

Rumor in Brand Community

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Talk is cheap, so the popular expression goes; yet hearsay can be a precious commodity in the marketplace of social exchange.

— Rosnow and Fine (1976, p. 1)

Over the course of the 20th century, the marketplace came to occupy a more central position in the daily lives of much of the world's population (Bauman, 2001; Cohen, 2000; Cross, 2000; Iyer, 2000; Marchand, 1985; Schudson, 1984). Most of the world now is exposed to consumer culture. Branded goods are the defining icon, the prime mover, in this social transition. A little more than a century ago, relatively few things were branded. Soaps, beers, and most "soft goods" were purchased by number, volume, or weight. They were unbranded commodities. Today, even water and dirt are branded. The desire for branded consumer products and the social agenda that derives from their unequal distribution are reputed to be significant factors in events such as the fall of the former Soviet Union and geopolitical struggles the world over. Brands are major markers of social identity (Cova, 1997; Frank, 1997; Gladwell, 2000; Kotlowitz, 1999). Clearly, consumption

is important in its own right, not just in terms of inequities of labor, production, or income (Lasch, 1991).

As consumption of branded goods and services increases, so does discussion of them. Consumers discuss their consumption, their purchases, and their favored brands. One form of these discussions involves spreading rumor. As in other contexts, consumption rumors often are analyzed in a pejorative fashion. The reasons for this are many, but one is gender (i.e., most marketing is directed at women, and marketplace rumor has been appended to gendered stereotypes about gossip). In addition, marketplace rumors are more likely viewed as false than as true, further stigmatizing them. And perhaps most important, rumors are outside the "marketing communication channel"; that is, outside of the marketer's control. This alone makes them undesirable for marketing practitioners. The industrial response to marketplace rumors has largely been to formulate strategies of control. Public relations firms may be hired to limit the impact of rumor. In fact, many public relations firms owe their very existence to detecting, stopping, or occasionally starting rumors. The role of public relations in several "whispering campaigns" is legendary.

Yet, in academic marketing, the study of rumor has a much smaller presence. In the 1950s and 1960s, the nascent discipline became obsessed with the larger category of consumer word of mouth (including rumor) and its impact on the firm's marketing activity. World War II optimism about modern and scientific propaganda efforts, a 1950s fascination with neo-Freudian thought (particularly the unconscious), and the advent of television led marketers to believe that they could directly and effectively motivate consumer behavior (O'Guinn & Faber, 1991). However, by the mid-1950s the idea of socially unmediated mass communication had vanished. At that point, marketing researchers began to focus on opinion leadership. This idea was a significant development in that it acknowledged that certain individuals were key players in the communications channel, and served to edit, translate, amplify, and dismiss mass-mediated messages via interpersonal communication. This two-step flow (Katz, 1957) rejected the theory of powerful direct media effects; that is, marketing information, without social mediation, directly (and powerfully) getting consumers to respond as marketers wished. The folly of the powerful direct effects position was underscored by practical experience. More and more advertising was required to move goods and services. People talked to each other about the things they were thinking of buying and what they thought about the things they had already bought and the ads they had seen. Prominent marketing failures such as the Ford Edsel underscored the role of the stubborn social public. For about a decade, academic attention focused on interpersonal communication (including rumor) and its interaction with marketing communication.

Research on most forms of word of mouth, including marketplace rumors, subsided as a topic area in academic marketing by the mid-1970s. Although universally recognized as important, marketing academics avoided the topic due to what seemed to be profound methodological limitations and an unproductive search for "generalized marketing opinion leaders." Rumors moved too fast for easy analysis. Not coincidentally, the marketing field simultaneously ended its flirtation with sociology and embraced the social psychology of "information processing." Rumor had little place in this new paradigm.

Now, 30-some years later, the Internet has created an acute need for more rumor studies, as well as providing an empirical venue for collecting rumor data in computer-mediated environments. The Internet has allowed consumers to form important social aggregations that act as rumor agents. One key form of these groups is the *brand community*.

BRAND COMMUNITY

The fields of marketing and consumer behavior have lately focused on consumption communities. A growing number of consumer researchers (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) demonstrated that these communities exist, are of significant numbers and varieties, and have an important impact on consumers and consumption, including the use of rumor.

Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) defined a brand community as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service. Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility" (p. 412). Because brand communities are centered on a branded good/service, the focal ideology is unabashedly commercial. An individual can be a member of the community even if he or she has never purchased the branded product or service but instead merely admired it. Brand communities share defining characteristics with other communities: consciousness of kind, the presence of rituals and traditions, and a sense of commitment.

