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Apple's Iconicity: Digital Society, Consumer Culture and the Iconic Power of Technology

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1. Introduction. Apple and the Iconic Power of Digital Technologies in Consumer Society

Among its several social implications, digital technologies have brought with them in recent years the centrality of personal mobile devices in social life, culture and relationships. In particular, mobile digital devices have not just enabled new relationships and practices in everyday routines, sustaining the development of contemporary "mobile lives" [Elliot and Urry 2010], but have also started to occupy a crucial symbolic place in our societies: computers, smartphones, tablets and other personal devices have become extremely meaningful objects in our lives, becoming powerful iconic presences within the contemporary cultural landscape.

When reflecting on the symbolic role those digital mobile technologies have gained in today's society, it is easy to direct our attention to the devices produced by Apple, the Californian company created in 1976 by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak and now the most appealing ICT company in the world. From the first personal computer in 1977 to the recent iPhone and iPad, through the iPod music player, different generations of digital devices created by Apple have become both material technologies with distinctive features, able to transform our mobile lives, and also extremely rich cultural objects, with deep symbolic implications within contemporary digital society. Apple is not just one among many most established producers of smartphones, computers and other digital devices; over the years, the company's

image and brand have actually turned into a powerful cultural icon, able to fascinate and seduce million of people around the world.

In 2013, according to the business magazine *Forbes*, Apple is the most valuable commercial brand worldwide, well ahead of Microsoft, Coca-Cola or McDonald's [Forbes 2013], highlighting that the Californian firm has become a powerful iconic object with which many people – the users of their technologies – identify. One of the clearest manifestations of this, as we will see later in this article, occurred in 2011, with the passing of Apple founder Steve Jobs, when we assisted to a global emotive reaction around Job's figure involving both the media and the public, producing a consecration of his image around the world. In this case, we witnessed a symptom of how far iconic power of Apple's technologies had actually influenced not only people's practiced and activities, but also their hearts and minds.

The fascination that Apple's objects have exerted on contemporary society is the outcome of the interaction between various elements that are simultaneously technological and cultural, symbolic and material, related to technical processes and innovation as well as to the way people are fascinated by and desire objects in our consumer society. In this sense we should recognize that cultural meanings of Apple's devices are part of a wider evolution of computers' cultural role of in modern society. Cultural approaches to technology have contributed to enrich a plane rational conception of the computer in the modern society by recognizing its "sacral" dimension [Alexander 1990] and also by acknowledging that digital technologies have been developed within a wider ideological environment, which contributed to shape their social evolution both materially and symbolically [Hughes 2004; Nye 2006.] If we want to look at the iconic power of technologies and digital devices in today's society, then the case of Apple probably represents a paradigm case to highlight how the iconic power of digital technologies has recently developed in our society and has acquired a crucial role in how these technologies have been adopted and appropriated.

Reflecting on the role of iconicity from a culturist perspective, in the introduction to a collective book [Alexander *et al.* 2012] on the power of icons in contemporary cultural life, Alexander and Bartmanski articulated the role of icons in contemporary symbolic social structures, highlighting how these structures emerge more and more often at the intersections between the material presence of objects, the external surface of aesthetics and the depth that characterizes the less rational, loosely rationalised, morally embedded dimension of social life. Following this theory rooted in the post-durkheimian cultural sociology, iconic power does not come just from the aesthetic and material *surface* of images and things, but by the way in which this surface represent the ground on which deeper cultural structures, moral beliefs and profound configurations of social meaning are actually articulated [Alexander 2008; 2010.] In

this view, the power of icons (art pieces, celebrities or just plain mundane objects) is the result of their ability to produce a sense of participation by people in social life and to serve as tools for controlling users' experience of society, offering to social actors a resource to interpret and interact with the deep cultural structure of the social world.

