (2006) and Hunt et. al. (1999) argued for several distinct categories of fandom, the participants studied in the forums for this research fit within a lower number of intensity categorisations. Also, beyond the psychological implications and problems of imposing it, the possibility of a "dysfunctional" label is also limited by the inability of this study to make any solid conclusion on the impact of any community member's 'real' lives beyond their actions and statements in the online forum. As the dysfunctional fan refers to anti-social behaviour and extremely strong

personal attachment, the indicators of these cannot be studied in a relatively social arena. For these reasons, the categorization scheme to be implemented during this research are *Casual*, *Devoted*, and *Geek* User-Fans.

1. Casual

The lowest levels of User-Fan intensity are to be labelled the *Casual* User-Fan. The *Casual* User-Fans display many similar traits formulated by Thorne and Bruner (2006) in their *dilettante* fan and other lower intensity fan categories. In regards to their online forum involvement and operating system attachment, the *Casual* User-Fan displays a casual attitude often representing those who participate at the level of guest, irregular user, or novice. In terms of self-concept, *Casual* User-Fans do not usually appropriate the operating system for the purpose of identity formation, equating with the practices of the dilettante, temporary or local fans in the marketing hierarchies discussed in the framework models described earlier (Thorne and Bruner, 2006; Hunt et. al. 1999). Whilst they are identified as users and also possibly fans of the operating system, even in the forums the software is not central to their internal definition of self. Also, unlike other User-Fans, the casual level of intensity does not necessitate the external display of their involvement with their operating system or the community they participate. A common example of this is that the casual fan does not view switching operating system allegiances as a deviant proposition.

Benefiting this study, the pre-existing hierarchies within the online forums aid the creation of a hierarchy amongst operating systems User-Fans. Within each forum every member holds a title signifying his or her value to the community. In some instances the titles are automatically assigned according to the post count of a user, while in other instances forum moderators grant titles to denote their importance or signify the quality and worth of the members' posts. In designating the *Casual* User-Fans amongst

the communities, this study will take into account the forums' own hierarchies.

The simplest method to correlate a User-Fan hierarchy with pre-existing forum hierarchies is at the *Casual* level of intensity. For the purposes here, those forum members described as 'newbies' automatically represent this intensity. In addition to this, one can also account for the length of community membership, posts per day and total number of posts as defining factors. Most important in defining the *Casual* User-Fan is the total number of posts. In accounting for this the *Neowin* community, the titles of Neowinian, Neowinian², and Neowinian³ represent *Casual* User-Fans. Within the *WinXp Central* assigned titles for *Casual* User-Fans are Junior Member, Member and Enthusiast. LQ Newbie, Member, Just Joined!, Linux Newbie and Linux User are the representative titles in Linux Questions and Linux Forums.

MaCNN offers a similar format to those already highlighted (New Member, Registered User, Forum Regular and Junior Member). Mac-Forums differs slightly, with a reputation system based on 'dots' with greater number of green 'dots' indicating User-Fan reputation and engagement within the forum (Mac-Forums, 2005). The number of 'dots' are dependent on the length of forum membership, number of posts, with limits placed on the number of ratings received and distributed in a day (Mac-Forums, 2005). Under this rating one can identify members who would qualify as *Casual* User-Fans (Mac-Forums, 2006).

2. Devoted

The *Devoted* User-Fan represents the middle level of intensity for operating system User-Fans. The differences between *Devoted* User-Fans and *Casual* User-Fans are marked, with *Devoted* User-Fans displaying stronger emotional bonds with their choice of operating system to an extent where it

becomes an important aspect of their internal and external expression of self. An example of this externalisation is the common practice of members posting their software/hardware specifications somewhere in their posts. Other examples include the appropriation of brands in nicknames and handles that are often linked to their choice of operating system. The *Devoted* User-Fan also exhibits a high level of interest and interaction within threads involving their operating systems but their responses are often succinct and to the point. During many of these posts the *Devoted* User-Fans are quick to recognise and broadcast that this topic or the operating system is not that important to them. This is a common recognition that the *Devoted* User-Fan establishes in terms of their self-definition. Essential to the concept of the *Devoted* member is an understanding that there exists levels of attachment lower than theirs but also members whose intensity and attachment exceeds this level. *Devoted* User-Fans, while often defined by higher levels of participation than *Casual* User-Fans, also incorporate significantly stronger acceptance from others through their displays of their knowledge, acceptance by the community of these displays, and their association with the community.

MaCNN offers a range of titles for the *Devoted* User-Fans including Mac Enthusiast, Dedicated MaCNNer and Senior User. Whereas for Mac-Forums they are defined as those members who have begun the reputation system and under fifteen reputation points (as defined by the 'reputation system' (Schweb, 2007)). Similar to MaCNN, the Windows forums offer a great range in defining moderate level User-Fan activity including WinXP Central Advisor, Trusted Advisor and Mentor; and Neowin's Resident Fanatic and Resident Elite. As with most forums, these titles are designated by the moderators and administrators of forums and are allocated on the basis of content, reputation and duration of membership. Allocated in a similar fashion, in the Linux arenas these User-Fans include Linux Forums' Linux Enthusiast and Linux Engineer; and Linux Questions' Member.

3. Geek

The highest level of User-Fan categorisation for this study will be recognised as *Geek* User-Fans. Using the Hunt et. al. (1999) template for the fanatical the *Geek* User-Fan represents community members who regard the operating system as a critical aspect of their online identity. Although the *Devoted* User-Fan appropriates the operating system as an important object in their self-definition, the *Geek* User-Fan does so with a greater intensity. *Geek* User-Fans express the importance of ‘their’ operating system in their life, and engage in interaction that benefits, supports or designates the importance of the operating system. Consistent with the hard-core sentiments the members of this classification display, they consistently have the highest levels of participation within the communities.

The dedication displayed by the *Geek* User-Fans often requires recognition by the community to elevate their status as integral members. Because of this, *Geek* User-Fans are often the most recognisable members within the online communities. This recognition granted by the community is an understanding of the *Geek* User-Fans’ high levels of expertise further justifying the time, community engagement and the centralisation of the operating system. Thus, the combination of high levels of participation and knowledge, the *Geek* User-Fans’ recognition makes them the most valued and recognisable community members. As such they are granted titles which separate them from the rest of the community. For example in Linux Forums titles include Linux Guru, Linux Engineer and Trusted Penguins. Importantly, the special title ‘Trusted Penguins’ is granted to members as a result of helpfulness, in-depth answers, and friendly manner towards others.

In Linux Questions’ forum, *Geek* User-Fans are identified as the assigned Senior Member or the granted title of Guru or LQ Addict. For Mac-Forums they can be defined as members with over fifteen reputation points, while MaCNN offers a range of titles, including Mac Elite, Professional Poster and

Addicted to MaCNN. The greatest discrepancy in titles is found at the *Geek User-Fan* level within the Windows arenas, with Neowin offering a greater range of titles than WinXpCentral. This, again, highlights the difference in nature between the technical and general forums with Neowin placing greater importance on participation rather than quality of the postings. While WinXpCentral offers the titles of Expert, Guru and the sole position of Master Guru, Neowin assigns numerous titles on the basis of many thousands of postings. These include Neowinian Senior, Neowinian Wise One, Neowinian UNSTOPPABLE, Neowinian DOMINATING, Neowinian ULTRAKILL, Neowinian Super Cool, Neowinian Super Star, Resident know-it-all, Resident post-it-all and Resident Rockstar.

Conclusion

This chapter has engaged with existing studies of fandom to illustrate how consumers have adopted similar patterns of attachment to mundane consumer products. Fandom frameworks that create hierarchical categories on the basis of intensity of adulation towards traditional objects of fandom (sporting teams and media) provide a platform for modes of consumer attachment and fandom (Hunt et. al. 1999; Redden & Steiner, 2000; Thorne & Bruner, 2006).

In returning again to the pre-existing hierarchies one encounters the first difficulties in adequately correlating them within the User-Fan framework. Although often defined solely upon terms of levels of intensity, it does not necessarily infer that it can be defined through commitment of participation. For example, in Linux Forums those who have been granted the title Member are incorporated in this study as both *Devoted* and *Casual* User-Fans. This is a result of the forum's loose definition of 'Members' in the hierarchy which, although still defined by participation, accounts for individuals who have posted between 30 and 999 times.

For the purpose of clarification between the communities' hierarchies and those unveiled as a result of netnographic research, this research takes into account the same formula of the computer-generated hierarchical titles. Just as the forums take into account length of membership and acceptance within the community to encompass such hierarchies, so too does this research. Acceptance within the community is of great importance as it avails the User-Fan a framework that avoids simply forming hierarchical categorizations through the quantity of posts, but rather also accounts for the ratings of the quality of their posts as assessed by their community peers. By incorporating these markers, this netnographic research is able to present a significant contribution as to how these communities are sustained through User-Fan activity.

Chapter Four Consumer Society in the Operating System Forums

Aside from participating in the signification of brands in the formulation of their identities, User-Fans who participate in operating system communities are also members of a culture where the acceptance of consumer society is the norm. Just as the aforementioned critiques have described the ascension and acceptance of mass-market consumerism, these online communities offer little to differentiate themselves from the predominant consumer behaviour in the modern world. Here I attempt to evaluate the role of consumerism amongst operating system communities and their relationship to the wider culture of the consumer society. In this sense, this chapter will attempt to express the domineering presence of marketplace, the value of consumption and the manner in which User-Fans, regardless of their presumed ideological stance, adhere to or resist these cultural norms.

To investigate the influence of the consumer society within operating system communities, a common thread in these forums is highlighted. By choosing threads that focus upon User-Fan discussion of the next-generation or update of the operating system rather than the current version, we are able to investigate notions of choice, freedom and individuality that are central to modern consumerism. For the requirements of this study, these threads will generally be referred to as the “Next Release” threads. To clarify, during the time frame of this study the accepted version of the “Next Release” threads in Windows forums focused upon the release of Vista. Similar threads were also commonly presented in the Mac and Linux forums.

The influence of the consumer society in these threads can be understood as a consequence of the technological focus these discussion forums are based upon. Yet in discussing the potential of technological innovation, they also relegate our present experience of the world to the background. Thus, the

focus of User-Fan attention was skewed towards future purchases and further consumption rather than present use. These threads neglected the experience of the 'old operating system' replacing it with the potentials of the upcoming version. There is an interesting relationship between innovative technology and modern consumerism, one that Castells labelled the merging forces of the techno-utopia of 'informationalism'. Castells (1999, p. 367) argues that "under informationalism, the generation of wealth, the exercise of power and the creation of cultural codes came to depend on the technological capacity of societies and individuals, with information technology as the core of this capacity." In embracing the consumer society as well as informationalism (or the similar concepts of technocracy and technicism), operating system User-Fans confront the 'new' from two similar but distinct perspectives.

Thus, in this study's settings, 'newness' provides an opportunity to satisfy both the technological superiority sought under informationalism and the consumer society's formation of hierarchies of distinction through ownership. Through consumer operating systems, User-Fans appropriate symbols of the consumer society as cultural capital for the structuring of relationships. By searching for future consumption, User-Fans illustrate a desire to distinguish themselves in attaining status amongst their fellow User-Fans. For example, in participating in a thread focused on the potential date of software release, User-Fans display a form of consumerist informationalism that combines reverence for knowledge, technology, and consumption and cultural capital.

By focusing on the supposedly technologically superior operating system the 'Next-Release' threads turn User-Fan attention towards their membership within the consumer society by prompting them to consider imminent market participation as a means of distinguishing themselves within consumer communities. By connecting User-Fans with the concept of future products these threads generate cultural codes which subsequently take the form of cultural capital employed to distinguish individuals within the consumer society. Additionally, by discussing the probability of the new operating

system, User-Fans prepare for the transition from one form of legitimate form of cultural capital to another. Importantly, though, this capital remains under the power of the brand, or at the very least, the corporate producer of the good. In this sense, these threads display how User-Fans identify with the significance of the branded product within their social lives. By presenting their behaviour in a situation where the cultural capital is yet to be determined (that is where the product does not exist), this study is able to highlight how consumer-based distinction is formulated and the forces, both internal and external to the individual, that determine these.

Consumerism among Windows User-Fans

Even on first impressions of the Windows forums, it becomes apparent that User-Fans dedicated to their community are not slavish devotees or inherently submissive to the logic of the consumer society. For example, during late-2006, User-Fans in the technical forum, *WinXPCentral* met the imminent release of Vista with some trepidation. This was of interest on two levels. First it demonstrated the ability of User-Fans to act independently from the market, brand expectations and the associated pressures on their identities. Secondly, the trepidation or unwillingness to alter their current form of operating system demonstrated an ability of community members to counter slavish consumerism and instead focus on the ideals inherent in informationalism. This was illustrated in User-Fan *McNulty's* (Figure 4.1) ability to disassociate their identity from the pressures of the consumer society and brand adulation associated with operating systems by continuing with the status quo (XP).

Figure 4.1

McNulty
Post #6
03-10-2006, 09:00 PM
Member
Administrator

Posts: 49

I too have been reading a lot of comments by beta testers that are less than impressed with Windows Vista so far. One talked about be totally locked out of their machine, others say the restrictions as computer admin are too much of a hassle. Then as pointed out, the heavy hardware upgrades. Top that off with the OEM license changes, as in it adds to further frustration to people who build there own computers and their already over heated feelings toward Microsoft. Man, I don't know. Time will tell.

I'm may do the switch to linux in a big way and use WinXP just for gaming. The only thing that interests me is DirectX 10, and some security features. Sure the eye candy is nice, but the I can see myself turning that stuff off after a week. The same goes for desktop search, yeech.

Mac is not an option for me. For one, it's too proprietary and where I live, they are not easily obtainable. Yes I could purchase one off the web, but what do I do when I need to have it serviced?

Despite this thread sparking an illusion of independence of Windows User-Fans from their de-facto association with the consumer society, the existence of other forces cannot be disregarded. One possibility behind their allegiance to a 'stable' and 'functional' edition of Windows may have less to do with the influence of the market, but rather the arena through which the exchanges took place. Occurring in a 'technical' forum, the conversation inhabited an arena that focused less on the logic of the consumer society through the signification of products and more so on the influence of informationalism promoting signification within Windows (as a brand) of technical stability and functionality. Thus, User-Fans remain attached to Windows as platform and brand but prefer its market predecessor rather than its successor.

From the perspective of informationalism, User-Fan critiques of Vista can be viewed as a localised movement to ensure the technological capacity of their peers are sustained. By engaging with the cultural power they have earned through the forums, User-Fans are able to exert their influence in a manner that promotes the symbolic importance of technical superiority, stability and functionality. Of course, these are notions of distinction which are determined

amongst the community and the market through symbols. Thus, despite the illusion that these User-Fans are able to differentiate themselves from, such displays do not in any way exempt them from the symbolic ideology of the consumer society. Here, the role of consumer was never discouraged; rather it was the manipulative market that was the focus of concern. In doing so User-Fans do nothing more than continue to mediate the accepted norms of the consumer society by continuing the sovereignty of the consumer. In fact, these User-Fans further demonstrate the two notions of distinction. The first relates to the manner in which consumers distinguish themselves from 'the pack' on the pretence of discerning taste (in this case technical knowledge or refusal to be manipulated). The second, and related manner, is how User-Fans develop symbolic notions of difference in relation to the level of intensity and inherent knowledge of their brand's membership in the consumer society.

The centrality of Windows to these User-Fans and their identities offers an insight into the commodification of culture. Not content with the commodity being the focal point of their attention in this context, the User-Fan culture encourages discussions on the future consumption of commodities. To this extent, the act of being a consumer was more powerful than being a fan, user or citizen. A thread titled '*The Next Version of Windows – Suggestions*' was one example in the neowin forums that contained discussions focused on the topic. Unlike the WinXpCentral thread, the neowin example is easily identifiable as a conversation on the 'Next Release'. It also differed from its technical counterpart in that the thread did not question the potential to consume. Rather, the neowin User-Fans assumed that their peers would partake in the act of consumption and, instead, regarded the question "what do they want in it" a more crucial concern. Posts such as those made by *Rawls* (Figure 4.2) illustrated the resignation of User-Fans towards their inevitable consumption of another version of Windows. In particular reference to these Users, the illustration of their dissatisfaction with the announcement of the name of the 'next release' (i.e. Vista) demonstrates the market orientation of Windows User-Fans.

Figure 4.2

Rawls
Jul 22 2005, 06:50
Post #4
I am God's pincushion
Group: Registered
Posts: 2,031
Joined: 8-October 03

dont really like the name Vista...doesn't look strong...sounds more like an ice cream name.....i guess i just have to wait till it grows on me...vista...muh!

Despite negatively responding to the announcement, the new name and other aspects of the software itself, User-Fans still seemed resigned to the consumption of Vista in the future. The response of *Rawls* (Figure 4.2) illustrated the persuasiveness of the commodity in the consumer society. Their desire for a brand name (...doesn't look strong...sounds more like an ice cream name) illustrates their alertness to the manipulation of consumers by brand marketing. As active participants in this process, they judge the merits of the brand name and the signs that are (or to be) embedded within it, rather than the merits of the product itself. The response "i guess i just have to wait till it grows on me...vista...muh!" also displayed an acknowledgment of consumers' passive role in the consumer society despite their allegiance to specific brands and products.

Sentiments such as those expressed by *Rawls* illustrate the inability of many User-Fans to think outside the consumerist ideology, the symbolic meanings they embed in objects of consumption, and how it is manifest in the society around them. The two posts illustrate that within these User-Fan communities, significations (such as brands) are held in a similar, if not higher, regard to functionality and price. It is in this sense that User-Fans are defined as actors in the consumer society. Where the product defines them as User-Fans, signifiers such as branding (and the related prestige or worth

that is created from them) are the tools which help symbolically distinguish them from others. Using *Rawls* as an example, he/she may not like the name but is willing to accept the signs embedded in the product due his loyalty towards the Windows. From this acceptance outsiders are able to distinguish the Use-Fan through these signs which represent the recognizable identity of a Windows User-Fan.

Another thread that presents a further clarification of the impact of consumerism amongst the Windows community was raised when *Bunk* asks “Why do we need vista, whats wrong with xp” (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3

Bunk
Post #1
Jan 30 2007, 06:14
Neowinian³
Posts: 427

Why do we need vista, whats wrong with xp. Personally I dont think there is anything wrong with xp ,ms could have improved xp instead of making a whole new operating system. Whats after vista and will ms copy apple. I am sure by now most people are happy and used to xp.

To some, this may have seemed a legitimate question, an appeal for evidence as to the existence of alternative views to the consumer status quo. However, when compared to the Windows User-Fans who answer the question (yet respond to the ‘Next Version’ threads), bunk’s view is in the minority. The first response did not answer this question within the parameters of the consumer identity, rather it offered a technical or ‘computing’ justification for the upgrade. In responding to this, *Daniels* (Figure 4.4) ignores the question of “why we need vista” and instead addresses why it will be an improvement.

Figure 4.4

Daniels
Post #2
Jan 30 2007, 06:26
Zero Point Module
Posts: 4,520

Why do we need XP? What's wrong with Windows 95? Windows 3.11?

Windows XP is 5 years old. That's an eternity in the computing word, and a lot of the stuff in Vista couldn't be added to it without the major changes that justify a whole new release. Completely new driver models, DirectX 10, desktop composition, a totally new network stack, redesigning so much of the shell around indexing, better performance than XP with newer hardware, etc, etc. None of that could go into XP, because in essence, you'd have Vista.

I recommend you read this:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Features_new_to_Windows_Vista

The response also contained similarities with Castells' informationalism. In this response *Daniels* equates "5 years old" as a default problem or undesirable aspect. In turn it represents a justification that new must be desirable. Such logic seems to define the ICT industry and its surrounding consumer communities, where numerous pressures (both technological and consumerist) means no one is content to remain in the present. Similarly, the fourth post in the thread illustrated the fetish of the new amongst User-Fans and their consumption of signs (Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5

Kima
Post #4
Jan 30 2007, 06:27
Resident Elite
Posts: 1,480

They need to make money you know... plus people like us want to explore new things. Plus, there are lot more features in Windows Vista that you might or might not know.

Devoted User-Fan *Kima* insightfully highlighted “people like us want to explore new things”. In this response, *Kima* (Figure 4.5) also demonstrated an understanding of Microsoft’s position as a business, beginning the response with “they need to make money you know.” Thus, in a single sentence, one community member displayed an awareness of the consumer society, with a level of recognition or self-awareness of their role in it that is not often fully appreciated in this context. In this sense, *Kima*’s justification for other User-Fans to buy Vista (as a product) lies not in desire but rather a cynical disposition towards the ideology of consumerism. In cases where consumers appear unaware of their subordination to consumerism, it is often unclear whether their lack of awareness is tempered by their desire for goods or for the lack of viable alternatives within the market.

For Windows User-Fans’ the symbolic integration of the product to their identity is also a factor in their continued consumption of Windows. This integration can impact in the resignation or obligation illustrated previously but also emerges in the knowledge of the more devoted User-Fans. An example of this is found in the contribution of *Herc* (Figure 4.6) to the thread.

Figure 4.6

Herc
Post #51
Feb 1 2007, 03:26
shell dude
Posts: 9,867

Quote:

I'm sorry, what? Do a search for Peter Guttman. Never heard of SPDIF I take it? HDCP? Vista is the most DRM fulled OS ever made, ever. Take a look over the vendor specifications; you can kiss good-bye to any 3rd party drivers as they now require a specific certificate to work on Vista.

I've hard of Guttman, and read his piece of fiction. Everything he says in there is completely wrong. Vista doesn't require any special "certificates" (I assume you're talking about driver signing) any more than Windows XP does. 64-bit editions of Windows don't allow you to run unsigned drivers in kernel mode,

though a lot of people don't seem to understand what that means. For example, Nvidia's unsigned drivers install perfectly fine on Vista x64.

If you haven't actually read Guttman's piece, I suggest you do - but actually think about what he's saying. For example, he claims that Vista will prevent you from listening to SACD content over an S/PDIF connection... on your non-existent SACD drive. Oh right, he forgot to mention that he's full of crap, and no PC can play SACD content, let alone restrict how you play it. It's all garbage, and you're doing yourself a disservice if you're holding off on upgrading because of that pile of rubbish.

As a Geek User-Fan (one could question whether he is 'From: Redmond, WA'), *Herc* demonstrates an intense devotion to Windows. He displays a depth of knowledge which curtails any criticisms, while at the same time using the positive review as an avenue to encourage other User-Fans to buy the product. This knowledge is displayed in his dismissal of security-specialist Peter Guttman and through his full explanation why he believes that what Guttman says is incorrect. By announcing extensive knowledge, *Herc* simultaneously discredits the arguments of *Bubbles* (and Guttman) and encourages other User-Fans to buy Vista whilst also cementing his position as an authority in the community.

A final illustration of consumerism acting in association with User-Fan devotion was forwarded by Devoted User-Fan *Omar* (Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7

Omar
Post #85 Feb 6 2007, 11:03
Neowinian
Group: Registered
Posts: 1,256
Joined: 15-July 02

Infact you dont need it at all. The marketing makes you THINK you need it. They design programs so you need it. But in reality if you had windows 2000 you would be just fine. The companies are making programs not run on these older OS so you have to upgrade. In 2000 you got by just fine with windows 2000. Why

couldnt u just get by with it now? I think the market is making you need it when in reality no one needs it unless you like the eye candy.

Its marketing at work.

Everyone thinks vista is so great now when in reality 10 yrs later it will be a POS. Or at least they think it will ;-). If you know what I mean.

By claiming “the marketing makes you THINK you need it,” *Omar* demonstrates the self-awareness of others who adopt this approach within the consumer society. Instead of furthering his critique, aspects of a User-Fan identity emerge. The comments “they design programs so you need it” and “no one needs it unless you like the eye candy” excuses Microsoft from their business model (for example file format lock-in), emphasising the User-Fan’s perception of the shared-relationship between consumer and producer. Further evidence in this User-Fan’s perception is the comment “In 2000 you got by just fine with windows 2000...” that promotes the concept of individual choice within the consumer society. By highlighting the relative ‘uselessness’ of some aspects of the software (“in reality no one needs it unless you like the eye candy”) and how this is constructed into a ‘use value’ through symbolic manipulation by the producer (“It’s marketing at work”), this User-Fan places responsibility of purchase and Microsoft market dominance on consumers.

In this sense Windows User-Fans can be viewed as engaged consumers rather than Microserfs, as their market consumption is clearly a choice rather than an enforced act. While Microsoft may attempt to manipulate symbols and consumers, for these User-Fans, Windows sufficiently fulfils their requirements (both as consumers and fans). While the theoretical argument between who exerts the most power within the consumer society is a different area of debate, for these User-Fans, Microsoft’s operating system hegemony appears to be a consequence of the individualist endeavour of empowered consumers and their support of Microsoft Windows as the most appropriate operating system platform.

Consumerism amongst Mac User-Fans

When discussing the Mac User-Fans position within a consumer society, the symbiotic relationship between Apple software and hardware is firmly entrenched. In threads focused on the imminent release of new software (or hardware for that matter), User-Fans inevitably discuss the potential release of new Apple brand hardware (or software). For this study the 'Next Release' Mac brand communities focused on the wait between OS X 10.4 (commonly referred to as Tiger) and OS X 10.5 (also known as Leopard). The most engaging discussions on this topic were found in the *MaCNN* forums under the titles of '*The 10.5 Wishlist*' and '*The official Leopard thread*'. Essentially, these two threads were one and the same (the 10.5 Wish-list is a precursor to the official announcement of Leopard as the nickname of OSX 10.5). Whereas '*The 10.5 Wishlist*' discussed requests and expected additions, '*The official Leopard*' thread (Figure 4.8) analysed them in terms of the additions or omissions from the 'preview' versions of the operating system. In a similar vein to the Windows forums, these threads generally focus on the technical improvements members expect to see in the 'new release'.

Figure 4.8

Dude
Addicted to MacNN
Oct 1, 2005, 03:26 AM

Originally Posted by OreoCookie
stop this GUI mess and finally converge Brushed Metal, Aqua, ProApps and Mail to a more sophisticated Mail-like interface with all the proApps goodies I'd like to second that. It's my number one request for any future OS X version. As far as I'm concerned, if they don't do that, they might as well not release a 10.5 at all.

Some other things I'd like to see:

- an X11 that actually works (umm, no, come to think of it, I want that in 10.4.3)

- make Preview be able to display and save PostScript directly and not just via (a sometimes lengthy) conversion to PDF
 - portable /~ so I can take my stuff with me everywhere and also login to my own /~ on another Mac (there used to be a home on iPod project)
 - remote desktop should be a part of the standard OS X package so that I can open a new user session on a remote Mac in a window of its own or even full-screen right from the login panel after booting
 - a Keynote/Pages version of Excel; not because Excel sucks as bad as PowerPoint or Word, but just because it's fugly and a pain to work with. Keynote and Pages are so much more comfortable (and beautiful!), I'd like to see Apple do the same for Excel
 - Automator needs to be able to access more apps and system functions (like, why can't I use Automator to write a backup script with DU and ASR?)
 - Either get AppleScript's 'record' button to work or get it the hell off the GUI!
 - and finally, for the love of God, desktop icons shouldn't get covered by the dock, ever
- (Last edited by Simon; Oct 1, 2005 at 03:34 AM.)

The technical requests in both threads ranged from improvement of the existing software applications (including Safari, iChat, Finder) to specific Geek User-Fan requirements (*Walters's* suggestion of “support the adium emoticon format”). The post by member *Dude* (Figure 4.8) was indicative of the high levels of expectation Geek User-Fans express towards a forthcoming release. The most notable aspect of this posting was that it responded to both the original call for a wish list, as well as the comments of *Maude*. In doing so, *Dude* demonstrated a higher level of intensity towards the topic beyond those of the average consumer and addresses others with a similar intensity.

As a Geek User-Fan, *Dude* demonstrated the importance these technical changes would have upon ‘his’ operating system. The inclusion of comments such as “AppleScript’s ‘record’ button”, “Automator needs to be able to access more apps and system functions” and “Safari needs built-in add blocking like PH” point toward the technical upgrades common to most of the comments in these threads. *Dude's* suggestions “I want user control...over

what the 'Services' menu display" and "It would be nice if Apple cleaned up the system a bit and made sure stuff goes to the proper place" indicate a deeper level of engagement with the operating system. It is dedication such as this that separates the intensity levels of the User-Fans.

A common response in these threads was the desire of Mac User-Fans for the Mac OSX to run Windows applications natively (that is under the Mac OSX without third-party or bridging software). Considering these requests occurred in a Mac community, it could be assumed that they were to be forwarded to Apple by Casual User-Fans or recent 'switchers'. Despite this assumption, there was also a genuine request from Devoted User-Fans in the community (see *Dude's* request for "an X11 like implementation of WINE for Mactels, just to shut up the gamers."). This suggests that the User-Fans consider a number of factors beyond technical competence or improvement. In a sense, this represents a merging of informationalism and consumerism with Mac User-Fans requests viewed as an acknowledgment of their need for the power and legitimacy found in the massive user-base of Microsoft's platform.

The discussion of Windows also highlighted a phenomenon amongst User-Fans that involves consumerism, knowledge and assumed improvement of technology. This is also a key element of Castells' informationalism. An assumption of technological improvement is a primary driver of informationalism where wealth and power are dependent on the regeneration and emergence of cultural symbols as a result of technological innovation (Castells, 1999, p. 367). Furthermore, informationalism is deeply entrenched in the culture of Mac User-Fans to the point where discussions of future innovation and consumption are distinct areas of symbolic interaction. One post in the 'New Release' threads introduced the 'insider' to knowledge that many of the more intense User-Fans display. Devoted User-Fan *Donny* (Figure 4.9) attempts to illustrate unique knowledge that also acts to encourage fellow User-Fans to use the 'next release'.

Figure 4.9

Donny
Senior User
Jul 26, 2006, 04:12 PM

I promise you there will be NO virtualization in 10.5, that's the next OS release. Apple's solution for 10.5 will be bootcamp aka booting into windows. There will be VMWare, and Parralles which both will get faster with time.

The comment “I promise you there will be NO virtualization in 10.5...” plays on the member’s legitimacy within the community to divulge information that will encourage the use of OSX 10.5. The announcement that “There will be VMWare, and Parralle[l]s which both will get faster with time” reflects the common assumption that ‘the new will be better than the old’ – a key element of not only informationalism but modern consumerism. Despite *Donny*’s ‘promise’, fellow Devoted User-Fan *Brandt* (Figure 4.10) questions the legitimacy of these comments.

Figure 4.10

Brandt
Professional Poster
Aug 2, 2006, 09:17 AM

Originally Posted by inkhead
I promise you there will be NO virtualization in 10.5, that's the next OS release. Apple's solution for 10.5 will be bootcamp aka booting into windows. There will be VMWare, and Parralles which both will get faster with time.

How do you know this for sure?

In asking “How do you know this for sure?” *Brandt* not only questioned the origin of this knowledge but also requests evidence of it. This can be viewed as a form of community regulation ensuring the cultural legitimacy of the hierarchy. The lack of subsequent response by *Donny* acts as evidence of how User-Fans were able to construct their own realities and subsequently

influence fellow User-Fans' (and consumers) knowledge of products without the involvement of corporate regulation, coercion or suggestion.

In the discussions of the 'Next Release,' the link between software and hardware offered a further perspective on the extent to which User-Fans were embedded within the logic of the consumerism influenced by informationalism. All User-Fans linked in these discussions were often focused on impending release dates, cost, and individual desire for the product. The extent to which consumerism was engrained in the psyche of the Mac User-Fans was highlighted by the readiness of individuals to consume a great number of Apple products. An instance that firmly illustrated the software/hardware link was a *MaCNN* thread titled "Apple 30" vs. Dell 24"". Initiated by *Uli Kunkel* (Figure 4.11), the thread asked for an "opinion" to the 'problem' of consumer choice.

Figure 4.11

Uli Kunkel

Forum Regular

Feb 22, 2005, 01:07 PM

I'm going to be buying a big lcd soon (like 2 months) and I want to know your opinions for this:

Should I spend the big bucks with Edu discount on the beautiful 30" Apple display or go for the ugly 24" and by meself some more RAM/Hard drives?

OR:

Should I wait 'till Apple can get their act together and give us portrait and memory card readers

Thanks a lot

The Casual User-Fan's post offered an insight into the emphasis Mac User-Fans placed upon continued consumerism. The User-Fan highlighted that a "big lcd" (monitor) was in his/her future plans. That the individual did not establish a justification for this potential purchase suggests that the member is passively adhering to consumer desires. In other words the need for the product is never questioned. In this case at least, what was of question was

the desire of an individual of low community standing to consume in a manner worthy of their fellow User-Fans. This illustrated a kind of fetish towards consumerism, and furthermore, an illustration that a successful consumer society does not rely on subsistence consumption but rather it succeeds when its members consume for reasons that sometimes negate logic. For example, the options given are a “30” Apple display” or a 24” Dell monitor and “some more RAM/Hard drives”.

Uli Kunkel also displayed the common acceptance of hearsay and speculation of future products that is somewhat in line with Castells’ informationalism. With no substance behind these comments, *Uli Kunkel* creates their own consumerist fantasy. The comment “Should I wait ‘till Apple...” relates to the User-Fan’s perceived deficiencies in Apple’s products and the User-Fan suggested a solution to these. In hoping for these solutions, which may or may not be prophetic, immerses the User-Fan within the rhetoric of consumerism and the hold it has upon the community and its members. In this sense the ideology of the consumer society has enveloped *Uli Kunkel* (and others) to consider consumption as the illusionary priority in life.

Although the signs of consumerism established amongst Mac User-Fans were quite evident, there remained relationships with the brand that were quite distinct from the consumer objectives. In highlighting these, I refer to notions of value, performance and legitimacy related to informationalism. These factors influence User-Fans’ perceptions that these technologies have a role in their lives beyond their worth as a tool. For example in the same thread begun by member *Uli Kunkel*, numerous responses posted advice in relation to the value and performance of Apple products. The response of *Kieffer* (Figure 4.12) demonstrated some of the User-Fan perceptions of these.

Figure 4.12

Keiffer
Senior User
Join Date: Jan 2001
Status: Offline
Feb 26, 2005, 11:44 AM

Well, here is what Ive just done:

I just got the Samsung 24", its \$100 less than the 23" apple, and has a \$100 rebate. it goes into portrait display. its fanstastic. I watch HDTV on it with my DIVCO card. I got this now although Im waiting for the next rendition of the G5 for that (running a dual 1gz G4) because FRYS in Ca allows no question 30 day retuns.

Id die to spent that kind of money and have dead pixels and then argue with apple.

but beware: apple OEM cards probably do not support rota[t]ion of the screen. ive asked this in this forum and a moderator with so many stars says they don't. ATI and NVIDIA out of their box supposedly does.

went to apple palo alto and asked the genius and they really didn't know but they promised to 'escalet' the q and get back to me by email.

....

It seems *Keiffer* was offering a practical performance based assessment (Figure 4.12). This discussion focused upon the performance of the monitors (the 'portrait' aspect of the question), while offering yet another possible commodity. It was clear, however, that the option (Samsung 24") was equal to the original choices as it cost less than the "23" apple", which was presumably less costly than the 30" option in question. This further option served to continue the consumer logic by offering additional possibilities outside of Apple's 'lair'. In offering a critique of the potential consumer choices, User-Fans empower themselves within the market and in doing so, they should not be thought of as mere consumers in a passive sense but active community members seeking to influence both manufacturers and fellow User-Fans. However it does not constitute unwitting consumption by Mac User-Fans rather it questions it in terms of 'what' rather than 'why' and to a lesser extent 'when'.

The question of what to consume sometimes occurred when discussing the ‘next release’ of OSX. Although these types of threads have a long history in the *MaCNN* forums, thus providing an opportunity for User-Fans to interact, debate and shared knowledge, when it came to the question of upgrading the operating system the debate was often biased. For example the release of OS X 10.4 (Panther) was followed by similar User-Fan enthusiasm as the aforementioned Leopard release. In a response to a question concerning the worth of upgrading submitted by Casual User-Fan *Franz*, Devoted User-Fan *Brandt* (Figure 4.13) illustrated User-Fans’ readiness to consume and their influence on others.

Figure 4.13

Brandt
Professional Poster
Feb 9, 2004, 04:49 AM
Originally posted by cash:
Hi everyone!
I am still running Jaguar and am planning to upgrade real soon,
but i was wondering if anyone knows or can speculate how long
it will be before Apple releases the next version of OSX?
Upgrading my OSX isnt critical so i wouldnt mind waiting
Thanks!
--
Franz
Jan 05, will cost 129 USD will blow our minds.
You should upgrade to panther before then, its well worth the money.

In this posting, there was no question of whether the cost is reasonable, instead it was used to confirm *Brandt’s* attempt to influence User-Fan *Franz*. This is despite *cash* mentioning that an upgrade “isn’t critical.” One reason to explain *Brandt’s* attempt was an inability to separate his User-Fandom from consumerism. It is in this sense that User-Fans may be blinded by their devotion to their products rather than need, worth and value.

Perhaps the most indicative sign of Mac User-Fans’ desire to consume came in their enthusiasm for Apple’s Macworld presentations. These threads

became arenas where the ‘insider’ knowledge and blatant speculation dominate. However, in these arenas one can discover the consumerist desires of User-Fans and the strength of their devotion to Apple. Casual User-Fan *Smokey* (Figure 4.14) seemed to mimic the accepted norms of the Mac User-Fan, illustrating the desire and anticipation to consume.

Figure 4.14

Smokey
Dedicated MacNNer
Nov 8, 2006, 02:42 PM

Now that we have a refresh in iPods, iMacs, MB Pros & MB what is left for Stevie to show us during the MWSF, apart from iTV and iLife/iWork updates (maybe Leo)? I have a gut feeling that there is something big brewing in Cupertino.

While many of the MacWorld announcements during the period of study were highlighted with major hardware announcements that seemed to excite User-Fans, there remained an underlying enthusiasm for operating system upgrades. The response of Devoted User-Fan *Marty* (Figure 4.15) to *Jesus Quintana’s* lack of enthusiasm (‘Looking to be a boring MacWorld’) demonstrates this.

Figure 4.15

Marty
Addicted to MacNN
Nov 8, 2006, 03:14 PM

Originally Posted by Jesus Quintana
Looking to be a boring MacWorld.
10.5 and its secret features is enough for me to make it non-boring.

By focusing on “10.5 and its secret features” *Marty* identifies his devotion towards not only the operating system, but also its links with Apple culture and his desire to consume it. It also highlights the anticipation and enthusiasm that User-Fans create surrounding these dates, only to be let

down when these (sometimes unrealistic) expectations are not met. A similar thread titled 'No Update On 10.5? No New Apps?' (Figure 4.16) demonstrates this point further, but also contextualizes the devotion of the Mac User-Fan within the wider consumer society.