Each of these traditional communal markers is closely tied to consumer narratives and rumor. For the purposes of this chapter, we are defining rumor as "a recurrent form of communication through which [members of a group], caught together in an ambiguous situation, attempt to construct a meaningful interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources" (Shibutani, 1966, p. 16). This definition has several important components. First, it focuses on how a group interacts with a rumor, as opposed to how an individual makes sense of a rumor or distorts it (as in serial transmission studies). Second, this definition focuses on the processes by which a group

constructs and responds to a rumor when faced with an uncertain environment. Third, the truth or falsity of the rumor is not the focus of the Shibutani definition; rather, the focus is on the ways that members of the community collectively attempt to make sense of it. Thus, the veracity of the rumor is incidental relative to the effects it produces on individuals and groups.

Brand communities are, to a large degree, defined by the stories that members share (Muñiz & Hamer, 2001; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 1995, 2001; Muñiz & Schau, 2005; O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2000; Schau & Muñiz, 2002). Not every brand will have a strong community of admirers—major consumer products (e.g., cars, computers, electronics) and those aimed at specialized markets seem particularly likely to generate enthusiastic groups and groups that are autonomous or semi-autonomous from the manufacturer. In this account, we focus on six examples: brand communities of Saab, Miata, and Volkswagen drivers, and of Linux, Mac, and Newton PDA users.

Consciousness of Kind

Like all communities, brand communities possess what Gusfield (1978) referred to as “consciousness of kind”—the intrinsic connection that members of a community feel toward one another, as well as a collective sense of difference from those outside the community. It is a shared consciousness and bond that is more than shared attitudes or perceived similarity—it is a shared sense of belonging (Fine & Harrington, 2001; Weber, 1922/1978). In brand communities, members share a sense of “we-ness” (Bender, 1978). Members feel an important connection to the brand, as well as a connection to one another. Members feel that they know each other, even if they have never met. They have established parasocial relations through assumptions about identity (Caughey, 1984). Frequently, this understanding includes a boundary between users of their brand and users of competing brands. Such a demarcation often includes a reference to brand users being “different” or “special” in contrast to users of other brands.

Terms of collectiveness are common in this consciousness. Members refer to “the cult of Macintosh,” “Saab spirit,” “the spirit of Miata,” or note feeling they had “wandered into the wrong part of town” when describing visiting a store that sold only a competing brand. Consider the following Usenet newsgroup posting. The member began by sharing what he believed to be a prototypical brand consumption experience, and then rejoiced in finding a forum in which members of the Miata brand community could congregate in virtual space:

Here in Las Vegas it's always a great Miata day! Even the few days that it rains I find that my little baby can float with the best speed boats, these roads always flood when it rains hard the 3 days out of the year that we get it. The best fun to be

had is zipping in and out around the tourists that drive down the road and don't really watch what they're doing. :-) Truth be told I just "found" this group and I'm a happy little person now that I've found there are other people out there like me that love their Miatas! By the by I've got a 93 white conv. (message posted to Usenet, February 1998)

This quote illustrates several points. First, brand communities are centered on narratives, just as is true for leisure domains (Fine, 1998; Mitchell, 1983). Tales concerning the history and performance of the brand are exchanged like currency. Second, such sentiments illustrate consciousness of kind in their recognition of a distinct social category: "other people out there like me" or community members. Third, this example also indicates the importance of computer-mediated communication. Although brand communities can and do exist in face-to-face settings as well (Muñiz, 1998; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), computer-mediated environments (CMEs) allow much larger and geographically dispersed brand communities.

Brand communities, like the brands on which they are centered, transcend geographic boundaries. Members feel part of a larger, unmet, but easily imagined community. They know that others are out there, just like them (e.g., Mac users, Saab owners), even though they might only have met a small percentage. Some researchers suggest that most contemporary communities must be, to some extent, sustained by notions of unknown, understood others (Anderson, 1983; Gellner 1983). Like other forms of community, a brand community is "a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds" (Bender, 1978, p. 145). This conceptualization of community is consistent with a social network perspective (Granovetter, 1973; Oliver, 1988; Wellman, 1979), stressing the functioning of individual ties over notions of local solidarity.

