


Article

Shameful Technological Impertinence: Consumer Ambivalence among iPad Early-Buyers

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Abstract: This article is motivated by the excessive success of Apple's iPad, introduced in 2010, questioning the motives for acquiring the product at the time of launch. The purpose is to understand the decision to buy an expensive product that had a fairly undefined use. On the basis of in-depth interviews of 'early-buyers' ('early adopters') of the iPad, we examine, in this article, justifications for the acquisition of such an 'open technology' use. Using theories of consumer society (Veblen, Bauman, Debord), Protestant ethics (Weber), impression management (Goffman, Leary) and group identity (Maffesoli), we develop, in the analysis, the concept of *shameful technological impertinence* concerning the ambiguity between frugality as value and consumer-based identity related to the latest technology. A reflection on this concept contributes to an understanding of how excessive technology consumption, on the one hand is followed by an unashamed desire to *show off* new 'gadgets' and on the other hand, a more shameful self-presentation defending the purchase. Today, just over ten years after the launch of the iPad and our interviews, the iPad is taken for granted as a central platform for a number of applications, for everything from personal entertainment to work- and school-related use. In light of this, we conclude with a reflection on how shameful technological impertinence as a more generic concept will be relevant in some phases rather than others, as new innovations are brought into use. The project is limited to the first iPad and its users, and further research could investigate a larger array of consumer electronics and how attitudes towards buying could be increasingly influenced by a growing concern about the abuse of natural resources.

Keywords: consumption; technology; identity; Protestant ethics; Apple iPad; early adopters



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1. Introduction

In December 2010, the first version of the Apple iPad was introduced in the Norwegian market. There were no clear categories for this innovation, but the product was, nevertheless, to be a magnificent success and formed the basis for a wealth of different variants within the product group 'tablets'. From the US launch on 3 April 2010 until it hit the Norwegian market, Apple had sold as many as 15 million units worldwide. As usual, Apple's representatives had great enthusiasm for the product, although something ambiguous: Phil Schiller (Senior Vice President, Worldwide Product Marketing) suggested in the launch video that 'it's gonna change the way we do the things we do everyday', while Jony Ive (Senior Vice President, Design) said in the same video 'I do not have to change myself to fit the product, it fits me'. These almost poetically formulated expectations of the product, and the positive market response, invited a socio-technological curiosity. The arguments for the product are partly contradictory and intervene in the controversy within science and technology studies [1] between technological determinism (emphasising how the product changes how we live, do things, and our needs) and social constructivism (emphasising how the product will be understood and shaped socially on the basis of the user's interpretation, opinion, practice or needs).

In this article, we are interested in studying ‘early adopters’ [2], and their explanations of the acquisition of the product. Core questions include: Why did they invest in the iPad? For what have they (at an early stage) brought it into use? Such early users of the ‘diffuse’ product, as the first-generation iPad must be said to be (cf. the Apple representatives above), are sociologically interesting because they can illuminate aspects of the analytical space between Weber’s *Protestant ethics* [3] and Veblen’s *conspicuous consumption* [4]. Here, the iPad is a non-randomly selected technology, since, at the time of its introduction, it did not seem to fill a functional void: It was not clear what the product could do that the laptop and/or (smart) mobile phone could not do (often better), which were already well-established tools in many people’s work and leisure. In this article, we examine why some people went to purchase a relatively expensive ‘gadget’ that was without a clear application, and we are interested in what arguments are used to explain the purchase to oneself and others.

Using in-depth interviews of ‘early-buyers’ of the iPad, right after its introduction on the Norwegian market in 2010/11, we noticed the link between a half-shameful need to defend the purchase, combined with a pride in being out early and receiving attention for a product that radiated a rare ‘coolness’. Of sociological interest in particular is the tension between Protestant frugality (expressed through consumer shame) and technological impertinence (expressed through consumer pride) and the way this is conveyed in the participants’ stories about how they attach meaning to their own iPad acquisition and use. From an interpretive sociological perspective, we explore what meaning the users themselves put into the product, and how it became a part of themselves, their practice, self-understanding and self-presentation.

This article is part of a broader sociological interest in personal technologies and how they contribute to changing our everyday lives. Understanding early users of ‘diffuse’ or ‘open’ technologies, based on sociological concepts, could contribute to greater knowledge of social processes in the consumer society and how new media platforms have come to dominate much of today’s communication. A further exploration of how everyday technologies are bought and taken into use may also lay the ground for critical social sciences that may inform how technologies influence the everyday lives of a growing number of people, also in negative ways. For instance, Lupton has suggested that health apps seem to strengthen healthism and individualism [5]. A broader societal and economic consideration is suggested by Zuboff, who has warned against the impact of surveillance capitalism [6].

Today, different variants of tablets have become ubiquitous, which was not obvious with the introduction of the iPad in 2010. In 2010, 28 books with ‘iPad’ in the title were published, most of them about app development, even for ‘complete idiots’ [7]. In later years (2017–2021), iPad books address issues such as seniors’ and kids’ use, pedagogic use, music-making, and specific programming kits/languages. A majority of less technically oriented literature demonstrate that the iPad is used by a wider audience, such as guiding parents to handles kids’ use [8,9]. In total, 315 such books were published between 2010 and 2021 (Library of Congress). Research and development of iPad applications have been excessive, with now more than 4 million apps on the Apple App Store (statista.com, accessed 1 May 2021). As many as 769 scientific articles had the word ‘iPad’ in the title (Scopus as of 25 May 2021), mostly reporting on research on applications. The three dominating areas are within medicine (328 articles dealing with assessment, intervention, training, and self-monitoring), the social sciences (289 articles, dominated by education and learning), and computer science (130 articles).