A chapter by Woodward and Ellison [2012] contained in the same book explored a relevant dimension in contemporary iconic processes: the pivotal role of consumer culture and consumer objects in shaping the contemporary iconic landscape. Living in a capitalistic and consumer-fuelled society means that meanings, cultural structures and therefore iconic power are deeply rooted in the material relationships people build with their–often beloved–consumer goods, whose meanings are profoundly imbricated in advertising, marketing plans and corporate strategies. At this regard, Woodward and Ellison rightly recall that the attention paid to the power of consumer goods in offering social orientation to people has a long tradition in socio-anthropological thinking. Since Douglas and Isherwood's [1978] seminal book on consumer goods, a substantial theoretical perspective has emerged that focuses on the consideration of material objects crucial to understanding cultural and symbolic meaning in contemporary social life.

We can also add that while the anthropological tradition has often focussed more on the symbolic dimension of materiality than on the material substance of cultural symbols [cf. Shove *et al.* 2007], the contribution of another theoretical tradition, that of science and technology studies (STS,) has added a more advanced sensibility to understanding the materiality of technologies and artefacts as integral to social practices and effectively intertwined with material objects' cultural meanings [Shove *et al.* 2012.] Take the example of the rebirth of vinyl record in recent years: the return to the use of this object is connected both to the meanings it carries also for its aesthetical qualities and to the possibilities and actions this old technology enables in listeners' material practices [Magaudda 2011; 2012; Bartmanski and Woodward 2014.] Putting together the symbolic attributes of materiality and the material substance of cultural symbols could be a fruitful strategy to expand the analysis of iconic power in consumer society, underlining the heterogeneity of the process through which the production of symbolic meanings is created and sustained in our capitalist, consumer-based and media-driven society.

Moving from a theory of iconic power, in this article I want to offer a synthetic reconstruction of the ways the iconic power of Apple and of its devices has emerged since the first Macintosh advertising campaign in 1984, showing at least three different processes through which Apple has become a powerful iconic presence in today's digital society. This description of the emergence of Apple's iconic power will be the basis for a preliminary reflection concerning the interwoven dimensions that bond

together mobile technologies, cultural meanings and consumer experience in today's capitalist society.

More specifically, the article focuses on three dimensions through which iconic power has been constructed and articulated in relation with Apple's technologies during recent decades. The first one directly refers to the firm's communicative strategies and the ways in which Apple has developed its iconic status with advertising by mobilizing wider cultural frameworks and symbolic structures in society. The second dimension refers to the processes involving users' and consumers' appropriation of Apple's meanings and images, with specific reference to the way consumers have developed spiritual involvements toward Apple's brand as well as a sense of sacral participation in Apple's identity that goes far beyond the expected relation with consumer goods or operative tools. A third and final dimension concerns how Apple's icon has become "reframed" and subverted by fans and media, often as a way to articulate and make sense of very different events in society. The appropriation of Apple's iconic power for different and alternative purposes reveals that the partial autonomy of the iconic power gained by digital technologies, which can become the surface on which to articulate other cultural structures, dualities and oppositions in contemporary society.

2. Advertising, Marketing and the Iconic Power of Apple Technologies

The first dimension in the construction of Apple's iconicity regards the way Apple's technologies have acquired iconic power during an historical trajectory of symbolic production rooted in marketing and advertising strategies. In this regard, Apple's symbolic trajectory highlights how advertising has been and still is fully part of the shaping of technologies' social meanings and symbolic attributes and how these marketing strategies have been anchored to wider cultural processes and structures related to the relationship between technology and society. As we will observe, Apple's iconic power also resides in how its iconic surface has been connected with deeper ideologies, cultural frameworks and wider moral understanding concerning the role of technology in society.