Figure 4.16

Knox
Senior User
Jan 9, 2007, 03:21 PM

While I was impressed with the product releases today, I was surprised that there were no new applications or any mention of Leopard. The only real software is OS X running on iPhone which is impressive in its own right, but I would have liked to see what new features might be coming our way.

Does this mean that Leopard doesn't really have any new features other than what was already mentioned? Perhaps it is behind in development? Or maybe Apple is going to pull one of its special "media events" in a few months to announce new products?

Should we be concerned about the name change to Apple Inc. or is this just a formality and not an indication that Apple is looking more towards furthering itself in cosumer electronics and less in computers?

Here, devoted User-Fan *Knox* (Figure 4.16) posts a concern about the absence of a Mac OS (Leopard) announcement at the 2007 MacWorld. Although "impressed" with the products available (and the possibility of consumption), the User-Fan displays disappointment that there was no mention of the operating system ("I would have liked to see what new features might be coming our way"). This post also highlights the extent of User-Fan devotion to their operating system, and not simply the products that Apple present to them.

The response of Geek User-Fan *The Stranger* (Figure 4.17) to *Knox* highlights the unique consumer identities of operating system User-Fans in the context of a wider consumer society.

Figure 4.17

The Stranger
Professional Poster
Jan 9, 2007, 04:13 PM

The internet has been ablaze for weeks now about nothing but the iPhone. Apple did the right thing by focusing this MacWorld on it. It is an amazing product and as far as I know, no other cellphone comes close to doing what the iPhone can. Spend an hour talking about nothing but this, show off every single facet of it, and let the media do the rest. By there not being a single word of Leopard and iLife brings me to think that a 'media event' will come up shortly which will be for Leopard.

In the introduction where *The Stranger* notes that “the internet has been ablaze for weeks” over the imminent release, one can identify an area of distinction between the interest of a consumer society (for example the iPhone) and Mac OS User-Fans. Where both *The Stranger* and *Knox* demonstrate a desire for a new operating system by commenting on the likelihood of a separate ‘media event’, it would seem that others were more concerned with buying an iPhone. In saying this, both User-Fans consolidate their membership as Mac User-Fans by commenting on the ‘impressive’ and ‘amazing’ product that Apple has produced. In this sense, they continue to be ‘marketeers’ for Apple, encouraging fellow User-Fans to consume.

Through their deep and centred connections between self and product, Windows and Mac User-Fans express differing extents of their relationships with the consumer society. Under the context of consumerism both groups of User-Fan display connections to ‘their’ brands on both symbolic (the Apple or Microsoft brand) and material (operating system, other products) levels. On the material level each group of User-Fan displayed a varied and multi-layered intensity towards current, past, and imminent versions of operating system softwares. It is within this unique acceptance of branded goods that individuals are able to be distinguished as User-Fans involved in product-centric reactions to modern consumerism. The differences emerge when

considering the manner in which brand loyalists engage in their relationships within the community towards certain aspects of each brand.

A further consistency amongst Mac User-Fans is the belief in the processes which underpin society's general shift towards informationalism. In their symbolic reference to the Mac-centric consumption of technology, these User-Fans define their relationship in reference to its empowering influence. This techno-utopian influence is reflected in Mac User-Fans correlations between software, freedom and choice. While this may be an ego-centric ideal on behalf of Mac User-Fans, it also reflects a view of the world where technological consumption provides us with an enhanced life.

By including aspects which readily define the brand and wider concepts of modern consumer ideology, User-Fan cultures display significant 'brand culture' differences. Windows User-Fans illustrate different levels of consumer involvement and engagement with branding. Windows User-Fans allow greater diversity in their consumer lives by interacting with their brand at a critical distance, thus demonstrating a sense of connection to consumerism without necessarily participating in it. Conversely, Mac User-Fans display a greater readiness to accept the products forwarded by Apple and thus display a tendency to create a hierarchy of consumption in which they selectively identify products to consume and centre their fandom on. It is in these differences that one is able to illustrate the interplay between the individual, the social, the forces of production and the symbolic power incorporated within each. Thus, it is through their choice of either Windows or Mac, User-Fans distinguish themselves as symbolic members of a shared reaction to modes of production.

Consumerism and Linux

Given the nature that the three operating systems approach proprietary ownership of software code, one would presume that the Linux communities would offer a distinct alternative to the consumer society. However, although often critical of non-Open-Source standards, Linux User-Fans, like their Windows and Mac contemporaries, often adhere to most of the ideological standards common to the consumer society. The role of consumerism in the construction of the Linux User-Fans' identity can be viewed from varied perspectives. Amongst User-Fans the logic can either be understood as having the same presence as society as a whole; as a force resisted by the community itself; or finally, as an ideological pillar for debates which denounce or proclaim its influence. The intensity with which User-Fans address the consumer society are paralleled in the philosophies underpinning the GNU Public License.

In defining an alternative approach to consumerism the GNU Public License adopts a formative assumption that GNU software adheres to a philosophy of liberty and freedom. As previously discussed, liberty in this sense refers to the freedom of developers to develop and users to use. This freedom, however, does not specifically alienate freedom from market consumption. This is specifically discussed by Stallman (1998, 2001) who argues that free software does not mean non-commercial. In turn, this relegates market consumption and the other 'norms' of the consumer society to be permissible under this legal proclamation. Under this philosophy, consumers have the right to consume through the market, just as they possess the right not to.

By implementing the GNU Public Licence as a guideline, it may be fair to assume that Linux has evolved as a consequence of the prevailing social and economic conditions of its time. However, rather than existing as a philosophical alternative to the predominance of consumption, Linux remains entrapped within the dominant ideology of consumer society. In fact, it would

not be a stretch to suggest that it has encouraged increased levels of consumerism. While not specifically market-based, the GNU Public License demands improvement in the product and is enamoured with the idea of continued consumption amongst the community. Unlike the Windows and Mac User-Fans, the Linux User-Fans exist in a state of flux whereby decisions of market or non-market based consumerism are often held at the liberty of the consumer, not the producer. Illustrating the diversity of the argument surrounding consumer logic was (now banned Devoted User-Fan) *Pink* (Figure 4.18) who specifically argued for Linux to emerge in popular culture.

Figure 4.18

Pink
Banned
Posts: 567

I wish for Linux to "come into its own" to the degree that any average citizen of any country on Earth would not hesitate to *laugh* in the face of anyone who was dumb enough to try FUD tactics...

Pink's desire for Linux to "come into its own" seems equated with entering popular culture. Whether it was ever intended to be a popular consumer good or 'free' is debatable but the desire for it to be accepted was an aim for *CodeRoot's* operating system, and consequently he believed it should be for the communities and individuals who use it. Criticism of "FUD tactics" (Fear, Uncertainty, Doubt) corresponds with Microsoft's market strategy, and his encouragement "to laugh in the face" of the purveyors of these tactics seemed to be aimed at them. FUD tactics are strategic attempts by corporate entities to influence the public by disseminating negative information. For Linux User-Fans, it was a common perception that Microsoft implements such tactics in an attempt to quash the challenge from Linux. Using this understanding, one could suggest that *Pink's* desire for Linux to "come into its own" related to overcoming the dominance of Microsoft.

Despite the liberty to actively participate, construct and consume their brand of the Linux, most User-Fans remained constrained by the common consumer logic present in society. This would be considerably different to the networks Linux developers create, whereby choice is further opened to them due to their skills and non-reliance on the market or sharing of code. In some cases it seemed as if the User-Fans within the forums find it difficult to balance their allegiances to Linux and its philosophy with the allure of the consumer society and its ideology. Once again, the 'Next Release' threads illustrated this dilemma. Of central importance to this study is a LinuxForums thread entitled 'What do you wish for linux?' Rather than discussing specific commercial distributions of Linux, the thread asked for User-Fans' general requests for Linux as an operating system and as a movement. This is an important thread as many of these members demonstrate an understanding of the Open-Source movement, Linux's role in the operating system market and its deficiencies as software.

Thread instigator *Slater* (Figure 4.19) illustrated the dichotomy faced by many Linux User-Fans.

Figure 4.19

Slater
Post #1
10-17-2005
Just Joined!
Posts: 11

What do you wish for linux?

What major developement you wish to see in Linux in the coming future?

Myself I wish to see Linux running on my PocketPC PDA insted of MS Windows Mobile. And to see my best Flight Sims running on linux!

Let us know what you wish for linux in the near future

AbuAnas

On one hand, *AbuAnas* demonstrated an adherence to consumer logic in that he/she owns a "PocketPC PDA" and the "best Flight Sims" and was

compelled to communicate that ownership to the community. On the other hand, he/she displayed a desire to continue and further the success of Linux. *Slater's* (Figure 4.19) desire for Linux to 'run' 'Flight Sims' and be operable on PDAs highlighted the desire many User-Fans have for Linux to extend beyond its niche in the market. The conflict displayed here is significant for the manner in which the new User-Fan (see "Just Joined" displayed under the date) viewed the operating system in defining identity and community. Whereas the display of anti-Microsoft rhetoric was a commonality in these forums, specificities of personal consumer products were more often relegated to technical issues. In this sense, *Slater* displayed the hallmarks of a Casual User-Fan of Linux, situated between two competing ideologies but unable to fully commit to either. Some User-Fans were more explicit in their anti-Microsoft but nonetheless pro-consumerism position (Figure 4.20).

Figure 4.20

Kramer
Post #5
10-17-2005
Linux Guru
Posts: 3,381

I also would like to see more commercial games released for linux along with better driver support from manufacturer's (especially those that make wireless cards).

Oh and I also want to see it embedded in mobile phones and pda's. Then finally i would have a reason to go out and buy a pda.

Geek User-Fan *Kramer* (Figure 4.20) 'wish list' involved the addition of Linux-compatibility to many Windows' orientated hardware (driver support, mobile phones and PDAs). In fact, this User-Fan claimed "I would have a reason to go out and buy pda" suggesting that Linux, rather than suppressing consumerism, may in fact do the contrary and harness yet another market. The implied resistance to Microsoft in this instance was therefore not anti-consumerist, rather they may be the result of anti-branding sentiments or a stance against proprietary code.

Kramer's desire for more commercial games highlighted another commonality of the Linux and Mac User-Fans, a clash between two ICT subcultures: the operating system and Gaming cultures. As a sign of the need to consume, the request for a stable gaming environment (or games) by many User-Fans can also be understood as an intersection of these two subcultures. It is not that these cultures are incompatible but that the software models cannot coexist because (the majority of) the game software is generated for the lucrative Windows platform. This inability for the minor operating system to harness the gaming culture forces the User-Fans to choose their stronger desire – games or operating systems. Thus, remarks such as those made by *AlexK* highlight the need for a resolution allowing both to coexist within their chosen operating system, not a forced one.

The majority of User-Fans (at least in these threads and forums) seemed to only demonstrate a willingness to adopt Linux through market-conditions and not as an alternative to such consumptive practices. Again this may be a factor of User-Fans' lack of programming skills to participate in developer networks but it also reflects aspects of consumerism. In this sense the use of Linux became a form of conspicuous, fashionable, or commercially resistive consumption. This presented the study of consumption amongst Linux User-Fans with an interesting duality. Whilst the Linux forums perpetuate and consolidate society's reliance on market-oriented consumption, they also provide an avenue for members to disintegrate their reliance on this form of consumerism through the distribution of software, code, and ideas.

Debate over the consequences of consumer logic amongst Linux User-Fans presents itself in a conversation between Casual User-Fan *Don* (Figure 4.21, Figure 6.31) and Geek User-Fan *Wooderson* (Figure 4.22 and Figure 4.24).

Figure 4.21

Don

Post #11
Just Joined!
Posts: 85

Quote:

Originally Posted by PsypherPunk

Manufacturer-written drivers (or at least more open specs. to facilitate their being written).

this is my hope.

I've already sent raging emails to HP, etc...about their lack of linux support. Apparently HP has some sort of a community-based driver system in the works...or maybe the woman in the email was bs'ing me...

Quote:

Originally Posted by a12ctic

i wana see game developers releasing a port for windows, linux, and mac....

my second hope...

I wouldn't even mind paying a bit more...I just wanna play BF2 and Steam games in linux....natively..

Figure 4.22

Wooderson
Post #12
Super Moderator
10-17-2005
Posts: 7,763

Nope. I disagree. I don't want that piece of ferret excrement STEAM to get anywhere *near* Linux. It's one of the most draconian "anti-piracy" attempts I've ever seen, and I'm boycotting the morons at Valve because of it. But that's another soapbox.

Figure 4.23

Don
Post #14
Just Joined!
10-17-2005
Posts: 85

But, I gotta have my CSS and HL2...can't help it. I also haven't had many problems with Steam like others have. Plus, I have 2 of my friends' accounts and passwords...so I can play the older games too. I'll be getting DOD: S eventually too..

Im not saying Steam is good, just that I enjoy the valve games.

Figure 4.24

Wooderson
Post #12
Super Moderator
10-17-2005
Posts: 7,763

See that's the conundrum, isn't it? I have no doubt that I would enjoy Halflife 2, but I haven't bought it because I disagree with Valve's distribution scheme. The sad thing is, enough people bought it that they'll think it was a good idea and it may spread to other companies.

The interaction between the two members began with *Don* revealing his/her 'wish list', which like many others included the desire for games and drivers. However, *Wooderson* disputed *Don's* willingness to participate within a consumer market. The response "I don't want that piece of ferret excrement" and "It's one of the most draconian "anti-piracy" attempts I've ever seen..." indicate the conflicting attitudes concerning consumerism and protectionist policies between the User-Fans of different intensities. Perhaps in an attempt to temper the situation, *Don* agrees with the 'anti-piracy' concerns but felt compelled to reason the dilemma because he/she "gotta have my CSS and HL2." In this response we can evaluate the member's support of the overriding Linux philosophy but also understand that it is tempered by the desire to participate (consume) in the gaming community.

In response to this dilemma, *Wooderson* illustrated the extent to which many in the Geek Linux User-Fans adhere to the philosophies of the GPL. In actively pursuing a course of non-market consumption, *Wooderson* demonstrated the difference in ideology between a Geek and Casual Linux User-Fan. For the likes of *Wooderson*, the philosophical and political posturing of Linux is of more concern than the inadequacies of the consumer society.

Through this particular 'Next Release' thread, one can note a particular difference between the User-Fans of Linux and the two 'consumer' operating systems. Whereas the Windows and Mac User-Fans seemed more concerned about functionality and aesthetic improvements in their 'wish lists', Linux User-Fans answers were not concerned with code but a shift in the Linux philosophy. While some, like *Wooderson*, appear content in their unwavering support of Linux, many seemed more concerned with the impact it had upon their integration within other sub-cultures and the consumer society as a whole. In many instances it caused a dispute between the ideologies of Open-Source and the consumer society. This forced Casual User-Fans to choose between Linux with hindrances (that is not being able to adequately support a gaming culture or operate on certain hardware) or less-problematic consumer goods. Thus, the Linux 'brand' neither represents a counter to the consumer society, nor is it fully enveloped within its allure.

Conclusions on the Consumer Society

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how operating system User-Fans are firmly entrenched within the context of the modern consumer society. As the creations of corporate entities, operating system softwares must also be understood as products that continue the ideology of the consumer society. As commodities, operating systems shift from functional software to the focus of consumerist fantasies. In this sense, Windows, Mac and Linux are not defined by their technical capabilities but by their symbolic significance. Under the regime of the consumer society, users are no longer fulfilling their software requirements but are also seen as fulfilling consumer desires that can be sustained through market participation. As a consequence, users of operating systems can be studied as fans, users and consumers.

In this sense the population of operating systems users offer an opportunity to study the nature of, often trapped, commodified identities. Our sustained

desire for commodities within the consumer society often defines us, discarding the possibility of non-market or complete removal from consumption. Just as Veblen described wealth as “the conventional basis of esteem” in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1934), the means to participate in the consumer society now equates with a “reputable standing in a community”. Whereas Veblen associated wealth and property with esteem, under modern consumerism it is the ability and requirement to consistently participate in modes of consumerism rather than ownership of commodities. This is why, in the Linux Brand Community, there is a desire for consumer participation and why in the Mac Forums so much attention is focused on new hardware and software. The desire and attention they garner are more often than not a consequence of consumer logic rather than dissatisfaction with their current product. Instead, no one wishes to be left behind in the ever-evolving communities of operating system users, nor in the consumer society. Thus, to retain or gain esteem User-Fans must continue to consume.

It has been illustrated in this chapter that the idea of operating system brand communities may sit within the paradigm of the consumer society. They provide an example of our society’s complete, unashamed, and unbridled quest to consume. As individuals, the members of these communities have become, like all participants in the consumer society, citizen-consumers and perpetrators of the system.

Chapter Five Community

Community, while one of humanity's most treasured concepts, is also one of its most contestable to define. Much can be made of the debate over the limits and extent of community definitions but it remains a constant standard with central importance to the study of modern life. The context of this chapter is to identify a theoretical framework from which community can be placed in the modern consumer-dominated society. Such a framework is not only the result of academic 'tampering' with the idea but a reflection of current social structures. For example, the common standard of the privately owned shopping mall as the 'town square' illustrates more than the privatisation of public space. It also illustrates how the market occupies a central place in our culture and the reality of social interaction.

Advancements in ICTs seem to have only accelerated the command of market-forces over the notion of community by creating new types of social interaction which are media and market dependent (Castells, 1996). Some of these ICTs (such as the Internet and mass-produced PCs) are the media which facilitate the formation of forums focused on operating systems. The argument I intend to develop in this chapter is that it is the aforementioned influence of the market and the ICT-aided ability to sustain specialised forums that create communities that Muñiz and O'Guinn have deemed *brand communities*.

Grounded in marketing theory, the brand community concept tends to focus on the connection between individuals and brands in a social setting. However, brand community's relationship with consumerism reflects well with Cohen's (1985) sociological assertion that communities are constructed symbolically with boundaries that create a "resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity" (Cohen, 1985, p. 118). It is under this view that brand can be viewed as a 'repository of meaning' through

which symbolic communities are formed by consumerism of particular products and brands.

As the aim of this research being to highlight brand communities as significant forms of community, there is a theoretical requirement to highlight its congruency with other theories of community. To do so I will outline traditional concepts of community. Following this, and in light of the impact of ICTs on society, a section introducing the concept of virtual and networked community will be presented. Finally, I will present a view of community that will encompass all three forms of community in this chapter that will benefit the study of both 'real' brand communities and those that are formed online.

The emergence of brand communities has impacted on the tenuous distinction between 'real' and 'virtual' communities. Making this all the more irrelevant has been the success of online social networking, and subsequent community-focused websites, the practical distinction between online and offline communities further dissolve. Brand communities and their association with these networks have only further blurred this distinction, requiring a theoretical construct from which all community can be defined. For this reason, theoretical notions that concern traditional, technological and consumer sponsored forms of community will be investigated with the aim of exploring the commonalities amongst each social entity as to present new forms of community formation. More specifically the primary aim of this chapter is to distinguish the role symbols play in the creation of community, with particular reference to those branded products which have created fan-like followings.

This chapter introduces the idea of brand community and attempts to place the theory within the traditional models of community. In addition to this it aims to highlight the concept of virtual communities and the subtle differences between traditional models. Finally, a theoretical framework is established where by the three broad models of community – traditional, virtual and brand – find common ground in their symbolic construction.

Traditional Community

Hobsbawn (1994, p. 428) commented that “never was the word ‘community’ used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life.” Through the vast number of social scientific investigations of standard forms community (by standard community I refer to communities based in the reality of face-to-face interaction), it becomes apparent that the term has been transformed into something that is often ambiguous, offering numerous uses and quite differing meanings. This review does not attempt to cement a definition of community. Rather it aims to highlight how models of ‘traditional’ community emphasise the creation of meaning, allowing for the idea of community to be constructed across different value systems, social organisations, and even modes of existence. In doing so, the notion of community as a symbolic social construct that represents its members rather than its structure (Cohen, 1985) can be employed in the context of modern consumerism, branding, and online interaction.

From a classic theoretical standpoint, the early works of Marx offer some insight into the importance of symbolism in the manner in which we identify with community. Importantly, Marx (and subsequent Marxist theorists) identified the state and capitalist society as an *illusory* community based on ownership. This draws a distinction to a community of people who attach symbolic significance to their ownership in the form of social order. He stated:

the earth is the great workshop, the arsenal which furnishes means and material of labour, as well as the seat, the *base* of the community. They relate naively to it as the *property of the community*, of the community producing and reproducing itself in living labour. Each individual conducts himself only as a link, as a member of this community as *proprietor* or *possessor* (Marx, 1973, p. 272).

In regards to the influence of consumerism, this represents a construction of the boundary between who and what an individual can represent. The insight from Marx becomes important in the modern formation of consumption communities and their members due to the acknowledgement of ownership as a means of differentiation within a social locale.

While many traditional approaches often view community defined by “interaction rooted in place, religious cosmologies and tradition was the basis for trust” providing stability, predictability and order (Hawdon & Ryan, 2009, p. 336), an understanding of community that allowed for the inclusion of diverse modes of sociality and less constrictive criteria have emerged. Brint (2001, p.8) defines “communities as aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs and who are bound together principally by relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern.” Poplin (1972, p. 9) argued that the three most important factors in defining community are geographic area, social interaction, and a common tie or ties. Wellman and Hampton (1999, p. 648) also defined communities through a set of three markers, being “informal ties of sociability, support, and identity.” Whereas Gusfield (1975, p. xvi) distinguished two forms of community, one being based upon a geographical or territorial notion of proximity, the other focused on the “quality of character of human relationship, without reference to location.” However, these definitions are problematic in the context of emerging patterns of sociality as a consequence of modernity.

One manner in which these can be addressed in understanding communities can be found in Benedict Anderson’s study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (Anderson, 1991). For community structures to function Anderson (1991) argued they require shared spatial, linguistic and cultural domains. However, these domains need not be encountered, enacted or sustained in face-to-face situations. It is such an understanding that is a departure from the original notion of geographical shared space and as such can incorporate the Internet as a domain of shared space, culture and language. The most important point established by Anderson, referring to the title of his book, was the concept of *imagined* community. He wrote that

because of the aforementioned requirements “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (Anderson, 1991, p.15). Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined (Anderson, 1991, p.15). These have come to represent aspects of our lives that cannot be grasped in everyday relationships due to the physical constraints upon our lives. Examples of these include communities such as the nation, religion, ideology or even the sports fan community. In this sense, communities exist only when their members create the ‘image’ of community.

In the context of this study, two images of community can be identified. The first is the *imaginary* community of the consumer society through which individuals participate in their consumption of the new software creating the cultural domains for its continuation. The second is a smaller, specialised community, created in the image of specific operating system consumption and the symbolic importance this represents to these individuals. Therefore, while consumerism may represent an ideology that bonds members of society into community, more specific forms of consumerism – for example the brand-focused consumption of operating systems – can be employed to also create an image of community. Problematic within understandings of community such as Anderson’s is the role of the individual in its construction.

Addressing this, Bauman (2001) established a concept of community highlighting what community represents to individuals. Concerned with society’s fascination with the illusion of community, Bauman (2001) argues the importance of community lay not in what it is, but rather the qualities it potentially represents. For Bauman the defining quality that community presents is an illusion of security and belonging. Bauman (2001, p.144) argued “we miss community because we miss security, a quality crucial to a happy life, but one which the world we inhabit is ever less able to offer and ever more reluctant to promise.” Furthermore, he suggests that the strongest sense of community is to be found in those groups:

...who find the premises of their collective existence threatened and who construct out of this a community of identity which provides a strong sense of resistance and empowerment. Seeming unable to control the social relations in which they find themselves, people shrink the world to the size of their communities and act politically on that basis" (Bauman, 2001, p. 100).

In offering perceived security, communities present us with the potentials of shared experience, common values and morals. For Bauman, one of the means through which we find this security is the projection of the self and self-definition through the market goods we possess and consume.

The individual is also central in the construction of social groups. Focusing on the role of individual personality in social groups, Magaro and Ashbrook (1985, p. 1479) argue that the individual "guides interactions with the environment so that discrete elements of the person and situation are arranged into a meaningful whole that is manifested in behavior." The characteristics of individuals within a group (or community) can be thought of as deriving from a common system of symbols which co-occur "within particular clusters of individuals result(ing) in their being considered personality styles" (Cohen, 1987, p. 16). Under this influence group identity can be conceived through the dedication to the shared symbolism originating from individuals. In relation to consumerism, Elliott (1993) contends that for products to establish symbolic importance they must first create meaning within an individual. From this individual meaning a product can then be employed as a symbol that is embedded with shared meaning and values amongst a group of like-minded consumers. It is in this process of community formation that consumerism meets Cohen's construction of symbolic community.

The symbolic dimension of community is an important factor in the theoretical development of community as it moves beyond the traditions of locale and face-to-face; opening to modern phenomena such as branding and communication technologies. Cohen (1985) argues that instead of attempting to create restrictions in its definitions, community should be

studied in terms of how it is symbolically expressed through a society's values and norms through the creation of *boundaries*.

For Cohen (1985, p. 15) the symbolic construction of community:

...is held in common by its members; but its meaning varies with its members' unique orientation to it. In the face of this variability of meaning, the consciousness of community has to be kept alive through manipulation of its symbols. The reality and efficacy of the community's - and, therefore, of the community itself - depends upon its symbolic construction and embellishment.

Central to this symbolic construction of community is the constitution of boundaries which sustain and protect the identity of community.

Boundaries are created when the people experience “the reality of difference into the appearance of similarity with such efficacy that people can still invest the ‘community’ with ideological integrity. It unites them in their opposition, both to each other, and to those ‘outside’” (Cohen, 1985, p. 21). Through the definition of the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’, the construction of community through symbols is reliant upon the construction of boundaries. Boundaries can be marked because communities most often “interact in some way or other with entities from which they are, or wish to be, distinguished” (Cohen, 1985, p. 12). That is to say, boundaries are distinguished in terms of their specific point of difference with other social groups. In this sense the boundary becomes a symbolic definition of difference for both its members and those on the ‘outside’ (Cohen, 1985) and thus the community itself also represents a symbol. Cohen (1985, p. 74) denotes that communities form symbolic boundaries to represent “the mask presented by the community to the outside world; it is the community’s public face” which is held both by those who perceive they belong within or outside of it.

Community members on the ‘inside’ “gather behind a highly generalized statement of the community’s character, in order to advocate the distinctive interests of the community or to promulgate its collective identity” (Cohen, 1987, p. 15). Thus, what distinguishes community for those within is a

common perception of the boundary and that as an individual they belong within the collective identity created by these symbols. In this sense “their shared use of these forms absolve them from the need to explain themselves to each other – and leaves them free to attach their own meanings to them” (Cohen, 1987, p. 16). However, while symbols may be “held in common by its members” the meaning can vary with each member’s interpretation of these symbols (Cohen, 1987, p. 16).

From Cohen’s work one can identify with the importance of symbols in community. Jenkins (2004) proposes that symbolic community upholds elements that are ‘generalisable’ to a definition of all forms of community. He argues “symbolizations of community are umbrellas under which diversity can flourish, masks behind which a considerable degree of heterogeneity is possible” (R. Jenkins, 2004, p. 116). Membership under such a definition depends on the symbolic construction of a “mask of similarity which all can wear” which can thus be imagined, and in turn becomes a potent symbolic presence in people’s lives (R. Jenkins, 2004, p. 110). Calhoun (1998, p. 391) adds to the symbolic notion of community by relating it with “dense, multiplex, relatively autonomous networks of social relationships”, defined not by place but by relationships incorporating belonging. These notions of relationship and belonging are avenues through which individuals are able to solidify the notions of the shared that are common amongst the most traditional community definitions.

In this sense McHoul’s (1996) understanding of community as a “collection of what happens” rather than placing any importance on the notions of shared time, space and physicality offers an additional perspective to the symbolic definition of community. He argues that the term community marks “a space of difference rather than of pure human presence” (McHoul, 1996, p. ix). By viewing community in this manner, we can remove it from the traditional defining markers allowing it to exist in a new realm. McHoul’s notion of community simply represents “a name for whoever, locally and contingently, carries out or materially embodies methodic activities” (McHoul, 1996, p.17). ‘Methodic activities’ refer to the empirical methods of semiosis, the way signs

are used, which are evident in all forms of media. This understanding can be compatible with the study of communities surrounding operating systems because while the members of the communities may not interact or even know of each other, they participate in the types of methodic activities McHoul describes. In relation to consumerism, the focused consumption of particular products, displays of ownership, and socialisation centred on the product is a symbol of their connection in a 'local or contingent' fashion.

Important in the context of the merging between modern consumerism, symbols and traditional communities are 'reflexive communities'. Using the common model of the shared meanings and practice, Lash (1994) extends to the notion of reflexive communities as to account for the communities individuals choose to form, enter and participate within. Lash argues that these communities are reflexive in that "first one is not born or 'thrown', but 'throws oneself' into them; second, they may be widely stretched over 'abstract' space, and also perhaps over time; third, they consciously pose themselves the problems of their own creation and constant re-invention far more than do traditional communities; fourth, their 'tools' tend to be not material ones but abstract and cultural" (Lash, 1994, p. 161). Thus, for symbolic and reflexive communities membership can be understood through a desire for the sense of the shared. However, in being reflexive, this desire can be expressed and held through varying degrees of commitment by community members.

Community as a symbol presents an opportunity to complement notions of consumption-based and computer mediated relationships. One avenue of concern is any presumption that recognition and semiotic competence equates with formation in or membership within community (Sewell, 2005, p. 87). Sewell argues that the semiotic fields individuals share may be:

...recognized and used by groups and individuals locked in fierce enmity rather than bound by solidarity, or by people who feel relative indifference toward each other. The posited existence of cultural coherence says nothing about whether semiotic fields are big or small, shallow or deep, encompassing or specialized.

It simply requires among signs and a group of people who recognize those relations (Sewell, 2005, p. 87).

In light of this, Blackshaw (2008) warns that symbolic theories which began as alternative, applied ways of understanding community can “end up ‘proving’ that theory by referring to pro tem events.” He contends that in doing so these approaches crush “atypical anthropological cultures into ready-made mores, cultures and moral ties that make them feel even smaller and tighter, rather than demonstrating that community is still a useful basic concept for interpreting social and cultural life associated with the modern lives of the majority of people” (Blackshaw, 2008). This, however, is the concern of methodological approach and critical understanding. Just as he is concerned with ‘putative’ assumptions of those who study interaction, critiques of symbolic community assume the same of both the researcher and individuals’ ability to interact across symbolic representation. Although warranted and a potential hazard for the unassuming researcher, Blackshaw’s concerns do not disempower theories of symbolic community that allow the researcher to conceptualise social interaction outside of normal geography, space and time.

Critique aside, the study of collective social interaction by recognising the symbolic nature of community opens the range of activities and avenues through which community can exist. In accepting the symbolic construction of community, one can identify the centrality of symbols in contemporary society. Of particular interest is the manner in which symbols of consumerism are employed not only as meaningful aspects of individual identity but they are also appropriated and shared in a social context – often in the shared symbolic meaning of consumption. One symbol of particular importance to the consumer is the brand. While brands have often been associated as symbolic representations of particular products, they also embody particular lifestyles, extensions of self and even community.

Brand Communities

While the symbolic importance of consumer branding is a relatively modern advent, there has always existed a link between the selective consumption, social interaction and symbolic difference. Herbert Gans notes that culture encompasses:

...the practices, goods, and ideas classified broadly under the arts (including literature, music, architecture and design, etc., and the products of all other print media, electronic media, etc.), whether used for education and aesthetic and spiritual enlightenment or for entertainment and diversion. Culture also includes other symbolic products used mainly for leisure or nonsubsistence consumption, for example, furnishings, clothes, appliances, automobiles and boats. Most appliances are today treated as necessities, but their forms, styles, materials, and so on are also a matter of culture (Gans, 1999, p. 5).

Much like Bourdieu, Gans' definition of culture addresses the importance of consumption, production, their associated practices, and the role they play in classifying class, status and belonging; they do not highlight the centrality of and sociality surrounding market goods. Baudrillard (1998) argues that due to the alienating nature of modern consumer society, individuals search for meaning consumption as symbolic representation thus creating identity and meaning in the products (symbols) they inhabit. More recently, studies from economics and marketing fields, as well as those in sociology and cultural studies, have presented insightful works in regards to the symbolic meaning associated with consumerism in our social lives (Bekin, Carrigan, & Szmigin, 2005; Cova, 1997; Maffesoli, 1996).

The work of Manuel Castells (1996) highlights the impact of modern economic factors on social formations throughout the world. The economic activity that spawned the network society has embedded the relationship between community and economic participation, for what Schouten and McAlexander (1995) identify in their theory of *subcultures of consumption*. Through a consumer-focused, ethnographic study of 'bikers', Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p. 43) defined a subculture of consumption as a "distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared

commitment to a particular product class, brand or consumption activity. Other characteristics of a subculture of consumption include an identifiable, hierarchical social structure; a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values; and unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression.” Thus, when consumers form emotional bonds with products or services and identify with similar minded people, a subculture of consumption is created (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 48).

Following this distinction, Zukin and Maguire (2004) argue that a shift towards lifestyle choices not only accounts for the presence of “technologically sophisticated consumer goods like automobiles, DVD players, and personal computers” in the global economy but also “... an increasing part of public culture [that] is shaped by goods and services, advertisements that promote their use, and places - from shopping malls and websites to fitness centres and museum gift shops- where they are displayed, viewed, and bought.” Employing Bourdieu’s notion of lifestyle variations as a foundation, Giddens (1991) argued that society places an emphasis upon lifestyle as a condition of ‘high modernity’. Lifestyles under Giddens’ (1991, p. 81) definition are “a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity’.” He argues that due to the pressures of high modernity that “we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose” (Giddens, 1991, p. 81). As a consequence this ‘choice’, has followed with it the ascension of consumer products central focus of public culture and sociality.

Cova, Kozinets and Shankar (2007) extend this of consumer agency and sociality by arguing that the ‘consumer experience’ should not be approached as a moment-by-moment situated occurrence. The authors argue that “lived experience is never simple and binary, but ever-shifting, full of adjustments and hybridisations. To see consumer experience as a choice between slavery and freedom, structure and agency, passivity and rebellion is to use an analytical frame that equates the increasingly subtle techniques

of post-modern marketing with the excessive manipulation of consumers” (Cova et. al., 2007, p. 8). Rather, they view the process as a fluid, sometimes value-adding, life-affirming experience. From this the increased impact of brands can be explained as an integral aspect in the symbolic construction of identity that links consumerism and social interaction, and thus, the rise of the *brand community*.

An extension of *subcultures of consumption*, Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 412) define *brand communities* as “specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand.” Carlson, Suter and Brown (2008, p. 285) add to the definition acknowledging the original concept of brand admirers who are also able to exist in a conventional community model or “as unbound group of brand admirers, who perceive a sense of community with other brand admirers, in the absence of social interaction.” Key to brand communities are three identifiers – shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). By sharing these brand communities provide a regulatory device in continued consumption by individuals by promoting sentiments of belongingness which contribute to brand loyalty and appropriation of self-image (Grzeskowiak & Sirgy, 2007, p. 300).

While useful, the aforementioned definitions of brand community neglect the importance of the manner in which communities are symbolically constructed. Taking an evolutionary step in brand community theory, Cova and Pace (2006, p. 1089) contend that a brand community can refer to “any group of people that possess a common interest in a specific brand and create a parallel social universe (subculture) rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy.” While Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) noted the importance of symbols in brand communities, they limit their definition to those brands with a consistent image, history, provide a sense of competition in the marketplace, with its consumption being signified in public. Cova and Pace (2006, p. 1089) contention that a brand community can refer to “any group of people that possess a common interest in a septic brand and create

a parallel social universe (subculture) rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy.

Another aspect of brand communities is the symbolic importance of oppositional brand loyalty as a form of cohesion. This is highlighted by a community's opposition to other brands which tend to be directed towards market competitors or differences in lifestyle (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). From this, brand community members are able to employ the brand as a symbol of difference creating the 'insider/outsider' dichotomy that Cohen discusses. Furthermore brand communities tend to claim a symbolic ownership of the brand beyond the product they may have purchased (O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2005). One example of the loyalty expressed through oppositional nature is provided by Davidson, McNeill and Ferguson (2007, p. 215) who found that a great percentage of magazine readers refused to purchase the market-competitor when offered even when their brand was unavailable.

Importantly, as symbolic constructs, brand communities present multi-faceted, multi-directional forms of social interaction between individuals who take and develop multiple, often individual meaning from the experience. Unlike the traditional modes of face-to-face community, the symbolic nature of brand community allows for its members to participate in them across different levels of time, experience and interaction.

Online Community

Through the evolution of community theory towards notions of the symbol, one can see the many difficulties establishing an adequate definition of community. The influence of modernity and the increasingly common experience of mediated interaction have combined to see a rise in theories that account for the (re)construction of community for a world where face-to-face encounters are no longer recognised as one of the cornerstones of communities.

Delanty (2003, p. 187) supports a theory of online community that remains in contact with symbolic constructions of community but is conscious of changes that are a consequence of modernity. He offers a definition of community which views it as “neither a form of social integration nor one of meaning, but is an open-ended system of communication about belonging” (Delanty, 2003). Delanty (2003, p. 189) concludes that modern communities should be understood as communication communities, explaining these are defined by:

...a sense of belonging that is peculiar to the circumstances of modern life and which is expressed in unstable, fluid, very open and highly individualized groups. The communities of today are less bound than those of the very recent past. The communicative ties and cultural structures in the contemporary societies in the global age - as opposed to in industrial and traditional societies - have opened up numerous possibilities for belonging, based on religion, nationalism, ethnicity, lifestyle and gender.

Thus online communities can be acknowledged as symbolic communities defined by the actions of “highly individualized egos who are consciously willing to support (perceived) collective goals and values” (Rheingold, 2000, p. 62). It is the development of theories forwarded by the likes of Cohen and Delanty that shift the focus of the study of community to be discussed in terms of the impact of the Internet on the social aspects of our lives.

Just as Bauman and Anderson noted the desire for the recovery of community as a driving force behind its importance within a now global society, Rheingold also announces its importance as a reaction to the missing measures of public space in our social lives. He suspected one explanation for this phenomenon was “the hunger for community that grows in the breasts of people around the world as more and more informal public spaces disappear from our real lives” (Rheingold, 2000). He argued that these public spaces “are places where people meet, and they also are tools; the place-like aspects and tool-like aspects only partially overlap” (Rheingold, 2000, p.46). However, unlike Bauman and Anderson, Rheingold views community as an attainable force in the face of modernity, occurring on

different plains of existence. This is the digital plain fostered by the advent of new technologies.