From being introduced as a product that ‘changes everything’ and/or that ‘fits the user’, it has become a platform for a vast array of specific uses. With this newer history of the product, our interviews from more than ten years ago were with participants that could have no clue about the coming success, other than confidence in Apple’s strategic thinking-ahead. Accordingly, Filho et al., in a study of American iPad first-users, found that the Apple brand provoked such a high level of devotion among consumers that they

imagined that the features of the iPad were superior to similar features in other products, even before these were launched on the market [10]. It is evident, however, that the years that have passed have shown us all that the iPad should become an extremely successful innovation that would define a new category of information technological platforms or standards—the ‘tablet’. We therefore use the opportunity to reflect on this development in the concluding discussion.

2. Theoretical Point of Departure

In the theoretical part, we outline a framework for the analysis, related to perspectives on consumption, frugality, self-presentation and community, and which is determined on the basis of an inductive empirical analysis—the stepwise deductive–inductive approach [11]. The selection can be perceived as eclectic, but is carefully selected to support a sociological analysis of the iPad users’ stories, after these stories have been analysed.

2.1. Modernity, Consumption and Needs

Consumption of goods and services covers our basic needs, contributes to a comfortable way of life and is often also a prerequisite for participation in various social activities. Simplified, we can say that the things we consume have different use functions, but also involve a symbolic aspect where the consumer attributes a content and a (social) meaning to the products. Modern consumption builds on the symbolic function of the commodity, where the thing can also contribute to self-realization, through status markers, identity symbols and signs of cultural belonging. The things one possesses can tell a lot about one’s acquired taste, personal finances and cultural capital [12]. In a Baumanian understanding, this is about individuals constantly having to renew themselves, rather than that a consumer mentality is just about satisfying a need [13]. One can even talk about forms of fetishist or hedonistic desire for material goods. In the consumer society, new tempting products are constantly being launched, but these quickly lose their attraction when a new and improved version enters the market (this is not least obvious with Apple products, with constantly new versions and with large-scale launches of these). This creates a desire to always be ahead. Desire is a self-created and self-driven motive that needs no other justification or cause, according to Bauman [13], who distinguishes between modern society where individuals are characterized by being producers and fluid modernity, where individuals are consumers. For the manufacturer, conformity is desired—the consumer being measured against his neighbour. In liquid modernity, the consumer strives towards individuality rather than conformity, and then, through consumption. Bauman refers to a changing consumer mentality, from demand-driven consumption, exemplified through sobriety where people only buy what they need, to a kind of use-and-throw mentality where you ‘shop’ what you desire.

This sobriety that Bauman pointed out as part of modern society was previously described by Max Weber [3], who places the rise of capitalism in the context of what he calls Protestant ethics. Capitalism is here explained as an unintended consequence of Protestant puritanism, where sobriety and the pursuit of profit maximization were seen as a good moral act. Hard work combined with self-control to refrain from personal pleasures was considered a way to salvation. The profit was not to be consumed, but to generate financial provisions that could be reinvested for future growth. According to Weber, this is reflected in a moral and ethical normative system in society. Such culture of frugality can be seen today as well, through a culture that distances itself from vulgar consumption, but which, at the same time, embraces a ‘self-deception’ by investing in expensive products—such as expensive hiking equipment, vintage wine or ‘authentic’ holiday destinations—in order to express social position.

In connection with commodity production, consumption and commercialism, Walter Benjamin has used the term *aura* to refer to how commodities can appear to be far more than what their material nature is. Aura is then described as a form of ‘energy’ or ‘holiness’ that comes with a product. Highlighting the product by almost giving it social character-

istics is a strategy widely used by the advertising industry. The advertisements for Coca Cola are still good examples of this, where the product is presented as something far more than just a sugar drink, but as a natural part of young, successful, beautiful, happy and social people's lives. This form of product-created performance can be further elucidated through Guy Debord's concept of *society of the spectacle* [14], which refers to a change in the relations between our 'direct experiences' and the mediated reality. The spectacular community transforms reality into a dreamy state created by commercial needs, which, in turn, reproduces new needs in order to maintain that illusion. According to Debord, 'false needs' are produced as individuals seek to obtain satisfaction through additional consumption, which can be illuminated through the analogy 'treadmill of consumption' [15], a consumer treadmill where the human desire is an infinite cycle of movement, satisfaction, breakup and new movement. It can never be fully satisfied.

In connection to this, the term *brand addiction* has been suggested as a combination of eleven salient properties: acquisitiveness; anxiety and irritability, bonding, brand exclusivity, collecting, compulsive urges, financial management versus debt tolerance, dependence, gratification, mental and behavioural preoccupation, and word of mouth [16]. Using various examples from focus groups and projective interviews, including participants being 'addicted' to Apple products, it is suggested that addiction comes in addition to other consumer-brand relationships (brand attachment, brand love, brand loyalty, brand passion and brand trust). It has also been suggested that brand loyalty for smartphones develops through utilitarian value and hedonic value (cognitive), brand satisfaction (affective), brand trust (conative) and finally, mobile phone brand loyalty (action loyalty) [17]. In contrast to this, in a study of smartwatch buyers, Deghanhi found that the factor of hedonic motivation did not emerge as a key factor affecting consumers' preferences for using smartwatches. Rather, perceived usefulness, ease of use, enabling technologies, functionality, compatibility, 'fashnology', 'healthtology' and complementary goods were reasons for using these watches [18]. While such individual consumer behaviour perspectives emphasise the relation between consumer and brand, our sociological perspective includes social interaction between consumers, i.e., self-presentation.