Apple's symbolic *milieu* has a long history that can be traced back to the beginning of the firm's history and that of the personal computer industry in the late 1970s. Apple contributed in a determinant way to spreading the use of the personal computer in everyday culture and has also been one of the most aggressive and imaginative ICT companies concerning advertising strategies. Apple's innovation in devices and technology has been accompanied by an intertwined innovation in the

processes of symbolic production of social meanings connected to technology, in so doing contributing to the articulation involving a material surface of technology and a deeper cultural structure in society. At least since the introduction of the first Macintosh computer model in 1984, Apple has sustained its products with strong and effective marketing campaigns, often characterised by spots or slogans that have engaged a symbolic interaction with powerful social beliefs and moral visions, such as the ideas of «freedom» and «creativity». As we will see, Apple's effort in the articulation of symbolic meanings, material technologies and deep cultural values of a society has represented a crucial dimension in the building of its current iconic status in digital society.

The first and best-known advertising produced by Apple was the spot for the launch of the Macintosh personal computer in 1984. In that period, personal computers were not yet common objects in families' households; these devices were still predominantly associated with workplaces, offices and corporations [Haddon 1988.] At that point, Apple introduced a new model of personal computer with some ground-breaking technical features specifically intended to boast the diffusion of personal computers among lay people, namely, a graphic user interface (GUI) with folders and windows, managed through a mouse. The TV commercial developed for the launch of this Macintosh computer was a sort of adaptation of the George Orwell novel *1984*, adding to the plot a distinctive post-industrial atmosphere echoing the atmospheres of the then-recent science-fiction film *Blade Runner*, released just two years earlier [Scott 1991.] In fact, Ridley Scott, the director of *Blade Runner*, was chosen to shoot this Apple commercial, with a record production budget for the world of advertising that totalled close to a million dollars. The spot, named "1984," attracted huge public attention because it was broadcast nationally only once, on January 22, 1984, during the Super Bowl, the most important sports event on U.S. television.

The commercial described, with the distinctively synthetic language of advertising, a grey and dusty world in which individuals were subjugated to a "big brother" who communicated with them through a large screen, metaphorizing in this way the IBM company, then the leading firm in the corporate computer business. A female character, colourful and dynamic, burst onto the scene and destroyed this "big brother" on the screen, thus interrupting its control over the audience. These intense images, which did not actually show the new Macintosh model, were followed by the words, "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like *1984.*" This commercial became not only one of the most famous and awarded of its time but it had a significant impact on the social construction of the personal computer, which was in that period beginning to be associated

with the values of individual freedom, creativity and a modern lifestyle [Friedman 2005.] This commercial helped to feed Apple's symbolic power through al least three different elements. The first one is clearly the interplay produced between powerful cultural meanings connected with George's Orwell's "big brother" and the influential atmosphere associated with Ridley Scott's movie. The second one is related with the way the new computer was associated with the values of freedom and self-determination, in so doing projecting on the surface of a consumer product the power of social values firmly rooted in western culture. Finally, this advertising influenced directly the way a soon-to-be popular object – the personal computer – was socially perceived: from a tool mainly intended to be used in offices and work hours to a creative instrument aimed at individual self-fulfilment.

Years later, in 1997, another advertising campaign played a similar role in the reinforcement of Apple's iconic power. This time, the rival was no longer IBM but Microsoft and the new campaign was aimed to revitalise Apple's image connection to the value of "creativity" and "innovation," partially lost during the early nineties due to erroneous commercial strategies. This new campaign was entitled "Think Different," a slogan that became crucial for the company's identity in subsequent years. It was based on a television advertisement in which seventeen famous and iconic personalities from culture, art and society of the Twentieth century were shown, with a voiceover out of the screen reciting a reflection on the nature of creativity and innovation. In addition to political figures such as Martin Luther King and Gandhi and scientists and inventors such as Albert Einstein and Thomas Edison, there were also artists (Picasso and Frank Lloyd Wright) and crucial figures from pop culture, such as Bob Dylan and John Lennon. The voiceover recited a text centred on the character of the innovators, described as "crazy," "rebels" and "problematic," people who "do not follow the rules," but who "push the human race forward". The ad was based on a strategy of mobilisation of iconic characters with legendary connotations and a deep resonance in society, especially American culture. Aesthetically, as it has been observed by Ronald Shields [2001], this skilful combination of iconic figures and a distinctive black-and-white visual rhetoric had a profound impact on contemporary American culture, making the ad the subject of numerous citations and references in different media. The use of celebrity icons [see Alexander 2010] by Apple underlines one more dimension in the process of production of iconic power, generated at the interplay between a representative surface, represented by famous cultural figures, and a deep cultural structure connected with the shared values of creativity and inventiveness.