One of the first writers to approach the subject of community in the digital realm, Rheingold (2000, p. 3) proposed and popularised the term *virtual community*, arguing that within these communities individuals act as they would in 'real' life, devoid of physical contact, yet still creating a richness and vitality apparent in other communities. Rheingold (2000, p.5) noted that virtual communities emerge when enough people interact and engage in public discussion, with sufficient "human feeling", resulting in webs of personal relationships. Members within these communities partake in activities including the exchange of thoughts, arguments, conducting business, playing games, and conversing (Rheingold, 2000, p. 3). In humanizing a potentially de-humanising form of interaction, "people in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you on the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries" (Rheingold, 2000, p. xvii).

Further refinement of the virtual community theory has led to descriptions of the extent to which ICTs have altered our concept of the social leading to the construction of a *network society*. Barry Wellman (2001, p.18) focuses upon a concept of communities as networks in his definition of social structures establishing them as "networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, and a sense of belonging and social identity." These networks represent new forms of sociality that exist in a global context. Furthermore, modern "communities are far-flung, loosely bounded, sparsely knit, and fragmentary." With most people operating "in multiple, thinly connected, partial communities as they deal with networks of kin, neighbours, friends, workmates and organisational ties. Rather than fitting into the same group as those around them, each person has his or her own *personal community*" (Wellman, 2001, p.17). Under Wellman's concept of community, we can develop *personal communities* across media such as the

Internet due to our ability to create the 'loosely bound', 'sparsely knit' and symbolic relationships he discusses.

The *network society* represents the formation of a variety of connections, differing in intensity and strength; featuring permeable boundaries, a great diversity of members, the ability to easily switch between networks and often the abandonment of power hierarchies (Wellman & Hampton, 1999, p.648). Through the network society, Castells (1996) expands upon Rheingold's notion of virtual community by understanding space as an expression of society, and as such a network society is dominated by the *space of flows*. The *space of flows* represent "the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows" (Castells, 1996, p. 412). Flows in this sense are "purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society" (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004, p. 40). Thus, for Castells, the notion of community in networked societies occur within the spaces of flows rather than any other form of 'traditionally' accepted community models. It is in this multiplicity that one can understand how individuals can be symbolically linked to communities across a range of life's experiences – including consumer practice and the symbolic appropriation of brands.

In accepting online communities as 'real', Ridings, Gefen and Arinze (2002) implemented the notions of common interest and practices in their attempt to define online communities. What separates their definition from those which also involve 'real' communities is where they emerge, the medium of communication and trust (Ridings et. al., 2002). They note that although members of virtual communities are often 'real-life' strangers, the communities arise "as a natural consequence of people coming together to discuss a common hobby, medical affliction, personal experience, or even develop relationships" (Ridings et. al., 2002, p. 271-272). What underlies this emergence is communication and trust. Communication is important as it is the exchange of conversation alone upon which these communities develop. As the authors state "the whole existence of a virtual community is based on

postings and their responses, and therefore contributing to that existence by being responsive shows integrity/benevolence” (Ridings et. al., 2002, p. 277). In turn the integrity displayed by individuals is recognition of the requirement of trust for a successful online community.

Trust, or at the very least the perception of trust, is required in every exchange of conversation within any community. Ridings et. al. (2002, pg. 275) offer trust as a significant indication to the individual “intentions to take part in the information exchange... getting or giving information.” They note that “people come to virtual communities to exchange information - either by providing it to others or by soliciting it from others” (Ridings et. al., 2002, pg. 288). This exchange is based upon the trust the members have in each other, and without this trust the virtual community there is no exchange and the virtual community will cease to exist. This research illustrated elements, which build this trust – responsiveness, confiding personal information, and a general disposition to trust, as well as its multidimensionality (Ridings et. al., 2002, pp. 288-289). Consequently trust can be identified both in the virtual nature of exchange and the point or focus of exchange, for example the operating systems.

Emerging from the acceptance of symbolic, consumption and online community theory is a range of literature focused on these converging worlds. Many of the brand community studies involve the investigation of Internet exchanges amongst groups of individuals who form ‘virtual’ communities focused on their brand (Szmigin and Reppel, 2008). Highlighting their worth to marketers, Szmigin and Reppel (2008, p. 626) note that “internet communities allow and encourage conversations that are of value to all involved, buyers, suppliers and other interested parties in that community, such that some form of community bonding takes place.”

Acknowledging the extent of online communities, Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau (2008, pp. 343-344) use the term online creative consumer communities to define another online community form. They contend that online communities provide consumers with complex socio-cultural

environments from which individuals can sustain communal and other needs with consumer-based innovation and creation (Kozinets et. al., 2008). Differing from other community forms (both 'real' and 'virtual'), the authors identify types of online creative consumer communities (Crowds, Hives, Mobs, and Swarms) to distinguish the modes, scale and scope of innovation within these social interactions (Pauwels, 2005). While the specifics of their theory are not relevant to this discussion, the authors' acceptance of symbolic representations and innovation provide further substance to the notion of fully functioning communities in an online context. An extension of these forms of production that is beyond the scope of this study has been the continued success of the Open-Source developer community (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007).

Brand Communities and Technology

The combination of strong marketing, brand recognition, and an avid user-base have formed around the use and consumption of Apple products as a quintessential brand community (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Szmigin & Reppel, 2004). Muñiz and Schau (2005, p. 745) identify that within Apple communities membership is part devotion to the product, part resistance to the competition's products, and part social experience. The study found that the seemingly obsolete personal organiser, the Newton, enjoyed a following usually associated with popular and cutting edge technology.

A result of its presence in the consciousness saw “a powerful, inventive, and vocal grassroots community coalesced around the Newton, partially as a result of the thriving Macintosh community” (Muñiz & Schau, 2005, p. 745). Despite it thriving in the Apple brand community long after its production, during its ‘real’ life-span the product was unable to engage a wider public beyond Apple’s strong brand community. There is a suggestion the failure and success of the product is a direct result of the brand image of non-conformity. For example, unlike the consumer society’s norm of consistent re-invention of production, the Apple community displayed symbolic non-conformity when the Newton was withdrawn from the market by continuing a fanatical support of the product that was long-lived and an aspect of community members’ identity. Members of the brand community recognise the symbolic value in “continuing to use an abandoned (and, by category definitions, old) technology they are acting in a way that defies consumer and marketplace norms (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). The fanaticism of the Newton users was one of many forms of discourse undertaken by members of brand communities. The existence of the Apple brand community is the framework from which the study of operating system brand communities is also built on.

Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) highlight that brand communities offer their members powerful experiences and a culture, with complex rituals, traditions, and behavioural expectations. Similar studies have revealed communities surrounding brand-based consumption including the experiences of Harley Davidson riders (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001), Jeep drivers, MG drivers (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006), Saab owners (also Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001), magazines (Davidson, McNeill, & Ferguson, 2007), theme parks (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008), even the fan cultures surrounding branded popular fiction, television and film (Jenkins, 1992). These revealed a high level of devotion, often comparable to religious experiences. Muñiz & Schouten (2005, p. 738) argue that these branded communities are defined “by their capacity for powerful and transformative experiences.” Despite this, it should not be overlooked that brands themselves are symbolic constructions primarily driven “by the logic of profit and competition, the overriding objective of the new media corporations is to get their product to the largest number of consumers” (Morley & Robins, 1995, p.22).

Conclusion

In summary, brand communities are social groups whose members experience a deep and conscious connection with an aspect of their market consumption. On one hand, they involve a loyalty to a specific product or company ethos. On the other, they represent a social experience not unlike any social experience in our real or online lives in that they are constituted and constructed by employing symbols as a function of identity. Conscious that their chosen products are not necessarily unique, nor individual, brand communities often lay claim to stake symbolic ownership of the brand, in a sense, competing with the corporations who legally own the brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). For consumers, the ownership of the brand is related to the symbolic construction of identity and community. These factors lead Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001, p.428) to deliver a statement illustrating the importance of brand communities:

At this moment in the early twenty-first century, the notion of community occupies a particularly important space. The things that community has traditionally represented are sites of considerable contestation in the post-modern world. At this moment we seek to understand community's existence, persistence, endurance, and constant reinvention in the post-modern consumption space where enormous changes in human communication reside. At this nexus we introduce the idea of brand community. We believe brand communities to be real, significant, and generally a good thing, a democratic thing, and evidence of the persistence of community in consumer culture.

The theory of brand community allows for the impact of the world's modern cultural icons to be studied. Defining the social groups focused on these subjects as brand communities enables researchers to approach them as they would traditional forms of community. Finally, in allocating resources to the study of the social reaction to these phenomena we can gain greater knowledge of the manner in which brands manifest themselves in our identities, communities and other social interaction.

Continuing from brand community as constructs, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007a, p. 138) provide a co-option theory of brand communities which views them in the context of the system of commercial marketplaces in which they emerge. Although they are critical of research which reaches inevitable conclusions of co-option by the market or 'hypocritical bourgeois affection', their approach to communities encourages the construction of community beyond the co-habitation between individuals and markets. They contend that communities should be approached with more nuanced analyses that "advance understanding of the structural relations, dialectical tensions, and ideological disjuncture that exist among the different market systems (and corresponding consumer orientations) that are situated within the global circuits of corporate capitalism" (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007a, p. 138). Inherent amongst this approach is that the symbolic (or in their formulation - disembedded) relationship between individuals, brands and the market can create communities with "principles, meanings, and ideals" that are co-opted by a range of actors (Delanty, 2003). Finally, they add an important disclaimer to the study of social formations like brand communities. The

authors warn that in attempting to define brand communities, the hazard of context should be confronted. They question the theoretical value of equal treatment of different manifestations of commercial activity within global consumer capitalism. Arguing that in the same sense as Wal-Mart pursuing the same (profit) motive as 'indie' music labels, they contend that community must be evaluated through the scale of endeavour rather than an encompassing critique of an aspect of the co-opting global market. This is an important consideration that will be addressed as the study moves towards illustrating the emergence of brand communities devoted to operating systems.

One of the distinguishing factors in brand communities becomes the symbols upon which they are constructed. Symbols in this sense are the binding force between individuals. In a world of multiple choices, modes of existence, and increased consumption, the symbols which bind communities have become increasingly important. These ideas have an ability to cross national and cultural boundaries, accessing and inviting larger populations to interact, live, visit, relax, entertain, discover and learn with each other. It does not mean that ideology is agreed upon by all in the community.

Community does not insinuate an agreed definition of symbols. As meaning is embedded into symbols by individuals, the definitions of these are dependent only on individual expectations and attachment to them. As such the notions of collectivity appear only upon the perception of shared symbols, and the bonds and identities they construct.

Chapter Six Operating System Brand Communities

With brand community presented as a modern form of the 'social' this chapter places it in the context of the operating system market and the User-Fans who consume the products. Through this theory, consumption of operating system brand is identified a multi-layered proposal in which consumers of brands demonstrate a range of behaviours, commitment and association towards operating systems. In doing so, it places the User-Fan as an inhabitant of the brand community. The notions of the symbolic boundaries expressed in the previous chapter are employed to illustrate how the concept of User-Fandom is coherent within brand community theory.

In essence this chapter has two purposes. First it demonstrates that brand communities emerge as a consequence of even the most mundane of products or brands. Consequentially, it demonstrates that when placed in modes of sociality User-Fandom demonstrates the hallmarks that have been previously postulated as brand community. The second purpose is to demonstrate and account for the emergence of an Apple brand community which has developed a stronger sense of brand community than Windows.

Mac Brand Community

From its emergence into popular culture Apple has established itself as one of the world's most recognisable brands. By combining a high level of media exposure with promotions fostering a culture of difference, Apple's marketing encouraged users to become User-Fans and, in turn, members of the *brand community*. Recognition as a success in branding is due, in some respects, to its success as a corporate entity but also as a consequence of the brand's legion of dedicated followers as the business strategies of Apple play a large role in the procurement of Mac *brand communities*. Rumours, release dates, conferences, and corporate hierarchy all become a matter of fascination for some of the more devoted User-Fans within the forums, and perhaps as an

extension of their loyalty to the brand they view these points of interest as enthusiastically as they do.

The introductory pages to the Mac forums provide some insight into the manner through which the community interacts with one another and their associations to the Apple and Mac brands. Each forum divides discussions into arenas according to the content or object it focuses upon. Distinctions are routinely made between hardware (iMac, iBook, Mac Book, MacBook Pro), operating system (Mac OSX, Tiger, Leopard), software (Internet to multimedia), and community focused discussion which enable community members to access their particular niche within the site disclosing information that is particular to a set of fellow community members. Both the *Mac-Forums* and *MaCNN* boards offer User-Fans specific distinction between the forms of hardware and software. It is important to remember that in the Apple brand community the Mac OS is commonly inseparable from the computer hardware. In distinguishing areas of hardware, operating system and software the Apple community members are able to choose which aspects of the product to discuss. It also allows for those seeking technical discussions to advance to the area in which they are experiencing difficulties.

Many of the interactions within the Apple brand community forums reinforce and intensify User-Fan connections with 'their' brand by attaching social significance to their products. Highlighting the act of community bonding through the appropriation of consumer goods is the emergence of "My Set-up" threads. As previously stated, in each forum most forms of Apple hardware tend to be supported with its own specific thread. In the case of the *MaCNN* and *Mac-Forums* sites these were found under the specific hardware category already highlighted. However, in the case of the *Mac-Forums* site there are also general "Official Setup Threads" found in the "Anything Goes" area. Although not specifically focused on the Mac OS, these threads provide access to the unique manner by which Apple User-Fans interact with each other using identifiable Apple and Mac products.

Voyeuristic in nature, these threads simultaneously boosted the integrity of members within their chosen community and increased the presence of the brand through User-Fan appropriation of their consumption of Apple products. By increasing the presence of the brand and its products throughout the community, these members were also increasing the bonds between themselves, their computers and the community as a whole. Below, Devoted User-Fan *Prez* (Figure 6.1) and Casual User-Fan *Burrell* (Figure 6.2) illustrate different examples from each forum accessed within the study.

Figure 6.1

Prez
Forum Regular
Mar 9, 2005, 05:11 AM

My Dual G5 and yummy awesome 30" display!!! iPod mini and powerbook G4 not in shot.





Figure 6.2

Burrell
Post #773

08-08-2007, 10:04 PM

Posts: 19

Here is my setup....



Both posts typify the User-Fan experience in the thread as it informs observers with signifiers of the brand and with inherent understandings of the bonds between it, User-Fans and the online community. Through the expression of ownership via a visual medium, User-Fans are able to demonstrate to the community the symbolic importance ownership of the operating system upon which the community is formed. Image postings facilitate the community in garnering a greater sense of the User-Fan not 'hiding' behind an avatar. That is, they express their real-life selves while at the same time de-alienate themselves from a sometimes impersonal text to an image, that while not explicitly personal as the User-Fan themselves are never viewed, alludes to a more personal form of contact.

Community was oriented around this arena in the commonalities that appeared in the experiences of both the poster and the members' consumer practices. They illustrated shared experience in creating norms of behaviour such as the manner of photo that was found in the thread. Each photograph displays shared similarities in that they show all aspects of the 'workstation',

most commonly including desk, monitor, lighting, chair, all hardware and other 'important' objects such as guitars, keyboards, or iPods. The posts of *Bodie* (Figure 6.3) typify this form of activity.

Figure 6.3

Bodie

Post #557

11-30-2006, 05:19 PM

Mac Specs: MacBook Pro 15" 2.2GHz/4GB/250GB, G4 Cube
450MHz + 17" Studio LCD

Updated setup with a wired Mighty Mouse:



Just waiting for my silver Griffin PowerMate to arrive and my setup shall be complete (well for the time being anyway!)

MacBook Pro 15" 2.2GHz, PowerMac G4 Cube + 17" LCD
Studio Display, 2x1TB WD My Book Studio (FW800)
iPod Classic 160GB (Black), 3rd gen 40GB, iPhone 2G 16GB +
Denon AH-C551K
NAD C370 + B&W 686 + Grado SR80

Bodie, displays the centrality of Apple through his desire to demonstrate and share this with like-minded individuals. The picture illustrates specific Apple hardware and software in working order. Additionally, the User-Fan demonstrates their membership of the brand community by highlighting every aspect of Apple and Apple-related product ownership through the signature line (MacBook Pro 15" 2.2GHz, PowerMac G4 Cube...). This is further manifest in *Bodie's* "updated setup" with an Apple 'might mouse' and

clarification that in order to be complete (in the Apple User-Fan and brand community sense of the word) the setup requires 'his' Griffin Powermate. However, *Bodie's* display to the brand community does not end with this post (see Figure 6.4).

Figure 6.4

Bodie
Post #570
12-09-2006, 01:11 PM
Yet another update to my setup with my PowerBook G4 15"
(specs in sig):



I am now Windows free!

An additional clarification of this post is the importance placed upon ownership in the brand community. By expressing his ownership of a Powerbook G4, *Bodie* conveys the extent of his 'right' to membership of the Apple brand community. Furthermore, the exclamation of "I am now Windows free!" highlights his desire for the brand community to recognise his claim for User-Fan status.

While hardware is often a focus, one aspect of these picture forums that relates specifically to the Mac OS is the display of operating system ownership and use. Many members of these threads demonstrate their brand connection through their decision to photograph their system in a

'working state' with the monitor displaying the Mac OS. An extension of this was the presence of Mac-specific software often in the same picture. This culture is displayed by User-Fans in most of the pictures in the forum, and highlighted in many of the pictures identified in this research (for examples see Figure 6.5-Figure 6.8).

Figure 6.5

Barksdale

Post #314

04-27-2005, 11:30 AM

Posts: 120

Thought I'd put mine in here. Its not much but it gets the job done.



Posted by Casual User-Fan *Barksdale*, a connection to the brand was not only signified through the presence of the iMac computer, iPod, Apple iSight camera and Apple wireless keyboard, it was also expressed through further fan-like appropriations of symbolic importance. With the monitor turned on, the User-Fan illustrated the working condition of this particular setup and in doing so shared User-Fans' experience with the Mac-Forums community. In

this picture the community is invited to view the specifics of this setup, from the toolbar at the bottom of the screen to the three Apple logos on the desktop background. The posting itself illustrated both the norms of the culture that it conforms to, and to a lesser extent the degree of brand connection which is made by some of its members. Deliberate or not, signals such as these suggest to the community that the operating system is as important as the hardware for the User-Fan.

This process further avails itself to the strengthening of brand community membership as it confirms User-Fan association with the brand and their decision to share experience in its consumption within a communal setting. By displaying their use of OSX these User-Fans demonstrate the extent that the relationship between individual and the brand can reach. This said, the remains the primary focus here. These kinds of operating system-centric interactions display the symbolic nature of community, but while important, offer little more than more evidence that the brand itself remains the focus of community attention.

Further investigation of *Barksdale's* post (Figure 6.5) displays another intricacy of the Apple brand community. This phenomenon involves the notions of brand recognition and brand connection. To anyone unfamiliar with the Apple brand, the speakers to the side of the computer reveal little, yet it is another indicator of both brand connection and community interaction. A Geek User-Fan with the screen name *Stringer* (Figure 6.6) was the first to respond to this posting.

Figure 6.6

Stringer
Post #315
04-27-2005, 04:12 PM
Posts: 2,820
Mac Specs: 17" MacBook Pro
Quote:
Originally Posted by donnation25
Thought I'd put mine in here. Its not much but it gets the job done.

I like it. Are those just the apple stickers on the speakers?

A consequence to this posting is that *Barksdale* receives acceptance by an active member of the Mac brand community (“I like it”) and also a question whose response to add to the collective brand knowledge “Are those just the apple stickers on the speakers”. By adding “just” to the question about the speakers *Stringer* demonstrates the nature of shared knowledge amongst the community as the “apple sticker” he is referring to seem to allude to those which are included with the purchase of Apple brand product, a commodity only an Apple user or consumer can possess, it becomes a signifier of the brand community.

The posting made by *Barksdale* (Figure 6.5) was particularly interesting in that it illustrated the process undertaken by User-Fans establishing brand connections and the formation of links between User-Fans. In this example, they were aided through the community’s access to asynchronous communication that grants User-Fans the ability to respond to any number of postings. In the case of *Barksdale*, two questions were posted in response to the picture. The first (Figure 6.6) has already been identified, the second was posted by devoted User-Fan *Tommy* (Figure 6.7) who poses a question attempting to identify the product which is holding the iPod in its place (“Where did you get that iPod mini holder/cradle?”).

Figure 6.7

Tommy
Post # 317
04-27-2005, 04:29 PM
Posts: 500
Mac Specs: 20" G5 iMac; 14.1" G4 iBook; 60Gig iPod Video
Quote:
Originally Posted by Barksdale
Thought I'd put mine in here. Its not much but it gets the job done.
Where did you get that iPod mini holder/cradle? I've never seen that one before but I like how its style matches that of the iMac foot.

Again, this suggests that there may exist a hole in the collective intelligence of the community because the member was unfamiliar, yet at the same time accepting of a product that seems to fit the aesthetics accepted by the Apple brand community (“I’ve never seen that one before but I like how its style matches that of the iMac foot”). The nature of brand community and the irrelevance of time are further demonstrated in *Barksdale’s* response (Figure 6.8).

Figure 6.8

Barksdale
Post #321
04-27-2005, 5:11 PM
Posts:120
Thought I'd put mine in here. Its not much but it gets the job done.
Yeah, those are just the apple stickers on my speakers. I didn't know what to do with them so I just stuck them on there. The ipod stand is something called The Iped 2. It is adjustable to fit any ipod (regular or mini, I think even the shuffle). They work great and I liked it to cause it goes well with the iMac. You can get them at <http://www.thoughtout.biz/>

The response to *Stringer’s* question involved reflection upon a problem encountered with the Apple stickers included in the packaging with its products. The decision was made by the User-Fan to appropriate them in a manner that further connects them with the brand. Consequently, this established a connection between member and brand community demonstrating a creative use of the stickers that strengthens brand affiliation. In this same post, *barksdale* was also able to address the question of *Tommy* adding to the brand community’s collective intelligence by announcing where the iPod stand is able to be purchased (see the inserted link www.thoughtout.biz).

Another manner in which Apple brand community bonds were formed was through the creation of boundaries of accepted behaviour. These range in restrictions and impact, but due to the formation of boundaries, discriminate against those who may not adhere to the common thread of discussion, might

be incapable of becoming a member of the community, or are simply not Mac User-Fans. Through the use of common language, shared understanding and appropriation of common signs the members of the brand community are able to sustain a symbolic boundary for the broad community. The constant reference to all things Apple throughout the forums sets a standard of experience and reality for those engaging in it to share. These commonalities increase the bonds between individual Mac User-Fans and also encourage others to enter the same level of experience to join them. The 'My Setup' threads not only represent a form of expression of Apple adulation but are often a catalyst for further conversation, debate and community interaction between fellow User-Fans. Conversation is initiated upon any number of subjects, queries or comments. However, most are directly related to the set-up. In being focused on the set-up, these threads illustrate the tendency of obvious shared experience and ideology towards the adulation of the Apple and Mac brands. These are often displayed in the aspirational comments by members towards so-called 'great set-ups'. An example of this was an original posting made by member *air* and the follow up passage of interaction with Casual User-Fan *Marlo* (Figure 6.9).

Figure 6.9

Marlo
Junior Member
Oct 2, 2006, 09:54 PM
Originally Posted by Partlow



That's a great desktop picture - where did you get it from? I'm (fingers crossed) taking delivery of a 12" PowerBook tomorrow, and that desktop is exactly what I want!!

The picture shown by *Partlow* is common amongst those found in the 'picture' threads with very little information disclosed about this member's life outside of their enthusiasm for Apple. The picture illustrates the Apple product central to their 'worship' (a Powerbook), ownership of an iPod (specifically announced as a 30GB video ipod), a Motorola Razr mobile phone, a Nintendo DS portable gaming system and a desktop graphic with a section of the Apple logo. The inclusion of the Motorola phone and the Nintendo are also of note, as both were commonly included in a similar regard to Apple products in terms of industrial design and user fanaticism.

The response of member *Marlo* to *Partlow's* posting contains three important features. Firstly, a congratulatory type response is manifest by the comment "That's a great desktop" and the symbolic acceptance of the "two thumbs up." Secondly, it includes a question referring to the origin of the desktop picture (" - where did you get it from?"). Finally, it presents self-expression of *zen's*

Apple fandom and their establishment within the community without a picture (“I’m taking (figures crossed) a delivery of a 12” Powerbook tomorrow”).

Despite the insightful comment by *Marlo*, it was not followed with any discussion of this in later postings. However, it was common for members to apologize for their cluttered or ‘messy’ set-ups whilst members with organised workstations received great acknowledgement throughout these threads. Many of the “set-ups” posted in the threads appeared as sanitized versions of ‘regular’, cluttered, day-to-day workstations. Often, User-Fans displayed only the components of their workstation without any clutter or personal artefacts. The posts of Geek User-Fan *Stringer* (Figure 6.10, Figure 6.11) illustrate the norm of this activity in the brand community.

Figure 6.10

Stringer
11-25-2006, 05:26 PM
Posts: 2,820
Mac Specs: 17" MacBook Pro
Here we go, I added some better lighting from last time



Posted within a day of each other, *Benjamindaines's* posts illustrate his different Mac experiences and appropriation of distinct brand community

norms through symbolic gestures. Due to his regular participation in these arenas, *Stringer* was able to distinguish the manner in which his 'setup' should be displayed to the community. The regulation of space (void of distraction beyond practicality) and the centrality of the Apple product demonstrate his understanding and ability to appropriate such norms.

Figure 6.11

Stringer
12-26-2006, 03:36 PM
Posts: 2,820
Mac Specs: 17" MacBook Pro
Tiny tiny update from last time ;)





Interestingly, responses from other members demonstrate a formed bond over the post, yet not about the shared experience of Apple product or brand ownership but seemingly peripheral subjects. For example the response of *Bunny* “Nice lighting! How do you do it?” and *Cutty* “Beautiful. Are those speakers 2.1?” demonstrate the continued identification with aesthetics amongst the Apple brand community. *Stringer* (Figure 6.11) appropriates more brand community norms by displaying the ‘setup’ in working order. In this instance, many are concerned with a symbolic importance is placed of the background wallpaper on the computer.

A further example of the cleanliness, or design ethic, which permeates through the Mac Setup threads is found in the discussion between Casual User-Fans *Slim* (Figure 6.12) and *Maury* (Figure 6.13).

Figure 6.12

Slim
Fresh-Faced Recruit
Jun 17, 2005, 12:02 PM



Figure 6.13

Maury
Forum Regular
Jun 19, 2005, 12:03 PM

messy messy messy

By identifying *Slim*'s inability to adhere to the norms of the brand community, it can be viewed that *Maury*'s comments ("messy messy messy") are a method of engaging the community to uphold standards set by previous User-Fans. It also acts as a regulator between a Devoted User-Fan (*Maury*) who understands these symbolic boundaries of the community that *Slim* has yet to identify. The image produced by Apple is Mac (and indeed all Apple products) as a techno-utopia, clean and free of complications. Thus, it would follow that the Apple brand community would adopt this symbolism within their community and the comment "messy messy messy" reflects the brand communities norms. In a sense User-Fans present their setups as though they were Apple commercial displays reflecting a highly organised, sanitised order.

Additional brand community norms are displayed through mimicked behaviour of Casual User-Fans. The post of Casual User-Fan *Poot* (Figure 6.14) is indicative of a recent “Switcher” (a person who has recently changed software from Windows to Mac) who has attempted to appropriate the signs of the brand community to illustrate or share his experience with fellow User-Fans.

Figure 6.14

Poot

01-17-2007, 01:56 PM

:D Switcher with pics!

Back in September I purchased my first Apple computer.

A 24" iMac: 2.16Ghz C2D 1 gig of RAM and a 7300GT 128mb video card.



Then I had the need for mobility and picked up a New MacBook

Pro:

2.33Ghz C2D, 2 gigs of RAM, X1600 Ati 256mb video card.



Im addicted. I love my new Macs.....

The statement “Im addicted. I love my new Macs...” identifies a desire to join the brand community, as does the appropriation of symbols of Mac through display of Apple hardware to ‘enter’ the boundaries of community. However, this is somewhat offset by both the Casual User-Fan’s inexperienced behaviour but also the high-end, expensive nature of his setup. Where one would assume that this would cement himself within a brand community, it stands as a glaring recent foray in community membership. Furthermore, while the setups were most often the ‘latest and greatest’ options available from Apple, older products were often displayed with very few criticized for age or obscurity. One suspects that this had much to do with it being a fan oriented section of the community, where the most devoted express their closeness to Apple and the importance it holds in their lives. Thus, behaviour such as that of *Poot* demonstrates the eagerness and conformity to be accepted within symbolic boundaries of the brand community.

The “My Set-up” photo threads used as examples in this section, illustrate the symbolic importance of the process of transformation from individual

consumer to devoted fan; and from a group of like-minded individuals into brand community. This process is often expressed through members' experiences with the consumption of their Mac OSX and Apple products. The continuing response and dedication to these images conveys to fellow User-Fans others like them wish to engage in this level of communication. This level of communication would not traditionally have been recognised as a form of community. However, Apple consumers have established their ability to create a multitude of personal connections through the networks that the technology has allowed. In this way, seemingly menial topics such as the colour of our computers can become intriguing and ultimately insightful conversations regarding the impact that our everyday consumption affects lives around the world.

What has been displayed here is the era of the Mac brand community that is generally distinguishable to Mac User-Fans. Depending on their level of User-Fandom they may note this era differently. As such, their experiences within the 'Set-ups' thread are distinguished by this level. For the Casual User-Fans it may represent the first expressions amongst the brand community of their ownership and shared experience in owning an Apple product. Whereas, for the Geek User-Fan it may be identified as a period of time or a generation of products. For example reference to a G5 iMac, 12' Powerbook, or MacBook Pro all refer to a specific product line that are easily identifiable to a Geek User-Fan. However the User-Fan remembers this history and the threads remain an important aspect of the brand community culture. For it is in the forums' allowance for User-Fans to develop and produce symbolic gestures of their ownership which enables the brand community to appropriate them as shared experience and ownership of the abstract.

Windows Community: The Generic Brand

Although in terms of visitor and member populations the Window-focused forums offer the largest community in this study, on first impression they did

not exhibit the overt levels of symbolic links that sustain brand communities. That is, the Windows brand community has evolved without the shared boundaries and behaviours among its members; nor does it display any overt justification for its existence as a communal space where brand appropriations are of symbolic importance. Most often this absence was demonstrated in the most technical areas within the community, but the sentiment was also found in areas which would in comparison be classified as much more intimate and personal. However, despite the lack of cohesiveness, one can find the boundaries of behaviour from which brand community is formed.

Before these boundaries can be discussed consideration must be made to the low levels of overt, brand-centric community interaction that occurs in these forums. In the Windows XP technical problems section of the *WinXPcentral* forum, this was first identified through recognition of the number of postings and threads compared to the number of site views. The Windows XP arena rates as the most popular in terms of posts and second most popular in regards to threads. Once in the technical arena it becomes more apparent that this is not an area where conversation and interaction take place. By looking at the most frequently viewed threads one can account for lurking activity combined with the number of replies each thread/question/problem received. The discrepancy suggests that the community is an arena for many 'lurkers' rather than active User-Fans. While there is little to ascertain from the discrepancy itself (which is no different than most forums), the low-levels of interaction (posts) reflects the limited opportunities provided by Windows User-Fans to participate in modes of communication whereby User-Fans signify identity and community. However, the forms of interaction present in the Windows forums symbolise the different focus of the community and the manner in which its User-Fans appropriate notions of the shared.

The difference can be accounted for in terms of shared experience by 'lurkers' and Casual User-Fans who participate in the sharing knowledge from their more devoted in the community. In turn, this extends the legitimacy

of Devoted and Geek User-Fans while creating community bonds, boundaries and sharing of knowledge in the form of 'how-to' solutions.

The most viewed threads in the technical section of *WinXPcentral* demonstrate the unique culture and language that exists in these areas of the Windows brand community. Clearly identifiable to those with Windows experience or knowledge, these are arenas which involve a certain form of language that is native to Windows User(-Fans) designated by particular titles, content and responses. The title of the thread often refers to a particular question or problem faced by the individual User-Fan. They claimed the problem (Workgroup to Domain Profile Migration; Network Connection Empty), the error (corrupt ntoskml.exe; Driver_irql_not_less_or_equal), or the solution (Driver_irql_not_less_or_equal And Irql not_less_or_equal Fix). Perhaps the best illustration of this discrepancy of interaction versus knowledge dissemination is the Driver_irql_not_less_or_equal And Irql not_less_or_equal Fix which, with over 22,000 views but only four replies was the most accessed thread on the site's forums. It exemplifies the symbolic interaction between User-Fans (or 'lurkers') and the sharing of knowledge within the Windows brand community through the interaction between knowledge-holding User-Fans and non-interaction between community members. By including the vast number of thread views to those who place their presence to the sites, the Windows technical forums offer an insight into a community that does not necessarily recognise itself as a social entity, or a brand community, but as an arena for User-Fans to display and share their technical knowledge and experience of their operating system.

By investigating the two most frequented threads in the technical section as an example, one can explore the behaviour of User-Fans. Noting the relative age of the postings and the continued popularity of the threads, one can highlight the symbolic importance of knowledge in the Windows brand community and how norms of behaviour create boundaries within this community. That is to say, although they participate in hegemonic technological culture, Windows User-Fans create symbolic boundaries

through the dissemination and sharing of knowledge which, in turn, is appropriated by the community to form hierarchies.

As highlighted earlier, the thread 'Driver_irql_not_less_or_equal And Irql not_less_or_equal Fix' contains only four posts (three of which are responses to the initial inquiry). This thread contains specialised information that only users with this specific problem would need to access. The initial posting made by member Geek User-Fan *Everett* seems to be a response to an earlier thread titled 'Driver_irql_not_less_or_equal'. As such it is a solution thread rather than a question thread. Referring back to the initial posting, *Everett* (Figure 6.15) formed a detailed solution to a specific problem and has posted a comparatively long, informative response. Detailed in this response is language specific to Windows User-Fans confronted with this issue.

Figure 6.15

Everett
Post #1
01-23-2003, 12:26 PM
Administrator
Posts: 2,3332
This solution helped me, but I do not guarantee that it will help you.
Also, there might be no way to undo this without reinstalling windows again. SO beware :-).
First thing to do is to clock down your CPU to the factory default voltage and frequency.
Second thing is to make sure memory is not at fault. Use memtest86 (www.memtest86.com). You will probably have to leave memtest overnight to make sure every single bit is tested.
Next, DISABLE ACPI. Yeah, yeah it gives some nifty features like standby, but hell, do you want these errors gone? Then use Hibernate, which is very nice.
There are many ways to disable ACPI....
...This is the complete computer configuration on which it worked. IRQ setup also included...

The responses to this involve two comments of thanks from Casual User-Fans and a minor correction from a fellow Geek User-Fan. One could suggest a few factors behind the limited responses. The first is a lack of

interest on the topic throughout the community, as with no interest there is limited scope for further posting of thoughts. However, this reasoning does not bode well in light of the number of page views the thread has received. The second, points to the accepted norms through the Windows brand community in this arena. It is possible that this thread exhibits an example of particular cultures of accepted behaviour whereby interaction remains limited to the exchange of 'pure' (see technical) knowledge. As the thread solves a problem, no response may be required from other members nor is the adulation deemed necessary from the individual who solves it.

Despite receiving 11 more responses to the initial post, the thread 'No gpedit.msc' (Figure 6.16) remains in the mold of the norm in these technical arenas.

Figure 6.16

Pete
Post #1
Windows Novice
Posts: 3
07-25-2003, 05:07 PM
I'm having problmes launching games in the MSN Gaming Zone....One of the tech's told me to come here and use the 'Increase Broadband' tip BUT i have no gpedit.msc anywhere on this pc...it's running XP Home....any backdoors to the application?? Ill take any suggestions

Beginning with a post from Casual User-Fan *Pete* (Figure 6.16), the thread followed the common pattern of highlighting the issue in the title, proposing the problem in the text, followed by solution in subsequent responses. The post also highlights the acceptance of the Casual User-Fan that community members holding greater knowledge may be present in the forum. The comment "one of the tech's told me to come here" illustrates the low degree of the User-Fan's association with brand community.

Following the question was a typically concise and impersonal response from a Devoted User-Fan with greater experience than the Casual User-Fan who

posed the question. However, this response does not satisfy another in the community. As Geek User-Fan *Delmar* (Figure 6.17) clarifies:

Figure 6.17

Delmar
Post #3
07-25-2003, 08:28 PM
Fastest Poster in the Site
Administrator
Posts: 1,084
Well, you have a problem. XP Home does not have the GPEDIT.MSC installed on it. Reason? Home is not designed to connect to a domain. Therefore, no Group Policy EDITor. Sorry, but you'll have to find a different fix.

In this post, *Delmar* was able to distinguish the difference in experience between Casual User-Fans (“Home is not designed to connect to a domain”) while at the same time illustrate the depth of knowledge held by Geek User-Fans. Thus, in this instance the problem here was unable to be addressed by the Devoted User-Fan as their membership in the community was based upon different (but similar) experiences. Despite *Delmar*’s inability to address the issue, Geek User-Fan *Big Dan* (Figure 6.18) provided a solution by ‘illegally’ posting the required software.

Figure 6.18

Big Dan
Post #5
Guest
Posts: n/a
07-26-2003, 12:35 AM
Here:
Unzip it, copy & paste it into C:\windows\system32
or C:\winnt\system32
and see if it works...you never know.

Attached Files
gpedit.zip (3.7 KB, 10893 views)

Big Dan’s short response highlights an aspect of knowledge and experience that can through the instructions only be shared by XP users (“unzip it, copy

& paste into C:\windows\system32). Furthermore, it reflects the extent of shared experience through the community through the number of automated downloads of the file as a solution (10893 views).

Unlike the previous example, the length of this thread was extended not by those unfamiliar with the norm, but by the problems faced by some of the members. Additionally, there were solutions to secondary problems that were posted within the same thread. Although threads commonly finished at the point of solution or at the point where the problem is unable to be solved due to lack of knowledge or skills from the initial post, this post differs in the sense that *Big Dan's* solution was flawed. Nearly two days later, member *Penny* (Figure 6.19) highlighted the problem faced.

Figure 6.19

Penny
Post #7
Member
Administrator
Posts: 79
Join Date: Oct 2002
Location: Ohio
07-28-2003, 07:54 AM
Snoopy,
I can't get your download link to the gpedit.zip file to work. It will not download, if you could check it out I would appreciate it.
mandible365
:D
Remember, He who dies with the most toys wins!