2.2. Consumption as Self-Presentation

It is reasonable to also anchor this treadmill in Torstein Veblen's more extreme observation of 'conspicuous consumption' [4], as flashy, vulgar consumerism, in which individuals with high-class backgrounds distinguish themselves from lower classes by use and consumption of exclusive material status objects. The visibility of consumption and the way it signals success will mean that individuals from lower classes will be able to yearn for these exclusive markers to gain access to a higher respected grouping. Veblen describes two ways in which the individual can express wealth—through having a lot of time for leisure activities (as the upper class has differed from the working class who were forced to spend a lot of time at work) and through lavish and visible consumption: 'In one case it is a waste of time and effort, in the other it is waste of goods' (p. 85).

Precisely the point that consumption, as understood by Veblen, acquires a separate function by its visibility, makes it relevant to also draw on sociological interactionism. Through being with others, we develop a reflexive relationship with ourselves, through an ability to see ourselves through other implicit feedback on ourselves [19]. Such self-insight enables us to highlight and control the impressions we want to make to some degree. If self-presentation is perceived as credible or authentic is up to our 'public' to consider, and here, Goffman contributed to the conceptual development within his *dramaturgical metaphor* [20]. With the concepts of 'frontstage' and 'backstage', he shows how people take on different roles in different contexts and how these roles are played out in interaction with friends, acquaintances and strangers [21,22]. Being 'backstage', you can drop the 'mask', fall out of your public frontstage role, and prepare for what is needed to be able to play your role in the most credible way frontstage in front of the audience with the right 'props' to strengthen this credibility. Self-presentation must be seen in relation to

impression management, which, according to Leary [23], can be considered a complicated psychological process in three parts. First, we convey the impression we want to present in a given situation; then, we adjust our behaviour in the situation to build up under the desired expression; and finally, we assess (reflexively) whether the recipients are left with the same impression. The process is complex because not all the expressions we give are conscious. Body language, facial expressions, tone of voice and identity markers can tell a lot about who we are to those we introduce ourselves to, and in the worst case, there may be gaps between different aspects of our presentation. Higgins' *theory of discrepancy* [24] operates with a threefold division of the individual's understanding of the self: 'the actual self', which represents the authentic part of the self; 'the ideal self', which is the representation of desired qualities of the individual; and 'the ought self', which are characteristics the individual self or others believe it should have.

2.3. Products and a Sense of Community

The visible consumption, for example, of products one carries, wears, eats, drinks or transports oneself in can contribute to impression management and, for example, create goals for the 'ideal self'. In the same way that sociological interactionism promotes an understanding of reflexive individuals and social construction through processes of negotiation [25,26], consumption is also to be regarded as social action. This is clearly demonstrated by Veblen's emphasis on class-related consumption, and can also be linked to Maffesoli's interest in group formations [27]. He argues that mass society is in decline, and is being replaced by consumption and socialisation based on new forms of group formation. Maffesoli uses the term 'neotribe' and points to a sense of community that can be diffuse, but strong, often linked to common interests, tastes and activities in a *community of identification* [28]. Equal taste, especially if it differs from the taste of the majority, can separate a group of people from the masses and thus, refers to an element that one is in agreement with, even if it happens on the basis of (apparently) individual preferences. According to Maffesoli, 'neotribality' is expressed in mass culture, where the temporary is an important point. Our social life is marked by membership in a number of overlapping groups, which allow for temporary identifications. In relation to consumption, we are then concerned with how society is constructed through meaning and not through structures: To recognize the other who is similar to oneself, who is more similar than different, who consumes the same as oneself, or who possibly observes the contrasts to those who consume quite different items, then becomes a source of a sense of community [29].

3. Materials and Methods

Empirical data that form the basis for this article's analysis were generated via in-depth interviews in the period March–April 2011, when Apple's first version of the iPad was launched on the Norwegian market. The idea was to reach out to so-called 'early adopters' [2], who are the first to start using a new product. The time is, therefore, not randomly chosen, nor the sample, which was recruited by an open invitation using the internet and other channels where iPad users could be reached. In the spring of 2011, Norwegian iPad users were a small group of people, and using a snowball sampling method, all participants that responded positively were included in the study. To facilitate recruitment, participants were included in the draw of two gift cards at an Apple outlet. Other criteria for the sample were that the participants had to be over 18 years of age and reside in Trondheim, since we were interested in conducting the face-to-face interviews for the best possible quality. Participants are listed in Table 1.

The material consists of 14 qualitative in-depth interviews, with a duration of between 35 and 90 min, conducted in the informants' homes, at their workplace, or at a café or other accessible place. A relatively comprehensive interview guide structured the interviews, with questions sorted into the following 9 topics: (1) procurement, (2) use, (3) interest in technology, (4) product type and alternatives, (5) iPad and the social, (6) attitudes toward Apple, (7) other Apple products, (8) iPad and style, and (9) the future.

Topics were developed on the basis of brainstorming within the research team, to include personal actions and attitudes. All interviews were recorded using an audio recorder, then transcribed and anonymised in normalized language, and coded empirically close and inductively grouped, according to a *stepwise deductive–inductive approach* [11]. Using the analysis software HyperResearch, we developed 146 codes, which we then grouped into 17 code groups. After a new grouping at a higher level, we were left with three main themes—‘legitimation’, ‘trust in the brand’ and ‘use’—where this article is based on the first two. These themes emerged across participants in the analysis, following a technique of ‘category zooming’ [30], by which conceptual generalization is developed inductively on the basis of qualitative analysis.

Table 1. Overview of participants.