Two critical processes operate to perpetuate consciousness of kind in brand communities: legitimacy and oppositional brand loyalty. Both are affected or even sustained by rumor. Legitimacy is the boundary-maintenance process by which members of a brand community differentiate between those who are true members of the community and those who are not. Whether one belongs largely stems from that person's appreciation and understanding of the brand. Legitimacy discriminates between true devotees of the brand and all that it stands for as an expressive object (e.g., culture, history, rituals, symbols, traditions) and "shallow", fair-weather users. For example, many long-time Saab drivers view with skepticism the new drivers being attracted to the Saab brand in recent years. As one such driver remarked: "A lot of people actually purchased the cars who I feel shouldn't have purchased them. There's a certain type of owner who is proper for the car and people who buy one just because it's something that they really don't have intentions of keeping for a long time" (interview with first author).

This member noted that during the 1980s, Saab was embraced by "the Yuppies," a reality that he did not relish because he asserted that this group was attracted to the car for the wrong reasons: It was trendy.

In a similar way, members of the Volkswagen (VW) community differentiate between the original Beetle, produced between 1945 and 1981, and the New Beetle, introduced in 1997. The original Beetle was central to the meaning of the VW brand community. Its unusual appearance and underdog origins were a source of pride among VW enthusiasts (reflected in many jokes about the original Beetle). To most long-term VW aficionados, the New Beetle is nothing but a pale, marketing-inspired imitation of the original Bug, designed to move VW upstream and further away from its economy-minded roots. Hence, long-term members of the Volkswagen brand community view those attracted to the brand by the new Beetle as being less legitimate members of the community. In both the Saab and VW cases, rumors about new models, the use of the original plans, and the rehiring of retired designers are an important part of the mythology surrounding the brand.

Consider the following exchange, taken from a Volkswagen Internet forum 2 years before the New Beetle was reintroduced:

I remember hearing (reading perhaps) that VW wants to target the new Bug at around \$8 000. I'm sure that all the luxuries (leather seats etc.) are just for the show car, the Concept 1. Wasn't VW working on some new car design that would reduce the time needed to actually build the car by 2/3? (Or was this the Ford executive VW stole, err, hired in Germany?) That would keep costs way down, and still allow them to offer things such as a CD player and dual air-bags. (message posted to Usenet, February 1994)

Another member responded by expressing indignation that the New Beetle would include so many things that he viewed as antithetical to the values of the original Beetle (simplicity, efficiency, pragmatism): "I find this hard to believe. I don't think VW is so far out of touch that they would offer the [Beetle] in such a configuration. There has got to be some misinformation here" (message posted to Usenet, February 1994). Such rumors feed the desire for legitimacy. Members want assurance that the brand will remain true to what they feel it stands for, and will seek this information out wherever they can.

Cultural capital and issues of credibility loom large in brand communities. These communities are hierarchically structured (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau & Muñiz, 2002). The longer one has been using the brand, the more knowledge of the history surrounding the brand that a member knows, and the higher that member's status is in the community. There are rewards to be gained from bringing solid information to the community (Rosnow &

Fine, 1976). Prior work has suggested that when operating in an uncertain environment, status is afforded to members who contribute insight (Scheibel, 1989; Shibutani, 1966). The same is true in brand communities.

Simultaneously, there are risks to being naive or gullible, and also risks to expressing opinions or beliefs that are perceived to be harmful to the group. Some cynicism might be expected with regard to "truth claims" in order for a member to be considered a sophisticated, well-versed member of the community. A member may feel the need to be skeptical, arguing against accepting claims, in order to maintain his or her status (Bordia & Rosnow, 1998; Kapferer, 1990; Shepherd, 1987). Members must balance maintaining credibility with not damaging communal morale. If the community is interconnected, it might be harder for members to distance themselves from having believed or announced rejected information.

Consider a recurring rumor in the Apple Newton community. The Apple Newton was one of the earliest entrants into the personal digital assistant (PDA) category. Rushed to market in 1993, the Newton was riddled with errors (Tesler, 2000). The problems with the Newton were widely reported (and lampooned) in the media, and discouraged many potential adopters. Consequently, the Newton never achieved critical mass. In February 1998, Apple officially discontinued the Newton and all related products. However, a community of 20,000 Newton users still exists (Kahney, 2002). Few suppliers carry replacement parts or software or perform repairs on the machine. As a result, these users have been largely left to their own ingenuity. Members strive to keep the devices viable, creating software and hardware that they exchange in online forums. These forums are characterized by informed discussion, as well as a fair amount of speculation.