The iconic construction of these two famous Apple's advertising campaigns helps to highlight the one of the main dimension through which Apple's iconic power

has raised during more then three decades. This iconic power has been developed by a relatively explicit strategy represented by the work of articulation between consumer products, an aesthetic surface involving popular culture and deeper moral cultural structures in society.

3. Spirituality, Enchantment and Consumers' Attachment to Apple

A second important dimension in the building of Apple's iconic power concerns the way in which the company, its products and even its founder have been objects of a cultural articulation in ways that are very peculiar for the context of technology and consumer products, well beyond advertising and marketing conscious strategies. The peculiar articulation between consumer society's aesthetic surface and its deeper cultural structure have been the basis of a distinct identification of consumers and fans with the brand and culture of Apple. This identification sometimes has explicitly trespassed into a spiritual, if not strictly religious, involvement, in so doing highlighting what Bartmanski and Alexander [2012] have addressed as the dimension of renewed enchantment of consumer experience in a commoditized capitalist society.

As Arvidsson [2006] has highlighted discussing the cultural significance of brands in today's consumer culture, the power of these brands relies on an immaterial labour of consumers and on their ability to generate social bond and shared identities through productive communication surrounding consumer products. At the same time, as Douglas Holt [2004] pointed out, one of the distinctive features of the iconic dimension of the brand is that it is able to perform identity myths and to address implicitly shared cultural contradictions in society. In the case of Apple, fans' identification with the brand has generated what has been described as a true "cult" around the Apple's logo [cf. Kahney 2004], an involvement that has become common in consumer culture and which marketing scholars have traced back to the very development of Apple's iconicity [Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001.]

As we have already noted, the work on the imaginary through advertising has helped Apple to build powerful symbolic associations and a full set of meanings related to freedom, creativity and non-conformism. These have been ingredients in a more general process of symbolic construction that has developed since the 1980s and which have helped to shape atypical forms of involvement by customers in the Apple brand [Fitzsimons *et al.* 2008.] The "bitten apple" logo has become a recurrent iconic presence in several contexts of the contemporary landscape, for example, in the common form of a sticker attached to the rear of Apple users' cars. In order to address these kinds of phenomena, connected with Apple fans' identification prac-

tices, marketing scholars have developed the concept of "brand community," meaning by this term "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand"; moreover, "like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility" [Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001, 412.]

Apple's iconic power derives to some extent from the partly spontaneous way in which consumers have developed a particular engagement with the brand's identity. This identification has resulted, for example, in the renowned opposition between Apple's users and owners of other kinds of computer, a controversy that has a bearing on actual consumer practices and which in 2006 was appropriated by the same Apple in the form of an advertising campaign titled "Get a Mac." If many objections can be raised about whether Apple fans really do represent a "community," the fact remains that the involvement and identification of consumers with Apple's iconicity seems to be unmatched by any other company in consumer electronics. For this reason, more than one observer has recognised in the spread of this phenomenon a genuine form of devotion, not dissimilar to real forms of worship and religious transport, albeit translated and adapted to a secularised consumer society [Muniz and Shau 2005; Campbell and La Pastina 2010.]