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Position	iPad Ownership	Technology Attitude
Albert	52	Truck salesman	Since 2010, before launch in Norway	Slightly interested
Ben	25	Media technician	1–2 months before launch in Norway	Reading everything about Apple products
Carl	37	Project manager	Since November	Apple fanatic
Celia	36	Researcher	Since July 2010	Always chooses Apple
Christian	24	Student social sciences	By the launch in Norway	Tech. interested
David	51	Professor	Before launch of iPad2	Statistics nerd, using Mac
Freddy	31	Composer	4 months	Interested in tech, playing games, consuming media
Jenny	21	Teacher student	Got as a present by parents by launch	Not very technically competent
John	21	Informatics student	3 weeks after launch	Not apple fan, PC user
Lucy	20	Student and journalist	Gift from father, bought in the US	Not an early adopter
Mary	23	Economics student	3 months	Very fond of gadgets
Nick	36	Researcher	2 weeks	“Techno whore”, Apple fan
Paul	44	Project manager	By the launch	Not nerd
Tim	32	Market analyst	By launch in Norway	“Apple geek”

When it comes to the use of in-depth interviews on an everyday topic, such as the use of personal technologies, a challenge may be that the participants are not very engaged in exploring the topic, as it is only a mundane part of the everyday. In this study, however, we recruited people who were at the forefront of technology use to talk about novel technology; hence, the experience was very different. They were very concerned about iPads and would talk happily about the acquisition and use of them, and as a consequence, many interviews lasted longer than the planned 30–40 min. When we used in-depth interviews in this study, we were looking for how the participants talked about their use of the iPad, why they acquired it, and what kind of concrete experiences and feelings they would attach to the product.

On the basis of an interpretative perspective, we were particularly interested in participants’ opinions based on their experiences and, in this context, their arguments to acquire the iPad. With a stepwise deductive–inductive approach [11], the aim of the analysis is conceptual: to develop a more generic understanding of the many-folded early-buyer accounts and experiences of the then relatively undefined product as the iPad.

4. Results

In the analysis, we address two main themes that emerged in the analysis, (1) legitimation and (2) brand trust, where we first address the rational and symbolic aspects of legitimation and then, matters related to the Apple brand, which are both about the expectation of top quality and, secondly, of the product as an identity marker.

4.1. Legitimation

A key feature of the interviews was the various ways in which the informants legitimized their purchase of the iPad. In connection with this, there were three main accounts of legitimation that emerged in the analysis, which we will categorize as rational legitimation, symbolic legitimation and how the legitimation assumes a form of defence of one’s own choices.

4.1.1. Rational Legitimation

The first argument was that the iPad at the time of purchase would meet a practical need for the participant. This was expressed in several ways in the interviews, and behind each argument, we found short- or long-term persuasion processes that included both the individual themselves and others. This implies that the acquisition rarely happened spontaneously—it was almost solely based on a plan. The iPad was practically useful in two situations—when traveling or for work or studies. Participants who used travel as an argument justified this on the basis of it taking up little space, being a source of entertainment or a good way to be accessible to others, without having to bring a larger laptop on the trip:

I'm very fond of such gadgets (laughs). Yes, I think it's very nice. Yeah, I am kind of a Mac fan. And then it's very nice that you can also read books on it, so you do not have to carry so much. Yes it will be overweight on the plane if I would have to bring all the books I have somehow (Mary).

Buying an iPad could save Mary a lot of stress, with less packing, and less weight, but still the opportunity to take books on the go. Likewise, Kim pointed out a far lower threshold to include an iPad than, for example, a laptop, 'you almost take it with you when you go to the bathroom, because it is somehow not in the way, and you don't have to bring a charger' (Kim). On long trips, the iPad is an excellent source of entertainment:

We were in New York and was going to drive very far, so we decided it was a good idea for us to have two iPads that we could throw in the back seat to the kids [...], and then it was not out in the Norwegian market yet. [...] We were supposed to have it anyway and it was just as nice to buy it when we were in New York, as it was cheaper there and we were going to drive so far (Celia).

Kids' need for entertainment on a long drive, to reduce boredom, becomes a good legitimation of the purchase. Both children and parents can conceivably experience a better ride by having two iPads keeping those in the backseat occupied and keeping the car calm. Mary's and Celia's accounts are rational in the sense that they are based on consequential thinking, where a potential absence of iPads will contribute to more stress on the go. Having plans to buy an iPad anyway means that the investment is not just about driving in the US, but about being able to save money on a planned investment:

We were on a trip to Miami, and I had a car adapter brought from a local store in Norway with me to be able to charge my phone. Then I put it in [the power outlet in the car], but then it did not work. So I thought, okay, I have no cell phone, and I did not bring my Mac because I have so many documents that I do not want to lose if it is stolen. So I found out that then I have to buy iPad to get on the web at least [...] since I had my boyfriend at home and so on ... I thought that not having contact with him for three months was a bit stressful. [...] So then I bought my iPad. And then I found out about that adapter afterwards, it was just turning a knob to make it work. So I used that whole trip to defend that purchase. [...] Now afterwards ... I kind of think ... I will get a lot of benefit from it since I have it. But I would not have missed it if I had not had it (Mary).

In addition to travel, many of the participants talked about usefulness in a work or study context as an argument for why they needed an iPad. That it was easy to bring to and from the workplace, easy to use, and that it takes up less desk space are rational arguments that were used. Participants also talked about the iPad as a less disruptive element because it was not as big as a PC, but also because it was less comfortable to use for Internet surfing over a longer period of time, and therefore, to a lesser extent, a time thief. The tool/toy dichotomy is a central discussion for many of the participants in the study, partly because they experienced that others regarded the iPad more as a useless toy than as a useful tool in a work context, as David pointed out: 'It is practical as a toy and considered a toy. [...]