A recurring rumor in these forums is that Apple is planning to reintroduce the Newton. Such rumors have made their way through the community at least eight times since the device was discontinued in 1998. Each time, the details surrounding the device are slightly different, and each time it generates considerable discussion. Analysis of these repeated rumors suggests that members of these communities use these rumors to provide a basis for their social investment, even though most long-term members believe such rumors are false (Muñiz & Schau, 2005). Hence, in the Newton community, those who don't believe the rumors and think that a new Newton would be impossible tend not to say so, because it could hurt group morale. By repeatedly partaking in the reintroduction rumor, the community enables members to believe that the reintroduction might not be imminent, but is still very possible. To believe anything else would be a blow to the community. A recent rumor outbreak ended with an addition to the community FAQ concerning such rumors. The entries are far from definitive. Under the portion of the FAQ devoted to hardware, one can find the following question and answer:

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

That's very probably just a rumor based on the interest of Apple for Palm devices. BTW, Palm Desktop which is to be found on iBooks is compatible with NCU (the format is like Claris Organizer). (FAQ for the Newton Community, www.chuma.org)

Even here, the desire to allow for the possibility that another Newton will get introduced is present. This possibility generates an important source of optimism. By leaving open the possibility that the Newton can be reintroduced, members find reassurance.

Oppositional brand loyalty is the other process that operates to perpetuate consciousness of kind in brand communities. Oppositional brand loyalty is a process by which members of the brand community denigrate users of competing brands (Muñiz & Hamer, 2001; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). This opposition is an important part of community affiliation and is a significant component of brand identity and group idioculture (Fine, 1979). Oppositional brand loyalty delineates what the brand is not, and who the community members are not. This process is consistent with findings in urban sociology suggesting that neighborhoods define themselves in opposition to one another (Hunter & Suttles, 1972; Keller, 1968); boundary work is crucial for the structuring of identity (Snow & Anderson, 1987). For example, many members of the Linux brand community derive an important aspect of their collective identity and group culture from their opposition to PCs, PC users, and PC giants Microsoft and Intel (derisively referred to as "WinTel"). The following exchange is from an online conversation in which users of the two platforms debated which system was best:

>> Life is too short to use Windows.

> Preach it brother!

Can I get an "Amen", my children? Another story: in 1997, it was discovered that because of a time-keeping error, Win95 would always crash after 42 days of continuous (2 billion milliseconds or something). Why did it take TWO YEARS to discover this problem? Because no one could keep a Win95 box running for 42 days reliably enough to notice the problem! (message posted to Usenet, August 2000)

The Linux community, like the Apple Macintosh community, opposes the WinTel establishment for its market dominance. Moreover, they define themselves in opposition to it. Many communities pull together and experience their tightest bonds during periods of social threat (Bensman & Vidich, 1995; Erikson, 1966). Oppositional brand loyalty probably explains some of the tensile strength of these communities. As in the case of legitimacy, ru-

mors about "the other" in opposition to the communal brand are common. They help keep the threat (and the image of the other) alive. They also provide "insider knowledge" of one's revered brand's strengths and the "evil" other's weaknesses. For example, rumors about Apple technology "stolen" by WinTel serve multiple cohesive functions.

One topic of repeated interest in the Apple Newton brand community concerns Apple's decision to discontinue the Newton. Rumors abound as to why the Newton was discontinued and why Apple has failed to reenter the PDA market. One recurring theme blames the failure of the original Newton on Microsoft. The following exchange is typical:

- > Anyway, I heard a rumour that it wasn't a lone gunman (SJ) that killed
- > the Newt, apparently, Big Billy Gates had his dirty paws all over it
- > too!!! Rumor has it that he injected a *whole*
- > lotta cash into Apple (which we know as fact) and one of his bargaining
- > chips was to kill the Newton, so that Win CE could take over that market
- > space (which is conjecture). Does
- > anyone else have any extra info on this? Or am I plainly wrong?

I'm pretty much sure you are wrong. I would be surprised if Bill Gates even spent a thought on the Newton when he bought that 150 million \$\$ worth of Apple shares. Frankly, the Newton's market share at that time wasn't worth bothering with. (message posted to Newtontalk listserv, February 2002)

The appearance of Microsoft as conspirator could reflect the fact that it is Apple fans' favorite villain, easily envisioned as a suppressor of superior technology, as well as because it is a dominant company and its inclusion reflects the "Goliath effect" that is common in consumer myths (Fine, 1992; Kapferer, 1990). In this way, the Newton reintroduction rumor may provide a cathartic outlet through which group participants actively project blame on outgroups. The group agrees on these targets, either explicitly or through inference.