The high degree of involvement and identification by Apple users can be interpreted – on the basis of the anthropology and the sociology of consumption [McCracken 1990; Ritzer 1999] – as a response by consumers to counteract the tendency, defined by the classical sociologist Max Weber, as a process of "disenchantment" in the modern social world, under the pressures of rationalisation of modernity. The identification with a commercial icon, which is able to embody values and meanings that are not exclusively commercial for consumers, represents a way to counter the logic of commodification typical of the consumer experience of market capitalism and, we would add, to balance the tendency to the disenchantment in social relations produced by the diffusion of digital technologies as means of interaction and communication in society.

Drawing on this interpretation, we can assume that the sense of "community" and belonging generated around Apple's brand represents just one of the ways in which consumers re-created a sense of enchantment around their experiences as individualised consumers of digital technologies. As also highlighted by Belk and Tumbat [2005], Apple's fans seems to articulate different meanings around the technology they use in order to counterbalance the prevalent experience of commodification in consumer electronics, generating and sustaining a series of new myths, symbols and icons compatible with magical and spiritual categories rather than a purely rational and instrumental relationship among ICT fans and "geeks."

It should be acknowledged that Apple and founder Steve Jobs worked consciously to stimulate the generation of these forms of involvement through the religious connotations around the brand. The entire organisational and communicative trajectory of Apple is characterised by episodes that confirm this fact. One of probably the most emblematic example of this is the fact that the definition of "technology evangelist," which later became a popular term in Silicon Valley [Lucas-Conwell 2006], was created inside Apple's organisational culture in the late 1980s to define a specific professional role dedicated to generating support for the new commercial and cultural technologies of the company through the dissemination of a particular vision around the use of these devices [Kawasaki 1990.]

Nor is it a coincidence that one of the adjectives used to describe the figure of Steve Jobs at the time of his death at the end of 2011 was precisely that of "visionary," a term that has religious and mystical attributes. As I have already recalled, the moment of Jobs's death revealed clearly that he had become something more than a mere commercial entrepreneur. In the days following Jobs's death, Apple stores around the world have witnessed an authentic pilgrimage for thousands of people – Apple fans or just the curious and tourists – to render homage to Jobs. Apple shops' windows around the world were filled with hundreds of cards for Jobs, flowers and candles, as well as objects of symbolic value, such as apples (sometimes actually bitten). Among the hundreds of cards that could be read hanging from the windows of the Apple store in San Francisco, one was particularly emblematic for understanding how the figure of Jobs had entered into the popular imagination in a profound and engaging way:

> Although yesterday was a very sad day and it made all of our generation stop and think (those of us born in the 1950s like you, Steve), it was also a day of sincere pride to be able to call you one of our greatest United States citizens in history. Your entrepreneurial drive and your creative and innovative spirit has transcended all age generations in the US and the world. […] You were the technological visionary who inspired your teams to stretch beyond what was perceived to be possible. Your technological vision spanned revolutionary products and animation and this was a "gift" uniquely provided to you. (Excerpt from a letter hanging in front of the Apple store in downtown San Francisco, October 6, 2011)

This extract from one letter, which was accompanied by thousands of others, tells us that Apple and the figure of its founder have crossed the boundary that divides the world of business and commoditisation from that of feelings, personal sentiments, national belonging and spirituality. Thus, the iconic status that the figure of Steve Jobs has gained in contemporary culture reveals one of the dimensions through which Apple's iconic power has spread in contemporary society, showing a further interplay

between the surface of consumer goods and the deep cultural and moral structures iconic technologies are able to embody in an apparently disenchanted digital society.

4.   "Reframing" and Subversion of Apple's Iconicity: the Case of the iPod

A final dimension on which I want to focus regards the way Apple's icon has started to circulate outside explicit commercial strategies and fans' identification practices, becoming the centre of practices of symbolic reframing and culture jamming [Carducci 2006.] This further dimension is helpful in understanding how the building of Apple's iconic power transcend, at least partially, both advertising strategies and consumer attachment to brand and products. In this regard, we can consider several examples, but here we will focus on one specific area: the development of the iconic presence of the iPod, the Apple music player launched in 2001. The iPod became a powerful iconic object [see also Bull 2007; Dant 2008] not only among consumers and music enthusiasts, but also in relation to its cultural articulation in different contexts, processes and topics.