Although not solely a Windows brand community phenomena, these threads follow a familiar pattern. This pattern is common to the technical arenas and hint towards the origins of the community. Both in the original post and their replies, the User-Fans alienate themselves in this thread by involving the most impersonal, technical aspects of their computing experience. This places limits upon all involved gateways to the conversations which help in the appropriation of community, identity and such, while solely focusing on problems/solutions to the experiences faced by community. While the norms of this culture limit the extent of the personal bonds User-Fans are able to

establish, the culture establishes a brand community based on the knowledge of User-Fans. It is in this sense that Windows forums create a 'generic' brand community based on the experience and consumption of the product rather than the appropriation and exchange of signs.

Despite the presence of a 'generic' culture, there remain examples of brand community devotion similar to that found in the Apple community. A *neowin* 'tradition' of threads titled 'Post your workstation' (Figure 6.20) where appropriations of ownership demonstrate a devotion to the brand, symbolism and the creation of boundaries through brand attachment. Unlike its Apple cousins, conversation of and around the brand are limited. Instead, the Windows brand community demonstrates their ownership of products which are related solely to their computing experience that is facilitated by their allegiance to Windows.

Figure 6.20

Pappy
Post #84
Jan 4 2007, 22:49
Neowinian
Posts: 47

Just got my 2407, I'll post some better shots later when it is clean and of the entire room.



Posted by *Pappy* (Figure 6.20), the post illustrates the extent that Windows User-Fans can appropriate Microsoft products as a point of community focus. The image displays to the community their ownership of Microsoft products by ensuring the community is able to view their X-Box, Dell computer, and Windows in running order. The appropriation of Windows in a functioning state illustrates two aspects of User-Fan behaviour that can only be identified across shared knowledge and experience of the brand community. The date of the post (Jan 4, 2007) demonstrates the User-Fan's devotion to the brand, highlighting the similarities of other brand communities (see Apple) whereby ownership (mediated by experience) signifies adulation and experience of the brand. The date is of significance as development of the Vista OS was completed in November of 2006 with the official release on January 30, 2007. The image illustrates the User-Fans' ownership of Vista, signified through the photograph of their computer running the operating system. The photo represents a symbolic appropriation of the product (through a media form) which demonstrates both attachment and knowledge to the brand and the brand community. By identifying these aspects of User-Fan behaviour, through which community is formed, it can be recognised as appropriations of sign that regulate devotion and knowledge of the brand itself.

While behavioural norms exist throughout these threads, there is no continuity of 'brand' through the community experience. While there is sometimes a demonstrated sense of commonality through User-Fan devotion towards Microsoft products – particularly in reference to the X-Box – signifying a devotion towards the brand further enhances the claim of the brand community as specifically Windows. In turn, this may also reflect the nature of the Windows brand community as one which is generically devoted to the hijacked notion of the PC, rather than the operating system itself. This is reflected in the prevalence of non-Microsoft related product discussion (Figure 6.21).

Figure 6.21

Junior
Post #22
Oct 3 2006, 07:33
GGTW
Posts: 10,224
Quote:



What case is that?

Although similar behaviour is prevalent in the Apple brand community, the Windows brand community reflects the diversity of the Windows User-Fan's consumer experience. In response to *George's* posting, Geek User-Fan *Junior* (Figure 6.21) identifies a product through which their User-Fandom can communicate (What case is that?).

Figure 6.22

Homer
Post #23
Oct 3 2006, 08:26
Neowinian³
Posts: 376

Quote - (George's @ Oct 3 2006, 07:33)
What case is that?
Antec P180B (Mid Tower)
<http://www.antec.com/us/productDetails.php?ProdID=81802>

The response and interest displayed by *Homer* (Figure 6.22) indicates the creation of boundaries based on consumer interest similar to that of other recognised brand communities. The notable difference in the Windows community is that through the circumstance of Microsoft's software focus; their brand adulation remains tempered towards Microsoft but is able to expand towards a range of other relevant parties. In answering *George's* question, *Homer* displays a common bond in consumerism with both User-Fans. Although no mention to Windows is made - the discussion focused on the case - no discussion would have taken place between the geographically dispersed individuals without their original User-Fandom of the Windows operating system.

The response of *Littleman* (Figure 6.23) further illustrates the out-of-brand experience shared within the Windows brand community.

Figure 6.23

Littleman
Post #24
Oct 3 2006, 10:13
Posts: 1,137

Quote - (*George* @ Oct 3 2006, 08:33)

What case is that?

It does say on my specs page, which was linked in my original post

Quote - (*Junior* @ Oct 3 2006, 09:26)

Antec P180B (Mid Tower)

Indeed, and a very nice case it is too.:D

The comment "Indeed, and a very nice case it is too" expands upon *anvi's* identification of the case and shares the agreement of its symbolic importance. Additionally, the post demonstrates a contestation of community norms with *Littleman* bluntly responding to *George's* question by directing the User-Fan to the original post for information ("It does say on my specs page"). This may also be a reflection of the common form of communication in the forums.

Identifying with this, there remains numerous possibilities that reveal greater identification with a brand community than first impressions illustrate. These brand communities are based on an assumption by only those User-Fans with knowledge greater than that of the individual posing the question will respond. This is a community that constructs itself through networks based on the symbolic notion of sharing knowledge. However, through the increased likelihood of problems, queries and intrigue of individuals, these arenas are the most accessible of the brand communities to those who are not or could not be distinguished as User-Fans of an operating system. As such, Windows User-Fans create a more diverse, generalist or 'generic' brand community which does not support a homogenous culture where only a brand is a sign to be appropriated and consumed. This said, brand association does exist, simply at different levels of intensity and centrality to the User-Fan than other brand communities.

The most overt form of this community interaction takes place in the arenas in which User-Fans discuss customisations of Windows XP. In the context of the Windows brand community customisation represent two factors of User-Fan experience. In Neowin's forums these include introductions to the tools used in the practice of customisation ("Introductory guide for windows customization II or Optimize XP - A Windows XP Optimization Guide v1.8, Another ***** guide :) update"), Windows specific instructions ("Desktop Icons without Text") and third party instructions ("Uxtheme installation under Windows XP/2003"). The motions of customisation and personalisation demonstrate a level of User-Fan engagement in ownership of products that McCracken (1990) deemed 'possession rituals' or a transfer in 'ownership' between consumer and producer.

The Desktop Icons without Text initiated by Devoted User-Fan *Vernon* represents one arena where the relationship between producer, product and consumer is appropriated through User-Fan activity.

Figure 6.24

Vernon

Post #1 Sep 30 2004, 14:20

www.herbystweaks.net

Posts: 2,133

Desktop Icons without Text - More functionality with less
Icons...



...The zip file contains:

- [Virtual Plastic]
- ACDSee 7 PP
- Ad-Aware SE Personal & Pro...
- ... Winamp
- Windows Defender
- Windows Media Player 9 & 10
- WinMX
- XnView (by Splinter)
- X-Setup Pro...

Vernon's post is a method of User-Fan adaptation of Microsoft's original product that is to be shared by fellow brand community members who are left unsatisfied with the original. In doing so, the User-Fans who follow his instructions appropriate a shared symbol of User-Fandom and become symbols of the Windows brand community. The general popularity of this thread (over 750 posts, many thousand more views), demonstrates that this form of behaviour represents a symbolically important mode of experience for this brand community. By continuing his devotion and reappropriation of Windows, Herby signifies the manner through which the Windows community

is diverse in its consumptive practices, the forms that appropriate them, and the bonds they *choose* to form.

The actions which are a result of 'desktop icons without text' and represent McCracken's 'possession rituals' also demonstrate the ability of User-Fans to re-signify branded products in personalised, unintended directions (De Certeau, 1984). Ritson et al. (1996) note that forms such as these appropriate "any new, personalised self-meanings, no matter how idiosyncratic, derive from a representation of an existing group-constructed meaning." Thus, in the context of the brand community, the symbolic importance of 'desktop icons without text' derives more differing personalised interpretations of that symbol than the general public (Ritson, Elliott, & Eccles, 1996).

Inherent in much of the discourse within the Windows brand community was an association with a community between its members. It would be fair to suspect that this may have something to do with the hijacked appropriation of the term PC (personal computer) by the media and others to represent Microsoft Windows-run computers. For this reason many within the Windows community claim membership to the PC community rather than the specific brand community based on the experience of Windows. The Windows brand community itself demonstrates a consciousness of this, acknowledging how its pages become a generic domain of devotion when compared to the Apple specific arenas (Figure 6.25).

Figure 6.25

Wash
Post #315
Nov 9 2006, 04:34
I'm not superstitious, I'm just a little stitious
Posts: 2,922
you can post mac stuff here, but cant post pc stuff there

Posting in a *Neowin* thread, *Wash* (Figure 6.25) instigates the discussion on the topic by stating ("you can post mac stuff here, but cant post pc stuff

there”). This comment highlights knowledge of practices within both communities. It also identifies PC as Windows in the marketplace of User-Fan expression through the distinction between “here” (*neowin*) and “there” (Apple arenas). This concern and assumption was addressed by *Pomade* (Figure 6.26).

Figure 6.26

Pomade
Post #316
Nov 9 2006, 08:30
Neowinian²
Posts: 215

a mac workstation is a workstation and a mac workstation,
a pc workstation is a workstation but not a mac workstation

By establishing the connection between PC as Windows and Mac as ‘workstations’, *Pomade* clarifies how the occasional Apple ‘workstation’ is accepted by the Windows brand community when the Apple brand community does not allow this form of behaviour. In addressing *Wash’s* fallacy of construction, the response details the perception of the Apple brand community as an exclusive User-Fan domain and the confusion that exists amongst the generic Windows community. By suggesting the Windows community is not an inclusive brand community, *Pomade* typifies the generalist computing culture that exists in these arenas. This however, was not the only response to the Mac-Windows ‘workstation’ argument (Figure 6.27).

Figure 6.27

Mr French
Post #348 Nov 15 2006, 03:21
Infiltrate
Group: Registered
Posts: 577

Quote - (Wash @ Nov 8 2006, 21:34)
you can post mac stuff here, but cant post pc stuff there
Yeah, some Apple users seem to be elitist **** heads. Oh well.

Mr French (Figure 6.27) expands on the original complaint over the lack of reciprocity from Mac User-Fans in the Apple brand communities. This Windows User-Fan identifies with the complaint noting that “Yeah, some Apple users seem to be elitist **** heads”. This comment highlights the perception of some Windows User-Fans towards their Apple counterparts. It also confirms a point of distinction between the brand communities. By claiming them as “elitist”, *Mr French* supports the generic, assumedly non-elitist culture created by Windows User-Fans. The culture is highlighted through the continuation of this discussion that focuses further on the inclusion of Apple products rather than the acceptance of all forms of computer hardware (Figure 6.28).

Figure 6.28

Siren
Post #349
Nov 15 2006, 12:37
neowin jedi
Posts: 743

^grumpy

In response to *Mr French*, *Siren's* (Figure 6.28) “grumpy” remark emerges as a possible ‘flaming’ attempt, or a reaction to the elitist claims established in the previous post. In turn *Mr French* (Figure 6.29) again highlights the acceptance of other brands in the Windows community.

Figure 6.29

Mr French
Post #353 Nov 16 2006, 21:20
Infiltrate
Posts: 577

Oh, I'm not grumpy. I'm just telling the truth. I have no problems with Macs or Mac users.

By claiming, “I have no problems with Macs or Mac users”, the generic nature of the community is again exposed. The remark “I'm just telling the

truth” supports the elitist argument established earlier (in the context of the brand community) and signifies a separation between Windows User-Fans and Apple User-Fans. However, for this particular User-Fan at least, the post suggests that while allegiances may exist they do not signify a ‘problem’.

The generic nature of the Windows and the brand community is again highlighted by the presence of individuals who display allegiances towards other software brands. Participating in this exchange, *Wharvey* (Figure 6.30) is one example of these individuals as he displays an anti-Windows (nee PC) stance with a seeming preference to Mac software.

Figure 6.30

Wharvey
Post #354
Nov 16 2006, 21:33
Neowinian³
Posts: 435

he must be one of those who thinks they are called MACS, not
Macs.
narrow minded PC person, "if it ain't Windows, I don't want nuttin
to do with it"

The most inclusive aspect of the Windows brand community is demonstrated when a comment such as “narrow minded PC person...” are accepted by the community. By accepting the comment as an individual statement directed at an individual User-Fan rather than a criticism of brand community behaviour, the Windows brand community remains accepting of other brands and the associated symbolic references that each entails. In saying this, the statement is addressed by both the User-Fans who made the original claim (“grumpy”) and those who established the conversation (Mac workstations).

In this post, *Siren* (Figure 6.31) distances himself from any attack on the Windows brand community:

Figure 6.31

Siren
Post #355
Nov 16 2006, 22:42
neowin jedi
Posts: 743
^ i wouldn't go that far. i just thought he must be in a grumpy mood. its true apple junkies can be quite pretentious. gfm made a good point in a slightly grumpy manner.... i think it was on a monday morning so who can blame the poor guy. sorry for any offence gfm

Furthermore, he establishes a connection with *GFM* on two levels. In the final sentence, *Siren* establishes a personal connection by acknowledging why he assumed that the poster was 'grumpy'. Additionally, by agreeing with his comment on Mac User-Fans he supports the Windows User-Fan position.

Figure 6.32

Mr French
Post #356
Nov 16 2006, 23:04
Posts: 2,922
Call me grumpy, but i dont think that Mac users should have their own "Mac Only" workstation threads, and while we cant post our pc workstations there, they however, can post their Mac workstations here. We should call this thread "PC Workstation Thread"

Finally, *Mr French* (Figure 6.32) clarifies that the original debate or conversation should have been more exclusive than it was (We should call this thread...). This symbolic use of PC again refers to Windows. In a sense this is a reflection of the forms of interaction that a User-Fan wishes to see within 'their' brand community. That is, a reflection of the brand rather than an inclusive social arena.

This community is formed on the symbolic boundary of Windows ownership and as such represents a *generic* brand community. Where Apple brand communities admire and praise the company's products, the Windows brand community appropriate their shared membership and ownership of the product as a platform for interaction separate from the brand. Due to the

steps required to participate in these communities, added with the time and effort to post and read posts, it points to greater association and commitment to the ideology of the operating system than these members perhaps realise.

Linux Brand Community: The Diverse Brand

The Linux forums present a complex network of community connections between the User-Fans, software and brand community. While Linux itself is a 'brand' among the commonalities of compatible Linux kernels there is little agreement amongst members on a range of important issues such as best distribution for personal use. The extent of this disagreement illustrates the extent of differences within the seemingly stable Linux community.

Due to the open-source background of Linux, it does not necessarily represent the monolithic corporate structures the likes of Microsoft and Apple represent. Rather it exists as a mid-point between a movement and an array of commercial and individual distributors. In this sense Linux represents both an ideological community and the product of a range of commercial and ideologically-focused manufacturers. In addition to this, Linux can be divided into a number of different brand-based distributions offering users subtly different modes of experience under the shared experience and ownership of Linux. Just as Windows and Mac User-Fans demonstrate allegiances to software, Linux User-Fans express preferences towards particular distributions (or brands) of the operating system whilst remaining devoted to Linux. It is the commercial and ideological differences between the products of these brands that become the focus of conjecture between User-Fans, shifting the focus brand community from a single branded symbol to a diverse range of representations of Linux both along specific kernel distributions and Linux in its entirety. Despite these fractures, the Linux brand community displays behaviour similar to those within the Mac and Windows brand-communities theory. To illustrate the extent of this dichotomous relationship, this section highlights the nature of User-Fan connections with Linux (as a community) and particular software brands (as a culture). With

this established, the focus shifts towards the 'conflictive' behaviour of Linux User-Fans between their symbolic definitions of Linux.

As an operating system, Linux differs from the proprietary-owned forms of software in that the GPL has allowed for it to be created and distributed by any complying entity. In many cases this has seen Linux branded by many different and competing entities ranging from popular and commercially-focused to the community-based hobbyist distributions which focus on the expansion of Linux and cost-effective computing throughout the world. In the forums, distributions are divided on the homepage to distinguish these differences. These categories differ from the distinctions established on the front page of the Mac forums as the Apple categories were based on the brand's differences in hardware, rather than software's differences.

While symbolic distinction between Linux distributions emerges as a factor of the User-Fan behaviour, this does not discount the influence of a Linux brand community. The brand community identifies with Linux as a branded movement that is unique to the operating system market. Unlike other consumer products, the Linux operating system stands as a movement or philosophy that is shared and distributed by branded entities. Following this, User-Fans often engage with Linux as a pseudo-brand community, perhaps even as a branded consumer movement.

For this reason, many User-Fans identify with the community as an arena for discourse 'above' brand signification and displays of loyalty. The reaction of *Cynthia* (Figure 6.33) to the possibility of desktop screenshots in the vein of other operating system communities indicates the perceived focus of the Linux brand community.

Figure 6.33

Cynthia
01-18-2007, 01:53 PM
Senior Member
Distribution: (B)LFS, Ubuntu, Slackware
Posts: 4,834

Sounds a bit odd to me. The purpose of LQ, anyway, isn't to boast with your desktop layout but help people. Of course if LQ staff wants some money from people who take it seriously when it comes to boasting with desktop layouts, it's cool. But isn't that a bit too much?

There are services on the web, easily available, for screenshots. LQ hosting anybody's screenshots is probably not helping anybody

Although the comment regarding the worth of posting pictures is not indicative of the brand community (there are hundreds of responses after it), *Cynthia's* comment does indicate the symbolic importance of the community for Linux User-Fans. The comment "the purpose of LQ, anyway..." highlights the perceived aims of the community. Furthermore, the User-Fan suggests that any such 'hosting' may jeopardise these initial aims. The importance of these functions are further noted in the User-Fan's dismissal of the culture of 'screenshoting' and dismissing the 'boasting' of desktop layouts. While the comment is somewhat neglected by peers in this particular thread, the sentiments reflect that of the majority of Linux brand community who focus discussion and community interaction upon the software, its nature and how it can be employed (that is technical issues). This differs from Mac and Windows community who have demonstrated a propensity to appropriate visual representations of brands to denote membership to 'their' community rather than textual discussions to indicate their allegiance.

A commonly assumed benefit of Linux is the stability it provides its users, which unlike Windows according to Linux User-Fans, is riddled with issues causing instability and consequential system 'crashes.' This comparison has led to a User-Fan perception that Linux is a superior operating system. The thread '*Post Your Uptime*' is an example of the manner in which Linux User-Fans are able to appropriate symbols (their 'uptime') that they are able to share as a community in recognition of their perceived superiority of Linux. Furthermore, it represents an arena where they can display solidarity towards Linux as a brand also shared by a community. Initiated by *Pickford* (Figure 6.34) the thread is again a display of User-Fan adulation combined with the symbolic expression of their 'uptime'.

Figure 6.34

Pickford
10-03-2004
Linux User
Posts: 363
Post Your Uptime
post your uptime and see if you can beat the person above you!
note: it can be found with the simple command "uptime".
6 days, 2 hours, 0 minutes

In the initial posting *Pickford* demonstrates two important features of Linux brand community experience. The first is the notion that ‘uptime’ is an important factor in the experience of Linux, reinforced in this post’s claim of 6 days, 2 hours, 0 minutes ‘uptime’. The second important feature is found in the instructions that *Pickford* details (“note: it can be found with the simple command "uptime"). Inherent in this ‘note’ is the ability and control of Linux User-Fans to interact with their operating system and an attempt to define their inclusion amongst Linux User-Fans (*Figure 6.35*).

Figure 6.35

Benny
Linux Newbie
10-04-2004
Posts: 141
20:01:22 up 31 min, 1 user, load average: 0.11, 0.12, 0.13
my pc is hardly ever running constantly... i have to turn it off at night because of the noisy fans (its in the same room i sleep in)

What becomes apparent in these discussions is a competitive notion that ‘uptime’ is an important symbolic reference for Linux User-Fans. As such many of them distinguish the factors behind their numbers, particularly in reference to ‘small uptimes’. For example *Benny* justifies his low result as a factor not of Linux but of a “noisy fan.”

The symbolic nature of these interactions is not unnoticed by the community itself. User-Fan *Sabrina* (*Figure 6.36*) identifies this theme, by posting “the shortest uptime.” However, in doing so, the norms of communication are further solidified in the explanation of this (“had it at about 7 days on

FreeBSD but i wanted to try out Arch Linux yesterday”). Again, this identifies to the community that Linux is not the factor in a poor result; rather the actions of the individual are the catalyst for ‘uptimes.’

Figure 6.36

Sabrina
10-04-2004
Linux Engineer
Posts: 826
18:34:22 up 49 min, 1 user, load average: 0.10, 0.10, 0.13
lol, i beat everyone for the shortest uptime.
i had it at about 7 days on FreeBSD but i wanted to try out Arch
Linux yesterday....

The thread progresses on some assumptions of the Linux community until one member questions the ‘value’ or ‘meaning’ of these numbers. The response of *Sabrina* (*Figure 6.37*) highlights the symbolic importance to the Linux User-Fans of these numbers.

Figure 6.37

Sabrina
11-04-2004
Linux Engineer
Posts: 826
Quote:
Originally Posted by Melvin
i kinda understand what these values mean but could someone clarify? Thanx...
...first is the time. it's 18:45. next is the uptime, the amount of time your computer has been up and running. yours is almost 23 hours. 2 users means you have 2 users total on your computer...
...if i still haven't answered your question let me say that high uptimes are favorable. this is usually if you're running a server. if the server has a lot of downtime there's an obvious problem, because other computers won't be able to connect to it. uptime is usually a measure of how stable your system is, especially if it's a server you intend to have on all the time. if you never had a system crash and never turned off your computer, you would have a long uptime.

Amongst the technical explanation, *Sabrina* is able to detail the assumed point of difference between Linux and competing operating systems brands. Assumed in these comments is the theme that Linux is superior at delivering

high ‘uptimes’. Implicit in this post are a number of Linux brand knowledges that are shared by User-Fans. These include “high uptimes are favourable”, “uptime is usually a measure of how stable your system is”, and a “if you never had a system crash and never turned off your computer.” Each of these is a common point of debate for Linux User-Fans in the platform’s superiority over others. In mentioning these, *Sabrina* continues a symbolic reference to Linux as a superior brand.

Finally, the post of *O’Bannion* (Figure 6.38) demonstrates recognition of the symbolic interaction of the Linux brand community, the appropriation of ‘uptime’ in this, and hints towards the differences amongst distributions.

Figure 6.38

O’Bannion
Post #58
12-03-2004
Just Joined!
Posts: 0
4:32PM up 569 days, 8:20, 2 users, load averages: 0.08, 0.10,
0.08
FreeBSD btw.

The first note in this post was the ‘uptime’ of 569 days. This was clearly the highest ‘uptime’ posted in the thread. Whether the post is factual could be a point of debate, but *O’Bannion* claim demonstrates that the brand community, and its members, holds this symbolic representation in a high regard. This is also justified in *Burnett’s* exasperated response “dear [C]hrist man.” The ‘uptime’ posted by *O’Bannion* also introduces the notion of brand distinction. By altering the community “FreeBSD btw” the comment signifies that it is a particular brand of Linux that has been able to perform such a feat. This symbolic hint seems to be an attempt to designate FreeBSD as the *brand of choice* for attaining similar results. While seemingly inconspicuous, small symbolic gestures such as this express User-Fan brand allegiances and create points of distinction between Linux User-Fans.

The emergence of distinct Linux brands can also be identified through User-Fan discussion of their selection of distribution (brand) and their expression of this choice. The Linux Forums threads such as “Which Distro? Poll 2005-2006” (*Figure 6.39*), stand as symbolic representations by User-Fans with specific brand attachment to the community.

Figure 6.39

View Poll Results: What distro are you currently running?		
Debian	210	11.19%
Redhat/Fedora	579	30.86%
Gentoo	90	4.80%
Slackware	167	8.90%
Mandrake	263	14.02%
SuSe	354	18.87%
FreeBSD	17	0.91%
Other ... (please tell in Topic reply)	196	10.45%

The results of the poll demonstrate the significant fragmentation and diversity of brand consumption within the macro-Linux brand community. Throughout the passing of time between these threads, one can identify a possible shift in User-Fan brand preference towards the larger (often more recognisable) distributions of Linux (that is those offered by the poll). While the numbers are not indicative of the entire Linux User-Fan population, they do highlight the brand preferences of an engaged and active part of the Linux brand community. Furthermore, while important in identifying the demographic makeup of the Linux community, the thread is of greater importance to understanding brand subculture. This is a factor of the thread constituting one of the few arenas where User-Fans are able to interact on the topic of ‘consumer choice’ in a brand neutral context.

An important aspect of the Linux brand community is the acceptance of all distributions. Unlike traditional brand communities that are based on contestation or competition, the differences in brand distribution emerge as fluid social groups that an individual User-Fan can participate so long as they are User-Fans by definition (that is users/consumers of the platform). One manner through which this is expressed is the ready admission of User-Fans of their past consumption of Linux distributions, their current experience

(both positive and negative), and their future considerations towards branded consumption (*Figure 6.40*).

Figure 6.40

Coach Conrad
Post #20
10-20-2005
Linux Guru
Posts: 2,623
Suse here. I first tried it at 9.1 and have stuck with it for the most part. I have tried others but have always found myself coming back to it.
Bryan

In identifying with their brand choice, User-Fans commit to similar behaviour patterns as the Apple and Windows User-Fans. For example *Coach Conrad* reveals his consumer choice of Linux (branded as Suse) and the moment of first consumption (“I first tried it at 9.1”). Again, inherent in this comment is the assumed knowledge of a community that ‘9.1’ is an important symbolic representation. Often, and in this case, it represents a point in time that demonstrates the length and strength of the relationship between the User-Fan and the operating system. The expression of this connection is further clarified by *Coach Conrad* in the comment “I have tried others but have always found myself coming back to it.” The attempt of the User-Fan to “try others” highlights to others in the Linux brand community that there is a significant benefit to this User-Fan in the consumption and retention of the specific distribution.

Figure 6.41

Ginny
Post #19
10-20-2005
Linux Guru
Posts: 3,380
SuSE user here for now. but will experiment more in holidays with either debian or gentoo.

In slight contrast to the dominant discourse through which User-Fans designate their brand association towards a Linux distribution, many User-

Fans view this association as malleable, shifting between brands. Geek User-Fan *Ginny* (Figure 6.41) demonstrates this sentiment by stating they are SuSE consumers, but has thoughts of switching brands (“will experiment more in holidays with either debian or gentoo”). The sliding between brands is not debated amongst the community, or even the SuSE subculture, suggesting that in the context of a holistic Linux discussion, brand identity is an important symbolic recognition of Linux and distribution allegiance based on individual needs and choice.

Branded Linux ‘subcultures’ emerge across the range of available brands of distributions. However, unlike most communities where behaviour is the moderating factor in the differentiation of culture, in Linux brand communities the only factor is the brand itself. One expression of this is the question of popularity that emerges in the competition between distributions. The LinuxQuestions forum presents a good example in regards to the popularity of Slackware (Figure 6.42 **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Figure 6.42

Pentico
Post #1
11-12-2003, 02:26 PM
Member
Distribution: Debian Lenny
Posts: 219
Why is Slackware not the most popular Distro

Anyone who uses Slackware will know that its great, But Why is it not at the top??
Sorry if i don't know this one ... but don't you just love to see slackware go all the way to the top??

Pentico's post highlights the User-Fan connection to brand. Most evident in this is the testimonial that “[an]yone who uses Slackware will know that its great.” Such a statement denotes connection between brand and consumer. More importantly the question “don’t you just love to see slackware go all the way to the top” indicates that other Slackware User-Fans may share this sentiment (or at the least share their thoughts on the subject). Responding to

Pentico, *Partyguy* (Figure 6.43) identifies the User-Fan subculture that is 'supposed' to display a connection to the brand:

Figure 6.43

Partyguy
Post #3
11-12-2003, 02:33 PM
LQ Newbie
Registered: Oct 2003
Posts: 15
Thanked: 0

Because Slackware is not "newbie"-ized, i.e. it's not designed with all the gui stuff for system admin, nothing really done automated so new linux converts can feel at ease, etc. That's what makes slack so great, because it TEACHES one the internals of linux as it should be.

The post identifies that Slackware is a distribution that should attract Geek User-Fans who possess a high level of familiarity with Linux (it is not "newbie-ized"). In articulating this, *Partyguy* defines the User-Fan demographic of the Slackware community. Additionally, it designates who is not a User-Fan of the distribution. Finally, *Partyguy* demonstrates his own connection to the brand by highlighting the aspects he identifies as symbolically important ("it TEACHES one the internals of Linux as it should be"). It is upon these ideas that *Oldtimer* (Figure 6.44) details the difference between the product and the User-Fan base.

Figure 6.44

Oldtimer
Post #13
11-12-2003, 09:01 PM
Senior Member
Distribution: Slackware 13.0, -current
Posts: 3,885

Why the Slack distro isn't the most popular:
fdisk/tui installer
tgz/pkgtool
cli orientation
reputation
walnut creek?

Basically what everybody else said...

At the same time that Slack has a rep as the 'most Unix-like Linux' and they're very standards compliant, this is the very thing that makes them an atypical and fairly non-standard Linux. Everybody else has the common factor of no common factors. But the very things that may turn off some people are some of the very things Slackers love about Slack. I wouldn't mind if Slack was the most popular distro out there (as it was for quite some time) but I don't really care as long as Patrick Volkerding and the rest continue to produce it. If **they** cared about popularity and Slack's relative lack of popularity encouraged them to give it up, **then** I'd care...

While detailing some of the same 'technical' issues that dissuade people from the brand, *Oldtimer* (Figure 6.44) identifies the aspects of the brand that attract and retain User-Fans. The first comment illustrates this as "the very things that may turn off some people are some of the very things Slackers love about Slack." This clarifies the brand or product as a point of difference in the market and within the community. Furthermore, this User-Fan highlights that lack of popularity is not the point of difference for the culture arguing "I wouldn't mind if Slack was the most popular distro..." reflecting that it is the branded product, not its status, which is most important to this User-Fan.

The issue of sociality and symbolic use of language are also factors that create barriers between User-Fans, Linux and distribution. This issues are raised by *Stacy* (Figure 6.45) who distinguishes Slackware as a negative influence when presenting the factors that have influenced his selection of Linux brand (distribution).

Figure 6.45

Stacy
Post #15
11-12-2003, 09:17 PM
Member
Registered: Nov 2002
Distribution: A totally 133t distro :)
Posts: 358

I'll tell you the one of the reasons I never installed it, the insufferable vanity of some of its users.

There are some who think that because they managed to install slack they are l33tness personified. Anything you can do with slack you can do with any other distro and much of the time you can do it with little to no configuration.

I never cease to get a kick out of seeing threads with slack users slapping each other on the back because theyre so l33t and on the same page seeing the most elementary of questions.

In identifying User-Fans of Slackware as “l33tness personified,” *Stacy* is critical of the subculture that has emerged around the brand supporting the argument of distinct brand subcultures. The critique of User-Fan behaviour (“slack user slapping each other on the back because theyre so l33t”) highlights *Stacy*’s observation of the distinct behaviour of these User-Fans and their explicit link with the brand. Furthermore, in providing an account of this, *Stacy* presents a Linux User-Fan’s account of a consumer subculture which created language, forms of behavior and symbolic references that he considers barriers that limit his investment.

The behaviour of the Devoted User-Fan *Stacy* can be placed in the context of the intra-culture (as *Stacy* observed), but also suggests changes in individual behaviour outside of the online community. Influencing the manner through which individuals interact with their computers and software, this is behaviour that is difficult to identify through the forums, but recognised by some (for example *Cop* in (*Figure 6.46*)).

Figure 6.46

Cop
Post #119
12-16-2004, 01:23 PM
Member
Distribution: Debian, Slackware, Amigo, Ubuntu
Posts: 221
I agree with Azmeen, 100%.
I used to use Mandrake religiously and, in fact, left Slack for a while in favor of Mandrake.
Worst mistake I ever made when it comes to Linux.
Mandrake gives you a bottle, changes your diaper, and spoonfeeds you on a regular basis. At one time I loved this, but later felt otherwise. Configuring my system by hand and not letting Mandrake do it for me felt good. And guess what? I can

configure my system even faster using aterm than any GUI-step-by-step process.

I think Linux is a great way to learn new things. While Mandrake can teach you the basics (and perhaps a bit more...), Slack will teach you the basics and beyond!

Of course, Slack might not be everyone's bag. I understand this.

As far as documentation goes... like Azmeen said, LQ is a great place to start. Shilo has written a spectacular guide on setting up Slackware.

<http://shilo.is-a-geek.com/slack>

Plus, there's always google. I can't tell you how many times google has saved my butt. =)

Here, Slackware is preferred by the User-Fan because of the impact it has on the individual's behaviour. In this post, *Cop* clarifies that two branded distributions influences individual, non-social behaviour. *Cop* first notes this in a criticism of Mandrake (it "gives you a bottle, changes your diaper, and spoonfeeds you on a regular basis"). In the context of this thread, these are assumed to be issues that need rectifying and not points of interest to a Slackware consumers searching for control and knowledge. As such the inclusion of these should not only be considered User-Fan criticisms of one brand, but support of the Slackware brand and the ideals of its supporters. Furthermore, *Cop* marks this in the opening of the post with the realization that while "I used to use Mandrake religiously and, in fact, left Slack for a while in favour of Mandrake...[It was the] Worst mistake I ever made when it comes to Linux." While this is not specifically the impact of the brand that causes this change (rather it is the product), the brand becomes associated with these forms of behaviour. Following this, the response of *Chaparone* (*Figure 6.47*) notes the differences in this behaviour with specific reference to notions of difference amongst brands and their consumers.

Figure 6.47

Chaparone

Post #84

12-09-2004, 03:13 AM

Member

Distribution: SuSE 10.0, Ubuntu 5.10

Posts: 56

Back when Linux really was just an OS for the super techie-minded, Slackware seemed pretty tame. Times have moved on

though, and there are hundreds of distros that cater for different tastes, tasks and time-constrictions. Linspire *coughs* is catered for the complete idiot-user. SuSE, Red Hat and Mandrake tend to cater for people who have a vague understanding of what an OS is...

...So, ultimately, the amount of effort required just to get Slackware to do anything is so disproportional to what you get out of it in productivity terms that for most people, it simply isn't worth it. Which regulates the distro to the status of a toy, an object of interest, and nothing more. I'd never recommend it to anyone as a solo distro, rather something alongside a standard desktop-based distro.

The post identifies a User-Fan's perception of what 'type' of Linux users constitutes the brand subculture of each distribution. *Chaparone* considers the existence of a variety of brand subcultures. These include:

- Linspire ("*coughs* is catered for the complete idiot-user");
- SuSE, Red Hat and Mandrake "for people who have a vague understanding of what an OS is";
- Debian (for people with a little more understanding, but not overly techie-minded);
- Knoppix (for users on the move between computers or just simple demonstrations); and
- Gentoo and Slackware (are indeed intended for the power user).

He also contends that Linux essentially exists as its own market with products "that cater for different tastes, tasks and time-constrictions." They often emerge with strong consumer bonds and associations. In a relatively unique insight, he comments on what User-Fans receive from their relationship with the brand ("What, honestly, do you get from Slackware?"). In offering a critique of its perceived benefits for its users, jamyskis unwittingly presents a concise summary of the subculture which acknowledges the worth of the product by claiming it is "a toy, an object of interest, and nothing more." This comment explains the detail and control that Slackware User-Fans feel they require which have led them to this choice. Furthermore, the "amount of effort" helps in creating a devoted

subculture that has invested time and knowledge creating bonds between User-Fan and brand.

Finally, the sentiments expressed by *Kyle* (Figure 6.48) raise a fundamental question of the brand communities in general – why do some people participate in these forms of behaviour when “most folks don’t care.”

Figure 6.48

Kyle
Post #96
12-09-2004, 08:56 AM
LQ Newbie
Distribution: Slack and FreeBSD
Posts: 25
Good Lord folks,
WinXP, has by far the highest user ratio, but does it make it the best or the most popular???? Sorry, most folks don't care, it's what was there when they turned it on. Actually XP sucks as an OS and is dangerous. Keeps our ISP help desk busy...
...I'm not a hacker here, and still left the DOS books behind long ago for a GUI but I like my Slack.

By placing the debate in the context of Windows consumers who “don’t care” because “it’s what was there when they turned it on”, *Kyle* centers the debate and to some extent belittles the question. The most powerful response of course, is that some actually do and this is what is important to understand.

In the first instance the Linux brand community demonstrate their attachment to the Linux movement. On this level they display associations to a community brand that is unique in the modern consumer society. Perhaps the best comparison in explaining this community behaviour is the manner in which sports fans discuss their code (for example football or basketball). Just as fans discuss their involvement in sporting codes in regards to the sport and their team, Linux User-Fans demonstrate an attachment to Linux as a brand (the macro-level, or the sport). Below this they display a connection to branded distributions (the micro-level, or the team). While each brand distribution operates within their own context in the form of branded internet subcultures, the behaviour within each does not differ to a great extent. In

demonstrating the behaviour of User-Fans who construct elements of sociality across their use of Linux and its branded distributions, this chapter has demonstrated the fluidity of User-Fan connections towards the communities they create. This fluidity is more evident in the brand 'switching' that occurs amongst User-Fans.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated brand communities emerge even through the consumption of even the most mundane of products and brands. It details, follows and expands upon assumed knowledge of the Apple brand community highlighting the symbolic importance of Mac OS and the strength of the bonds between User-Fans and associated Apple products. While this was important, perhaps the greater contribution was the detailing the existence of Windows and Linux brand communities.

By representing Windows as a *generic* brand community, one can identify that brand communities can be formed despite its members appropriating a range of symbolic definitions, attachments and commitments to the brand. This represents an important diversion from brand community theory which has generally associated the formation of brand communities with niche products or brands of distinction. Similarly, the definition of a Linux brand community offers an important distinction between the accepted notions of Linux-based sociality. Where most literature has concentrated on Linux users as 'prosumers' who both consume and create the software, this study distinguishes User-Fans as consumers of Linux who do not create and as such form communities of like-minded consumers.

It is from the findings of these three distinct communities that one can begin to discuss the nature of the symbolic formation of brand communities and how they emerge as important aspects of individual identity. One is the manner in which the tangibility of symbols and their personalisation through

physical arrangement has emerged as an important component of brand loyalty.

In the context of operating system brand communities, particularly the Windows and Mac communities, the physical representation of ownership and what it symbolises an important point when it comes to the techno-utopian element of fandom. This techno-utopian element relates to the self-identity of User-Fans, consumer choice and consumption. Thus, given that popular conceptions of technology involve some form of hardware visualisation it would be apparent that brand communities relay these representations. For example, the fact that Mac User-Fans employ their 'set-ups' through photographs provides further symbolic engagement with the brand, avenues to represent devotion and a platform upon which to share experience and ownership of the symbol.