That it is a serious work tool is not obvious to everyone'. Christian believed that it should be unnecessary to justify this choice to parents:

I defended my interest to my parents. But it's like I'm defending to buy a pencil for school [...]. It was a tool I thought I needed. It made it pretty easy. If there was anyone I had to defend it for, it was myself. Three thousand NOK [about \$500 at that time], that's not so much! (Christian).

Defending the purchase might happen towards others (family or friends), but many participants mentioned that it was, first and foremost, towards themselves that they had to have some arguments. For Christian, it seemed that the iPad purchase was as an obvious investment, as something he needed, and pointed out that they were not so expensive that he could not afford it. Tim suggested that reading on the iPad compared to on the PC was one reason:

Yes, Lord Jesus. Someone said I should buy a computer. I said: try reading a book on a computer, instead of like this, on the iPad, and the battery life is good and it is so light. [...] Mum did not quite understand it, she does not even have Facebook, but I said it was to read books and blah blah blah, a defense mechanism like this, defending that I burned off NOK 4000 [\$650] on a technological gadget like this (Tim).

For Tim, the purchase was not as obvious as for Christian. When Tim puts it in the way he does, that he 'burned off' money on a 'gadget', he signals that his critics may have had a point: An expensive product is expected to be able to meet specific needs.

4.1.2. Symbolic Legitimation

While rational legitimisation refers to specific situations where it would be useful or practical to use the iPad, when travelling, in meetings, for reading, browsing, and the like, symbolic legitimation accounts for the need for the iPad with other conditions than practical functions. This could, for example, be related to an environmental aspect where not having to print documents on paper, but still experience the convenience of sitting back with something resembling a paper document, becomes relevant:

As long as you [have a] format so you can sit in a regular chair and read, it's just as good to read it on screen. And the alternative is that if you are going to use a PC, it is often the case that you have to print it on paper, so I think there is a kind of environmental aspect to it. I do not know if I have become so environmentally friendly that it corresponds to the production of an iPad, but it may be in the long run (David).

I read [the local student newspaper] on the iPad, since I have an app that makes it easy for me to read it digitally, so I don't need the paper version (Christian).

The idea here is that digital documents are more environmentally friendly than their alternatives. Acquisition of the iPad is justified by the fact that it benefits something that is greater than the user's own personal needs (here, environmental considerations). Participants also involve others in the argument when they legitimize the purchase, for example, family, and the feeling of being 'the world's coolest big brother then, like when I come to visit [...] where there are kids and stuff, then it's just to deliver it right away (laughter)' (Ben). Being the kids' hero when he brought the iPad became a reason both for being 'the world's coolest', but also as a form of care of smaller siblings.

On the other hand, Ben also uses another argument—that it was expected from his colleagues at work that he would buy the latest technological device on the market. When asked what kind of other technical gadgets he surrounded himself with, he answered that it may be better to ask what he did not have in his surroundings, and that his colleagues would call him the 'gadget king' (see Table 1). Ben's status as a technology fanatic, and the nickname he received as a result of this, meant that he could also legitimize the purchase by what others expected from him. He had become known for having the latest in audio-visual

equipment and could confirm to those around him that he lived up to the position he had been given. Ben's legitimation becomes part of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which the label he has been given by his surroundings is internalized by himself and becomes part of his self-presentation. However, it is not a given that owning an iPad will give status:

I think there is some status. But I think it's a bit of a question of who the observer is, because some people think it's silly somehow. And that it would rather be the opposite, 'a stupid person who spends money on that sort of thing'. So I think it's a bit of both (Mary).

The Apple brand, knowledge of it, and being in possession of the latest of the latest from this manufacturer will, in some circles, be considered a greater status symbol than in others. For some, adorning themselves with expensive technology is a sign that they are keeping up with the times, have a lot of technical knowledge and satisfactory personal finances. In other groups, this will have the opposite effect in that it is perceived as a pompous display of privileges, that one wants to show off, or that one is inclined to spend money on nonsense.

4.1.3. Legitimation as a Defence

In the questions about the acquisition of the iPad, most of the participants would try to legitimize the purchase in one way or another, both to themselves, to others in their circle of friends or in the actual interviews we conducted in this project. Although there are many nuances here, and many statements that indicate that the relationship between the symbolic and the rational is difficult to distinguish, it appears that the participants try to position themselves in relation to legitimation in two ways. Either they were distancing themselves from the fact that they had to defend the purchase to others, or they defended themselves because they felt ashamed of having bought something expensive and useless—and hence, felt it was a purchase that had to be defended to the outside world. The latter was most common, while the former was expressed through the fact that the participants bought the iPad because they wanted it, and that they did not think others should care about how they spent their money. The core of the argument was that it was their own money and that they could use it for whatever they wanted. Most people, on the other hand, had a feeling that this was a purchase they had to account for: 'I more often feel I have to defend having an iPad than bragging about it in a way' (Christian). This was also expressed as follows: 'And as I said, it's a bit like I feel that I have to defend that I have it, [. . .] and yes I think people who know me are not surprised that I have an iPad' (Lucy). Carl had reached a more two-sided argument for the purchase, as he denied that he was embarrassed over having bought the iPad, but still seemed affected by others' remarks of this being a useless product:

- Carl: It still feels a bit taboo to sit with it. A bit. It feels like you're feeling great. It was a bit like that when one started getting a mobile. [. . .] It was a bit taboo to sit on the phone.
- Interviewer: But you are not ashamed to have an iPad?
- Carl: Nah-hi! I do not, [but you] should not sit and flash it too much. [. . .] Although there are very many people who have it, [. . .] I feel like the thing [. . .] like 'what's the point of an iPad then? You have a computer' [. . .] I cannot say I care about such things, but still you think a little about it.