Rituals and Traditions

The second marker of brand communities is shared rituals and traditions. Rituals and traditions perpetuate a community's shared history, culture, and consciousness. Rituals create "visible public definitions" (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979, p. 65) and social solidarity (Durkheim, 1915/1965), whereas traditions are "social practices which seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioral norms and values" (Marshall, 1994, p. 537). In

brand communities, rituals and traditions reflect how the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community. Most typically, they center on shared consumption experiences with the brand. For example, two members of the Saab brand community discussed a common Saab greeting ritual:

George: If you drove a Saab, whenever you passed someone else driving a Saab on the road, you beeped or flashed your lights.

Mark: Or you'd wave at each other. I did it today, I was driving around downtown Kenosha, and it was a four-door, nothing special, but that's OK, Hey, how you doing? Yeah I still flash my headlights at people. (interview with first author)

These greeting rituals involve public recognition of brand users and include a knowing nod, honking, waving, and asking about their brand model. Such rituals may at first appear insignificant, but they perpetuate the consciousness of kind. Every time a greeting ritual is initiated or returned, members are validated in their understanding of the community. Their belief that the other users of the brand are just like them is affirmed. These traditions are often passed along as rumor, particularly with respect to their origins and acceptance by the brand's maker.

The history of the brand is important to community members, and may be transmitted as rumor. The celebration of the brand keeps the community vital and perpetuates the culture of the community and the brand. Appreciation of such history differentiates true believers from the more opportunistic, and is a form of cultural capital within brand communities. Thus, user-created Web pages devoted to these brands are replete with historical narratives. The textual nature of the Internet provides an excellent forum in which members share their knowledge of the brand's origins, often replete with illustrations and photographs. Consider the following, from an ambitious user-created Volkswagen Web site:

The idea for the Beetle came from a German engineer, Ferdinand Porsche, in the early 1930's. The final design for the Beetle was completed in 1938 and the first bug prototype saw the light of day in 1939. Unfortunately, WW2 ceased production shortly thereafter. Fortunately, in the summer of 1945, production restarted and Beetles couldn't be produced fast enough. In 1958, Volkswagen of America was established and Beetles soon made their way onto American soil. By the mid 1960's the VW Beetle was out selling all American made vehicles in the US. The Beetle was mass produced for a record 30 years, undergoing over 50,000 design modifications along the way. Loved for its unique road handling and its adorable

style, the Beetle stands proudly today as the top selling imported car in US automotive history. (from a now-defunct user-created VW Web site)

Similar texts and retellings are common within most brand communities, and frequently include rumors and other unverified data. In the following, two members of the Macintosh community debated some of the finer points of Macintosh history:

- > The order of these events were:
- > 1) Apple gives Xerox an option on Apple stock (\$1M) in return for a look at what PARC had done (a one day visit)
- > 2) Apple invents a number of technologies (overlapping windows etc.) based on what they thought the PARC machine could do.
- > It was no where near as advanced as Apple thought it was.
- > 3) Lisa & Macintosh introduced
- > 4) Bill Gates blackmails Apple into licensing some code to produce Windows 1.0 (Bill wrote the OS for the Apple II)

Not quite. MicroSoft wrote AppleSoft BASIC for the Apple II, not the original Apple DOS or ProDOS. In fact, I think a good chunk of the original Apple II DOS was written by Steve Wozniak. (message posted to Usenet, August 1995)

The history of the brand is an important source of pride for members of the community. Macintosh users, like Volkswagen drivers, enjoy their product's history as outsider, underdog and innovator. However, Macintosh users share a slight paranoia in this regard, particularly in relation to arch-rival Microsoft. Historical details, accurate or not, are more likely to be accepted by the community if they confirm this relationship.

Beliefs such as these, transmitted and accepted as true by loyal community members, can be dangerous for the company, because it holds them to standards—real or imagined—that they cannot or may not wish to meet. Many in the Saab brand community feel that Saab has moved away from what it once stood for since being taken over by General Motors. As a result, members spend considerable time discussing the future of Saab, including rumors about future Saab plans. Recently, such speculation has been fueled by statements from GM that they plan on making dramatic changes to the Saab brand line. Members of the community consider this significant, because it could dilute the brand or move from what it once stood for. Such

changes could affect the meaning of the brand and, by extension, its community. Consider the following from a Saab newsgroup:

Okay next is a piece of text I found some days ago ... I don't know what is true and what is just made up by the author, but I find it quit disturbing. Read and be afraid, be very afraid. Sorry for my comments in between.