However, this form of appropriation is not available to Windows User-Fans as Microsoft does not produce computing hardware. As a reflection, in the context of these forums, Microsoft only represents Windows in the sense of this brand community discussion when compared to Apple, as Microsoft has long concentrated its efforts only in the software market. Thus, while in direct competition in the operating system marketplace with Apple, as a brand (at least in the PC realm) Microsoft can only be appropriated by User-Fans as a symbol of software. Furthermore, the Windows User-Fans lack the presence of shared hardware experience as the diversity of Windows (PC) hardware has resulted in a plethora of computers upon which the Windows software may operate. Apple, on the other hand, through its restrictions on hardware interoperability and limited product lines, has created a hardware environment which is shared by all Mac consumers, User-Fans and brand community. Thus, while the consumer society may be incorporated within a Microsoft hegemony, within this homogeneity Mac User-Fans have appropriated the products that in themselves are more homogenous than its Windows counterpart.

Unlike Mac and Windows brand communities, Linux communities do not share the same representations of User-Fan setups. This is perhaps a reflection of the distance between much of the open-source movement and modern corporate consumers. Furthermore, the diversity of Linux distribution does not allow for the commonality of experience that are able to be appropriated and shared amongst User-Fans as those like of Microsoft and Apple represent. Instead, Linux User-Fans seem to appropriate ideological concerns and concentrate on a range of commercial and ideologically-focused manufacturers. In doing so, Linux brand communities can be divided into a number of different brand-based distributions offering users subtly different modes of experience under the shared experience and ownership of Linux. Just as Windows and Mac User-Fans demonstrate allegiances to software through physical appropriation (and external representations), Linux User-Fans similarly express this choice of consumption through ideological expression. For this reason, many User-Fans identify with the community as an arena for discourse ideological brand signification and displays of loyalty.

A second, perhaps more significant, point that emerges from this chapter is the manner in which brand communities are symbolically defined. While this may seem moot (brand as symbols), it extends further than this physical or image appropriation to the definition of symbolic boundaries as a result of selected or focused consumption. Brands in this sense can be employed by User-Fans.

Comparable to Cohen's idea of the symbolic boundary, the operating system defines the sociality that takes place and those activities unrelated to the software do not belong within the community. Referring to the forums, one can view that brand specific activity that both creates and reinforces the boundaries through representations of brand are accepted. In acknowledging and accepting the brand as a boundary community members reinforce a "highly generalized statement of the community's character" and "its collective identity" (Cohen, 1987, p. 15).

It is these symbolic boundaries which may explain the different natures of each operating system brand community. Due to the generalized nature of Windows, its brand community has become overly diffuse as its symbolic boundaries represent too many (and sometimes conflicting) definitions. Conversely, the Mac and Linux communities are able to appropriate the position of the symbolic 'other' by offering an alternative to the dominance of Microsoft. In this sense, both Mac and Linux communities define themselves through what they are and are not, where the Windows community is only capable of expressing what they are.

The symbolic notion of the outside is highlighted throughout the upcoming chapter on resistance, where much of Apple and Linux's strong following amongst the computing community have developed ideological or technical grievances with Windows. However, unlike the Apple brand community which has developed an allegiance through displays of adulation towards Apple, the Linux brand community is formed despite its conflicting opinions, allegiances, and personal experiences surrounding the range of distributions.

Chapter Seven Operating System Idols and User-Fans

This chapter introduces the notion of the ‘public face’ and its importance to the public (and corporate) perception of products. The ‘public face’ is a concept that refers to the individuals who act as human symbols in the public sphere (Feldman, 1986; Ranft, Zinko, Ferris, & Buckley, 2006). In the modern marketplace the ‘public face’ is often symbolised through the role of the Chief Executive Officer, but can also be embodied by celebrity endorsers or founders of the entity. For the operating system market these ‘public faces’ are recognised as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Linus Torvalds. The case of the operating system market offers a curious example, as during the era the research was undertaken, the individuals representing the ‘public face’ of each entity played a crucial role in the early origins of the entity and the development of the software, yet all were in different stages of their careers. Gates was a CEO in the process of relinquishing his power, Jobs was CEO, and Torvalds was acknowledged as the founder of the software, but would seem to exert little corporate influence.

The following chapter will first give a historical biographical account of Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Linus Torvalds. Compiled through biographies and other secondary resources, I will provide an overview of their lives, controversies and achievements as background for understanding their symbolic value in the OS communities. They also serve as historical accounts of ‘public face’ leadership. Of particular importance will be the way that this biographical knowledge is consumed and elaborated within the operating system communities as part of User-Fan devotion to their products.

The celebrity-like interest that follows these ‘public faces’ conveys similarities with the traditions of hero-worship. Heroes can be defined as cultural icons

who reflect and embody the culture of the time (Bennett & Woollacott, 1987). Celebrity differs in the sense that is largely detailed by public expectations of and reactions to an individual. Boorstin (1974) argues that celebrity-worship has replaced the mythic notion of the hero. He argues that where the "hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity [is] by his image or trademark. The hero was created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero is a big man; the celebrity is a big name" (Boorstin, 1974, p. 61).

Although some have argued that celebrity and heroes are not interchangeable, others have argued that hero status is a definition recognised only by those who reference the symbolic importance of specific qualities within their celebrity (Stever, 1991). Thus, while all celebrities are not necessarily heroes, all have the potential to be recognised as one. Although the semantics of hero-celebrity definition are somewhat mute, essential to understanding 'public faces' is the shifting identification of heroes through the absence of myth (Browne & Fishwick, 1983, p. 12).

Celebrity heroes often emerge as leaders of a cultural movement or shift. Collins (1998, p. 36) identifies that heroes of this nature emerge "when a group has a high degree of agreement on the ideas put forward by some intellectual leader, that person becomes a sacred object for the group." It is in this sense that the importance of a celebrity or 'public face' is "entirely dependent upon the development of a consensus among a significant number of discrete individuals who make up the collective whole" (Browne & Fishwick, 1983, p. 18). Integral to the cultural consensus required for transformations of celebrities into public heroes is the influence of the media and technology which has been embraced by image makers who engage in the constant hunt for heroes as they are now defined (Browne & Fishwick, 1983, p. 13). This is further exacerbated by media attributing a firm's performance and actions to its CEO, and the manner in which they relay these attributes to the public often creates celebrity status (Hayward,

Rindova, & Pollock, 2004). With this said, the media cannot establish the celebrity as a hero; this influence lies in the hands of individuals (and groups) to accept or reject the transition from celebrity to hero (Browne & Fishwick, 1983, p. 18). It is this consensus and agreement which is investigated amongst the User-Fan interaction within the operating system forums.

Public faces, celebrities and heroes are important in the context of a corporate society whereby brand personality is an influence on consumer decisions. Aaker (1997, p. 347) defines brand personality as “a set of human characteristics associated with the brand.” Brand personality can be understood as how consumers perceive symbolic references of the brand. Included in this idea are notions of product attributes, employees, typical consumers and other symbols associated with the brand (Aaker, 1997, p. 348). These symbols are employed by consumers, often in an emotive manner, in their construction of brand and product preferences. It follows that since no one can ever see an organization or corporation, that brand personality and public faces “exemplify a growing tendency in our culture to visualize things that are not in themselves visual” (Guthey & Jackson, 2005).

However, the ‘public face’ is separate from the notion of brand personality. Where brand personality is an anthropomorphic expression of corporate existence, the ‘public face’ represents the brand personified. While brand personality may explain why consumers make decisions, the ‘public face’ informs them of what decisions can be made. These ‘public faces’ can become a dimension of a brand personality, particularly in examples such as the operating system market where strong associations exist between the product and the leader (Aaker, 1997, p. 347).

The Public Faces of Operating System products

In representing the 'face' of their respective softwares, Gates, Jobs and Torvalds have become the objects of both adulation and scorn in the ICT sector. All three played crucial roles in the development of their respective operating systems, however each has taken different paths to arrive to their current position. These paths have differed because of their own personal choices, philosophies, and beliefs. Despite these differences, each has become an idol in the ICT community. These 'public faces' present an important aspect of this study as, in one sense, they act as symbolic leaders to those who participate in the operating system communities. Their actions, words and philosophies not only impact on the manner in which their market entities function but also upon the online communities who focus on their products. Through their authority the 'public faces' become symbolic targets of adulation and criticism for consumers.

Through their long, deliberate and successful leaderships, Gates, Jobs and Torvalds could be seen to be modern representations of Weber's (1905) charismatic authority. For Weber, charismatic authority or leadership is based on the honoring of or devotion to character and heroics rather than rational explanations of individual authority. This Weberian notion argues that followers of charismatic leaders "recognize and acknowledge the personal qualification and characteristics of the possessor of charisma" (Weber as cited in Adair-Toteff, 2005). A modern, perhaps neo-Weberian interpretation of charismatic leadership is found in Shamir *et al.*'s (1993a; 1993b) thesis which suggests that charismatic leaders successfully exert authority by appealing to followers' self-concept. In identifying with followers, charismatic leaders lead symbolically through rhetoric rather than through organizational discourse. This is important for the three 'public faces,' as it will be shown that each has utilised symbols which appeal to the followers who participate in online forums. However, while it will be shown that all three leaders possess a level of charisma that enamours them within the User-Fan communities, their standing is also the result of their symbolic importance in the brand cultures surrounding the operating system products.

Counter to their charismatic leadership, we find these leaders immersed in the symbolic authority of the product becoming less prone to the fluid definitions and pitfalls of authority than the charismatic version Weber introduced. In support of this, modern studies of leadership have established an understanding of the symbolic importance of leaders in corporate and public institutions. In the field of organizational studies, Edgar Schein (1985) introduces the notion of leadership as culture manipulation and management. One significant tool in which leaders manage culture is through the manipulation of symbols, specifically acting as symbols themselves. Pfeffer (1977, p. 104) argues that the power of leaders rests in them serving “as symbols for representing personal causation of social events,” including continued success for the products they promote (Pfeffer, 1977, p. 110). In understanding the manipulation of symbols by corporate leaders, the leadership displayed by ‘public faces’ within consumer communities can be evaluated.

The ‘public face’ argument presented in this study follows a similar vein to that of the *virtual leader construct*. The *virtual leader construct* is a “leader who is virtual, first in terms of being virtuous in relation to culturally accepted archetypes of leadership excellence, and second in terms of not being an actual embodied human being” (Boje & Rhodes, 2005, p. 407). They argue that the “virtual leader is a ‘construct’ because she or he is an image or idea that is created by systematically fitting gestures, voice, and other virtues together to generate an impression or model” (Boje & Rhodes, 2005, p. 407). Echoing Baudrillard, the online communities form a symbolic dependence on the leadership presented by Gates, Jobs and Torvalds in order to participate in the consumer spectacle and brand communities it helps support.

A further elaboration on the importance of ‘public faces’ can be found in Leslie Sklair’s (2001, 2005) concept of the Trans-national Capitalist Class (TCC). Put simply, the TCC is the class that organises the conditions under which their own interests (often those of a trans-national corporation) and the interests of the global (capitalist) system can be furthered in both local and

global contexts (Sklair, 2005, p. 59). Sklair (2001) notes that capitalist system is crucial to the emergence of the TCC. He notes that:

...capitalism operates globally, some actors and institutions within the capitalist system have more power than others, and in many spheres of social existence those who control the forces of global capitalism do make the key decisions that affect the lives of many if not most people on the planet (Sklair, 2001, p. 5).

The combination of the truly global nature of the operating systems that Gates, Jobs and Torvalds represent, and the impact of each, display behaviour consistent with membership in such a class. This further separates them from their followers, establishing them as symbols of leadership and product success. Sklair argues that through their leadership they exert global economic and political control, and promote a cultural ideology within their own consumerist rhetoric and practice (Sklair, 2005). This rhetoric will be analysed throughout this chapter.

Bill Gates

As noted previously, Microsoft was one of the first ICT entities to challenge the 'hacker' culture that was prevalent in the founding years of his company. This instance was the first of many that polarized public perceptions of the man. Simon Cooper (1996, p. 37) understands this split in recognition of his accomplishments noting:

...some see Gates as a miraculous innovator, the Henry Ford of the digital age. Others fear him as a ruthless businessman; his company Microsoft has been accused of operating unfairly: its practices led to federal antitrust actions against the company in response to its alleged 'monopolisation' of the market.

Because of his outspoken nature, depending on whom you talk to, Gates is either the Messiah or the Pariah.

In studying the Microsoft Internet Explorer anti-trust trials, John Heilemann (2000) also provides a unique insight into the philosophy of Gates and how others receive him. He notes that Gates inspires an intense following by both admirers and antagonists without a hint of the conventional charisma or nature of such an influential and important figure (Heilemann, 2000, p.16). According to former Microsoft executive Mike Maples, what separates Gates from the rest is his intelligence. Maples notes that “there are probably more smart people per square foot right here [at Microsoft] than anywhere else in the world, but Bill is just smarter” (Heilemann, 2000).

However, Gates’ ‘smarts’ are not as all encompassing as the world may think. According to Heilemann (2001, p.16) “the notion that Gates is a technological genius is a central part of his public legend, the depiction elicits eye-rolling (and less charitable responses) in computing circles, where his technical gifts are regarded almost universally as solid but unexceptional.” Heilemann (2001, p.17) also makes a number of other ‘insider’ supported claims on the extent of Gates’ technological savvy. These include the view that Gates has made no significant contribution to computer science despite spending the last 25 years working in software, and that he holds only one patent. However, in deconstructing the myth of Gates as the ultimate computer programmer and brains behind his company’s software, Heilemann uncovers perhaps the true extent of ‘smart’ Bill Gates.

Whilst it may be true that Gates is not the software geek that many perceive him to be, he is, above all, a shrewd, tactical and often-fierce businessman. Above all, he achieves things differently. Gates’ requirement for this is his lasting desire for a ‘friction free’ form of exchange. He argues that whether in the marketplace, inter-subjective communication or entertainment, the ideal environment for anything to occur is with as little resistance as possible (Cooper, 1996, pp. 37-38). In the introduction to *The Road Ahead* (1995), Gates, in proclaiming the benefits of the inexpensive communication

between a globally interconnected network of computers, also claims “we may be about to witness the realization of Adam Smith's ideal market, at last” (Gates, Myhrvold, and Rinearson 1995, p.4). Cooper (1996, p. 40) argues:

[T]he values that underlie Gates' vision of a digital future create a hierarchy where elements such as embodiment, location and regulation of the market system, which previously structured and partially constrained personal and social meaning, are regarded as intrusive and unnecessary details. As such, they ought to be eliminated or bypassed as quickly as possible.

Gates' vision of this friction-free mode of capitalism has underlined many of Microsoft's practices in the past. Part of this philosophy has been a constant level of disrespect towards government and competitors. Heilemann (2001, p.15) explores this aspect of Microsoft's corporate culture, noting that:

Extending a long middle finger to the government and your competitors is not conventional behaviour among the top executives of most blue-chip companies. But, of course, Microsoft was different - self-consciously so. Populated by an army of young men (mainly), most of them unusually bright, many of them abnormally wealthy, working endless hours and pulling frequent all-nighters, Microsoft has always retained the air of a fraternity - a fraternity of rich eggheads, but a fraternity nonetheless. For years, Softies were wont to sport buttons that read FYIFV: Fuck You, I'm Fully Vested. Another favourite acronym, meant to suggest how far the company would go, in Ballmer's words, to "get the business, get the business, get the business," was BOGU: Bend Over, Grease Up.

The most obvious displays of this attitude could be found in both Gates' and the company's approach to the birth of the Internet as a popular and mainstream computing tool.

The problems that Gates and Microsoft have had with government have not stopped him from calling on governments to act when it is in his own and Microsoft's interest. An example of this has been his attitude towards the protection of Intellectual Property and piracy. This issue has long been a

point of Gates' attention (as illustrated previously in his *Open Letter to Hobbyists*) and the Internet has elevated his concern. Gates himself has written on what he views as the problem:

The Internet makes it possible to distribute any kind of digital information, from software to books, music, and video, instantly and at virtually no cost. The software industry has struggled with piracy since the advent of the personal computer, but as recent controversy over file-sharing systems such as Napster and Gnutella demonstrates, piracy is now a serious issue for any individual or business that wants to be compensated for the works they create. And since the Internet knows no borders, piracy is now a serious global problem. Strong legislation such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), cooperation between nations to ensure strong enforcement of international copyright laws, innovative collaboration between content producers and the technology industry, and standards developed by organizations like the Secure Digital Music Initiative (SDMI) that can prevent or deter piracy have already made an impact on addressing this problem. But as more and more digital media becomes easy to distribute over the Internet, the government and private sector must work together to find appropriate ways to protect the rights of information consumers and producers around the world.

Gates' call for government intervention seems to defy his sentiments towards government restriction, but it remains in line with what are the dominant philosophical underpinnings of Gates the businessman, the 'friction free markets' and information as a commodity.

Although often defined on the basis of Microsoft's sometimes ruthless corporate manner, Gates has also presented a different side to his personality which has tempered the perception of him as a global pariah. When this study was first undertaken, Gates was the 'World's Richest Person', with a net worth of an estimated US\$46.5 billion. Since this time he has been overtaken, now resting third in the list, but he is now also recognised as the world's greatest philanthropist also devoting \$27 billion to good deeds (Forbes, 2005). The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation helps the fight against infectious diseases (most notably funding AIDS research), funds

vaccine development, and helps high schools and other educational inequalities. This philanthropic diversion saw he and his wife jointly awarded *Time* magazine's Person of the Year in 2005.

The dichotomy of Bill Gates' 'public face' is a common theme of discussions in not only Microsoft-focused forums but also the Apple and Linux counterparts. Many of these discussions are directly related to Gates' actions as the 'public face', which for all operating system communities act as symbolic gestures that help in defining the shared identity and ideology. Viewed by these communities as savvy, protectionist or somewhere in between, the implications are that the 'public face' Gates presents has an impact on the cultures with an interest in his actions. While the wider public has often seen the 'public face' of Microsoft as somewhat of a pariah in popular culture (*The Simpsons*, *South Park*, Tim Robbins's 'Gates' character in the movie *Anti-Trust*), User-Fans reflect on his impact on their chosen product, identifying him according to the relative success of it.

Bill Gates and Microsoft User-Fans

The historical, ideological and personal differences between the three charismatic leaders and their continued position as figureheads of their respective brands have led to intense scrutiny within brand communities. This is unique considering the critique of the TCC previously highlighted. With the possible exception of political leaders, the trans-national capitalist class remains anonymous to all but those with a vested interest in their market objectives. For their part Gates, Jobs and, to a lesser extent, Torvalds, have gained notoriety contrary to the norms of the TCC. Whereas members of the TCC represent only the interests of concerned parties, these three deviate from the TCC thesis with each standing as celebrity icons of brands. It is in their deep-rooted relationship as founders and leaders that began and continues to perpetuate the intense scrutiny occurring within the online brand communities.

In acknowledging the previous discussion on the backgrounds of the charismatic leaders, it should come as no surprise that of the three, Bill Gates holds the most notoriety within the brand communities. Often the focus of the global media, Gates personifies the ascending wealth, power and impact of the ICT industry. Consequently, depending on context, he is commonly held in high-regard or disdain amongst all three brand communities. In noting this there also exists a distinct duality as to how Gates' is perceived within the Windows brand community. Even within 'his' own people, Gates is regarded both as the iconic, genius creator and the pariah of wealth and modern capitalism.

Often these differences are polarised and occur through the wide variety of topics and conversations that emerge within the forums. However, these extremes of User-Fan perception take place within arenas that are not open to debate. To clarify, a common event is that Gates is referred to by a User-Fan who instigates a thread with either a positive or negative reinforcement of a particular view of Gates, which incites other User-Fans to continue the thread along the same lines. Threads such as "Is Bill Gates Satan, Bill Gates is the Anti-Christ" and the like all continue upon the negative or comical tone the initial post creates. However, by no means are all negative. Significantly for the Microsoft community Gates is often held in high regard. A specific example can be found in a Neowin thread entitled "The Official Happy Happy Birthday Bill Gates Thread" (Figure 7.1) whereby member User-Fan *Rooster* relays to the community all of Gates' achievements and frames the 'public face' of Microsoft in a positive light.

Figure 7.1

Rooster
Post #1
Oct 28 2003, 19:50
Neowinian Wise One
Posts: 5,835

Today is Bill Gates birthday... and well, we can not deny he and his company has done a lot to improve the way how we use computers and even make our lives a lot easier because of that. I don't wan to sound like a fan boy but, honor to one who deserves to be honored...

Happy Birthday Bill!!!

The opening sentence signals to others that for all the negative associations surrounding the man, “we” the community should look to the benefits he (and Microsoft) have given Windows User-Fans and computer users. The comment “I don’t wan[t] to sound like a fan boy but” is also of importance because of the manner ‘fan’ opinions are discredited by User-Fans such as *Rooster* and the entire brand community.

As stated earlier, Gates has enhanced his reputation in recent times through his philanthropic endeavours. One such example of how this standing influences the brand community can be found in a thread focused on celebrity donations for Hurricane Katrina and a forum member’s question “why hasn’t Bill Gates donated anything?” Although possibly posted by a troll (someone who posts inflammatory comments), some of Microsoft User-Fans ‘take the bait’ with *Mattie* (Figure 7.2) offering their own explanation.

Figure 7.2

Mattie
Post #34
Sep 4 2005, 00:17
Neowinian²
Posts: 114

Thats pretty harsh on old Bill Gates. He does donate more money than any other person in the world and regularly donates more than many countries. He's donated over \$7bn over the last decade through his charitable foundation.

Thats nothing to be sniffed at. He probably has donated vast amounts of money to Katrina's victims, he just doesn't publicise it too much. He donated \$3million to the Tsunami appeal which was on the other side of the world and probably didn't directly affect him as much.

The response is an explicit defence of Gates explaining that the question is 'pretty harsh' considering the extent of his philanthropy. The most interesting aspect of this response is the assumption that "he probably has donated vast amounts of money to Katrina's victims, he just doesn't publicise it too much." Given the lack of sufficient evidence, the claim highlights the esteem in which Gates is held in the Microsoft brand community.

Whilst these threads provide ample opportunity to investigate the range of User-Fan perceptions and the symbolic support of a shared ideology, specific threads often lack diversity and remain monochromatic in tone. More often than not negative posts are simply viewed by User-Fans as attempts to initiate 'flame wars' and are generally overlooked by the majority of the brand community. This is evident in the lack of high-level User-Fan community participation in the threads such as the aforementioned *Is Bill Gates Satan* and *Bill Gates is the Anti-Christ* threads. Despite this, the duality of Gates' reputation is evident amongst the brand community when observed in these forums where User-Fan participation is strong and the opposing views are posted within the same thread. An example of the lack of diversity amongst Windows User-Fans can be found in a thread titled "Get on 'Gates for President Bandwagon'" (Figure 7.3) demonstrates the gap in User-Fan perception of the Microsoft CEO.

Figure 7.3

LaBouef
Post #1
Nov 30 2006, 22:43
Ars + Neowin
Posts: 22,354

Quote -

Land writes

"Dilbert's Scott Adams kicked off the idea in his November 19th blog post, saying there isn't anything wrong with this country that President Bill Gates couldn't cure in less time than it takes to get a new operating system out the door. Today, the idea is moving

forward with a brand-new 'Bill Gates for President' Web site. Adams is also back on the campaign trail, flogging the site and Gates' candidacy."

A blog post at Network World includes a lot of eye-rolling about this idea, but neither Adams nor the folks at the 'Gates for President' website seem to be taking this lightly.

Bill Gates for President

Instigated by the Geek User-Fan *LaBouef* (Figure 7.3), the thread is also a 'news' post in which Dilbert creator Scott Adams suggests Gates could be the answer to America's problems if he could be persuaded into running for President. Although *LaBouef* does not present his comment on such a topic, the post still manages to develop into a conversation on the apparent benefits and deficiencies Bill Gates would bring to the public office. This is indicative of the Windows brand community as it displays a deep, shared knowledge of Gates and his political and economic beliefs.

Figure 7.4

Lucky
Post #2
Nov 30 2006, 22:47
Resident Fanatic
Posts: 806
i think he would be a good president, cant get much worse than bush!
he donates alot to charity and is very intelligent (unlike bush). its a win win situation imo!

The quick response of *Lucky* (Figure 7.4) demonstrates a positive perception of Gates' attributes ("he donates a lot to charity" and is "very intelligent"). Instead of focusing on his business strategies or the success of Microsoft, the comments represent an endorsement of the public persona that Gates moulded throughout his time in the spotlight. It is in the responses of members such as *Lucky* that we see the 'true believer', the high-intensity User-Fans, who view Gates in the manner as one between teenagers and pop-stars. Despite evidence to the contrary, they believe in, sometimes worship, the acts of Gates and it could be argued that in the eyes of American User-Fans there would be no higher honour that could be

bestowed upon the man than the Presidency of the United States. The overlooking of Gates' past criticisms of the United States government (such as the infamous "we control the government" statement) demonstrates that the User-Fan has either limited or selective knowledge of Gates' personal sentiments towards government or beliefs in the charismatic leader's ability to perform 'heroic' deeds. Conversely, responses such as those of *Undertaker* (Figure 7.5) evoke some of the concerns some in the brand community have towards Gates:

Figure 7.5

Undertaker
Post #18
Nov 30 2006, 23:48
Resident Elite
Posts: 1,391
Oh yes this would be excellent! Have the biggest corporate
whore ever, in charge of the most influential country in the world.
Everyone wave bye bye to your rights
Hopefully Gates laughs this off soon enough instead of getting
ideas

The sarcastic enthusiasm of this response and the hope that he does not get "ideas" illustrates the competing perception of Gates within the Microsoft brand community. In this case, the negative evaluation of Gates as the "biggest corporate whore ever," is one which if he was to ascend to the presidency would enforce his corporate style upon the country. The sentence "everyone wave bye bye to your rights" continues this assessment by implying that it is he who has continued Microsoft's strong stance on restrictive digital rights and the potential a monopoly may have on these. In the matter of a few lines, this particular User-Fan has developed a narrative based on the relationship between Bill Gates, the intellectual proprietary position of Microsoft, their role in perpetuating corporate ideologies and individual rights. Absent from this criticism is any consideration of Gates' impact on the world in his current position.

The scrutiny the community places on Gates also helps in formulating a shared narrative of their charismatic leader. A demonstration of this is the extent of assumed knowledge User-Fans' have attained regarding Gates' life. One such example is the assumption of control that is associated with the three leaders, but particularly strong amongst the Microsoft and Apple brand communities. An interesting assumption often established by the lower intensity Windows User-Fan is that Gates has total control and direction of Microsoft. To a lesser extent there is also often a misunderstanding of his role within the creation of Windows. But it is the distinction whereby User-Fans confuse and amalgamate Microsoft and Gates into a single entity. In other words, Bill Gates has become synonymous with Microsoft. The response of *Emmett* to a "WinXpCental" thread "Removing IE or whatever...now check this out!" (Figure 7.6) touches on these assumptions.

Figure 7.6

Emmett
Post #2
Junior Member
12-06-2003, 03:12 PM
Hey you shoould have not done those things man. Remember that you can't never ever remove IE if you don't have the source code of Windows. And unfortunately Bill Gates will never do that for ya dude.

In a critical comment on Microsoft's approach to intellectual property, Casual User-Fan *Emmett* (Figure 7.6) demonstrates this link between the corporate Microsoft and the individual Gates. In criticising the embeddedness of Internet Explorer in Windows, *Emmett* lays blame on Gates over all others in Microsoft. Whilst this may have some relevance considering Gates' role as one time chief software architect, it may be somewhat of a stretch on the behalf of the User-Fan, that despite his integral role to Microsoft, to believe that Gates himself has control of the programming knowledge (Edstrom & Eller, 1998). Even Geek User-Fans establish this connection, as demonstrated by Administrator *Moon* (Figure 7.7).

Figure 7.7

Moon
Post #3
The Lone Poster
Administrator
08-13-2003, 03:43 PM
Posts: 4,129
we all gotta be nuts... we keep giving Gates our money.....
"Peace"
Sox

In a single post, the User-Fan demonstrates the connection between purchasing Microsoft products and the money Gates accumulates. The User-Fan associates only Gates with Microsoft. There is no mention of any other employees, shareholders, or even the company itself. Through the logic presented in this comment, Microsoft is Bill Gates and consequently its money is in his pocket.

When presented with this form of misinformation infiltrating 'their' community, Geek Windows User-Fans often take it upon themselves to correct the ignorance of the 'newbies'. In a 2006 thread questioning the potential for the then upcoming release of Vista to 'flop', a Casual User-Fan *Yarnell* (Figure 7.8) and others questioned a number of aspects surrounding Vista's release.

Figure 7.8

Yarnell
Post #27
Mar 24 2006, 13:12
i'm reading that thread right now about minimum requirements. it seems that my pc is "recommended pc" so basically even more than minimum needs. but i stay with xp i think cos it doesn't give me anything more than a pleasure to make Gates even richer. 64 bit computing is also so young that it's the same as with 32 bit. Rubbish? Where? don't be so black n white - i'm sure that you can find even one letter you liked.

Within this post concerns were expressed over constraints upon hardware, expense and why Windows User-Fans need it. The thread continues as per

usual in the sense that it is a debate over the relative potential of Vista. That is until a Geek User-Fan *Bearman* (Figure 7.9) questions *Yarnell's* post.

Figure 7.9

Bearman
Post #28
Mar 24 2006, 13:23
Neowinian UNSTOPPABLE
I think its a Trolling attempt....that he wont use Vista because it would make Bill Gates Richer. Although it actually wont since Bill gates doesnt get paid according to how many copies of Windows he sells. Apparently if he buys Vista Bill Gates will get pleased...Wish I was pleased for every copy of Vista that was sold...would be a good few years.

By responding to *Yarnell's* assertion that buying Vista will do nothing other than “make Gates even richer”, *Bearman* implements the authority that a Geek User-Fan exhibits. The correcting comment “Bill gates doesnt get paid...” holds more legitimacy in this context due to the hierarchical nature of the brand community. In doing so the brand community now shares this quasi-legitimate knowledge rather than the remarks made by a Casual User-Fan. Shared community knowledge of this nature is often editorialised by high-intensity Windows User-Fans. In doing so, their responses continue, perpetuate and cement the manner in which the brand community regards Gates. It allows for little other than the truth as the 'esteemed' members see it. As to the manner in which power is gained through these communities, there is little discourse through which the truth of Gates, positive or negative, can be supplemented by the ‘truth’ of the more intense User-Fans in the community. Individuals whose positions within the community understand the nature of this, with *Yarnell* (Figure 7.10) questioning the legitimacy of the community itself.

Figure 7.10

Yarnell
Post #40
Mar 24 2006, 13:33
Neowinian

hey - heard about sarcasm? NO?? troll - google a bit so you'd also know what it means. actually there's not many of you having any kind of real conversation. you just deny what are the facts - some of you call it rubbish. should i go to apple & mac forum to get my votes - lol.

Studying the User-Fan perception of Bill Gates allows one to investigate his impact within the discussions of Mac and Linux brand communities. As is the combative nature between brand communities and the market competitor's products, so too is the regard in which Gates is held amongst the community and perpetuated to new User-Fans.

Steve Jobs

When discussing the operating system leaders it becomes apparent that of the three, Steve Jobs' roles as leader is perhaps the most crucial in the life and success of his software. Whether one is discussing the birth of the company, its hardware-software lock-in, its near collapse in the 1990s or its consequential resurrection, Jobs' name is never too far away. As already highlighted, it was not Jobs who invented the Apple computer, rather it was Jobs who saw its market. This distinction between the technical and the innovator becomes a common thread in the lives of Jobs and Apple. Unlike Torvalds, or to an extent Gates, Jobs is not often regarded as a genius programmer. Jobs' genius is proclaimed in his foresight, through which he is heralded as an oracle, a visionary leader who will set the path for his followers.

An orphan, Jobs was raised by his adoptive parents in San Francisco and moved to Palo Alto (Slater, 1987). After working at Atari during his late teens, Jobs would join the Homebrew Computer Club where he would meet with Steve Wozniak, a high-school friend five years his senior (Wozniak & Smith, 2006). It was here that Jobs' entrepreneurial vision and Wozniak's technical

genius would culminate in the first successes of Apple. These successes were then overshadowed by corporate infighting that eventually saw him relieved of his position and leave Apple.

Upon leaving Apple on less than amicable terms, Jobs concentrated on two business ventures, Pixar and NeXT. While the success of Pixar's computer animation is as interesting a story as those presented in this chapter, it was his involvement with NeXT that would eventually see him return to Apple. During his time away from Apple, the company suffered a series of product failures under the leadership of CEOs who lacked the same inspirational and innovative leadership as Jobs (Young & Simon, 2005). Interestingly, Apple later acquired NeXT, a move that would eventually see Jobs again cement himself as the company's CEO. At the time Apple was in need of a new operating system and in acquiring Jobs' innovative NeXTSTEP established a move that would eventually culminate in the Mac OS X. Jobs' return was the turning point in Apple's fortunes. Ann Branshires (2001, p. 68) captures the moment the Apple community was informed of Jobs' return explaining that:

On January 7, 1997, at the MacWorld convention in San Francisco, the biggest Mac event of the year, Gil Amelio introduced Steve Jobs to an audience of Mac fans four thousand strong. They went crazy. It was the return of a hero. And he was as well-spoken and mesmerizing as ever. They gave him a long, thundering standing ovation. Here, back at Apple was the true father of the Macintosh.

One aspect that distinguishes Jobs from his fellow operating system leaders is his personality and charisma. One only has to look to mainstream media coverage of the man to understand how Jobs' personality has affected the course of Apple. *The Economist* (2007) notes the conflicting aspects of Jobs' psyche:

As a character, he had always been a bundle of contrasts. Aesthetically and outwardly, he started as a Californian hippie, a "fruitarian" and a Zen Buddhist. At the same time, he habitually

and gratuitously parked in handicapped spots and was capable of decidedly un-Zen-like outbursts of anger and ruthlessness towards friends and colleagues.

In *The Second Coming of Steve Jobs*, Deutschman (2000) also conveys this negative aspect of Jobs' personality, reporting that during his original time at Apple many employees accused Jobs of being manipulative, hostile, and condescending - all traits that Deutschman (2000) notes as the major force that resulted in his demise from power in the 1980s. However, many argue that on his return to Apple, Jobs has become more subdued to his and the company's benefit (Deutschman, 2000; The Economist, 2007; Young & Simon, 2005)

It is the contrast between the personable and the ruthless that have earned him the respect of analysts, sometimes to a point where his decisions are not scrutinized to the extent many others (Gates for example) receive. Daniel Gross (2007) suggests that the reasons for this are that he “is too big to fail” and that “he is too popular—among investors, journalists, employees, analysts, and in the culture at large—for anyone to recommend that he be deposed. Without Jobs, after all, there would be no Apple.” Consequently, Gross argues, the release of products such as the Leopard OSX or the iPhone are veiled in hype and adulation not because of the strength of the product but rather the history and leadership of the CEO.

In a study of corporate leadership style, Marc van der Erve (2004) notes that what highlights Apple's history is Jobs' leadership excellence and his repeated focus towards a niche-nurturing stage of products. Whether it be in the early Macintosh, iPod, or software development, van der Erve argues the Apple ‘niche’ has been developed by Jobs. He argues “the approach of Steve Jobs is focused on the creation of a work environment in which whiz-kid engineers flourish. With the help of a motivated team of talented, even eccentric people, he manages to achieve annual revenues of up to 600 million dollars” (van der Erve, 2004, p. 5). According to van der Erve, Jobs'

leadership style is suited to the product development and innovation, which as a consequence has helped cement Apple's position in the computer and software markets (van der Erve, 2004, p. 14).

Pohle and Wunker (2007) also identify Jobs as a 'visionary leader'. For the authors a visionary leader is "a senior executive who understands the future better than customers may, motivates employees to zealously pursue that vision, and keeps generating ideas that are unexpected and profound" (Pohle & Wunker, 2007, p. 3). They argue,

Steve Jobs of Apple is the paragon. His visions have included creating one of the first personal computers, commercialising the Graphical User Interface on the first Macintosh, bringing design to computing with the iMac, and developing the iPod. While the firm has created many innovations, it tends to launch only a few key products at a time, and in fact spends less on R&D than the industry average (Pohle & Wunker, 2007, p. 4).

It becomes apparent when discussing the life of Steve Jobs that he is a unique and charismatic leader. It is because of him that Apple, and particularly the Mac operating system, have remained innovative. But it is because of Steve Jobs the personality that he has garnered a media presence more familiar to a rock-star than a modern day CEO. In this sense, like Gates, Jobs represents much more than the aims of the corporation he represents.

Steve Jobs and Mac User-Fans

If one was to believe the concerns of the Mac User-Fans, Apple is steered neither by the invisible hand of the market, nor the concerns of shareholders or a multitude of board members. For these User-Fans, Apple is Steve Jobs, and Steve Jobs is Apple. The brand community's assumption of Jobs as the

alpha and omega of Apple is perpetuated through the User-Fans' representation of him throughout the forums. His role is always assumed, sometimes questioned, but never proved. The post by *Clay* (Figure 7.11) exemplifies this Jobs-centric Apple narrative in a thread "Watch steve jobs kick some ass".

Figure 7.11

Clay
Professional Poster
May 16, 2005, 12:44 AM

Wow wow wow.. Microsoft responsible for Apple still existing? BS! They bought a tiny bit of stock, It wasn't even more than 100 million (which compared to what apple had EVEN THEN was pathetic), non-voting shares too..

Steve Jobs saved apple.. not Bill Gates, and to reiterate this, Apple was worth at least \$2 billion at the time, so \$150m was a drop in the bucket, not to mention at the amount they were losing money they could have blown through that \$150m easily.

This was strictly PR.

edits again

Admittedly, their commitment to keeping office going was a worthy one, that helped, but didn't single handedly change a lot.

Justifying this argument with a range of claims positioning Microsoft's contribution as minimal ("150m was a drop in the bucket"), the poster further positions Steve Jobs as the 'saviour' of Apple. In doing so it also places him as the visionary behind Apple's success. In being identified as the visionary leader, many User-Fans respond to Jobs as an influence on the corporate direction of Apple and their subsequent Apple purchases. In the forum titled 'Is Steve Jobs an asshole?' Devoted User-Fan *Brandt* (Figure 7.12) provides evidence of an assumed influence of Jobs on individual Apple consumer's lives.

Figure 7.12

Brandt

Professional Poster
Nov 19, 2004, 08:03 AM

Yes (but he was being honest).
Jobs
Branson
uh..uh..etc.
All dedicated assholes, all great leaders.
We don't want a "nice guy" steering the ship, we want a leader.
As long as Steve still knows who's boss, he will give me what I
want.
And I will pay for it.