The fact that the iPad on its launch date did not strictly fill any specific or clarified needs created a wish for users to defend their spending. Others' comments of the iPad being an expensive and redundant product pointed to the fact that its acquisition was expected to be accounted for. This expectation must be seen in relation to the participants being early users, since the interviews were carried out just after the iPad was launched in the Norwegian market late 2010, at a time when there were few who really knew what the iPad was and what kind of application this technological device could have. A 'public ignorance' about the product would necessarily place the 'burden of proof' of the product's

applicability on the early users interviewed in this study. Few could have guessed that this would be a product that would take the entire Western market by storm in the next few years to such an extent that almost nobody would demand buyers a well-reflected answer as to what the gadget should be used for. We will return to this later.

4.2. Brand Trust

In this section, we concentrate on trust and fidelity to Apple as both related to quality and identification with the brands.

4.2.1. Confidence in the Quality of Apple Products

Several of the participants in the study expressed a strong belief in Apple and their products. Although they did not have an expanded knowledge of the products, or had familiarized themselves with competing manufacturers' goods, the Apple brand was a prerequisite for quality:

Mac has an incredibly good reputation from before, sort of. So there are a large number of Mac fans who in a way should have it no matter what it is, as long as it comes from Apple [. . .]. And you know in a way that if you buy a Mac, it's good. That's how it was when my previous PC clicked, and I had to have a new PC right away. So then you either bought a regular PC, and then you have so many brands that you have to check if it is good or not. Or you can just buy a Mac. Then you do not have to check anything (Mary).

For Mary, the brand was a sign of quality in itself, and it did not really matter which other products were on the market. The product also had something immediate attached to it: 'You do not know what to do with it until you hold it in your hand' (Nick). 'You kind of like it automatically' (Celia). The participants showed how being happy with an Apple product made one inclined to buy the next product from Apple, regardless of whether one knew what to use it for. As long as Apple launched it, 'it had to' be a good product; 'I have enough faith in Apple, that their products work, and I have no faith in imitations' (Nick). Confidence in the brand meant that one could buy a product for thousands even if, as one of the participants said, that he was probably 'a little unsure of what [he] actually bought, [..he] did in fact not quite know what it was' (Paul).

That the purchase was legitimized through great trust in the brand was repeated in almost all the interviews. Trust can build on past experience, product design, its popularity, and is often a mix of many different factors. At the same time, there was also another dimension to this, which Carl pointed out, that 'it is seamless, and flows well no matter how you use it. It could look like a bathtub, but people would still buy it because it's cool. And that makes it feel all the more functional'. Hence, it is far more than the physical product that makes Apple products stand out as attractive, and one may, therefore, be inclined to consider the relationship between user and product with an undertone of fetishism, i.e., with an abnormal attraction. Carl defined a line between the product's 'aura' and its functionality. Since the product was 'cool', he considered it to be functional as well.

The attraction to the iPad is based on something more than just the product's design and functionality, as well as aura. For Frida, it was also about some form of community: 'I have seen people sitting in parks and reading on an iPad, and I think that I really have something in common with them'. In other words, trust in Apple is something many people have in common, and it may contribute to perceived belonging to other people, an 'imagined community' [31] or a community on the basis of identification [28]. The community aspect also came to Mary's attention when we asked her what she thought of when she saw another person walking around with an iPad:

I think, 'Hey bro!' (and laughs), no not really, but I think there goes a smart guy—an Apple person. [...] The way I learned Apple products to know, then, there are often some types of artists, musicians and students who use it, who

basically have little money, [...] but they have really invested in it. Because it's about getting such a strong ownership of it, that is, you personify it (Mary).

The products create the basis for a kind of 'Apple community'. Mary connected other types of computers with something more old-fashioned and said: 'Now there's the guy sitting on a pretty "hardcore" work-PC (pointing to a person in the room), but I think he might have wanted to sit with an iPad, he is sort of lagging behind'. For Mary, the iPad represented something 'new and hip', a thing that the modern human being would use. For her, the iPad had to do with identification with something more than the technology itself, but what the new technological widget represented. This takes us further into the topic of technological consumption as an identity marker.

4.2.2. The iPad as Identity Marker

A common feature in the interviews was that many talked about self-presentation in connection with the products. Terms such as 'Apple geek', 'Apple fanatic' and 'gadget king' were descriptions several of the participants used about themselves. Ben, as mentioned earlier, pointed towards his nickname at work, the gadget king, which he accepted as his role, having more or less every piece of technological equipment in the AV [audio-visual] world. Also Carl gave a similar description of himself: 'I've been using [the iPad] a little for reading, obviously. I'm a gadget-maniac', Nick said even more strongly; 'I'm a bit like a "techno whore" maybe (laughs), if it is allowed to say that. I'm "a little" above average interested in the technology that Apple supplies'.

These participants had a clear perception of themselves as above average technology enthusiasts, and acquisition of the iPad was, therefore, both natural and expected, as a result of this interest. In connection with this, it is conceivable that the informants, through their technology consumption, wanted to convey something specific to others. Mary said, for example: 'If it just looked nice, but could not have been used for anything, I would of course not have bought it. But I like that it fits in with the rest of the things that I have'. The iPad was, therefore, selected on the basis that she was already well-integrated into Apple's technological 'ecosystem', and the iPad was a natural choice to create a 'stylistic purity' along with her other products. Continuing this purity may, in many ways, become an expectation towards oneself, as well as continuing a self-expression to the outside world. The various Apple products become, in this context, an identity marker, or as Mary further remarked: 'It's important that the iPad matches the laptop'.