Saab is on the verge of a product explosion. Today GM's Swedish subsidiary has four models: the 9-3 fastback and convertible, and the 9-5 fastback and station wagon. GM says Saab will have five to eight models based on the Epsilon platform. According to the following roundup of what's coming, it looks like at least five Epsilon 9-3s: fastback, sedan, wagon, roadster and coupe, plus however many styles of new Epsilon 9-5s arrive at the debut in 2004.

a car like the country master is good (see the Volvo V70XC which is a nice car, except it is a Volvo of course). I don't know what the writer means with the sedan version of the 9-5, maybe he means hatchback? (message posted to Usenet, July 2000)

This member shared an unverified piece of news seen in another Internet posting. This message generated great discussion among members. Several offered other possibilities based on rumors that they had heard—competing and comparing texts. In a similar vein: "I heard a blurb somewhere that Saab might make a new model to challenge, or at least match in size, the BMW 7 series. Does anyone know if this is true?" (message posted to Usenet, November 1998).

Reactions to such rumors are fueled by the ambiguous information available from more authorized channels. The community is embedded in the brand history. As members discuss the possibilities of such new models, unsubstantiated information enters the discourse. Sources for these rumors posted about Saab included Saab dealers and mechanics, other Saab drivers, and participants on a variety of other automotive discussion forums:

- > has anyone seen news about a new model smaller than a 9-3? Jetta-sized?
- > It would look great next to my 9-5 wagon!
- > Especially with wide rubber ...
- > Some time ago I saw sketches in an auto-mag of a proposed 9-2 hatchback.
- > So something is brewing.

Try www.saabzone.f2s.com [an unofficial site] and look at the galleries ... you'll see plenty of nice stuff, including the 9-2. (message posted to Usenet, May 2001)

The concern over these plans is a preoccupation of the community. Similar rumor-fueled speculation is common in the Macintosh community. Here, topics have included possible takeovers of Apple by Disney and IBM, and also whether or not Apple would stop producing computers to focus solely on operating systems and software.

Personal stories based on common experiences are also important (Stahl, 1989). As in all aspects of group culture, they invest the brand with meanings understood by other members of the community. The telling of these stories tends to be ritualistic, reflecting a narrative tradition. Consider the following "war story" (Fine, 1998) in which a Miata driver, under the subject heading "Miatas ARE Waterproof," shared an account of miraculous survival:

I'm in the Navy, we work very late sometimes, I knew there was a 'noreaster coming in but figured I had parked my 97M in high enough ground not to worry. WRONG. I came back home at high tide to find water about half way up my doors (it was over the tires of the truck parked next to me). There was nothing I could do about it then so I went to bed then to work today. When I got home from work today my Miata was on high ground again. There was no water at all inside, it cranked right up ... The water was too high to get it out of the parking lot so I left it running for about 20 minutes to evaporate all the water out of the exhaust. Except for needing a bath she's just like I left her! OUTSTANDING!!! (message posted to Usenet, February 1998)

The fact that this poster's Miata survived unscathed is a testament to its worth as a car and validation of his choice of the brand, as well as that of other members of this community. The story makes a claim for the existence of a "Miata culture." As members retell such tales, the details change to fit the circumstances, but the traditions and ideals remain intact.

Similarly, among Saab brand community members, a popular war story is the "Saab saved my life" narrative:

The car I had before this one, I was going down the road and a fella in a garbage truck made a left hand turn in front of me and I hit him broadside and totaled the Saab. The policeman sitting at the corner having lunch saw it happen and thought I was dead. I stepped out of the car and didn't have a scratch on me. Yeah. It looked like an accordion. The whole thing just collapsed right up in front. Actually, it broke the door wheel on the garbage truck. Broke it off. (interview with first author)

Most members of the Saab community have such a story in their repertoire, a firsthand experience or the account of a friend (Muñiz, 1998). The consistency of these stories is remarkable. Consider the following, told by a different Saab driver, to participants in an Internet Saab forum:

I love my Saab. It is my second one, the first one got totaled when a stupid young girl pulled right out in front of me. I was going about 50mph and slammed on my brakes as hard as I could (there was a truck coming in the other lane). Everything went into slow motion and I braced myself for the crash. My car held straight, didn't waver or slip on the wet pavement and it also saved my life. I walked away ... she wasn't so lucky. The cop told me Saabs & Volvos are the safest in crashes that he has seen. (message posted to Usenet, August 2000)

These stories are often transmitted in the register of rumor: "I heard that this story is true ..." or "I know this guy who ..." The presence of the policeman—or some other unbiased observer—makes a claim that the story is objective and transparent, open for all to see. Similar rumors are common in brand communities.