As in the case of personal computers, the commercial success of the iPod took advantage of marketing and advertising strategies adopted by Apple. One of the most important ad campaigns developed around the iPod by Apple, titled "Silhouette," was widely visible between 2003 and 2005, leaving a significant mark in the contemporary aesthetic environment. This campaign was characterised by the use of a two-colour graphic in which black figures danced against a monotone coloured background while listening to their iPod, recognisable by the distinctive white wire of Apple's earphones.

What is interesting for our discussion is that this characteristic iconographic style, based on flat backlit figures, has spread well beyond Apple advertising aims, being adopted for other contexts and converted into visual forms for different purposes. One of the most debated and controversial adaptations of this particular graphic style has involved politically "subversive" acts using "guerrilla posters" (posters with political significance attached illegally on city walls) created by art activists in Los Angeles in 2005. These posters were entitled "iRaq" and were developed as a form of criticism of U.S. military intervention in Iraq in 2004. The posters reproduced silhouetted figures with white cables, but in this case, the figures recalled the tortured prisoners of Abu Ghraib [Mitchell 2011, 103; Solaroli 2011], the white wires being the electrified cables used in torture. This adaptation of the iPod's advertising exemplifies one of the ways in which the iconic power of the Apple has relied on alternative forms of symbolic production, far from both marketing strategies and

the direct consumer identification with the brand. Even if this cultural reframing of iPod's iconicity is not connected directly with the original object, this dimension in the iconic production contributed to reifying Apple's iconic power in contemporary culture.

Moreover, we can also note that, especially in its initial years, iPod iconic power has catalysed media attention and social interests, well beyond music fans or tech-savvies. This is easily understandable when we look at the different and multiple ways that the iPod received attention in the media at the peak of the social fascination with it between 2004 and 2005. One of the most emblematic examples is probably the cover of the U.S. magazine *Newsweek* in July 2004, showing a picture of Steve Jobs with an iPod in his hand, headlined by the sentence "iPod, Therefore I Am," a successful slogan later used extensively in books, newspapers and blogs. In those years, the iPod as a powerful icon entered the media circuit in varied and different ways, which often made reference only secondarily to the topic of music and technology, but that called into question different social and cultural domains. For example, in 2005, the iPod enjoyed considerable visibility because U.S. president George W. Bush boasted of having an iPod full of very American "authentic" country music (with artists such as George Jones, Alan Jackson and Kenny Chesney) to listen to between a meeting in the Oval Room and an international summit. George Bush's playlist was interpreted and analysed by political commentators as a tactical move to redraw the president's image among American citizens by providing him with more youthful and everyman connotations [Bumiller 2005.] This was because, in a certain sense, the iPod had suddenly be able to articulate, on a surface of popular culture, deeper cultural identifications and also moral projections associated with the U.S. identity and their dominant values.

Another example regarding the iconic power of the iPod is probably even more unpredictable, being connected to the alarm generated by iPod thefts, which were sometimes accompanied by violence and even, on occasion, murder. For example, in July 2005, the *New York Times* reported that Steve Jobs had personally phoned the mother of a sixteen-year-old teen killed in Brooklyn by men who had wanted her iPod [«New York Times» 2005.] In 2009, in Canada, a nineteen-year-old man was sentenced to life imprisonment for a murder committed in Ottawa against another man while stealing his music player [CBC 2009.] The theft of iPods became such an issue that local authorities in various cities were compelled to develop specific prevention projects to counter this crime, as in the case of the city of London, which since 2007 has placed public signs to warn tourists about iPod thieves in certain areas of the city with the highest incidence of theft. Here again we can observe how the iconic presence of the iPod exceeded the realm of consumption and technology, and

provided the surface to articulate visions and representations connected with social problems such as murders and criminality.