Based on the descriptions that the participants used about themselves, the choice to go purchasing Apple's tablet is not primarily an independent choice, but also an expectation they had for themselves in order to appear in the way they wanted. Purchasing the first generation of the iPad was, therefore, a necessity for maintaining an already established 'frontstage' [20] as technically updated. It was also revealed that this identity construction that Apple products help to maintain can also be a mainstay for a sense of belonging and community. Historically, Apple has stood out so that users of Apple's computers had a clear need for something other than a 'regular' PC.

Earlier, there was this slightly weird group of people that used Apple products. When I started with computers, there were probably ten different systems that existed. And Apple was one of them. I also had an Apple computer very early on—the Apple II. And then Microsoft came and would dominate everything, and then only Apple survived of the rest. So then it was only weirdoes that had Apple—only those who did design, graphic software and so on (David).

David uses the word weirdoes (Norwegian: 'særing'er') here to describe those who used machines from Apple. According to him, this group consisted of those doing graphic design and such, but has also been associated with musicians, filmmakers, and other creative professionals. David pointed out that he himself was out in the Apple landscape early on, having had the Apple II, which was launched as early as in 1977. In this context, 'weirdoes' need not be a negative term, but also a group David could desire to be part

of. He, too, therefore creates a distinction between his own group of quirky and special Apple users, and the other large mass who adopted Microsoft Windows after this became the mainstream choice of operating system. Apple's own ecosystem of hardware and software, which were more closed and internally interconnected, held for many years stand as an unusual rather than a default choice. The experience of belonging to those using Apple and a notion of distance to the other vast majority on Windows can thus be understood as a *communal form* based on identification [28] 'against' a mainstream, or as a consumption-based 'neo-tribe' [27].

For other participants, such a sense of community did not appear. Rather, they experienced Apple products as high status, as Celia stated:

The products are hyped, and that is what gives status. My husband has both a computer and a mobile phone, which is more expensive than mine. More expensive than the Mac. But he does not get any position from it. But people know what a Mac costs [...]. In addition, Apple often releases limited edition products. It gets empty very quickly, so it gives status to be one of those who get it. And before it comes out in Norway, it gives status being in the US and picking it up. Then you are sort of cool, because you have picked up the product in the US—an iPad or iPhone. So, I think the status is also a lot about it coming here so late. [...] When we came home from the US with two iPads, it was a lot of hassle! Everyone was coming over to our house to look at them. When we picked them up, everyone wanted to look at them, and touch them. For no one had such a thing earlier (Celia).

In 2011, the iPad was a brand-new product, and to be the earliest of the early users, either importing the tablet or buying it abroad was required. For Celia, this exclusivity was about being one of the few in Norway with the product, which laid a foundation for a social status. As she put it, it was not just that the products were expensive—as both PCs and certain mobile phones could be even more expensive—but that Apple products were associated with something expensive and exclusive. John pointed more directly to the price aspect as a reason for the status of the products:

- Interviewer: Do you think it gives status to have an iPad?
- John: Yes, I would say so, there is a lot of money in it. So, if you spend money on something that most people do not really need, then it [will give status].

A large part of the 'aura' of Apple products is about it being associated with something exclusive. If you are someone who even acquires the product before it arrives in your local market (in Norway), you join a very exclusive community, which, in itself, gives social recognition. It was, nevertheless, evident that for others, there was an ambivalence within this status aspect that Apple products could provide. Obviously, *conspicuous consumption* does not have to give position and prestige to the person in question, but may rather express a form of vulgar and demonstrative consumption.

5. Discussion: Shameful Technological Impertinence

The analysis shows that the participants experienced an implicit tension—or ambivalence—associated with the purchase, between a form of Protestant morality (shame in relation to spending money on a product that does not meet clearly defined needs) and technological impertinence (shameless pride in buying a future-oriented hip product and a desire to show it off). In the role of an iPad early-user, the participants in this study often took an ambiguous position within this field of tension. This is expressed through the ways in which they legitimized the purchase, both rationally and symbolically. To understand this tension, insights from Weber and Veblen are useful, because they explain both a form of shyness over showing one's own techno-posing pride (Weber) and a formidable confidence in a specific brand's quality and aura (Veblen). In addition, the Norwegian iPad early-buyer stands with one foot in the Nordic culture of austerity and the other in a larger Western consumer society (with huge marketing budgets and spectacular product launches) that legitimizes a partly hedonistic desire for the

latest, even when it should not cover a rational need. When participants in this study mentioned that they did not need to defend their purchase, but at the same time just defended this to us in the interviews, they clarified this split between sober and pleasurable consumption.

5.1. Between Sinful Spontaneity and Patient Domestication

The participants in this study largely acquired their iPad because they wanted it, and it appears that the possibilities of use for many were unclear to begin with ('a toy'), but that possibilities related to use in travel, among others, became evident after a short time of use. As shown in Table 1, the participants had had their iPad between two weeks and one year in the time of interviewing; hence, the possibility of detecting this change in use would differ between the participants in the study. While some experienced the purchase as *sinful spontaneity*, other users discovered the investment making sense, after the product had been owned long enough to be domesticated [32] becoming useful for specific 'local' applications. As pointed out by Tjora within a study of music technology, use of personal technologies can go through usage trajectories, by which different uses are tested over time and only the most potent use will be maintained after a while [33]. In addition to such changes in use, the manufacturer Apple was quick to get individuals and businesses involved in developing app(lication)s, both for entertainment and professional use, at a formidable pace. In this way, a new software ecosystem around Apple's tablet emerged fairly quickly.