Indicative of many Apple User-Fans, *Brandt* identifies the individual and group with the brand in examining the influence of Jobs ("We don't want a "nice guy" steering the ship, we want a leader"). This is important in the context of User-Fandom as it separates simple consumption, defined by need for a good, from fan consumption which suggests and expects more ("and I will pay for it"). Furthermore, there is a theorised connection between individuals and Jobs by the User-Fan. The statement "As long as Steve still knows who's boss, he will give me what I want" illustrates this and is important for two reasons. The first is that it again continues the Apple narrative of Jobs as a visionary and controlling leader. The second is that it reinforces User-Fan connection with brand and the notion of attachment also implying that it is a mutual relationship beyond producer/consumer logic that defines modern capitalism.

The User-Fan connection with brand, combined with the real and perceived consequences of Jobs' leadership, has led to strong affiliation from Apple User-Fans to the CEO. The connections displayed by User-Fans often resemble the forms of devotion normally associated with religious leaders, politicians and other 'movement' leaders. The post of *Snoop* (Figure 6.13) highlights common aspects of this relationship:

Figure 7.13

Snoop
Addicted to MacNN
Nov 19, 2004, 08:48 AM

Steve reminds me of the Pastor at my current Church. Only said Pastor is not as cut throat and not worried about profit. That said He does work to make our Church as useful and beneficial for those who attend as possible. WONDERFUL leader. Steve always struck me as someone who would be a great preacher if he were called.

That said I think people sometimes don't appreciate that Steve has a vision and sometimes he forgets to play nice with others. That said I think he's simply trying to do his best. And his attitude to Panic was down right kind. That said those guys make some BAD choices. And I think it's a bit stupid that they'd want to work as a Shareware company instead of work for Apple. How much do those guys actually make!? I bet they'd make more and have more resources to make better products if they worked at Apple. Though perhaps it was more one of the two that had actual talent

Again, this User-Fan identifies with Jobs as a leader for the consumers of Apple. In light of the 'cult of Mac' or evangelicalism amongst Mac users, the metaphor of the Pastor at a Church is perhaps an apt description of Jobs and the group of User-Fans who follow Apple. Combined with an element of religiosity amongst Apple User-Fans are the unique perceptions and knowledge of Jobs as the leader. Threads and topics such as "Steve loses turtleneck, earth shatters," "Replace Steve, tell us your picks", "What's with Steve", and the like exhibit the unique behaviour and ardent following Steve Jobs has amongst Mac brand community members. He is held to a standard separate from the brand and software, whereby User-Fans participate in the worship and scrutiny of their products' 'creator'.

The scrutiny on Jobs' life shapes very much in a similar vein to that of modern celebrity culture. User-Fan analysis of his life is consistent with the displays of fandom which focus on celebrities' day to day life. An example of this lies in User-Fans who display knowledge of the CEO which many people would deem insignificant. In identifying Jobs as a vegetarian (which is later disputed – he is apparently a vegan), User-Fan *Proposition Joe* (Figure 7.14) demonstrates intrinsic knowledge of the CEO that is retained only in the

name of fandom as it has little cultural capital outside of this arena of fandom. In addition to this *Proposition Joe* recognises Jobs' impact as Apple's leader in relation to 'their' competition.

Figure 7.14

Proposition Joe

Mac Elite

Join Date: Feb 2001

Location: Canaduh

Status: Offline

Aug 1, 2004, 07:36 PM

How ironic given that Steve Jobs is a fit guy and a vegetarian. In comparison, Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer, who are both out-of-shape slobs, will probably live well into their 90s. I bet Gates and Ballmer were secretly hoping that Jobs had the fatal kind of pancreatic cancer.

Jobs differs from fellow members of the celebrity corporatists like Donald Trump and Richard Branson, in that he has not sought fame or media celebrity as the spokesman for the company's products. Rather, Job's importance to Apple's User-Fans has emerged through allegiance to its products (of which the Mac OS is a notable constant). It is these which have garnered their adulation as consumers and given rise to a platform for Jobs' celebrity CEO status. This is in contrast to other cases where it has been the media which has often been seduced and manipulated by other charismatic members of the corporate elite (the path taken by the Trumps and Bransons of the corporate world). The uniqueness of Jobs' circumstance is that despite the fluctuations in market success, Mac User-Fans have sustained the continued pop-star adulation of the company's founder and current CEO.

Linus Torvalds

As the founder of the Linux kernel, Linus Torvalds represents an Open-Source equivalent of the charismatic (in computing terms) leaders of

Microsoft and Apple. His position in this discussion of leaders may seem to be the wrong choice as arguably Richard Stallman and Eric Raymond are more vocal and have more impact than Torvalds. However, Torvalds himself has attained a similar level of notoriety attained by Gates and Jobs. For an example of this, one just has to look at *Time* magazine's reader's poll of people of last century. Torvalds finished the poll at number 17 (admittedly with only 0.5% of the vote), with no sign of the other two (Time, 2000).

Torvalds' rise to importance contains a number of parallels to the other two leaders. Just as it did for Gates and Jobs, Torvalds' interest and expertise in computers began as a hobby. As the son of journalists, his formative computing years were "spent poring over a Sinclair QL, an eccentric British computer launched in 1984 that had many faults but one real virtue: it was a true multitasking system that allowed advanced hacking" (Moody, 1997). He also was instrumental in the creation of his original platform, just as Gates and Jobs were in theirs. And just like Jobs, Torvalds continues to be recognised as an excellent programmer. As Eric Raymond (2000) notes "Linus seems to me to be a genius of engineering and implementation, with a sixth sense for avoiding bugs and development dead-ends and a true knack for finding the minimum-effort path from point A to point B."

Although similarities between the three exist, there remain important differences in their lives and philosophies. Unlike the other two, Torvalds not only entered higher education, he completed his degree and went on to finish a Masters in Computer Science at Helsinki University. It was during his studies here, notably in a course on Unix, that Torvalds began to develop the Linux kernel. Interestingly, Torvalds gained his Masters in Computer Science with a thesis title *Linux: A Portable operating system*. The next difference between Torvalds and his fellow leaders is a philosophical difference. It may even be cultural.

Where Gates and Jobs saw the fruits of their own labor become the cornerstones of companies that were destined to become transnational corporations, Linus avoided this. In regards to setting up his 'own' software company he has been quoted as saying "I wouldn't want the paperwork" (Moody, 1997). He also notes that while he has a desire for money "it's not my primary goal in life" (Moody, 1997). Despite his different aspirations in regards to money, Torvalds still views himself as an important figurehead for his creation. In an interview with Steve Hamm (2004), Torvalds states "I am a dictator, but it's the right kind of dictatorship. I can't really do anything that screws people over. The benevolence is built in. I can't be nasty. If my baser instincts took hold, they wouldn't trust me, and they wouldn't work with me anymore. I'm not so much a leader, I'm more of a shepherd." Statements such as these illustrate the importance Torvalds places on shared and communal work.

In the same interview, Torvalds advocates these values by explaining his reasoning behind his views on the wrongs of intellectual property. He argues "it's good to copy good ideas. It should be encouraged. We don't say Einstein was a really smart guy and we should come up with a better theory of relativity. We build on top of his good ideas and have new exciting quests" (cited in Hamm, 2004). Eric Raymond (2000) also understands Torvalds reasoning, stating that without this sharing process, fixing bugs and problems within software becomes difficult. "Linus demurred that the person who understands and fixes the problem is not necessarily or even usually the person who first characterizes it. Somebody finds the problem," he says, "and somebody else understands it. And I'll go on record as saying that finding it is the bigger challenge" (Raymond, 2001).

Linus Torvalds and Linux User-Fans

Whereas Gates and Jobs seem to attract the eye of the fan communities due to their presence in the media, Torvalds is held in a quite different esteem within the Linux brand community. Despite his position as the founder of Linux, Torvalds cannot be held responsible for the processes which create Linux. A primary factor driving this is the utilitarian nature of the Open-Source process whereby success, scandal and debate firmly rests on the community of developers and users (including those User-Fans associated within the brand communities this study focuses on). The shared nature of Linux realises Torvalds' position as something of an oracle rather than corporate genius or an omnipotent, controlling mastermind.

The difference between Torvalds and Gates and Jobs is reflected through the manner the Linux brand communities identify his role in the creation of the operating system (Figure 7.15).

Figure 7.15

Roadkill
Post #3
11-22-2006
Trusted Penguin
Posts: 2,6911

Most projects have a leader (or a group) that runs the project. This leader is generally the one that decides when a new release is ready. If you don't like this leader, you can always fork a project and run the fork yourself.

As for the actual Linux kernel, the ultimate head of this is Linus Torvalds. However, there are a great many kernel developers, and Linus is more of a unifying force than a supreme dictator.

2) What do you mean "distributor"? If you're referring to Red Hat or SuSE (both of whom sell a version of Linux), purchasing Linux from them generally gets you some proprietary software as well as support contracts. But the Linux kernel (and most distributions) are free to acquire, yes.

3) The Linux kernel is open-source: not all Linux software has to be. Even if Linux software is under the GPL (thus FOSS), you are allowed to charge for the software, you just need to give out the source code with it. Source code is generally distributed

through packages: for instance, the Gaim sourcecode is available at:
<http://gaim.sourceforge.net/downloads.php>

4) There are some companies who contribute a great deal to Linux development (IBM, Novell, Red Hat, etc.), but most of Linux development is done by volunteers. It has worked very well, in general.

I hope that answers your questions: let me know if you need clarification.

In identifying some of the important aspects of the Linux operating system and culture, Geek User-Fan *Roadkill* (Figure 7.15) notes that “as for the actual Linux kernel, the ultimate head of this is Linus Torvalds. However, there are a great many kernel developers, and Linus is more of a unifying force than a supreme dictator.” It is in this distinction that the Linux brand community is clearly engrained with the ideology of the Open-Source movement and Torvalds has come to be viewed differently from the corporate figures of Microsoft and Apple.

Due to the brand community’s knowledge of Torvalds’ role, the personal critiques that plague Gates and Jobs within their respective brand communities are near non-existent when investigating Tovalds’ ‘public face’. Combined with this knowledge is the subdued nature of the man himself. Unlike Gates or Jobs, Torvalds tends to keep out of the media limelight, and consequently, often remains out of the shared consciousness of the brand community. This said, when he does voice an opinion publicly his voice echoes throughout the Linux forums. Due to his limited media exposure, Torvalds statements are often presented in signature lines (for example framp’s signature line of a Torvalds quote “Really, I’m not out to destroy Microsoft. That will just be a completely unintentional side effect”) or links to previous media interviews.

Again, the respect he gathers is a consequence of his role as much as it is of Linux User-Fan perceptions. As the creator, consultant and spokesman of the operating system, Torvalds does not play the role of salesman or

marketeer, nor does he fit the corporate ideal conceived by Sklair's thesis of the TCC. He represents (and to an extent includes himself in) the Linux brand and developer communities. He is the face of an alternative perspective to the proprietary icons of Microsoft and Apple. By empowering the Linux community to "do what they will" with the source code, he is able to deny fallibility from the User-Fans who know that criticisms of the Linux product are aimed at a great many rather than one charismatic leader. In studying the Linux brand community's perception of Torvalds, it becomes apparent that his unique standing might actually tell us more about the shared consciousness of Windows and Mac User-Fans than it does of their own.

Although Torvalds' undisputed position as the creator/leader of Linux operating system is assured, a thread on the Linuxforums.org website opens a debate on his role in the Open-Source community. Titled "*Icons of the open source movement*" (Figure 7.16) the initial posting installs Richard Stallman below Torvalds as the 'greatest icon'.

Figure 7.16

Taxidriver
Post #1
08-19-2006
Linux Guru
Posts: 1,539
Hello - the idea behind this thread is to ask: who are the hackers? I mean people who have contributed to the world of computers through their tireless zeal and enthusiasm; certainly not system crackers who are obviously all going to Hell one day. Tomorrow probably.
Earlier today I tried to find a good list, or a site dedicated to great hackers, but I couldn't find one. In this thread daacosta and me were discussing the whole thing and we came up with some pretty obvious names ... Well I did. He managed to think of some more original ones than me. As it stands the list goes something like this:

Richard Stallman
Linus Torvalds

Alan Cox
Larry Wall
Don Knuth
Eric Raymond
Guido van Rossum

I would add:
Grace Murray Hopper: the mother of COBOL (ugly baby!!)
Tim Berners-Lee ...
Alan Turing ...
Who were those people who worked on the ARPANET??

Receiving little debate the thread further demonstrates the extent of the shared knowledge of the Linux brand community. Their ability to distinguish between icons of the operating system and the Open-Source movement belies the separation between the ideology of the movement and its products. An interesting side-note to the debate in this particular thread is the post of User-Fan *Jogger* (Figure 7.17) who ironically identifies Bill Gates as a potential candidate for this pseudo hall-of-fame. The posting identifies the competitive and resistive stance adopted by the Open-Source and Linux communities towards the Microsoft head.

Figure 7.17

Jogger
Post #2
08-19-2006
Just Joined!
Posts: 89

Bill Gates definitely. He motivates us opensource folks ;)

Within this same thread Geek User-Fan *Running Late* further identifies the shared knowledge and understanding of what encompasses being not only a member of the movement, but a respected icon of it (Figure 7.18):

Figure 7.18

Running Late
Post #15
11-21-2006

Linux Enthusiast
Posts: 668

I remember a comment several years ago by the freebsd team in an interview.

it related to the several unsung 'heroes' who wanted to remain just that, I mean, its great putting these people on a pedestal , but they are the only people from the project that you can associate it to. The others just work on , for the love of the project, thousands of them, they require no pedestal or admiration.

The anonymity that *Running Late* discusses is also a reflection of the hacker ethic (Himanen, 2001). As explained earlier, this ethic encourages shared resources and as such success of the project (Linux) must also be shared (reflected in the comment of the desire for “several unsung ‘heroes’ who wanted remain just that”). Furthermore, the hacker ethic is also highlighted by the desire of individuals to be recognised not by society or in monetary terms but by their peers (Himanen, 2001). By forfeiting monetary gain for the benefit of the ‘code’, Torvalds and ‘the unsung heroes’ receive accolades from within this community. However, in fulfilling their role in a hacker culture, they also emerge as leaders to those with inferior skills and talents. As a notable figure, or the only willing participant, Torvalds has emerged as a ‘public face’ of Linux’s original hacker roots.

Historical appreciation of Torvalds is also open to community critique. Throughout the forum there is a somewhat illusionary myth of the origins of the operating system. Detailing the problematic nature of this myth is Casual User-Fan *Hit and Run*, (Figure 7.19):

Figure 7.19

Hit and Run
11-07-2006
Linux Newbie
Posts: 109

Linus torvalds released linux originally under a different license and nobody was interested. Nobody wanted to contribute to something that may be "stolen" or closed up later. Without RMS

you would not have the GPL, you would not have the idea of "free" software (FSF defined freedoms) and you would not have had a lot of developers contributing to projects that put their faith in this idea of free software. So while you may have still had a linux you would not have people contributing to it. People were willing to contribute to linux because the GPL assured them that it could not be taken away and everyone would benefit from everyone. This assured it wasn't just another unix .

In a lengthy post clarifying the relationships between Torvalds, Richard Stallman, the GPL and Linux *Hit and Run* identifies that it was Torvalds' survival instincts that lead him to the GPL, due to the inadequacy of traditional IP laws to deliver collaboratively created software. This clarifying comment does not insinuate that Torvalds ever had commercial intentions. Rather it suggests that without Stallman (or the collaboration with others) he would never have attained his iconic position. Despite this form of historical analysis, it remains more a critique of the 'Linux myth' rather than a critique on the actions of the man himself.

It can be seen here that unlike Gates and Jobs, Torvalds is clearly identified and respected for his contributions as creator and leader. However, due to the nature of the Open-Source movement he does not shoulder the responsibility or degree of criticism faced by the other two. In this respect Torvalds is a figurative leader - one whose position as an icon is lessened by little influence (real or imagined) in the eyes of the Linux brand community.

Conclusion

It can be understood that the notion of the 'public face' is of great importance to User-Fans' concept of identity and their perception of the products and brands they consume, with the 'public face' referring to the individuals who act as human symbols of the corporate, governmental or other organizations in modern society. For operating system User-Fans, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Linus Torvalds represent symbols of origin, control and future success.

The 'public face' examples of Gates and Jobs present a unique circumstance whereby the mostly members of the corporate elite represent pseudo-brands in themselves. Both have garnered this attention through the success of 'their' products and subsequent personal success (often expressed as wealth) prompting adulation as consumers. In this sense they have opened themselves to be idolised, adored and criticised beyond the scope of their business. As demonstrated in this chapter User-Fans express these sentiments across a range of issues – from business acumen to personal health – relating this to the nature of their operating system. Unlike Gates and Jobs, Torvalds is clearly identified and respected by User-Fans only for his contributions as creator and leader. As mentioned, this is possibly due to the shared nature of Linux development, the influence of the hacker ethic, or Torvalds's personal (or cultural) decision to remain less visible than his American counterparts. In turn, he does not receive the compliments nor does he shoulder User-Fan condemnation like the other two. Despite the differences in User-Fan behaviour, each operating system 'public face' represents a symbolic anchor for User-Fans to engage with.

Chapter Eight Brand Resistance

Just as communities can emerge out of individual consumptive practices, consumerism has also become a site of contestation and counter-hegemonic representations, which serve to help define communities. Like community, consumerism acts within a cultural framework where power and ideology represents “a site where power, ideology, gender, and social class circulate and shape one another” (Denzin, 2001, p. 325). In doing so, sites of consumption become symbolic representations of power and resistance. According to Hearn and Roseneil (1999, p. 1) power, resources and life chances “are routinely produced and reproduced by and through consumption patterns.” Furthermore, “power also figures in the micro-processes of consumption, be they selling or shopping or ‘surfing the net.’ Consumption can be a form of resistance, just as much as consumption can be resisted” (Hearn & Roseneil, 1999, pp. 5-6). Despite their involvement in the consumer society, Mac and Linux brand communities appropriate symbolic displays of resistance that act as counter-hegemonic forces attempting to dissolve or least question Microsoft power.

While resistance often evokes the ‘noble’ causes of political revolution, human rights or social change, it can also represent subtle and complex discourse responding to domineering aspects of our culture. Raby (2005) highlights that the diversity of resistance can range from critical comments and political opposition to “clowning around”, not voting, wearing Nazi symbols and watching Madonna videos.” Simply put, resistance, even in its ‘everyday’ form can “be thought of as exerting a constant pressure, probing for weak points in the defences of antagonists,” and testing the limits of its presence (Scott, 2008, p. 58). Thus through consumption, individuals (and communities) can “empower, demean, disenfranchise, liberate, essentialise, and stereotype” through commodities (Denzin, 2001, p. 325). This chapter aims to clarify how the Mac and Linux Brand Communities can be contextualized as resistive forces against the persuasive nature of the

Microsoft Windows hegemony and the dominant consumerist discourse that it is a part of. In establishing this, resistance to consumerism (or even hegemonic forces) can be essentially identified in more general and less specific modes of action that can be implemented within or against any aspect of modern life.

Thus, resistance is often conveyed as the combative positioning of an actor against a perceived illegitimacy of another actor. In the study of operating systems Brand Communities, the opportunity of an alternative presented by Mac and Linux User-Fans presents a platform for a perception of illegitimacy of Windows' hegemony. Thus, in a market of purported consumer choice, this hegemonic power becomes an obvious focus for the appropriation of resistance. In this sense, operating systems may become cultural artefacts that are appropriated in symbolically significant forms that can be identified as cultural resistance.

What is Resistance?

At first resistance seems to be a simple idea. Ewick and Sileby (2002, p. 1) note the potential ease in defining resistance arguing that it represents "the ways relatively powerless persons accommodate to power while simultaneously protecting their interests and identities." Fournier (1998, p. 88) argues resistance stands as "an opposing or retarding force" concerning activities that are exerted to counteract or defeat. From an organizational viewpoint, Tucker (1993, p. 26) identifies resistance as "social control directed upward-from subordinates to superiors." However, others contend that attaining a clear definition is a much more difficult task.

Poster (1992, p. 94) notes that cultural studies focused on resistance investigate "the way individuals and groups practice a strategy of appropriation in response to structures of domination." This description implicitly represents recursive interplay between the actions of the resisters and the structures of domination. Aggleton and Whitty (1985) argue that in

defining resistance one must specify or contextualize the targets of acts of resistance. They contend that one “should distinguish between acts of challenge directed against power relations operating widely and pervasively throughout the social formation and those directed against localized principles of control” (Aggleton & Whitty, 1985, p. 62). In such an account, the former actions are defined as resistance, the latter as contestations. This understanding is further explained through their study of teenagers in a middle-class English town, noting that while sentiments of anger and contestation towards local positions of control were present, there existed little evidence of resistance to wider power structures (Aggleton & Whitty, 1985, p. 62). While resistance as a localized event is useful, to separate it from wider social contexts of the consumer society enforces a ‘definition’ between what can be resisted and what cannot. For example, this ‘definition’ restricts the notion of resistance in the context of operating system brand communities to localized experience in social entities that – by definition – are global and dependent upon global power structures.

More recently, Mumby (2005, p. 38) argued resistance as needing to fulfil one of two components, one being “the practice of a wholly coherent, fully self-aware subject operating from a pristine, authentic space of resistance.” The other frames activity of social actors who “are subsumed within, and ultimately ineffectual against, a larger system of power relations” (Mumby, 2005, p. 38). In attempting to secure a typology of resistance Hollander and Einwohner (2004) found that across the diversity of definitions, action, opposition, recognition and intent are constant factors in recognizing acts as resistive. Intent and recognition are the most contestable, but when opposition is not recognized by its targets, or when it is described as being unintentional, it becomes difficult to qualify the act as resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004, p. 548). From these factors, they distinguish a typology that includes - overt resistance, covert resistance, unwitting resistance, target-defined resistance, externally-defined resistance, missed resistance, and attempted resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Of these, the overt and covert resistances are most relevant to this discussion. Overt resistance can be understood as “behaviour that is type, resistance, visible and readily

recognized by both targets and observers as resistance and, further, is intended to be recognized as such” (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004, p. 545). Covert resistance refers “to acts that are intentional yet go unnoticed (and, therefore, unpunished) by their targets, although they are recognized as resistance by other, culturally aware observers” (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004, p. 545).

Consumer resistance can take form through a range of discourses from altering the meanings of objects and the process of consumption through to the symbolic appropriation of marketing as ‘tools of resistance’ (Penaloza & Price, 1993, p. 123). Recognizing these aspects of consumer resistance, Penaloza and Price (1993) propose four dimensions of opposition. The first represents the organizational (individual to collective). The second refers to the goals or intent of the discourse (ranging from reform to the radical). The third articulates the tactics of the organization (the form of discourse/behaviour). The final involves the relationship the resistance has to the producer and the consumer system (Penaloza & Price, 1993).

The cultural appropriation of operating systems recalls the work of Michel de Certeau (1984) who argued that consumers transform the cultural meanings of commodities for their own personal means. He argued that in doing so, individuals discover “ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong thus lending a political dimension to everyday practices” (De Certeau, 1984, p. xvii). Using the operating system as commodity (and practice), one can understand through the symbolic use by User-Fans in brand communities that seemingly inert or homogenous products can envelop cultural and political form of resistance. In this sense operating systems require an analysis that accounts for the practices through which they are consumed and appropriated as forms of resistance.

In identifying operating systems as symbolically significant artefacts in forms of resistance, one can illustrate the discourses that encompass cultural resistance within the consumer society. Just as de Certeau argued that meaning can be found in any commodity, others have noted that

consumption itself can also provide significant meaning. Kozinets and Handelman (2004, p.691) argue that “as consumption has come to play an increasingly central role in contemporary society, consumer movements have arisen to challenge and transform aspects of it by propagating ideologies of consumption that radicalize mainstream views.”

In the context of this discussion resistance must be considered as a reaction to the seduction of the consumer society through the appropriation of an array of symbols and discourses. Barber (2007, p. 261) justifies the study of these activities arguing they “are significant forms of resistance and subversion, the more so because they grow out of the pathologies they address and can be imaginative products of consumers (often young consumers) and producers (often influential producers) who we think of as ‘caught up’ in a cultural logic of consumerism which they may in fact be capable of subverting.” Botttrell (2007, p. 599) asserts that resistance as a concept is defined through “practices which express opposition to rules and norms in specific contexts, and which contain critiques of social relations, from the lived experience of marginalization.” In presenting the general theme of opposition or contestation, this research must present a context into which the resistance can be defined.

Specific to consumers, Kates and Belk (2001, p. 402) identified two major trajectories of consumption-related resistance. One is resistance to the dominant culture *through* consumption, and the other is resistance *to* consumption (or what may be termed ‘consumer resistance’ as expressed in narratives to condemn commercialization) (Kates & Belk, 2001, p. 402). Through this distinction consumer resistance can be conceptualized as “the broad set of oppositional consumption meanings.” These include any act that a consumer employs to counteract the symbolic meaning of consumption (or even the ideology of the consumer society) (Kates & Belk, 2001, p. 401). These can include (re)appropriation of symbols on t-shirts, use of shopping malls for purposes other than consumerism, loyalty to certain shops over others or even exiting conventional consumerism (Kates & Belk, 2001, p. 401; Penaloza & Price, 1993). Brands, particularly those with strong social

resonance, represent such symbols with Apple in particular offering a platform for User-Fans (and consumers) to express resistive or alternative expressions of consumerism.

In identifying operating systems as symbolically significant artefacts as forms of resistance, one can illustrate the discourses that encompass cultural resistance within the consumer society. Just as de Certeau argued that meaning can be found in any commodity, others have noted that consumption itself can also provide significant meaning. Kozinets and Handelman (2004, p.691) argue that “as consumption has come to play an increasingly central role in contemporary society, consumer movements have arisen to challenge and transform aspects of it by propagating ideologies of consumption that radicalize mainstream views.” Kozinets and Handelman (2004, p. 692) present these consumer movements as “not only the changing of principles, practices, and policies but also a fundamental change to the ideology and culture of consumerism.” These can be identified as movements but also as consumer resistance as they “attempt to transform various elements of the social order surrounding consumption and marketing” (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004, p. 691). In grouping individual responses to the consumer society, consumer movements (like brand communities) occur on the notions of the shared and a point of distinction. Symbolizing a form of resistance, these movements focus upon ideological differences between those who resist and the dominant course, with the ‘resisters’ in many instances adopting a ‘David and Goliath’ stance to change the current social order (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004, p. 701). These forces of resistance have been labelled in a negative light as anti-globalisation, anti-corporate and anti-capitalist; or in a positive sense consumer boycott, consumer resistance or ethical consumption. All signify the importance or centrality of consumerism in our lives by questioning or disrupting the status quo. Be they oppositional, confrontational, constructive or destructive they appropriate the consumptive process for the means of their cultural ideology.

Holt (2002) proposes two forms of consumer resistance which counter the consumer society’s authority that presents alternative culture in the form of

reflexive and creative appropriation of commodities. Both offer similar grounding in that they assume consumer culture as an “irresistible form of cultural authority that generates a limited set of identities accessed through commodities” (Holt, 2002, p. 72). In accepting this, reflexive resistance becomes possible when the consumer is able to develop a ‘reflexive distance’ from a marketer imposed ‘signal’ and “are able to disentangle the marketer’s artifice from the use value of the product” (Holt, 2002, p. 72). Creative resistance offers consumers the ability to “emancipate themselves from marketer-imposed codes by altering their sign value to signify opposition to establishment values” (Holt, 2002, p. 72). Thus, while Apple’s marketing campaign or Linux’s philosophical underpinnings may represent an alternative or resistive symbol to consumers, it is possible for consumer’s to appropriate the software in an alternative manner to that designated by its creators.

Resistance as social

One of the movements that is identifiable as oppositional to the consumer society can be regarded as anti-corporatist. Often portrayed as anti-globalist or anti-capitalist, on closer inspection the activities within this movement focus their opposition towards the corporate dominance in contemporary economic policy. This critique and the subsequent membership in the anti-corporate movement state that neo-liberal policies have led to worsened conditions for the poor, breaking with former implicit social contracts which promised a certain extent of material security and wellbeing between a centralized, corporatist state and national populations (Eckstein & Wickham-Crowley, 2003, pp. 12-13). Chomsky (2005, p. 201) identifies the question central to the movement that asks, “do corporations have to be controlled by management and owners and dedicated to the welfare of shareholders instead of being controlled by the people who work in them and dedicated to the community on the workers?”

With the help of ICTs and the network society, anti-corporatist resistance is now a global social movement that discounts any criticism defining it as anti-globalization. Beverley Hooper (2000) identifies Chinese citizens who fashion unique forms of resistance to Coca-Cola, Pepsi and other trans-national corporations in the face of the relaxing of government barriers to outside influences. These include street protestors shouting “dado Maindangloo” (down with McDonald’s) outside a restaurant in Nanjing; or in Guangzhou holding placards reading: “I’d rather die of thirst than drink Coca-Cola. I’d rather starve to death than eat McDonald’s”. Similar studies identify similar forms of resistance in Okinawa (Yonetani, 2004), and in Bolivia (Otto & Bahm), through the re-appropriation of advertisements in the so-called ‘West’ (Joseph, 2002), and both locally and cooperatively throughout the world (Kingsnorth, 2004). The members of this resistance movement have adopted a core set of values identified as including non-violent struggles, democratic practice, social justice, inclusiveness, secularism, peace, solidarity and equality (Chase-Dunn & Gills, 2005, p. 53). Underlying these protests may be concerns of cultural imperialism but they also reflect doubts that neo-liberalism and global corporatism can bring benefits to all global economies. These acts also highlight that the anti-corporate movement is not solely the bastion of the ‘Western Left’ (Friedman, 1999) as it is incorporated within a global population that identify with each other yet offer a range of differing perspectives, knowledge and actions resisting them.

Identifying anti-corporate resistance as a form of the modern appropriations of resistance offers an alternative to the dominance of market consumption in everyday life. Although many view consumer movements as a modern function, Herrmann (1970) illustrates that they are not solely a modern phenomenon. Herrmann (1970, p. 55) argues that great levels of consumer unrest in the 1960’s arose from a combination of serious economic and social dislocation, with an increased level of consumer education and sophistication. This consumer movement of the 1960s has footing with preceding movements in the 1900s and 1930s. According to Herrmann (1970), all of these resulted in higher standards of business conduct and a requirement for social responsibility. While in retrospect these may or may

not have been attained, Herrmann's illustration displays that consumer awareness, concern, and resistance are not solely a modern day phenomenon and can be useful in discussing the modern movements.

A form of symbolic resistance, 'culture jamming' represents a form of discourse whereby resisters can subvert those in power with the same products and media through which their power is disseminated. Lasn (1999) argues that culture jamming aims to topple existing power structures while forging major adjustments to the way we all live through our interactions and the manner in which meanings are produced in a mass mediated society. An example of this can be found in the technologically savvy form of culture jamming referred to as Google Bombing, which is a collective strategy whose participants intend to alter the search results of a specific term or phrase for their own (often subversive) means (Tatum, 2005). This reflexive action by jammers allows them to react to changes of institutional power and influence.

Klein (2000) focuses upon the rise of consumer resistance throughout the 1990s, exploring consumers' connections to the notion of the brand and the effect that has upon both the consumers and creators of the goods consumed. For Klein (2000, p. 301) consumer movements exist due to a slow divestment of corporate culture which has lead to a "population of skilled workers who don't see themselves as corporate lifers", a population that she argues "could lead to a renaissance in creativity and a revitalization of civic life" and is "already leading to a new form of anti-corporate politics." She highlights brand resistance from traditional boycotts and protest to more imaginative and creative forms from culture jamming, the McLibel trial and 'Reclaim the Streets' parties (Klein, 2000). These types of resistance adhere to what Bennett (2003, p. 10) claims are the goals of anti-corporate resistance. These include persuading "corporate compliance with social or environmental standards regimes", and "inserting otherwise hard to communicate political messages into the closely held personal or lifestyle meaning systems of media publics." For Bennett (2003, p. 10) this can only occur today where "the networking capacity of the Internet, when combined with logo-logics that cross different cultures and lifestyles, have resulted in

surprising political victories -- often by surprisingly small numbers of seemingly resource-poor activists.”

Such anti-consumptive resistance focuses itself on two levels. The first is the restriction on purchases of certain products and brands, whilst the second aims at limiting the market basis of modern consumption. An important question to be asked of consumer resistance movements is what forms of alternative consumption are derived as a direct consequence of the resistance. For example, what shoes do ‘resisters’ wear after they protest Nike’s labour practices, or what do they eat when they protest genetically modified food? In the context of a consumer society the most drastic response to such a question involves participants in the movement to withdraw from market consumption completely (or at least the aspect they are resisting). A subversive form of resistance is the appropriation of market competitors as alternatives to others. This is the most consumer-centric of consumer resistance. This form of artefact appropriation consumer resistance can be conveyed through any number of cultural creations. The focus of computer operating systems is one of a vast array of culturally significant products that can be adopted as a manner of protest and resistance. For example Belk and Tumbat (2005, p. 216) have demonstrated that Apple enthusiasts have in their “fervent loyalty” “ennobled and sacralised the ‘cause’ of Apple and vilified and profaned opposing brands in the marketplace.” Similarly, Linux, as software, has been demonstrated to symbolically reflect a challenge to proprietary ownership, alternative modes of development and resistance to societal norms by forwarding alternative values (Himanen, 2001).

In many instances the countercultures that deplore one aspect of consumer culture are themselves incorporated into the very culture they resist; in the end actually posing little threat to the status quo (Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002a). This occurs, because the consumer society produces “agents who work directly in the corporate economy as managers, marketers, and advertising ‘creatives’; by independent ‘brokers’ who analyse and criticize consumer products; and by dissidents who initiate alternative responses to

the mass consumption system” (Zukin & Maguire, 2004, p. 175). These include not only limiting the ‘destructive’ forces against consumerism, but also adopting issues of “women’s empowerment, environmental sustainability, and racial equality into the service of product promotion, thus reducing social justice to the freedom to choose between products” (Zukin & Maguire, 2004, p.182). This process identifiably signifies part of the success of Apple who has relied on ‘Think Different’ and ‘I’m a Mac’ campaigns to distinguish itself from the Microsoft hegemony. Following this brand campaign have been the brand consumers who have appropriated these as symbols resistance within their community.

However, in creating icons of resistance it is possible for the original aims and goals of the resistive products to get lost in their gradual success and acceptance within a consumer society. In the end, many products appropriated in the name of consumer resistance have often become a part of culture rather than changing it. It is the aim of this chapter to investigate whether Mac OS and Linux are, have or will remain artefacts of modern consumer resistance. To ensure this, further theoretical development on the classification of resistance movements is required.

With the constant, evolving nature of technology in our everyday lives, resistance and protest has also evolved with these changes. In the realm of modern ICTs the most obvious forms of resistance have been the use of software in a constructive or destructive manner between networked computers. These have commonly included often-reported hackers, crackers, malicious viruses and worms to the less publicized work of hacktivists and on-line petitions (Allen, 2003; Carty, 2002; Froehling, 1997; Garrido & Halavais, 2003; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003). Pickerill (2001, p. 164) highlights that modern ICTs provide “speed, cheapness, interactivity, and relative freedom from government or corporate control have enabled significant changes in the way campaigns are organized and advertised and goals are achieved.” Continuing the resistive potential of ICTs, Kahn and Kellner (2005, p. 80) recognize the Internet as a ‘contested terrain’ where

subversive and progressive forces present themselves in opposition to dominant forces.

In the context of ICTs, resistance has long been associated with the notion of 'hacking'. Although the term 'hacker' has been somewhat immersed with notion of criminality and unauthorized access, the term 'hacker' "was originally used in computing circles to refer to individuals who had a low-level familiarity with the operation of technology and were capable of devising technically elegant software solutions" (Furnell, 1999, p. 29). According to Wark (2004) whatever they hack, hackers are "are the abstracters of new worlds", thus rather than criminals, hackers represent resisters of the techno-status-quo. For Levy (1984, p. ix), the Hacker Ethic understands that:

- Access to computers—and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works—should be unlimited and total.
- Always yield to the Hands-on Imperative!
- All information should be free.
- Mistrust authority—promote decentralization.
- Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race or position.
- You can create art and beauty on a computer.
- Computers can change your life for the better.

It is from this founding that hackers can be understood as participating in alternative and resistive forms of discourse. For example, the use of Linux, as software, has reflected a similar but more virtuous ethic which has offered a challenge to proprietary ownership and an alternative ethic of creation (Himanen, 2001). Adopting the 'Hacker Ethic', Linux follows a notion of resistance to societal norms forwarding ideals of social worth, openness, activity and caring (in opposition to mass-consumerism's supposed sterility) (Himanen, 2001).

In opposition to global corporatism the adoption of ICTs for resistance has been common. In what is known as 'Hacktivism', subcultures of cyberactivists have turned to the internet "developing networks of solidarity" which help in "propagating oppositional ideas and movements throughout the planet" (Kahn, 2004, p. 89). Much of the focus of cyber activists has been upon "historically specific forms of domination, typically mystified by ideologies that thwart human freedom, community, and self-constitution" (Langman, 2005, p. 49). This has led to the internet being employed as a practical tool in organizing protest groups (such as the Friends of the Earth, Direct Action Network and People's Global Action) (Wall, 2007), or disrupting the online presence of governmental and corporate entities (Kahn & Kellner, 2005). However, through more deliberative and creative uses of technology these activists are able to communicate globally in a manner that challenges and resists dominate cultural powers.

In resisting these forces 'hacktivism' has promoted the idea of computer literacy (Wall, 2007), free-wifi or 'war-driving' (Kahn & Kellner, 2005), Google-bombing (Kahn, 2004), ROM creation (Jordan, 2007), and various modes of file-sharing (Napster, Kazaa, warez and torrents) (Kahn & Kellner, 2005). Open-source software has also been involved in hacktivism that have been "used freely to circumvent the attempts by government and corporations to control the internet experience" (Kahn, 2004, p. 90). This has included releasing "programs such as Six/Four (after Tiananmen Square), that combines the peer-to-peer (P2P) capabilities of Napster or Kazaa along with a virtual private networking protocol that makes user identity anonymous, and Camera/Shy, a powerful web-browser stenography application that allows anyone to engage in secret information storage and retrieval" (Kahn, 2004, p. 90). Kahn (2004, p.90) notes that on a "non-militaristic note" open-source software including Linux and OpenOffice provide powerful and free alternatives to the Microsoft hegemony. Furthermore, internet arenas assume the "qualities of 'public spheres' where people can find or provide information, debate ideas, develop critiques, and envision strategies" (Langman, 2005, p. 55). It is in this sense that the internet can be employed by groups (or individuals) to resist the status quo,

offer alternatives and open the dialogue between competing forces (Kahn & Kellner, 2005).