All these examples relate to a very peculiar way in which the iPod has assumed an iconic role in the contemporary imaginary and the media, showing how a specific consumer technology can generate a stream of very diverse cultural articulations not limited to commercial strategies or consumer identification. This specific dimension of iPod's iconic power shows us another relevant way through which the aesthetic and material surface of Apple digital technologies has been socially articulated in relation to wider cultural structures, identities and moral depth of contemporary society.

5. Conclusion: the Multiple Dimensions of Iconic Power in Digital Consumer Society

Today digital technologies are probably among the most powerful consumer goods in terms of their ability to fascinate people and to assume an iconic role in contemporary society. This should not come as a surprise: entering a digital society also means articulating meanings, myths, icons and symbols on the material and aesthetic surface represented by digital technologies and devices. In this article we have looked at different dimensions involved in the construction of the symbolic power of Apple and Apple's technologies, showing the multiple processes involved in the construction of an iconic status in the contemporary consumer, media-driven society.

More specifically, the examples we discussed highlight at least three relevant points for reflection to further the debate on the iconic power in contemporary society, with specific reference to digital technologies. First, the examples have underlined that digital and consumer digital technologies have a cultural history in western society and that this history is rooted in the social and cultural appropriation of these technologies by society as meaningful and fascinating cultural objects. The iconic power of Apple technologies has its roots in the role Apple devices and their imaginary played in the last thirty years, not just as ground-breaking technologies but also as pieces in the construction of a specific articulation involving images, aesthetics and materials as well as cultural values, socially shared believes and identities.

Second, in the article we have seen that the iconic power of technologies is today inextricably intertwined with contemporary consumer culture and its distinctive symbolic processes. In this regard, the iconic power of Apple's digital devices has grown in a dialectical process involving the commodification typical of consumer society and a counterbalancing tendency to recreate authenticity, spiritual experiences and

enchantment in everyday consumer life. To put it shortly, Apple's iconic power also resides on the ability of its aesthetic, material and semiotic dimensions to incarnate a sense of community and participation which goes far beyond the functional role of technology or the distinctive status accorded by the possession of desired consumer goods. Finally, we have based our reflection on Apple's iconic power on the idea that iconic power in contemporary society arises from multiple cultural processes and domains: from corporate communication strategies to consumer practices, from symbolic appropriations of corporate brands to the works of political activists critical of Apple's imaginary, to the unexpected associations between Apple's technologies with murders and thefts. This multiplicity makes us reflecting on the relatively un-predictable and barely controllable construction, circulation and change of iconic power in today's global, consumption-based and digitally mediated society.

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Apple's Iconicity

Digital Society, Consumer Culture and the Iconic Power of Technology

Abstract: Moving from a theory of iconic power, the article offers an understanding on the ways the iconic power of Apple technologies has emerged since the first Macintosh advertising campaign in 1984. This description of Apple's iconic power will be the basis for a preliminary reflection concerning the interwoven dimensions that bond together mobile technologies, cultural meanings and consumer experience in today's capitalist society. The article shows three different processes through which Apple has become a powerful iconic presence in today's digital society. The first dimension directly refers to the firm's communicative strategies and the ways in which Apple has developed its iconic status with advertising by mobilizing wider cultural frameworks and symbolic structures in society. The second dimension refers to the processes involving users' and consumers' appropriation of Apple's meanings and images, with specific reference to the way consumers have developed spiritual involvements toward Apple's brand as well as a sense of sacral participation in Apple's identity. Finally, a third dimension concerns how Apple's icon has become "reframed" and subverted by fans and media, often as a way to articulate and make sense of very different events in society. The appropriation of Apple's iconic power for different and alternative purposes reveals the partial autonomy of the iconic power gained by digital technologies, which can become the surface on which to articulate cultural structures, dualities and oppositions in contemporary society.

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