5.2. A Technological Ecosystem as a Basis for Trust

For iPad users, the development of apps contributed to a rapidly growing opportunity to integrate the iPad into various functional and professional contexts. Even early users could settle down with an ever-increasing number of apps, and the toy aspect could be pushed into the background. Consequently, the timing of the interviews is important: We know today that the iPad and other tablets have a wealth of different uses, but at the same time, we know that participants in our study could, to a lesser extent, could predict this development—they could have risked acquiring a useless gadget, a flop. However, it is at this point the great trust of Apple as a manufacturer comes in, which may be understood as a level of manufacturer fetishism, but also a well-reasoned faith in Apple's seamless ecosystem, where hardware is supported by tailored operating systems and software, as well as formats for sharing files, movies, music, and the like. In addition, the successful introduction of the iPhone in 2007 may have made the justification for acquiring the first iPad easier [10], by a strengthened enthusiasm among 'Apple believers'. On the one hand, Apple succeeded in mediating this ecosystem to its buyers, by its exclusivity and design approach, and by large-scale launches, fronted by the deceased mythical CEO Steve Jobs. Despite its secrecy related to plans and strategies, Apple has proven to be trustworthy in the sense that products have been carefully planned, both in terms of production quality, ease of use and integration across products, which guarantees added value, especially for the most loyal customers. There are only very few studies of iPad buying decision/consumption, pointing towards aspects such as 'brand addiction' [16], 'brand loyalty' [17], usefulness, ease of use and compatibility [18]. What this study adds is the interpretation of such aspects *as social*, by which decision making, from the most emotional (addiction) to the most rational (usefulness), needed to be accounted for towards various others. Hence, the whole scale of reasons to buy an 'early-stage' product such as the first iPad, from addiction to expected practicality, was negotiated within each user's social sphere. In the case of the iPad, this negotiation is now easier—or less relevant—as the iPad has proven its usefulness for a wide range of applications.

5.3. Ten Years Later: From Shameful Impertinence via Technological Tribal Communities to Mainstream Tools

When we constructed the concept of shameful technological impertinence in our analysis, our sociological lenses were used from the standpoint of users, where technological interest and willingness to spend time and money to 'test' (or play with) new products

and services creates a level of ambivalence. The impertinence here is about a nosy nerdy pride in being able to use one's own resources (time/money) to find out about products in their early stages. The early-buyer of the iPad, however, has had moral anguish related to utility focus, rationality, frugality and sobriety, with Protestant ethics still being a part of Norwegian culture.

The empirical sample of early-buyers—or *early adopters* [2]—is of interest because these participants take the chance of spending time and money on technical solutions that are not necessarily here to stay (although confidence in the ecosystem can mitigate perceived risk). We asked, as a starting point of the study, the question of why people go to the acquisition of a product such as the iPad, then, based on the ambiguity in Apple's launch, exemplified by key figures in the company: the above-mentioned Phil Schiller pointed out that it would create changes in everyday life and Jony Ive thought the product would suit the user. In retrospect, we can safely say that Phil Schiller was the one of these two who best have described the iPad's social meaning. Since the launch it has defined new frameworks for functionality, for domains for technology use and for new user groups. For a number of older people, for instance, the iPad has become a friendly tool for increased (long-distance) contact with grandchildren and great-grandchildren and to stay up to date with the news. The political obsession with iPads in schools as a warrant of 'digital competence', despite a lack of evidence, also shows the political impact this technology has gained. The iPad has changed the everyday lives of many.

We conclude that it is about a playful desire to try out something new, to have confidence in the specific brand, but also to maintain a membership in a tribe-like community [27], which, together, form the human side of a technologically and design-driven ecosystem. In parallel with this, these early users experienced a need to explain their priorities (for themselves and others), in order to curb a feeling of shameful (over)consumption.

6. Conclusions

This article is based on interviews with 14 early-users of the iPad, shortly after it became available in the Norwegian market, and is empirically limited to nuances of individual experiences and explanations. Despite this limitation, the study has a potential for *conceptual generalization* [11] by *category-zooming* [30] into identifying two main accounts, of rational/symbolic/defensive legitimization and brand confidence/identification, that sum up to the concept of *shameful technological impertinence*, as an ambivalence associated with being out early with the purchase and use of new technologies. There is reason to assume that this ambivalence will be particularly relevant when purchasing relatively expensive products immediately after they are launched on the market. In Norway, some of the first buyers of the Tesla electric car may have had a similar sense of ambivalence, with proud environmental awareness and, at the same time, being victims of public criticism of receiving government subsidies for a luxury that only some could afford (there are large taxes on new cars in Norway, but these were cut for electric vehicles). In this sense, the shame (here: that the state subsidizes individual luxuries) and the impertinence (here: to show one's environmental awareness) can be linked to various factors in consumption and spending.

The case of the early iPad has additional aspects—the fact that it neither substituted an existing product, nor had a clearly defined application (quite different from a car). That Apple with the iPad in retrospect succeeded in developing a whole new technological platform may, in fact, have been supported by a heavy 'impertinence-side' as opposed to the 'shame-side' of the concept 'shameful technological impertinence', especially among the tribe of Apple enthusiasts/addicts. Hence, the concept must also be perceived as relational and linked to social interaction, since the users express themselves in the tension between shame and impertinence—between shyness and pride—facing specific individuals (friends, acquaintances, and 'tribe-members') or generalised others. Shameful technological impertinence can thus—as a concept—describe a social-emotional aspect that will, to some degree, regulate overconsumption of technological luxury items. In addition, increased

public knowledge and a growing ethical conscience about the exploitation of scarce natural resources and working conditions within mineral mining for consumer electronics, may lead to a strengthened ‘shame-side’ of the balance. Hence, the balance in this ambivalence is a significant factor in the sociological interpretation of the cognitive dissonance that characterizes attitudes (climate-related conscience) vs. action (consumption).

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