Communal Responsibility

The third marker of brand communities is a sense of communal responsibility, including responsibility to the community as a whole, as well as to individual members. This helps produce collective action during times of threat to the community. This commitment is evidenced in recruiting, integrating, and retaining members, as well as in assisting other members. The functional, anonymous nature of market relations has been transcended, because a brand community reflects a strong sense of embeddedness in consumption practices. Economic choices have become moral choices. Consider a dialogue in which two members of the Saab brand community discussed their practice of stopping to help other Saab drivers with mechanical problems:

Researcher: Have either of you ever stopped to help a Saab driver on the side of the road?

George: More than once.

Mark: Yeah.

George: Sure. In fact, on the way home from work, Thursday, ... Wednesday or Thursday last week, I got off the Interstate and I see this car sitting

there. It's got Wisconsin plates. I drove him into the gas station and had [Midwestern Saab] club cards with me and said "Here, you want one of these?"

Mark: Yeah, we see another Saab on the side of the road, we pull over to help no matter what it is. (interview with first author)

Consider the following newsgroup posting in which a VW driver thanked his fellow members for help and reminded them of community protocol: "So if you are driving through Cincinnati and see a white 67 Beetle at the side of the highway, hopefully it will not be me this time. If you do see a bug stranded by the side of the road, remember that it is good VW etiquette to stop and see what is wrong" (message posted to Usenet, February 1998). This responsibility to provide assistance not only manifests itself in helping to solve problems, it is also apparent in the sharing of brand-related resources. Members share important brand-related and community relevant information. On the Internet, members create elaborate pages devoted to the brand, designing them to be useful resources, independent from the manufacturers. Often this information includes rumors. For example, "I heard that Saab is going to reintroduce the Saab 98. There's going to be a waiting list, so you better call the dealer and get on it."

An example from the Macintosh community illustrates the role of rumors and communal responsibility. One member posted a message to an online forum concerning a problem with the e-mail program Eudora. In the responses that followed, several members offered their own solutions, as well as rumors related to problem. For example:

My main complaint about Steve Dornier's excellent email program Eudora is that it suffers from the 32K text limit so common to Macintosh programs. This isn't inherently Eudora's fault—after all, Steve currently uses TextEdit (a component of the Mac operating system essentially designed to handle minimal text editing in dialog boxes, scrolling lists, and so on) to provide text services, and TextEdit causes the 32K text limit. (Rumor has it that the next version of Eudora, at least the commercial version, will eliminate the 32K limit entirely). (message posted to Usenet, September 1996)

In this example, the member suggested that the problem under discussion would be fixed in the future, according to unverified sources. The responsibility in this community to provide information, any information, is high, so the temptation to rely on informal and unverified sources is substantial. Rumors are such a common part of the Macintosh community that there are actually multiple Web sites that specialize in debating and analyzing Macintosh rumors.

Marketers and Shills

Marketers have long understood the value of word of mouth in promoting products and services. Recently, marketers have recognized the potential to create fake or contrived word of mouth. This practice has been relabeled "buzz marketing." It has been successfully employed in promoting Christina Aguilera and the movie *The Blair Witch Project* (Khermouch, 2001). Marketers have also recognized the existence and value of brand communities, particularly with regard to the value these communities have for generating word of mouth. To capitalize on this, marketers have increasingly begun attempting to manipulate these communities, either by supporting them with information, or by planting confederate members, or shills, and thus undercutting the authority of the community. As a result, the manufacturer may have a hand in the construction and spread of rumors, as Coke attempted to prior to the introduction of Vanilla Coke ("Coca-Cola," 2002). Indeed, the rumor may shape or manipulate the community. Through a shill, a marketer might plant a rumor in a brand community to test an idea. Thus, Saab might "leak" pictures of a new prototype and then track reaction. Alternatively, someone from Palm, posing as a member of the Palm Pilot brand community, might start a rumor about performance tests favorably comparing a Palm Pilot to a competing PDA. The idea of brand sabotage via a brand community exists, too. A manufacturer, upon learning of the strength of the community for the competitor's brand, could be motivated to corrupt that community in order to encourage migration to the manufacturer's own brand. It is not known whether this has ever happened, but given the power of brand communities, it is conceivable.

