Chapter 3

A Hero Who Never Dies: Steve Jobs in His Fans’ Minds

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how consumers become Steve Jobs’ fans and how they establish psychological bond with Steve Jobs as a means to understand the general fandom phenomenon. The authors adopted the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) to formulate five research questions and conducted a content analysis of web reviews based on two Steve Jobs’ fans online communities. Results demonstrated that (1) most fans began to know Jobs either through the use of Apple products or the exposure of mass media about Jobs and his biography; (2) what fascinated fans most about Jobs was his thoughts and ideas that “change the world”; (3) in the minds of his fans, Jobs was regarded as the greatest man or superhuman and revered as a legendary hero who inspired lots of people in the world; (4) many fans perceived Jobs as the icon of Apple products and, to them, Jobs was Apple and Apple was Jobs. As such, while many fans considered them both Apple fans and Jobs fans, significant numbers of fans were only devotees of Jobs but not Apple brand; and (5) for many fans, they actually devoted themselves to Jobs not to Apple, and they would not consider Apple products the same as Jobs’ Apple. While some fans continued to support Apple as the heritage that Jobs left for his successor, others had lost their faith, loyalty and commitment to Apple in the post-Jobs era.

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INTRODUCTION

He was neither head of state nor Hollywood star. But the death of Steve Jobs, the visionary genius who reshaped the world, was marked with the love and respect reserved for the most illustrious of cultural icons. Makeshift shrines quickly sprang up outside the company’s headquarters and at its stores across the globe. Apple’s legions of fans gathered together to remember the life of a man they revered as a hero (Rose Parker, 2011).

The devotees of Apple’s community base their beliefs on notions of individuality, creativity, and counterculture, and this system of beliefs is supported by a mythos surrounding Apple’s history and Steve Jobs’ life. The Apple brand itself is the most sacred symbol of the community, protected by the taboo of criticism. The products act as religious fetishes to Apple devotees, and Apple stores function as temples. Followers perform public pilgrimages to store openings and Apple conferences, and private rituals of product unboxing (Pogačnik and Črnič, 2014, p.353).

The passing of Steve Jobs in 2011 stunned world, particularly among the worldwide Steve Jobs fans. Jobs is remembered as one of the America’s greatest innovators, along with Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and Walt Disney (Isascson, 2012). Although not a saint, Jobs is recognized by his fans as a legendary hero that they worship like the God. Much of the hero worship of Steve Jobs takes after his death (Harju and Moisander, 2014). In the minds of Jobs’ fans, he has been described as “a Christ figure”, “God’s divine liaison” (Campbell and La Pastina, 2010), “a visionary”, “a prophet”, “a messiah” (Pogačnik and Črnič, 2014), “a hero” (Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Harju and Moisander, 2014), a “most potent man-of-action hero” (Holt and Thompson, 2004), a “superhuman” (Pogačnik and Črnič, 2014), and a “spiritual leader” (Harju and Moisander, 2014). Fans may manifest their attachment to their idol or their favorite brand through specific behaviors toward the object (Hunt et al., 1999) and sometimes fans participates in related activities contributing varying amounts of time and capital (Thorne, 2011). Apple fans, for example, not only almost exclusively use Apple products but also can’t resist the urge to buy just about any new accessories of Apple gadget (Copeland, 2016). Apple fans further play the role as brand evangelists who spread “good news” about new Apple product to non-Apple fans and convert iPhone to the “Jesus Phone” (Campbell and La Pastina, 2010).

Fandom typically constitutes of a subculture or a community that surrounds a particular person (e.g., a celebrity) or object (e.g., a brand). A fanatic community often demonstrates quasi-religious elements such as belief (faith and worship), emotion (awe and reverence), group identity (community) and behavioral rituals (gatherings in Apple stores or Jobs’ speech seminar). Brand communities of Apple, Harley-Davidson and Star Trek are typical examples of such fandoms that have strong brand loyalty and brand attachment. For example, Belk and Tumbat (2005) describe the characteristics of Apple fandom as a brand cult with extreme devotion which consumers have toward Apple computers. Muñiz and Schau (2005) find supernatural, religious, and magical motifs are common themes among Apple Newton users. Pogačnik and Črnič (2014) further demonstrate four religious dimensions of the Apple phenomenon: community, beliefs, sacred, and rituals. Apple fans accept Apple ideology and fanatically love Apple products as a sacred brand. For some extremely zealous Apple fans, they spent a night outside an Apple store waiting for the newest iPhone (Pogačnik and Črnič, 2014).

As McCloud (2003) once noted, some popular culture communities, especially those surrounding dead celebrities, share many substantive and functional parallels to religious movements. Belk and Tumbat