Despite the potential for wider political and social change through ICT, software and its content can also be considered forms of resistance against a variety of perceived social, economic and legal problems. Eschenfelder and Desai (2004) highlights that the continuation of 'illegal' software on rogue Internet sites illustrates new forms of resistance against modern concepts and practice of intellectual property law. Furthermore, Eschenfelder and Desai (2004, p. 111) note that the continual posting and linking to the (now) technically obsolete software represents symbolic political action, even a form of "relatively unobtrusive e-civil disobedience" towards the aims of the law. Peer-to-Peer networks (such as Kazaa, Limewire, Napster and BitTorrent) and new social media platforms (Postigo, 2008) have all stood in the face of legal challenges continuing their presence long after these threats, resisting media conglomerates and governments pressures. Not surprisingly, resistance towards software has also been appropriated by a number of parties against Microsoft.

Bennett (2006, p. 114) acknowledges that the history of 'the Microsoft campaign' that began "with large-scale hacker attacks on Microsoft products, and active web networks aimed at branding the company as a predatory threat to openness and innovation in software development and a free Internet environment." One result of this was that:

...business competitors and workers filed various lawsuits dating from the early 1990s, and those suits increased in number and legal coordination until the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) and 19 states filed a federal anti-trust action against the company. The business opponents -- dubbed N.O.I.S.E., for Netscape, Oracle, IBM, Sun, and Everyone Else in the insider accounts of the campaign-- provided major funding, core elements of the DOJ legal brief, as well as sharing board members, information, and legal strategy with many of the organizations in the campaign (Bennett, 2006, p. 114).

Conclusion

Brand communities are forms of resistance whereby consumers seek autonomy in the consumer choice (often but not always from a dominant discourse), whilst remaining connected to the notion of the shared. In this sense they have more in common with activists as symbolic engineers rather than the shallow. In a sense they reflect activists who seek “awareness of self or a more autonomous existence, like ‘consuming differently’ and making other changes in one’s daily life, is indicative of a desire to live ‘coherently’, that is, to live in accordance with your principles, to ensure an agreement between ideas and practice, between the way you think about the world and the way you act in it” (Williams, 2008, p. 76).

The metaphor of the activist, while not lost in the Linux brand community, may seem too far of a stretch for Mac brand community members. Yet, the displays of loyalty that precede this discussion are considered choices in the vein of those that activists share. Additionally, in conforming to new norms within autonomous movement, Mac User-Fans establish a community that possess notions of resistance as a primary identity-forming notion.

As highlighted previously, this notion of resistance is deeply embedded in the Apple brand – both through the appropriation of consumers and the strategic marketing of Apple. This strategy may be part of what Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody (2008, p. 168) regard as a wider desire of produce to create:

...cultural conditions that allow for more subtle ways to insert brands and products deeply into the fabric of consumer lifeworlds... [that has resulted] a style of marketing practice that now aims at completely drawing consumers into the production and, more importantly, *innovation* process itself.

In doing so, brand community resistance is as much a complicit stance as it is a counter-hegemonic one. Rather than independent actors, producers construct consumers as “as partners in mutually beneficial innovation and production processes,” and whilst not exploitive, reduce the risk of consumer

behaviour evolving in ways other than those prescribed by the company (Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008, p. 168). That is, this resistance is always market sanctioned. As Holt (2002, p. 89) concludes:

Consumers are revolutionary only insofar as they assist entrepreneurial firms to tear down the old branding paradigm and create opportunities for companies that understand emerging new principles. Revolutionary consumers helped to create the market for Volkswagen and Nike and accelerated the demise of Sears and Oldsmobile. They never threatened the market itself. What has been termed “consumer resistance” is actually a form of market-sanctioned cultural experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself.

In this sense, those who are intent on examining consumer resistance need to recognize “that there is no total escape, no place out there totally outside the market from which positive social change, including effective consumer resistance and freedom from market domination will emanate” (Penaloza & Price, 1993).

Chapter Nine Brand Community and User-Fandom as modes of Resistance

Resistance emerges as a central feature of both the Mac and Linux brand communities. Throughout both communities User-Fans appropriate the consumption of products as a means of demonstrating their position against Microsoft hegemony through the autonomy in the consumer choice while remaining connected to boundaries of a communal entity. Again, this reflects a distinction from the passive consumer of goods to one who engineers and appropriates modes of meaning from their consumption. This chapter reflects their modes of 'consuming differently' (Williams, 2008, p. 76) in resistance to Microsoft influence and its hegemonic power.

Mac as Resistance

The symbolism of resistance has been undeniably present in Apple's history, and continues to resonate today in their marketing campaigns, company ethos, brand community and User-Fan identity. Founded by both Jobs and Wozniak, the aura of resistance associated with Apple stems from a combination of foundation and its marketing strategy. From the outset, the company has thrived on the perception of the company's hardware and software as being alternative and superior to that offered by IBM (originally) and Microsoft (currently). Stein (2002) highlights that during the early 1980s both Wozniak and Jobs brought their products to this position by 'creating' media stories that emphasised "their hippie, garage-grunge style and anti-corporate, anti-hierarchical stance." In contrast IBM had propagated itself in a standard corporate culture of company rankings and an insistence on a uniform corporate look and attitude (Stein, 2002). It is this difference that can be referred to as Jobs and Wozniak's greatest invention, the 'myth of Apple' (M. S. Malone, 1999). Part of this myth is the resistance Apple creates in the

operating system and hardware markets. In this sense, Apple is “a style, an attitude, a *movement*” (M. S. Malone, 1999, p. 231). It alludes to resisting the dominant computing and corporate culture, whilst at the same time participating in them.

The sophisticated marketing of Apple as resistance plays a significant role in the continuation of the ethos originally created by the ‘Steves’. The first example of this having an impact past the computing ‘community’ is the now infamous ‘1984’ Macintosh advertisement. The advertisement illustrates a gloomy, futuristic world with workers taking part in laborious, monotonous work. The workers, all dressed the same, perform similar repetitive tasks. A Big Brother-like voice announces:

“Big Brother”: “Today, we celebrate the first glorious anniversary of the Information Purification Directives. We have created, for the first time in all history, a garden of pure ideology. Where each worker may bloom, secure from the pests purveying contradictory thoughts. Our Unification of Thought is more powerful a weapon than any fleet or army on earth. We are one people. With one will, one resolve, one cause. Our enemies shall talk themselves to death and we will bury them with their own confusion. We shall prevail!”

However, running through the middle of these plain workers is an athlete - colourful, different and fast. A different voice over announces:

Announcer: “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like 1984.” (Stein, 2002).

The allusion to George Orwell’s novel *1984* and the choice of Apple Macintosh as the alternative provides both a sense of resistance and individuality. Stein (2002) notes that Orwell's novel was a critique of power, directed specifically at Stalin and his gulag and a similar theme is evident in the mass of workers assembled on the screen in the Mac advertisement. The use of this theme in the advertisement can be understood to identify IBM (Big Blue) with Stalin (Big Brother), and the “dehumanizing of technological progress” (Stein, 2002). The promise of the ad “1984 won’t be like 1984”

encourages viewers to 'not to conform to the world' and instead adopt the Macintosh.

At the release of the Macintosh in 1984 Steve Jobs presented a speech that continued the notion of the resistance of Apple. In it Jobs promoted Apple as the antithesis of IBM; the then dominant corporation in ICT. Jobs stated: "It is now 1984. It appears IBM wants it all. Apple is perceived to be the only hope to offer IBM a run for its money. Dealers, initially welcoming IBM with open arms, now fear an IBM-dominated future. They are increasingly turning back to Apple as the only force that can ensure their future freedom" (Malone, 1999, pg.279). Although history proved Jobs wrong, as Microsoft, not IBM, emerged as the greater power, Apple's stance against IBM continued a sense of resistance and anti-corporate action to this day.

In supporting the Macintosh and its operating system, Apple has since presented similarly themed marketing campaigns. Recently, Apple unveiled 'Think Different' as a company slogan. Billboards around the world presented the public with modern models/symbols of resistance including Cesar Chavez, Malcolm X, and imagery of young, red-flag waving militants (Rebensdorf, 2001). Naomi Klein (2000) also highlights that in a similar campaign Apple even used the image or likeness of the Dalai Lama encouraging people to 'Think Different'. Thinking different is an obvious reference to the Apple stance as alternative to Windows, but also plays with the identity of the company, its consumers and also its potential customers. The 'Think Different' campaign was superseded by the Get a Mac slogan with its "I'm a Mac" advertisements whereby Hollywood actor Justin Long personifies Mac as a young, hip and cool alternative to John Hodgman's nerdy PC/Windows. This most recent advertising campaign continues to play on the precedents of the culture that Apple has previously propagated.

The rhetoric of resistance that permeates throughout the wider media context has flowed into the consciousness of the Apple Brand Community. Of interest in the context of this study is whether this is a reaction to the media campaigns or if the Apple User-Fans have created their own 'anti-brand

movement'. In a Mac-Forums thread entitled "Not allowed to buy a Mac?? wtf." postings responded to a members' inability to convince his father that a Mac system is not a waste of money. A posting, this response by *Dukie* (Figure 9.1) illustrates numerous points of validation of the resistive attitude Mac User-Fans hold.

Figure 9.1

Dukie
Post #5
12-31-2003, 01:41 PM
Guest
Posts: n/a

Quote:

Originally Posted by Norman

I know how you feel... You might say my parents.....well aren't "technological" people... They like old fashioned things....On the other hand, I am a technological freak...I love anything that makes me be lazier or ust life easier....I am running a Dell Dimension 8200, 2.0 GHz, only 256 MB Ram(and its killin me). I wanna get the Dual 1.8 GHz G5, 1 GB Ram but god that price tag! I know exactly how you feel....Hang in there.....I still haven't switched but I know its a whole different world...A good World....The Apple World

Im lucky, my DAD is technological n ****, I got my brand new ibook, which ive been saving up for ages for, I am never going to buy another windows box ever again (maybe if i get paid by M\$ and only if its all their money) slap your dad and say its your money and you can do whatever you want.

If that doesn't work persuade them, say you will run away from home (i am not taking liability if you actually do)

Stake your school grades on it, all I did was find a cheap one on ebay.. !!

The member's self-identification as more technologically enlightened than his own father is an important point in displaying the shared knowledge the community possess in their selection of the alternative operating system. Furthermore, *Dukie's* argument that he would never use Windows again ("I am never going to buy another windows box...) illustrates the relationship between Apple User-Fans and Microsoft products. However, whereas the

User-Fan recognises the Apple brand community's resistance towards Microsoft and Windows, he does not clarify the argument with a pro-Mac allegiance or himself as a self-identifying fan. In this sense, it may be a reflection of a Casual User-Fan's desire to be accepted within a new community and in turn participating in the norms of its culture.

Many Mac User-Fans involve the Mac OS as an appropriation of their resistive state towards the status quo of the Windows/PC. In doing so, members seems to appropriate the operating system in their own self-conceptualisation as 'true-believers' and as a cultural object through which the Apple brand community is resistive to dominant cultural forces. Mac-Forums member *Beadie* (Figure 9.2) discloses his use of the 'resistive' operating system and other Apple products to externalise an aspect of his/her identity.

Figure 9.2

Beadie
Post #24
04-22-2006, 01:29 PM
Posts: 7,467
Mac Specs: Quad 2.5Ghz PowerMac G5 / 1Ghz iBook G4 / OSX 10.5.8 /iPhone 3
Quote:
Originally Posted by dimagex20
Windows has their OS, and we have Mac OS X. I think I will stay on Macs side of the fence and not care to much about what goes on in Window's backyard.
I agree. The problem is that you come to a Mac forum to discuss the Mac and Mac related things, and yet there seems to be an unchecked Windows gang going around and defending MS and arguing about OSX vs Vista/XP. They seem to have the attitude that it is their job to enlighten us to how bad Windows isn't, despite the fact that nearly every Mac user here has chosen the Mac over Windows for some reason. Seems to that if this a Mac forum, why is this happening? If you want to go praise MS and Windows, go find a Windows forum.

The User-Fan places his/her own textual emphasis (originally in Blue, bold and *italics*) on the computer (Quad 2.5Ghz PowerMac G5 and 1Ghz iBook G4) and the OS version that is being used (OSX 10.4.6). This emphasis is

used by member *Beadie* as a means of externalising Mac and Apple as an important aspect of his/her identity. *Beadie*'s statement reveals that there is a perceived difference between Windows and Mac User-Fans. The comments also reveals the perception that "nearly every Mac user here has chosen the Mac over Windows for some reason", continuing the notion of resistance to Windows that is common to the Mac Brand Community. This reveals, at least for this User-Fan, that the act of choosing Mac over Windows is indeed an act, or at the very least an appropriation of resistance. Also in this specific posting it can be seen that *Beadie* is continuing a fellow member's problems with Windows users entering Mac territory, further solidifying community bonds and their own resistive identities as Mac fans. In particular, the sentence, "if you want to go praise MS and Windows, go find a Windows forum", illustrates both resentment to pro-Windows sentiments in this forum and also suggests the existence of what it entails to be a true Mac user. It also identifies the arena as a Mac community where pro-Windows talk is not the norm nor acceptable.

The resistance to Microsoft is also presented in a hypothetical question in a MaCNN thread entitled What if Apple Dies whereby members are asked what members would do in the event that the Mac OS floundered. The response of Devoted User-Fan *Wee-Bey* (Figure 9.3) and the Geek User-Fan *D'Angelo* (Figure 9.4) reflect a common reaction of the resistance in the Apple brand community.

Figure 9.3

Wee-Bey
2003-01-20 12:28 am
Oh my God.
Registered: 2000-12-19
Posts: 2240
Re: What if Apple died?
Shrug, buy a PC, use Linux apps (Paid for, well, the apps, not linux, you know what I mean) pirate Windows and it's games like everyone else I know

I like Apple, but I have bigger things to worry about

Member *Wee-Bey* typifies the intensity of the resistance to Windows in the opening statement "Shrug, buy a PC, use Linux" suggest that the member does not affiliate as closely with the operating system as some of the other members. However, the comment 'pirate Windows' in combination with the hypothetical choice of Windows reaffirms the anti-Microsoft sentiments. In using a 'pirate' copy of Windows, Arc would be prepared to succumb to the culture of Microsoft's software but only in a subversive way by not participating in the market consumerism common to the norm (except for 'everyone' this User-Fan knows). The concluding statement reveals two things. The first is the acceptance and externalisation of the member's appreciation of Apple, an appreciation that allows him/her to be studied as a User-Fan. The second important point in this statement is the limitations on the own User-Fan's identity by limiting the importance he/she places upon the subject. These claims and justifications are in line with the many in the community who claim affiliation with Apple but much of their focus is on remaining opposed to Windows.

Figure 9.4

D'Angelo

2003-01-18 7:38 pm

Member

Posts: 2417

Re: What if Apple died?how does using a computer go against what you believe in, are you some wierd machine based religion? Seriously people, windows isn't that bad, and you probbaly would end up going "wow, this is SO much easier then on a mac!" like I did.

I've been forced to use Windows in various (work) situations & I've never found one where I've found it to be "easier" than a Mac. Sometimes it's "similar, but a different way". However, the odds of me using any Microsoft software is pretty low (unless I have no choice whatsoever). I use WMP & Explorer only when there's no other possibility, and that's the only MS stuff I run. It might be a "weird computer based religion", or it could be just that since I got into computer's (1980) I've always had severe problems with Microsoft's/Bill Gates' philosophies/methods. For as long as I can remember they've been on a "standards" kick. However, the program/whatever with 90% market domination isn't the "standard" format, it's the 2% MS product which they tie

into their more succesful products until it kills the market leader that's the "standard". (To be fair, some market leaders (VisiCorp/Lotus/Wordperfect/Netscape) allowed their products to go down the toilet, allowing MS to beat them, but others were just wiped out via bundling). I think Microsoft's view towards competition was best summed up by the head of a long gone company about problems they had marketing their Windows word processor (Ami) in the early days of 3.1. "Microsoft wants there to be as many Windows word processors as possible to increase its use, but they don't want anyone except themselves to actually sell any".

Posting in the same MaCNN Forum thread based on the hypothetical demise of Apple, member *D'Angelo* (Figure 9.4) illustrates a more intense devotion towards Apple, a more in-depth analysis, and most importantly a resistance towards Windows. In responding to a post which questions the dedication of Mac User-Fans, *D'Angelo* is identifiable as a member whose affiliation with Mac is clearly defined. Although he does not mention his use of Mac (however, he does suggest that Windows is forced on him in work situations), he justifies his argument with anti-Microsoft points that aims to impress in this specific community. In this posting he justifies his dislike of the 'enemy' in two ways. Firstly, he mentions his problem with Microsoft ("I've always had problems with Microsoft/Bill Gates' philosophies/methods"). This position situates him well with the community that often ridicules and resists both Gates and his company. Secondly, *D'Angelo* employs his expertise to create a justification for his comments and in doing so attempts to elevate his position in the community. To then justify this resistance and his *dedication* to Apple, *D'Angelo* raises two points. One involves a mention towards his longevity of computer use ("...that since I first got into computers (1980)"). This places him as an experienced statesman within this computing community, but the comment seems to refer to the 'hacker' days suggesting he also dislikes Microsoft. Even the date on which he registered makes him a recognised veteran to those reading the post. The second is the recognition of the instigating comment of Mac fans' religiosity. In commenting that "It might just be a weird computer based religion" he becomes self-identifying regarding his own potential worship and that of others in the community.

Apple User-Fans demonstrate a combative position against those who threaten their own beliefs or the common perception of the community. It should not come as any surprise that Geek User-Fans display the extremes of these forms of this behaviour. A good example of these extremes can again be found in the same thread at MaCNN (Figure 9.5).

Figure 9.5

Vondas
2003-01-18 1:54 pm
Member
Posts: 7471
Re: What if Apple died?
I will never voluntarily use Windoze.
All of the crap that M\$ has pulled is unforgivable in my eyes. All of this "hey, it's just a cpmputer, what's the big deal?" spiel doesn't fly with me.

I never will buy M\$ products, I never shop at Wal-Mart, and I never eat Nestle chocolate, I will never buy a diamond from DeBeers.

See, I have this thing called a conscience, and I don't ignore it when it's convenient, especially when there are viable alternatives available. That has NOTHING do do with religion.

Again, no reference is made in regards to the member's own Mac OSX but the entire post offers justification behind resisting a Microsoft world. This is either assumed or more importantly due to the member's long association with the community and does not need to externalise this yet again. The member's dedication is well illustrated in the sentence "All of this "hey, it's just a cpmputer (sic), what's the big deal?" spiel doesn't fly with me". Here, despite the obvious spelling error (cpmputer), *Vondas* displays the importance of the topic to some User-Fans. This inability to recognise the often-trivial nature of these topics to those outside of the brand community is a constant facet of postings made by User-Fans who adopt a stance of resistance against Microsoft.

Furthermore, this resistance is underlined in *Vonda's* language. His use of the abbreviation M\$ is common amongst the members with higher levels of

User-Fan intensity. M\$ is a play on words with the traditional abbreviation of Microsoft, MS, with the dollar symbol (\$) as an obvious connotation of the perception towards the company's focus on money and profits, and the ill sentiment that this permeates through *Vondas* and others hold in this community. Most likely a common perception in line with MaCNN member *D'Angelo's* (Figure 9.4) sentiments towards both the philosophies, marketing and practices of Microsoft, *cocoamix* implements the abbreviation twice and also refers to Windows as 'windoze' highlighting his disapproval of the Microsoft operating system. *Vondas* furthers his justification referring to anti-corporate sentiment noting "I never will buy M\$ products, I never shop at Wal-Mart." In placing these mega-brands as objects of avoidance, *cocoamix* raises anti-corporate politics and "a twisted thing called conscience" into the fold as a justification to not use Microsoft. In doing so, Apple is elevated to a place of corporate responsibility. This comment can be viewed as an attempt by a Geek User-Fan to diminish any potential for success of the 'rival' in this forum by influencing those with lower User-Fan intensity through dictating the norms of the community.

Resistance to Microsoft can also be politicised in a more traditional sense. This is notable in a thread that engages the brand community to equate Apple with the conservative and Microsoft with the liberal values. Apple with the conservative and Microsoft with the liberal sides of the political spectrums. Within the Apple brand community, this is contested as Microsoft is often seen as the oppressive 'corporate machine' that many associate with the anti-globalisation movement. While this in itself is a unique perspective (as both are corporate monoliths) this is contested in the Apple brand community as Microsoft is often seen as the oppressive 'corporate machine' that many associate with the anti-globalisation movement. While this in itself is a unique perspective (as both are corporate monoliths), *Monk* (Figure 9.6) disputes the claim whilst also providing an insight into factors which User-Fans may appropriate as symbols to resist.

Figure 9.6

Monk
Mac Elite
May 6, 2006, 02:00 AM

Yes, and then they realize what capitalism is actually all about, – but by that time it's faaar too late. Most people on this planet have a very limited understanding of politics and history, and will chose whatever they are spoon fed (pretty much like Windows users)

Political conservatism (much like Microsoft) has not added a damn thing to human culture in the recent past, and capitalism is simply the easy (superficial) way out of a failed economy (China, most eastern European countries etc.) In the end tho, they wound up with plutocracies (Microsoft), corruption (Windows) and a revival of religious fundamentalism ('Office').

See, Microsoft pretends to give you an OS and Software that will make your lives better, but once you have it installed, you realize what you've gotten yourself into (and regret that decision until the day you die (or switch to Apple)

Most people will stay with Microsoft, simply because that is what they are used to (what they have come to accept through all their suffering *g*) and want to CONSERVE!

Apple OTOH, has products and an OS that makes life EASY and AESTHETICALLY PLEASURABLE. It's somewhat expensive at times, but in the end, the choice most people would make if they were truly FREE ('LIBER')!

Because what is far more important than 'thinking outside the box', – is 'acting outside the box'!

If I change my way of living, and if I pave my streets with good times, will the mountain keep on giving...

In this post, *Monk* (Figure 9.6) contests a previous statement suggesting that conservative and liberal politics can be equated with Microsoft and Apple respectively. In contesting this claim, the User-Fan identifies a range of factors upon which resistance to Microsoft should be resisted (presumably by consuming Apple). It must be noted that it is assumed in this statement that these are reasons why one from a 'liberal' perspective would want to resist a Microsoft hegemony. Microsoft is also constructed as an 'artificial' default with the author arguing that "Most people will stay with Microsoft..." suggesting that choice (resistance) is available to those who seek it. A final

justification for the resistance to Microsoft is raised noting that acting or enforcing difference is a central virtue in being free. In doing so, *Monk* supports Apple both as the 'superior' product but also as the rational and free choice ("in the end, the choice most people would make if they were truly FREE ('LIBER')!").

In answering a thread asking, "what made you get your first mac," *Shamrock* (Figure 9.7) announces that Windows 98 was the only reason for being a Mac user. This simple comment reflects both a critique of the assumed problems with Windows and resistance to its hegemony.

Figure 9.7

Shamrock
Moderator Emeritus
Oct 30, 2004, 03:21 AM

Windows 98.

Consumers of Microsoft products also become a central area of critique presenting arguments about the need for resistance. In a MaCNN thread discussing the then imminent release of Vista (then codenamed Longhorn), *Truck* (Figure 9.8) presents the consumer as a source of encouragement for Microsoft's agenda.

Figure 9.8

Truck
Oct 20, 2004, 07:29 PM
Mac Elite

Originally posted by jamil5454:
If Microsoft's main priority was to make software, do you agree that they would at least make quality software and not sell it for so much?

I agree. The fact that they are in a comfortable position (and hold a captive market which guarantees them a certain amount of revenue) gives them less of an incentive to spend the extra cash

it would take to make their product more than just "good enough." If folks are willing to pay for it anyway, why improve it? As we see now, OS X and UNIX/Linux has been threatening MS's territory, so now they have to start improving something.

Besides, if a company, like Microsoft, has software development as priority, why would they venture off into so many side ventures like hardware development (xbox, input devices, home networking devices, etc.) if not to "diversify" and increase profits, or in other words "make more money?"

As for a company's priority being to carry out it's purpose or main business, that may be the rule on paper, but not in practice. Ford doesn't make cars for free. It doesn't give cars away. It doesn't even sell them at cost. They build and sell cars to make money (not the other way around), and for no other purpose. They reason why Ford happens to sell cars and not, say, tulips, is because that is what they have expertise in. Bill Gates knew a lot about software, so he started selling that to make cash. Steve Jobs (and Wozniak) knew how to build computers, so they started selling that.

The idea that a company's priority is to carry out its main business is really just to appease their customers so they will believe that the company really does care about the quality of their product first, and the customer's money last. Generally.

Back On Topic♦.. I'll admit that Longhorn looks impressive, but I honestly don't expect the Windows Experience♦to change one bit. Like others are saying, it's the task-based concept that screws everything up, because it means the computer is always getting in the way and telling you what's available. It's perpetually dumbed-down.

As with many other Apple User-Fans, *Truck* (Figure 9.8) demonstrates a perceived lack of quality software produced by Microsoft. In doing so he symbolically prepares Apple consumers as enlightened and resisting inferior software. The placing of blame on the consumer is further justified in accounting for the profit motives of Microsoft ("make more money") in contrast to the Apple brand community narrative (who are often portrayed as representing design and quality above all else). However, there is a sense that "himself" understands that (even) Apple may participate in the same logic that other companies do. It is this realisation of Apple's core aims as a

major corporate player (in contrast to its anti-corporate image) that causes tension in the minds of some Apple User-Fans.

While a central issue of User-Fan resistance seems to focus on a combination of technical inferiority and business acumen on Microsoft's behalf, it remains that the Apple brand community as a resistive force faces a range of issues in its platform. The most obvious of these is ensuring that Apple (as resistance) actually represents a point of difference to Microsoft. In a thread "Apple users are sheep?" Wallace (Figure 9.9) denotes the conflicting nature of resistance through focused consumerism against Microsoft.

Figure 9.9

Wallace

Jul 20, 2001, 07:03 AM

Junior Member

Just read the thread about the 10.1 20\$ fee.

I don't know if the fee will be true but, as i know is that some guys start going to say:

"Seeing 10.1, i admit i will pay my 20\$ fee for it!" or things like that...

Are we sheep?

We pay already a lot of money for their hardware, that are not the fastest ones in the world, but are the more expensive ones!...

Plus, we pay as frequently as the macintosh platform is poorly evolutive, to have their new technologies working on our machine, that begin to be old(humm 6 months!)(see note below)

And now, they are asking us to pay for their OSX update after a paying beta, and a 150\$ for the final(????) box... Kind of very expensive system...

Why apple should change, if a lot of us, me included, are starting to say AMEN to that, and buy, buy, buy, buy as they always done?

I wish i could boycott apple for that. But i'm not going to do that. I'm a sheep.

Chris.

Note: and nothing tell us that is update is going to be damn fast on our actual machines... They showed that on dual 800 !! with a lot of RAM, and optimized disks. Maybe on my g4 450, the

sluggishness will be there with this update... So 20 \$ for the update,+ 3500 \$ for the new mac... hmmm cool

The central question of “are we sheep” is asked of the brand community. Implicit in this question are concerns surrounding the loss of actor agency and personal choice of a community that supports one entity in response to the ‘behaviour’ of another. The post highlights some of the contradictions of Mac brand community bias that others have stated as influences on their resistive stance towards Windows. One example touted by *Wallace* (Figure 9.9) is the monetary cost of the operating system in comparison with the technical advances the ‘upgrade’ grants (“we pay as frequently as the macintosh platform is poorly evolutive, to have their new technologies working on our machine”). However, unlike resistance to Microsoft, the Mac User-Fan’s reaction places blame on the individual for their loss of consumer agency arguing that it is consumer behaviour that has resulted in the company’s policies (“Why apple should change...”). Furthermore, in a somewhat ironic twist, a member of the resistive community suggests that one solution might be further resistance, this time focused on their ‘own’ brand (“I wish i could boycott apple...”).

Resistance in this sense has not been framed as specific actors contesting a force aware and reactive to their position. Rather, the resistance that can be identified in the Mac brand community is a personal, symbolic form of resistance. It is an appropriation of the Apple brand as a means of countering Microsoft’s software hegemony. Appropriating Apple operating systems as a point of difference, the Mac brand community engage across the points of differences between Mac and Windows as justifications for encouraging the selection of one over the other, in this community of Mac instead of Windows. The commonality of the differences expressed by User-Fans then become symbols of resistance in a ‘debate’ between the two products. Resistance is thus formulated on a platform of software or technical differences, business strategies or those Microsoft consumers who are often accused of being unenlightened to the ‘truth’.

Importantly, in the Mac brand community this debate is usually only engaged between those sharing a common stance contesting Microsoft. This again reinforces the notion of resistance towards an unconscious entity. Despite the occasional contestation from outsiders, namely Apple dissenters or Windows users (all usually accused as “trolls”), the majority of this resistance against Windows flows through the community, creating a symbolic boundary between the Apple brand community and ‘outsiders’.

Resistance within the Linux Brand Community

As highlighted in the theoretical development of resistance, there exists numerous ways in which actors participate in resistance. By studying particular Linux based forums, some important forms of resistance displayed by the Linux User-Fans can be investigated. While not a complete expression of all manners of Linux-based resistance, the activities within the forums display important facets of the position of the members within the particular online communities and the ideological myth behind many of the Linux User-Fans’ allegiance to the operating system.

Resistance to Microsoft

It becomes apparent through studying the interaction that has taken place within these communities that Microsoft and Windows has become a central opponent of many Linux User-Fans. Often this opposition is manifested through the choice of operating system, language, and the tone of general discussion throughout the site. However, upon closer examination there is also resistance to Microsoft at an ideological level. As highlighted previously, the fundamental difference between Microsoft and Open Source exists on the manner upon which the question of intellectual property is handled and enforced. However, the difference between the ‘real’ ideological position of

Microsoft and Open Source, and the 'myth' is expressed through a great number of the postings in Linux communities.

Throughout the Linux communities numerous threads contain information as to why the members have chosen Linux as their operating system of choice. Commonly, those who have 'switched' from Windows use a grievance in regards to Microsoft's software and/or business practices and have appropriated Linux as a form of resistance. In Linux Forums, member *Tura* (Figure 9.10) initiates one such thread under the title "Why Linux?"

Figure 9.10

Tura
Post #1
02-16-2004
Linux Newbie
Posts: 130

Why Linux

Well, I thought this might be an interesting thread if people could relate their reasons why they switched to linux.

I had two:

(1a) Cheaper -a lot cheaper, the OS is cheaper, the apps are cheaper -hell, for everything I'll ever need there is a free version that would suffice for my needs.

(1b) No need to buy Norton, which is terribly expensive for a poverty-stricken english major.

(2) Microsoft slipped in proprietary software with a security update, so now (at the office) if I want to listen to music I must d/l software (and no explanation of this software is given). They already screwed me at the office, because I can remove the proprietary software, but I must remove the security update as well -not really a choice given this is a company computer. If they were weasels enough to slip the software in, I would be a fool to d/l the new software just so I could listen to music.

In highlighting a past in which Microsoft was his operating system of choice, *Tura* identifies that his use of Linux is not a natural state, but rather a mode of resistance to the norm. In this sense, he positions the notion of switching as the point whereby the resistive stance is adopted in an attempt of autonomy sought by many consumers. In the second point behind 'switching' *Tura's* problems with Microsoft seem recent (in regards to the time of the

post) and illustrates both software and business grievances. The grievances are displayed in the member's concern with proprietary software and an accusation of invasive software, hinting towards loss of personal freedom. *Tura's* concern towards Microsoft's business practice calling them "weasels" for the manner in which the security software is downloaded on to any computer. This can be identified in the comments whereby *Tura* highlights cost-effectiveness ("cheaper – a lot cheaper"), detachment from brands ("No need to buy Norton"), and loss of individual control to corporate entities ("Microsoft slipped in proprietary software with a security update") as factors accounting for his switching as an expression of resistance. It can therefore be assumed that in contrast to the loss of consumer autonomy that *Tura* expressed in his consumption of Windows, through adopting Linux as a resistance, some form of autonomy is retained.

In addition to the loss of autonomy felt by some User-Fans, the wider Linux brand community also adopts a range of moral or political stances in their resistance to Windows. For one, criticisms by Linux User-Fans of Microsoft's business practices are common. In a Linux Questions thread titled "The All New Linux vs Windows MegaSuperThread" Geek Linux User-Fan, *Co-op Guy* (Figure 9.11) presents a number of common criticisms of Microsoft and owner Bill Gates.

Figure 9.11

Co-op Guy
Post #14
04-30-2006, 08:52 AM
HCL Maintainer
Distribution: Slackware
Posts: 6,620

IMO Microsoft is a company designed by a criminal to dominate the computer industry. It has been well documented by the United States District Court for the District of Columbia (Washington, D.C. - the seat of American government) that Microsoft is criminal. Bill Gates 'got his start' by stealing computer time from Harvard, selling a company a hacked version of it's own software and cheating both them and his partner (Paul what's his name) in the process. Bill Gates has

established a MO of lying, cheating, and stealing. When a real threat arrives against his poorly-coded Windows OS, or anything else Microsoft has, he first tries to buy out the competition. If that doesn't work, he uses whatever means necessary to destroy that company; the main one being suing them in court. Because he owns so many lawyers and judges, and has so much money, he usually succeeds in either forcing the company to sell to him, or putting them out of business because they can't pay the court and legal fees to defend themselves. This is not an unfounded rant, but facts which are verifiable.

In most countries of the world, Bill Gates would be locked in jail and the key thrown away. Why not America? Trace his money trail and see how many politicians he owns.

When it comes down to it, there are software packages designed for all operating systems. We have choices, and I dare say there's nothing that can't be used in the Operating System you choose. I happen to prefer Adobe InDesign for desktop publishing, and Adobe Photoshop for image editing. There is nothing comparable to InDesign in open source. There is GIMP which isn't a substitute for Photoshop, but will work for most things. So for these two apps, and a few more, I installed QEMU in Slackware. Then I installed a Windows OS which I purchased prior to using Slackware in QEMU. Then I installed those apps only designed for Windows in Windows inside QEMU. So now I can use the superior software that is only designed for Bill Gates inferior OS in the much superior Slackware Linux OS -- without having to reboot.

If open source applications comparable in quality were available, I'd never let anything from Microsoft touch a hard drive of mine again. But at this time, there are professional services for which I use those apps, and no suitable replacement for my needs.

I'd like nothing better than to see Microsoft's monopoly dissolved as AT&T's was -- and Bill Gates jailed for his criminal activities. But as long as Bill owns the politicians, it's not going to happen.

While criticisms by Linux User-Fans of Microsoft's business practices are common, this Linux User-Fan offers a number of them in a single post. While the legitimacy of some of the claims are debatable, topics the post cover include:

- The Microsoft monopoly – especially in the manner it is perpetuated (“he first tries to buy out the competition”, “putting

them out of business because they can't pay the court and legal fees to defend themselves”);

- Microsoft’s alleged criminality – through a simple claim it is “criminal” and a claim that Gates’ early career as a programmer was reliant on his alleged criminality (“Bill Gates has established a MO of lying, cheating, and stealing”);
- The manner in which Microsoft is protected of lawyers, law makers and politicians – including comments “he owns so many lawyers and judges”, “In most countries of the world, Bill Gates would be locked in jail and the key thrown away. Why not America? Trace his money trail and see how many politicians he owns”; and
- The inferiority of Microsoft’s products – “poorly-coded Windows OS, or anything else Microsoft has”, “I can use the superior software that is only designed for Bill Gates inferior OS”).

The accusations of criminal activity are both a reference to the legal problems faced during the early 1990s and the consequential (according to this User-Fan) monopoly gained from this. Underlying this is the impact the company has upon the further expansion of Linux throughout the world, and the need for User-Fans to resist such domineering forces.

The symbolic importance of Microsoft’s business ideology expressed as foci of Linux User-Fan resistance is an aspect not lost on the brand community. *Bush* (Figure 9.12) notes how this is of concern to Linux User-Fans, and as such justification for their particular mode of resistance.

Figure 9.12

Bush
Post #58
05-05-2006, 08:22 PM
Member
Posts: 84

Quote:

Originally Posted by Combgame

You're missing the point. I never said that nothing was ever wrong with Windows. All I said was that it seems that some were just making up problems in Windows to make Linux look better. I think that is very immature and just makes the Linux community look bad.

Whether or not Microsoft has conducted itself with questionable business practices is another issue entirely. In fact, they may have. I don't disagree with you on that subject.

All I want is for Linux users to stop bashing Windows by saying it's "error prone," because it usually simply isn't the case. If you disagree with Microsoft's business practices, then all the more power to you. Just focus on bashing their business practices instead of the software.

No, both technical and business issues are central to the matter. It is many times the cases that Windows contains technical flaws. Really, given the resources at their disposal, it contains embarrassingly disproportionate amount of errors. Furthermore, many issues related to Linux are due to business practices of Microsoft and other companies. If you believe again, that it "usually simply isn't the case," then I invite you to at least make a cursory study of the issues Windows users have found on Usenet or any online forum, etc. Let's not be coy about this.

In this post, *Bush* (Figure 9.12) considers the comments of *Combgame* who accepts (to an extent) the criticism of Microsoft's business strategies ("I don't disagree with you on that subject", "many issues related to Linux are due to business practices..."). However, in noting this and the prevailing resistance to the position by the Linux brand community, *Bush* illustrates a contradiction in critiques that implement both technical and 'business' issues. Of particular importance to this discussion is the notion that Windows is considered inferior software ("All I want is for Linux users to stop bashing..."). The statement "Just focus on bashing their business practices instead of the software," is issued to a brand community in order to remain that legitimate resistance must reflect an element of truth or reality, rather than abstract or vague. In contrast, *Bush* considers resistance as a shared experience of the community that requires the symbolic exchange of legitimate modes of knowledge – both of which may be contestation of the software and business of Microsoft ("No, both technical and business issues are central to the matter"). What is highlighted in the exchange is the appropriation of non-commodities as symbolic loci for acts of resistance. That is, while Windows

and Microsoft are in themselves being resisted, it is the result of ideology, practice and assumed incompetence that modes of resistance are appropriated (Figure 9.13).

Figure 9.13

Papasmurf
Post #79
05-10-2006, 03:55 PM
Member
Distribution: Debian Testing
Posts: 170

Originally Posted by ioerror
OK, but that's their agenda, it has nothing to do with Linux or FOSS. To say that Suse/Red Hat/etc should/must compete with Windows is one thing, but Linux/FOSS must compete... I don't think so.

I think ioerror may have a point here.