The Presence of Agency

One virtue of a brand community is that it provides consumers with measure of agency (real and/or supposed). They come to exercise some measure of perceived power and control over life events that are otherwise outside of their control, creating a sense of self-efficacy. This has traditionally been an explanation for how rumors spread, particularly in relatively powerless groups (Bordia & Rosnow, 1998; DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998; Parsons, Simmons, Shinhoster, & Kilburn, 1999; Scheibel, 1989; Scott, 1985). By allowing members to vent frustrations, these rumors serve as an extrajudicial complaint processing system (Nader, 1980). Given that they may lack other means of righting brand-related and product-related wrongs, members of a brand community use these rumor discussions to seek symbolic redress from those parties that have treated them unjustly. In very real terms, the ability of consumers to aggregate rapidly and cheaply, and communicate among themselves, involves greater agency in and of itself.

There are other ways that rumor commingles with agency. The significant recurrence of rumors in brand communities could be a response to the need to negotiate a new definition of the situation (Shepherd, 1987), one that provides more control, or at least the perception of greater control. The Apple Newton reintroduction rumor is one such example. At present, Newton owners face the reality of an aging technological product with no replacements being made. Without new equipment, the community will atrophy over time. But what if Apple came out with a new Newton? The community could migrate en masse to the new device, or it could dissipate. Both eventualities are potentially threatening to the extant Newton community. In this context, rumors can be very powerful. Rumor construction can act to assuage communal fears by constructing more palatable alternative outcomes, such as Apple deciding to reembrace the Newton. In a similar way, the recurrence of rumors concerning General Motors in the Saab brand community reflects the communal concern for its future as a group.

These brand community rumors exist in the context of what Fine (1979, 1987) called "idioculture," which refers specifically to the culture of small groups, capable of being referred to by members with the expectations that the meanings will be shared by other participants. These idiocultures play a vital part in maintaining social consensus (Deighton & Grayson, 1995), cohesion (Fine & Holyfield, 1996) and expectations regarding the future of the community. Participation in such rumors contributes to solidarity among members. By simplifying these explanations, they provide a common history on which members of the community can agree, or at least be familiar with. These conceptual reductions produce simple patterns of dialogue that are similar to scripted discourse, in which the community has an agreed-on set of beliefs regarding the technology and its history and circumstances. The discourse is traditional with slight personalized variations on common themes and amounts. The script fortifies the community and expresses group-based meanings and social processes. Rumor is always responsive to the cultures of the groups in which it is embedded.

Michel Maffesoli (1996) noted, "We have so dwelled on the dehumanization and the disenchantment with the modern world and the solitude it induces that we are no longer capable of seeing the networks of solidarity that exist within" (p. 72). Brand communities offer an example of just such a thing: networks of social solidarity typically overlooked or even seen as evidence of the destruction of "real community." Supposedly, there was once a time and place where community was completely outside mercantile exchange; in this imagined pastoral vale, material objects yet unmarked by the heavy hand of mass commerce had a benign function. Then came the branded good, and paradise was lost. It is a story told and retold, reproducing a central mythology of modernist social thought. Commerce is to blame for hordes of wandering spirits, experiencing only simulacra, lacking commu-

nity. Such a historical record is suspect, because contemporary communities centered on brands do exist. They possess the traditional defining characteristics of community. As a result, we must abandon the idea that just because something is commercial, social phenomena like community cannot occur around it. A brand community is a contemporary and particular form of community, but a form of community nonetheless.

This returns us to rumor. As embedded communities, participants in groups focused on brands search for information as best they can, sharing and critiquing the communications of each other, reminding us that knowledge is always social. In groups that lack formal authority—such as brand communities—given their distance from manufacturers, what is transmitted is often unauthenticated, and sometimes incorrect as well. It is the distance of brand communities from those products that they celebrate that make these communities storehouses of rumor. Yet, it is the presence of rumor—a function of their independence—that makes brand communities consequential in their ability to question the claims of the powerful. The trust that members place in each other permits them to evaluate claims in light of the politics of plausibility, placing affiliation ahead of authority, and communal cohesion ahead of corporate strategy. Rumor is, as Ralph Rosnow well recognized, a means by which an insistent and continuing questioning of the ambiguities of social life can be the basis for creating a community of equals.

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