The perspective that hasn't yet been picked up, afaik, is noting that while MS owns the greater market share in business and homes for the "average user" (which would need debating in itself), the competition itself is at the level of the game of appearance and alleged software interworking that MS itself has promoted, manipulated and locked down the codes for. It has obtained the market share through machiavellian deals with hardware manufacturers and retailers, thrown money at every developer and idea-smith that seemed to have got somewhere, and ran roughshod over any competition. For this, they held off a market monopoly, ensuring that the freedom to choose was denied to anyone who wanted to participate in the popularised cyber revolution by buying a new home PC or business machine. Then compare the Linux kernel developed by an uber-hacker from Finland and developed across the Internet, wrapped with barrels of code united by commonalities of APIs, libraries and formats and the GPL which opened the door for all wannabe scripters to have a go in a wonderful orgy of creativity and let the market of ideas decide...

A spreadsheet or presentation or specially formatted document produced on OOo anywhere in the world (on a GNU/Linux box) will be reproduced, edited and reformatted precisely on a foreign machine as on the producing machine also running OOo on a GNU/Linux box. GNU/Linux boxes running OOo has fantastic inter-operability among other machines running it, just as MS Word is said to have (?!?) among MS-running boxes...

GNU/Linux is good enough to set its own standards. Inter-operability with MS is an add-on, a sop to that world that still

uses MS and thinks that they are the way to go. So be it. MS is mostly flash. Personally, I'd rather go for substance than appearance. If Red Hat & Co want to secure the desktop market, that's up to Red Hat & Co. GNU/Linux is more than I could want from a computer just as it is ... in fact, it is me who has to catch up to its capacity and potential.

The distinction is made in the final paragraph, whereby Casual User-Fan *Papasmurf* (Figure 9.13) distinguished his own resistance as the ideologically correct position to adopt. The rightfulness of the resistive state can be identified in the language such as “a sop to that world that still uses MS and thinks that they are the way to go”, “I'd rather go for substance than appearance”, and the statement of “its capacity and potential.” It assumes that choice, substance, capacity, and potential (all assumed as technical supremacy) are indicators that operating systems, their users, and communities should aspire and support.

Figure 9.14

Scoobydoo
Post #1
01-20-2006
Linux Newbie
Posts: 106

Did you always support the underdog?
... I kind of have. Looking back, I had an Atari ST when everybody played on their Amigas, I bought a Sega Master system when the Nes was hot property, got myself a Sega Megadrive when Snes was the thing to have, ditto Sega Saturn when the 'cool' folks were raving on their Sony Psx machines, again I had a Sega Dreamcast when you were regarded as a square if you didn't have a PS2 in the house. I very nearly bought a Mac, but instead opted for once to join the masses and bought a Windows machine. Can you see where this is going?
Now I've migrated to Linux I realise that I'm kind of feeling like my desktop splashpage says: 'welcome home', despite the whole thing feeling very unfamiliar and alien to me. As far as my own circle of friends is concerned, I'm most definately in a minority of one with my choice of OS. and, do you know what?

I wouldn't have it any other way

Although there is a general resistance against Microsoft, Windows and other proprietary software, Linux Forums actually present intolerance towards blatant Windows 'bashing'. However, this intolerance is not specifically designed to limit anti-Microsoft sentiment. Two processes have been implemented in linuxforums.org. The first is a limit on negativity. The site notes that negativity is "Something we have discussed in the past is the number of "negative" posts that show up on this forum. A few examples of negative orientated topics are "worst distro," "do you hate Microsoft," "i hate life," "what sucks more, microsoft or BSD," etc. To summarise, a negative topic is any topic that is likely to generate a lot of responses of a negative nature. In other words, this is borderline trolling. Expect these topics to be locked on sight from now on." The other process of this is the moderation of the alternate forms of spelling Microsoft. As part of Linuxforums policy on l33tspeak (hacker slang: elite speak), these forms of spelling express the types of language acceptable to the Linux community. Under the forum rules a statement is made noting that "no matter how many moments of frustration you've had with Microsoft's products it doesn't mean that the spelling changes. In other words, Microsoft is not spelled microshit, microshaft, micro\$oft, microcrap, M\$, or any variant thereof - such spelling will be considered l33tspeak, and moderated as such." Interestingly, in some of these forums members view Microsoft-bashing as a practice undertaken mostly by new Linux users or forum members. A good example of this is found in the response of Geek User-Fan *Cadillac Crook* (Figure 9.15) in a thread titled "Stop Microsoft Posts." This member's responds to the accusation by Casual User-Fan *Burglar* that the common occurrence of anti-Microsoft threads is due to 'GNU elitists' noting:

Figure 9.15

Cadillac Crook
Post #15
10-19-2005
Linux Guru
Posts: 2,408

Re: stop it with the microsoft posts

Quote:

Originally Posted by Burglar

I said something similar to this in another thread, but I ended up getting accused of trolling. There are a handful of GNU elitists who post on this board (who make up half of the anti-ms threads), to stop myself from getting banned, I tend to ignore them now.

I disagree (you troll :P ... jk)

I guess I would count as a GNU elitist and I can't recall any being started by other GNU elitists . I think most of the anti-ms threads are started by new users (both linux and this forum) who have just come from windows and are still pissed off at it. I personally find that the longer someone is away from windows the less they are to ***** about it.

Brilliant Mediocrity - Making Failure Look Good

The point made here by *Cadillac Crook* highlights a problem between the resistance motives of Casual User-Fan and the Geek User-Fan. According to this argument the Geek User-Fans who have disassociated from Microsoft, do not feel the need to externalise their grievances with the company. Conversely, because of their closer association with the products the Casual User-Fans are more likely to undertake this. Despite this difference, there is understandably an agreement that Linux is a superior choice and that the use of it is different to the norm. Although Linux is meant to be the focus of these forums, the anti-Microsoft sentiment is often carried over into other aspects of the company's market interests. These include application software, Internet standards, media and the expanding importance of the Xbox gaming system. At this point the Linux/Windows position of resistance becomes a point of numerous points of contestation.

Resistance to Apple

Microsoft is not the only software developer who receives opposition from the Linux User-Fans. Steve Jobs, the Apple Corporation, its products and legions of followers are often also a focal point of debate. Interestingly, Apple (a company that partakes in similar economic practices and currently high

profits) does not face the same level of resistance and opposition from these members. Much of this may have something to do with the *myth*-like presentation of all three OS and the creation narratives which surround them. Within the Linux forum, this is again often expressed in the profit-driven MS, its alternative – Apple, and the ideologically superior FLOSS/Linux.

For some within the Linux community, Apple and those who support it display even more reprehensible behaviour than Microsoft. One point often raised is that Apple uses UNIX and should better support Open Source. In the Windows versus Linux thread, again *Cadillac Crook* (Figure 9.16) provides insight to this perception.

Figure 9.16

Cadillac Crook
Post #26
05-01-2006, 08:51 PM
Member
Posts: 84

I say again:

I don't really see your "Apple Connection." Apple has ripped off the BSD Community. Ok. I get it. But so what?

Certainly, Apple has graciously taken BSD source code and donated very little back to the community. Wow, "Rendezvous." It makes no contributions, even to the Samba project, for which without it Apple would be irrelevant. This goes for more projects than simply BSD and Samba however.

Nevertheless, you haven't really made a point. What has Apple done that "no kid in Finland could have accomplished" that has any relevance to this discussion. Apple has stolen more from the Open Source community than any kid in Botswana could ever dream to, what's your point?

You keep going on and on about some mystical Wall Street and these magical fairies that Apple produces but none of it is relevant.

How does this Apple business have anything to do with Linux? If you think Apple is somehow not a proprietary software company because it rips off an Open Source project and donates nothing back then I think you are mistaken. Microsoft for years used the BSD TCP/IP stack code, so what? Is Microsoft, then, championing the cause of Linux? I, frankly, don't see the connection.

I just can't fathom how DRM, proprietary music formats, vendor lock-in, proprietary hardware, proprietary software, and ripping off the Open Source community further the "cause" of Linux. Perhaps you can enlighten me.

Cadillac Crook argues that Apple's use of DARWIN is looked upon as stealing from the Linux community without pertaining to the philosophies of the movement. These comments are in response to a fellow community member's assertion that Apple's use of BSD source code is valuable to the continuation of the Linux movement. However, *Cadillac Crook* wholeheartedly disagrees with this point arguing that "Apple has stolen from the Open-Source community". Furthermore the resistance against Apple continues in the form of anti-DRM and proprietary systems, with the User-Fan proclaiming "I just can't fathom how DRM, proprietary music formats, vendor lock-in, proprietary hardware, proprietary software, and ripping off the Open Source community further the 'cause' of Linux." Interestingly, there is no response to this posting from its provoker. This again raises the point of difference between the resistance of a Microsoft world and the 'free' and open debate.

While the Mac User-Fans form of resistance is somewhat based upon difference and individuality, the Linux User-Fan's resistance is based on the ideology and philosophy of libertarian freedom. *Steve* (Figure 9.17) illustrates this difference, in his response to another member's suggestion that people should "Buy a Mac."

Figure 9.17

Steve
Post #953
10-23-2003, 07:41 PM
Member
Posts: 226

<<< Buy a Mac... >>>
Riiiggghhhttt. Propriety software and hardware. And overpriced software and hardware at that. Mmmnnnn goody, just what everyone wants and needs!!!

Given the context of the post, in that it is a response to one community member's suggestion to 'buy a mac' as an alternative (or resistive) act against Microsoft hegemony, Steve demonstrates two points of Linux brand community resistance. The first is a display of resistance to the notion of proprietary software and hardware – of which Apple products pertain. This is demonstrated in the patronising statements which dismiss the notion of Mac as a solution (“Riiiggghhhttt” and “Mmmnnnn goody”). Secondly, the response highlights the notion of ‘what everyone wants and needs’. This statement suggests that despite the differences amongst brand communities, User-Fans and general consumers, there exists a shared philosophical, ideological and consumptive position that is best for all.

Resistance to Modern Consumerism

It may seem that the resistance expressed towards Microsoft, Apple and hardware throughout these forums displays considerable disdain towards the practices of trans-national corporations and global mega brands. However, it becomes quite apparent through studying the communities that while there is an element of this sentiment there is also resistance towards the legalities of proprietary ownership. Geek User-Fan *Pixl* (Figure 9.18) expresses how important Open Source and the GNU Public Licence are to resisting this system.

Figure 9.18

Pixl
Post #13
06-02-06, 05:17 AM
Senior Member
Posts: 3,313

I share the opinion of sundialsvcs who is here the only person to bring a constructive point.
As he explained, Open Source and GPL are strong enough to resist to media companies (mafia) pressure. I've never had doubt about it.

But I was so annoyed by the fact that somebody dared to threaten the GPL and spread FUD that I wanted to inform everybody, especially on an international forum.

FYI, since, a french minister has qualified the Open Source users of integrists. Unfortunately, I haven't found one link in english.

Concerning this thread, the story is still going on.

Elmware and khaleel5000, you are out of topic and furthermore, please inform yourself before posting wrong things. I hate propaganda or FUD call it what you want. If you want to know the truth, cross check with several web sites and learn the history of France. Thank you.

Peace

Taking part in a thread discussing a proposed end to free software in France ("Stop the French government from prohibiting free software"), this post illustrates the point that members within the community view 'their' operating system as a form of resistance against media corporations ('mafia' presumably including Microsoft and Apple). The use of "media companies (mafia) pressure" in this post again insinuates unethical corporate practices similar to those accused of Microsoft. It is this resistance against media companies that aligns some with anti-corporate and anti-capitalist sentiment. This resistance also can become politically motivated (Figure 9.19).

Figure 9.19

Daytripper
Post #12
07-02-03, 12:18 AM
Guru
Distribution: Slackware; Debian; Gentoo...
Posts: 2,163

I suppose I am what you call an "anti-american communist-socialist extremist against capitalist guy" (or whatever you call me like).

I think capitalist and liberalism ideology will drive world to a damn social chaos (it has already begun).

I also think that letting companies ruling the world isn't a very good idea for the future (sorry it's not Bush who rules USA since some companies has pay his campaign).

I believe more in people than in money or profit or whatever our stupid liberal world believe in (but I'm against communist, but most people can't see the gray between the black and the white).

So... What's wrong? If you don't like Linux because of me, then it's your problem. If you can't accept that I have a different opinion of you or that people can maybe not all think the same, you have a serious problem.

And by the ways... What the hell is that useless thread on an help forum? If you're frustrated by people who think different, then ask your deputy to jail them all... However, Linux and computer world in general have been by people who were having divergent opinion.

In a Linux Questions thread titled “I like Linux except....” Geek User-Fan *Daytripper* (Figure 9.19) explains why he/she believes in the critique of the role of corporate dominance throughout the world. This post was a response to a fellow community member’s accusations that any anti-corporate and anti-capitalist sentiment is spread by an “anti-American communist-socialist extremist”. As a self-confessed “anti-American communist-socialist extremist,” *Daytripper* questions the “capitalist and liberalism ideology” which dominates modern culture. The statement “I also think that letting companies ruling the world isn’t a very good idea for the future” is used to illustrate an argument that is common in Linux circles and demonstrates a central form of resistance and acceptance that encompasses many within the Linux brand community. This said, many Linux User-Fans are quick to distinguish their point of resistance as choice and freedom rather than anti-corporate or anti-capitalist (Figure 9.20).

Figure 9.20

Bicycle
Post #16
07-02-03, 05:50 AM
Member
Registered: Jun 2003
Posts: 380
Thanked: 17
ok... I'll bite. Nicksan... first off my condemnation of MS is mostly down to their monopolising of branches of the software market. Monopolies are anti-competitive, and therefore anathema to the capitalist ideology you purport to believe in so much.
The reasons for my use of Linux are manifold. Here are a few:
1. It's open source, this improves the overall quality of software due to peer review by thousands.
2. It's secure and reliable... see point 1.

3. It's ridiculously flexible and configurable to the end users specifications and preferences.
4. The economic model encourages competition.
5. I come from an old-school computer background where information was freely shared.
And not a mention of Microsoft anywhere...
I'm not anti-capitalist... I believe nature is fundamentally capitalist. I'm not a pinko commie either although I do believe that many aspects of socialist democracy deserve implementation rather than just academic discourse.
I'm certainly not anti-american. I believe that the USA has given us many important technological and sociological advances.
What I am is against 'intellectual property' and software patents.
I'm against artificial market influences, whether they be government intervention or aquisitive, monopolistic monsters.
IMHO (regarding software at least) patent law should be abolished, proprietary information eliminated and let the battle for the marketplace be fought over added value such as presentation and customer support. That way, you retain your beloved capitalism, us long-hairs get our beloved socialism and the CUSTOMER WINS!

Responding in the same thread, *Bicycle* (Figure 9.20) specifically notes that while not anti-capitalist (also referring to not being a 'pinko commie') what he/she is arguing against is 'intellectual property and software patents' - in other words, the proprietary system. However, although many of these individuals do not identify themselves with these greater movements, they represent and articulate many of the concerns about it. Firstly, some of the central concerns of the anti-corporate movement (such as monopolisation of sectors, exploitation of the Third-World and exaggerated profits) become apparent within these communities. Using *Bicycle* as an example this becomes apparent. Although self-evidently not anti-capitalist (although indicates that he is a longhaired socialist), the member refers to being "against artificial market influences, whether they be government intervention or acquisitive, monopolistic monsters", an aspect of not only the anti-corporate movement but also classical liberalism.

Conclusion

What emerges from the Mac brand community's resistance to a Microsoft hegemony and the similar vein of anti-corporate, open-source philosophy of Linux brand community is a consumer resistance to perceived threats to consumer choice and agency. However, in demonstrating the forms of resistance appropriated through Mac and Linux User-Fans' the question remains: *are they to be understood as resistance or simply the continuation of hegemonic power in a different form?*

For Kahn (2004, p.93) these forms of discourse represent "a dramatic transformation of everyday life that is presently being constructed and enacted by internet subcultures" constituting "a revolution that also promotes and disseminates the capitalist consumer society, individualism and competition, and that has involved new modes of fetishism, enslavement, and domination." That is to say, brand communities potentially offer a new form of resistance whereby support of an alternative product is appropriated as a resistive force in promoting or continuing the ideals of competition in the consumer society. It is in this light that the conversations occurring in these brand communities highlight how alternative forms of discourse are presented as resistance.

By evaluating what resistant activity can focus upon, the potential problem of leaving the word resistance as 'meaningless' is elevated. By distinguishing these appropriations of alternative discourse, the opportunity to evaluate them as potentially resistant requires the hierarchy of power that needs to be determined. If we understand *capitalism* or *corporatism* as the power in regards to operating systems, Microsoft Windows and Apple Mac both are considered 'agents' or products of this power. Even Linux, to a lesser extent, can be understood as part of this power in that many of its distributions have become successful corporate entities. However, if we consider the monopoly held by Microsoft Windows as the power (in part symbolising both the extremes of capitalism and corporatism), then both Apple Mac and Open-Source Linux represent modern modes of resistance.

That is not to say that there are not elements of resistance to the wider *capitalist* or *corporatist* power with Linux User-Fans offering their resistance not towards a person, entity, or ideology, but rather in libertarian terms as an opposition to control. Control, however, is not resisted in purely political or economic conditions rather the resistance to control is technical. Linux User-Fans who illustrate this form of resistance reiterate that Linux liberates them from the constraints of commercial, proprietary software just as the anti-corporate/capitalist movements focus on the constraints of the economic system. Similarly, the Linux Brand Community also shares a commonality with these movements in the sense that as an organised group/community they represent only a small resistive force to the dominant ideology faced in their society or area of interest. This is to say that although both may seem important and may eventually enjoy some degree of success in their cause, both are in fact representing a minority. According to some within the Linux brand community, it is by being in this minority that they are able to present themselves as an alternative and position themselves as pastors of resistance.

Within the concept of brand community resistance one can identify with Castells' (1997) understanding of the role collective identity plays in the network society. Firstly, the notion of brand community sustains the notion of the legitimised consumerism through consuming a product and the communal activity of expressing this behaviour. The support of Mac and Linux reflects the legitimisation of the ideology of consumerism by resisting concerns of a monopolistic market which adversely affects the freedoms associated with consumer choice. However, while supporting the notion of consumer agency, User-Fans in brand communities also reflect a network of resistance acting against the placeless logic of social domination (Microsoft) in the information age (Castells, 1997 p.358). It is in this sense that Mac and Linux brand communities demonstrate two of Castells' (1997) sources of identity in a macro and micro context.

In a macro context of the consumer society, the legitimised identity represents a source of identity for these User-Fans, defined by those who

are introduced to dominant powers in society to extend and rationalise their domination (Castells, 1997, p.8). That is, in response to their involvement in the consumer society, these consumers have rationalized their positions and formed an identity in response to the dominance of Windows. In a micro context, User-Fans are influenced by a source of identity which is represented here as the resistant identity. From this source collective identity can be generated though the condition of being devalued or stigmatized by the logic of domination (Castells, 1997, p.8). It is upon these resistant identities that Castells argues communities are formed. Thus, in adopting resistant identities against Microsoft, consumers of Mac and Linux form symbolic communities of resistance.

While consumers are free to resist the 'hegemonic' force of Microsoft and remain in the mode of the consumer society, it does not alter their functioning within a system that "depends of the continual integration of person with commodity" (Cook, 2000, p. 111). It is upon this recognition that resistance within the Apple and Linux brand community exists in a unique form. In one sense, it offers a clear conception of forms of discourse that contest the dominant consumer experience. However, in another sense, these forms of discourse do not themselves contest the cultural hegemony of the consumer society.

Chapter Ten Conclusion

In the engagement of consumers with their operating systems this dissertation has acknowledged the emergence of brand communities and User-Fandom. It has been argued throughout that their emergence is reflective of wider shifts in a society enveloped within the rhetoric of consumerism and the influence of the consumer society. In contrast to contemporary studies of consumer behaviour, a focus on consumers of operating systems investigates the experience of engaged consumers of a particular product. While consumers of operating systems are at first purely passive consumers of a product, when they participate in brand communities they express a social response to the product that, while active, does not create or adapt any part of the consumer experience. By focusing on the social response of operating system consumers, this study reflects both the shift towards a consumer society and the notion of active consumerism in markets where products are associated with passive consumption. As a convergence of a range of theoretical understandings this study identifies new forms of social interaction and the reasons for them. Where other studies focus on particular communities (O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2005; René, Utpal, & Andreas, 2005), this study investigated three products and communities that while comparable, are recognizably diverse in terms of their identity and consumer orientation (or something like this). Common to all three groups was the manner through which individuals define their social and consumptive allegiances to the brands they idolize.

In doing so, this study has made three important contributions to this area. Empirically, it represents an original comparative case study of three independent, online brand communities and their employment of the market to establish socially constructed boundaries. Theoretically, it explores two areas of importance – the development of the user-fan and exploration of resistance as a form of consumer engagement. Encapsulating this study as unique, this concluding chapter contextualizes these contributions in relation to consumer markets, cultural shifts and the modern modes of sociality which

emerge from them. It is my aim here to compile the forms of discourse appearing throughout this text and identify them as unique, important shifts that are translatable to a wider population rather than the niche communities studied. Just as I have proceeded through the chapters with distinct areas of interest, this conclusion highlights operating system brand communities, User-Fandom and branded resistance as the fundamental findings requiring further discussion.

Socially constructed boundaries in online brand communities

As a description of three brand communities during a particular point of time, this study identified how the construction of symbolic boundaries are integral to sustaining relationships between consumer and the formation of community. This extends Muñoz and O'Guinn's (2001) brand community theory as an apt description of the behaviour and bonds exhibited by the consumers central to this study. In outlining the convergence of individual and communal 'worship' of brands, the brand community concept is adapted to highlight both a form of communal interaction and the outcome of consumer devotion. This study contributes to the work of Muñoz and O'Guinn by identifying how socially constructed boundaries are central to the formation of brand communities and their relationship to various aspects of the market. In this study it was found that all three communities employ Microsoft as a reference point for defining, sustaining and protecting the boundaries and identity of each community.

Referring to Cohen (1985), boundaries represent the shared experience of difference amongst a sense of similarity. For the Mac and Linux User-Fans central to this study, it is in their opposition to Windows as an operating system of choice which represents a shared experience of difference leading to the formation of brand community boundaries. Further adding to the formation of boundaries is the use of 'alternative' operating systems which unites them in their opposition to Windows, separates them from those on the 'outside' of their community and attracts them to each other (Cohen, 1985, p. 21). Thus, in these brand communities, Windows represents a

socially constructed boundary as a symbolic point of difference for those on the 'inside' of the community and by those who represent the 'outside'.

The importance of the 'outside' to the definition of boundaries in brand communities is also represented in the modes of resistance expressed throughout. As explained in the chapter discussing resistance, the form of resistance appropriated by brand communities can be identified as a personal, symbolic form of resistance. For example, in both the Mac and Linux brand communities, operating systems are appropriated as a means of countering Microsoft's software hegemony. Representations such as those made by *deepanddark* (Figure 7.10) demonstrate the perceptions of Mac and Linux brand community of Microsoft. Integral to this form of resistance is its combative nature towards an unconscious entity. Demonstrated throughout the forums is that the majority of this resistance against Windows flows through the community, creating a symbolic boundary between the Mac and Linux brand communities and 'outsider' Microsoft community. The symbolic creation of 'outside' is highlighted throughout the chapter on resistance, where much of Apple and Linux's brand community is demonstrated to have developed with User-Fan grievances with Windows. Under these expressions of resistance, User-Fans create a symbolic statement of the community's character, to create its identity through distinct boundaries (Cohen, 1987). Thus, what distinguish community are those symbols which hold common meaning.

Although distinctly more subtle than their Mac and Linux counterparts, creation of symbolic boundaries amongst the Windows brand community was particularly evident in the comment such as that posted by *GFM* (Figure 6.27). By identifying the boundaries created by Mac 'elitists', this User-Fan demonstrates how the boundaries are reflexively upheld by both 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. In distinguishing the brand communities, *GFM* identifies the Windows brand community as encompassing those who do not conform to the Mac 'elitism'. Reflexive of this, in acknowledging the boundary (symbolic or otherwise) of the Mac brand community, the User-Fan upholds the inclusive nature of the Mac community.

As such, this study identifies the significance of symbols to the definition of brand communities whereby the brand extends further than its image to be appropriated as symbolic boundaries. Comparable to Cohen's idea of the symbolic boundary, the operating systems are identified as a vessel through which communities create and reinforce accepted behaviours. It is these symbolic boundaries which can serve to explain the different natures of brand community.

Due to the generalized nature of Windows, its brand community has become overly diffuse as its symbolic boundaries represent too many (and sometimes conflicting) definitions. Conversely, the Mac and Linux communities are able to appropriate the position of the symbolic 'other' by offering an alternative to the dominance of Microsoft. In this sense, both Mac and Linux communities define themselves through what they are and are not, where the Windows community is only capable of expressing what they are.

Emergence of User-Fans

In line with the recognition of the importance of socially defined boundaries in brand communities, this study also developed the notion of the User-Fan, in which members of a brand community appropriate consumer products to construct their identity within a hierarchy of User-Fandom. The study of operating system brand communities offered complex arenas where the relationship between fans and mundane products could be contextualised. The emergence of User-Fandom correlates with Sandvoss's (2005b) assertion that the study of fandom must move beyond the relationship of producer and consumers to investigate the role of popular cultural in the formation of identity. Through its emergence throughout this study, the notion of the User-Fan contributes to the investigation of this assertion.

By investigating brand communities as fan-like cultures this study has identified the agency of the fan that they are often credited outside traditional

models of fandom. Importantly, like Sandvoss' assertion, amongst a range of potential consumer interpretations there remain specific signifiers that particular consumers appropriate as the boundaries of brand communities that can also be identified as signifiers of a User-Fan. For operating system User-Fans, these signifiers include both physical and abstract representations. For example, the appropriation of 'setups' by Apple User-Fans demonstrates how the physical is appropriated by User-Fans to signify their devotion to the brand. This is further extended into the abstract in discussions such as *donnation25* (Figure 6.8). In the divergence away from the product itself, one can identify the manner in which User-Fans appropriate symbols and create boundaries of accepted behaviour. Where the example of *donnation25* represents a connection to the product through the appropriation of 'stickers', it also demonstrates behaviour that further connects them with the brand. Whilst in other brand communities these may differ due to the formation of boundaries, these modes of behaviour established a connection between consumer and brand community in the form of brand affiliation.

In order to uphold the boundaries of their brand communities, User-Fans appropriate particular symbols as both resistive and identity forming. In the study of operating systems brand communities, the opportunity of an alternative presented by Mac and Linux User-Fans presents a platform for a perception of illegitimacy of Windows' hegemony. In this sense, User-Fans employ the rhetoric of consumer choice as a 'battleground' of boundaries through which a hegemonic power becomes an obvious focus for the appropriation of resistance. In this sense, operating systems become cultural artefacts representing symbolically significant forms in the presentation of User-Fan identity. It is in this respect that User-Fan created boundaries are an empirical demonstration of Poster's (1992, p. 94) claims that individuals and groups adopt 'strategies of appropriation' in response to domination.

In chapter 9 examples were presented of User-Fans who form an identity based on resistance towards Microsoft. From these resistive positions, they are appropriated as socially accepted behaviours within a community, which in turn, forms the norm of its culture. In doing so, User-Fans appropriate the operating system to present a self-conceptualisation as 'true-believers'. For example, User-Fan *baggss* (Figure 9.2) discloses his use of the operating system and other Apple products as an aspect of User-Fan identity. As a common occurrence in the brand community, User-Fans place emphasis on the operating system they use thereby externalising Mac and Apple as an important aspect of their identity. By constructing these boundaries User-Fans share the experience of autonomy of consumer choice and represent symbolic engineers of their own identities. By seeking self-definition and autonomy through 'consuming differently', User-Fans live in accordance with their principles by grounding their perceptions of the world, their place within and how they act in it (Williams, 2008).

To conclude, the concept of the User-Fan represents the individualisation of the brand community experience. As it has been framed, User-Fans stand as a modern form of fandom profoundly affected by the influence of the consumer society. Extending Thorne and Bruner (2006), and Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999) fan models, User-Fans are defined as those who develop an affinity with the mundane products of modern culture. Central to the formation of brand communities, the User-Fan is an acknowledgement of the extremes of devotion displayed in modern fandom whilst also accepting that consumerism is a form of discourse whereby allegiances exist.

In addition to these theoretical contributions, the research was also able to focus on the primary research questions through netnographic investigation of Windows, Mac, and Linux online forums. Returning to these questions, I wish to discuss how the outcomes of the study address them.

Given the formation of online communities how are user-identities expressed in the form of brand communities?

Through investigation of the forums, it became evident that the difference in market share between operating systems did not influence whether or not brand communities are formed surrounding the said product. Windows, Mac OS, and Linux have all developed active communities surrounding the use and continued consumption of their products. Despite the activity amongst all consumers, the minority positions of Apple and Linux consumers served to create stronger brand communities than those formed by the dominant Windows. The stronger brand communities were identified by virtue of the emergence of resistance towards Windows amongst these 'minority' consumers that was then employed by User-Fans as a component of their individual and communal identity.

By defining community through the notions of symbolic appropriation, boundary creation and resistive identities this study reveals that market-based products can be the catalyst for the interaction between individuals who share a devotion to the product, thus laying the foundation for brand communities. The research established that each operating system brand community had created distinct modes of user expression and community identity by employing the brand as a symbol of unity. It is in this respect that one can identify the first characteristic of communities as those that hold the brand as a central object through which User-Fans symbolically appropriate their experiences. In evaluating the discourse in these communities it became apparent that each community differed in this expression in response to two primary factors – the symbolic exchanges between users and the relationship that exists between the brand and its User-Fans to Microsoft (or consumerist) hegemony.

Microsoft's hegemonic power establishes Windows as a latent product and subsequently its User-Fans form a generic brand community. That is to say, it exists as a community with a focus on a particular brand but the absence of the resistant identity results in a diffuse population that employs the brand (and product) as a default symbol of membership. Furthermore, as a consequence of these diffuse identities the symbolic boundaries of the brand

community are malleable and difficult to distinguish beyond the central symbol of the brand. In contrast, a consequence of the subordinate market and cultural positions of Apple and Linux, brand communities are formed upon the symbolic appropriation of their brand and resistant identities towards Microsoft. For this reason these brand communities demonstrate specific and unique modes of behaviour when compared to the latent Microsoft brand community.

As one may have expected from the assumptions and finding of other studies (Kozinets et al., 2008; Lam, 2001; Muñiz & Schouten, 2005; Stein, 2002), the Mac brand community displayed connection to not only Mac OS as a product but also its parent brand Apple. Much of the discussion highlighted in this study saw the fluid transition from adulation of the branded product (Mac OS) to the corporate brand (Apple) and all that physically and symbolically represent. This was particularly unique to the Mac brand community as its members were able to demonstrate a connection to all Apple products while also signifying the importance of 'their' operating system. While Apple is a focus for much of the community, Mac as a brand and product remains an intent focus for many. In this sense, the operating system is one branch of a wider community appropriating the Apple brand as identity and community.

The second characteristic of a brand community is demonstrated in the manner User-Fans position themselves as distinct from other brands, as a form of relational identity or a mode of boundary formation. For example, throughout the Mac brand community, the symbolic difference to Microsoft hegemony was often a contributing factor in defining User-Fans' experience. This was highlighted in the recognition of Apple's products through the resistive nature of the brand towards Windows. In displaying their association with Apple products, Mac User-Fans were able to convey to the brand community their rightful position as Mac consumers. This appropriation of branded products can be understood to be employed by User-Fans as a symbol of devotion to the brand, while also representing the point of difference from the Microsoft-dominated world.

However, within this unity a third characteristic of brand community emerges. That is whilst brand communities demonstrate the symbolic shared allegiance to the brand, these allegiances vary in the intensity of devotion to particular products representing the brand. For example, where the Mac brand community existed as a clear entity, the Linux User-Fans demonstrated a diversity of individual experience whilst creating continuity within community. Just as fans discuss their involvement in sporting codes in regards to the sport and their team, Linux User-Fans demonstrate an attachment to the Linux as a brand (the macro-level, or the sport), and below this they display a connection to branded distributions (the micro-level, or the team). While each brand distribution operates within their own context in the form of branded internet subcultures, the behaviour within each did not differ to a great extent.

Most interesting was the experience of members of Windows forums. Whereas previous brand communities have been conceptualised as representations within niche products or as a result of focused marketing, the Windows forums engaged in this study highlighted that brand communities and User-Fans also emerge as a result of the shared experience of market-dominant products. While the forums focused on Windows represented a high diversity in the extent of community, with individual bonds to the brand equally diverse, within this diversity a strong level of consumer engagement with the brand occurred. In turn, these consumers shared these bonds with each other. Thus in an arena where interaction for many simply represented the communication of problems between forum members, others expressed clear devotion, or at the very least subjugation to Microsoft, appropriating the arena as a community.

Micro-analysis of the operating system brand communities demonstrates that an interesting dichotomy emerged. In terms of community culture Windows (as the standard system) formed the most diverse community, whereas Mac and Linux brand communities demonstrated more homogenous User-Fan behaviour in their displays of resistance and difference to Microsoft. Within

these brand communities, Windows User-Fans, in their consumer conformity, formed and sustained a diverse culture, perhaps due to the user-base it began with. For this reason, it can be concluded that the major influence the product has within the operating system brand communities is through the collective intelligence of said communities. The use and the consequential ingrained knowledge of the product of a particular operating system affect the potential of an individual to participate fully with others sharing the same devotion.

In a broader sense, while potentially creating conformity within the 'resistive' forces of Mac and Linux User-Fans, it has not led to a homogenisation of operating system brand communities. In fact, the Mac and Linux brand communities offer unique and diverse arenas for group participation where symbols are exchanged and appropriated. Although Microsoft dominates the manner through which many of us receive and interpret information from the online world, it does not extend to Mac and Linux consumers. However, for their User-Fan it influences the forms of discourse found within brand communities

Does the state of the global market system influence the formation of brand communities?

In regards to choice of operating systems, it became clear in the Linux and Mac brand communities that User-Fans had three justifications for the use of these Operating Systems: technical superiority, user-preference and resistance to the status-quo. While technical superiority and user-preference are individualized forms of qualification for consumption, it is resistance to the status-quo that brand communities are symbolically founded through their incorporation as an aspect of User-Fan identity. In doing so, technical superiority and user-preference are employed by User-Fans as support in their appropriation of the operating systems as forms of resistance to Windows. By claiming these, User-Fans illustrate the dilemma they face in participating autonomously in a society under the doctrine of consumerism. To participate within such a society, individuals partake in accepted market

practices. However, resisting a corporate monolith such as Microsoft Windows is limited without doing so through the market. Where the option exists for User-Fans to create their own Linux kernel this would place them in a separate resistance community of Linux creators that attempts to create real alternatives to hegemonic forces (Microsoft). In a reaction to this, perhaps as a form of self-preservation or the need for acceptance at some level, the Mac and Linux Brand communities emerge as culturally accepted, soft forms of resistance.

These represent 'soft' resistance in that the communities and their User-Fans do not actively question or overthrow the domineering authority of consumerism, but subvert or contest them through symbols of ownership and usage. As such they cast themselves as alternatives by presenting themselves as both members of a consumer society and appropriate products to symbolize this subversion as the symbolic 'others'. For one, Mac User-Fans are particularly more overt in this behaviour as this resistance and subversion to Microsoft is aided by Apple's stylized 'choice' campaigns and in the manner that the community is able to appropriate more than software in their resistance to the conformity of consumerism choices. Associating themselves with Apple as a form of resistance, Mac User-Fans remind us that one of the founding principles of consumer-focused capitalism is the notion of free choice. A critical eye may distinguish them as servants to brilliant marketing, pawns in a corporate battle which adopts symbols of taste and difference in encouraging consumers to spend. However, as a consequence of this research, I have highlighted that many User-Fans acknowledge the rhetoric of marketing for what it is. To not acknowledge this would be to underestimate User-Fans as free-thinking, intelligent individuals. I have illustrated instances whereby they understand that what they idolize and affiliate themselves to is by all means and purposes a simple product through which the cycle of consumerism relies. This 'intelligence' illustrates that resistance for Mac User-Fans is not a question of ideology but the extent of its influence - primarily the extent that Microsoft can dominate in a supposed free-market. Yet, despite this conclusion, the rhetoric of real resistance remains in the Mac community.

In acknowledging themselves participants in global corporatism, the Apple brand community still resists a form of hegemony within it. By actively seeking an alternative, with its different software and iconic hardware, Apple User-Fans appropriate Apple's consumer goods as a form of resistance to what they (and the company) define as the monotonous, restrictive and boring products of competitors. Furthermore, User-Fans seek the approval of each other in their adoption of Apple culture. From the pictures of Apple hardware to the posting of stickers, tattoos and haircuts, Apple User-Fans seek acceptance through brand community similar to the manner as teenagers seek approval from others in performing rituals of subversion and contestation (Cohen, 2005). The dominance of consumerism has seen the notion of free choice co-opted by consumer choice. Thus, where individuals consider choice as an option, User-Fans are confronted with consumer variety rather than independent choice. Under the rhetoric of consumerism, when individuals are dissatisfied with Microsoft, Apple often represents the only symbol of choice. In offering a platform for this symbolic appropriation, alternative products actually provide a means through which members of the consumer society can actively alter the course of culture by picking and choosing which aspects they can live with and which they need to subvert and change.

Again, this is not to say that there are not elements of resistance focused on global corporatism. The Linux brand community in particular offers modes of resistance directed towards Microsoft not as a corporate entity but rather in libertarian terms as an opposition to control. Linux User-Fans who participate in this form of resistance reiterate that Linux liberates them from the constraints of commercial, proprietary software just as the anti-corporatism focuses on the constraints of the economic system. While this explains their position, it does not account for the fact that many of the Linux community continue to participate in the operating system marketplace by consuming commercial distributions of the operating system. The response to this cannot be found in the content of brand community conversation, but is inherent in its formation. Due to an individual lack of skill, time or application

most Linux User-Fans cannot participate in the creation of free, non-market distribution nor can they sustain the intensive upkeep required to sustain a stable system. Additionally, without enough sustainable communities of highly skilled, free labour, Linux as a whole is unable to distinguish itself as a non-market alternative supported by many Linux advocates. As a result those who acknowledge Linux's benefits or resist the market-focus or profit motives of the alternatives, are forced to adhere to the market-model Linux platforms. It is upon this recognition that resistance within the Apple and Linux brand community exists in a unique form. In one sense, it offers a clear conception of forms of discourse that contest the dominant consumer experience. However, in another sense these forms of discourse do not themselves contest the cultural hegemony of the consumer society.

If brand communities demonstrate anything, it is that consumers search for the same sense of belonging and acceptance through their consumption. In response to the consumer ideology individuals appropriate products often as a point of difference – to symbolize to the world, their community and themselves that there exists definable aspects of the purchase compared to others. It is in this sense that brand communities are a consequence of the consumer society rather than the individual consumers who form them.

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