

Brand Faith: How Spiritual Relationships Develop  
Between Consumers and Brands

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**ABSTRACT**

Consumers increasingly seek spiritual satisfaction and existential meaning through brands. However, despite the rising prominence of secular forms of spirituality, consumer-brand relationship research largely overlooks the processes by which consumers initiate, develop, and maintain spiritual connections to brands. Using the concept of faith as a theoretical lens, this paper explores how consumer-brand relationships take on spiritual dimensions. Drawing on an interpretive biographic analysis of in-depth interviews and netnographic data, the authors examine spiritual relationship development processes as they unfold between consumers and brands over time. Findings identify five phases of brand faith development (intuition, association, reflection, affirmation, universalization), which progress from initial attraction to deep conviction. Consumers cultivate faith in brands across these phases through a process of believing in, valuing, and committing to a brand as a sacred entity that acts as a center of spiritual meaning. These findings offer a more nuanced understanding of spiritual relationships between consumers and secular brands than current literature provides. The analysis also examines factors that facilitate or inhibit brand faith development, contributing a contextual understanding of brand faith that accounts for influences arising from an interplay between personal, brand, and marketplace factors that affect consumer spirituality.

*Keywords:* brand faith, consumer spirituality, consumer-brand relationships, spiritual satisfaction, sacred consumption

Consumers increasingly seek meaning, purpose, and even spiritual fulfillment through their interactions with brands (Belk and Tumbat 2005; Einstein 2008; Fuschillo, Cayla, and Cova 2025; Otnes et al. 2018; Ozanne and Appau 2019). Exemplifying a decline in traditional religious participation and a rise in individualized spirituality, nearly one-third of the U.S. population now identifies as spiritual-but-not-religious (Pew Research Center 2021). Yet individuals still have fundamental needs for seeking existential certainty and moral orientation in a world of fear, suffering, and uncertainty (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Lama 2011). Although material pursuits have been criticized for overshadowing moral and spiritual values, many individuals today turn to brands and other non-religious entities (e.g., environmental organizations, political parties) to seek hope, coherence, and direction in their lives (Beaudoin 2007; Edelman 2019).

The impact of brands on personal identity is well-known (Escalas and Bettman 2003; Fournier 1998; Park et al. 2010), but less is understood about how consumer-brand relationships influence spiritual concerns, which involve the pursuit of meaning and transcendence beyond the physical world (Emmons 2000). Additionally, Consumer Culture Theory research has explored the sacralization of consumption (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Buchanan-Oliver and Schau 2019; Kozinets 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005), but it lacks a processual framework for how consumers come to see mundane brands as spiritual entities and how this process unfolds through individual, brand, and marketplace influences over time.

Our research addresses these knowledge gaps, asking: how do consumers develop spiritual relationships with brands? We adopt faith as a theoretical lens to examine how consumers develop spiritual relationships with brands, drawing from religious studies literature, where the concept of faith has been used to understand spiritual connections with religious and

non-religious entities or values (Fowler 1981; Harris, Howell, and Spurgeon 2018). Faith, as conceptualized in this paper, transcends the traditional precincts of organized religion and manifests as a deeply personal process of believing in, valuing, and committing to an entity that acts as a center of existential meaning. Extending the concept of faith to consumer-brand relationships, we introduce brand faith as a developmental process with five phases that explain how consumers experience spirituality through brands over time. We also analyze the facilitating and inhibiting factors that shape this process, specifically how individual, brand, and marketplace factors influence the development of spiritual consumer–brand relationships.

Our research makes two primary theoretical contributions. First, our study expands the consumer-brand relationship (CBR) literature by explaining how consumers develop spiritual relationships with brands over time. Extensive literature has explored functional, affective, and identity-based dimensions of consumer-brand relationships (Albert and Merunka 2013; Khamitov et al. 2019; Park et al. 2010). However, despite the centrality of spirituality to human identity and experience, the impact of spiritual dynamics on the development of consumer-brand relationships remains underexplored. Our study demonstrates how consumers initiate and nurture spiritual consumer-brand relationships, which extends the literature beyond interpersonal relationship analogies (e.g., friendship, flings) to encompass spiritual meaning-making. We also build on Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) studies of brand relationships, which have examined how consumers derive spiritual satisfaction by sacralizing secular brands and linking them to utopia, community, and transcendental experiences (Belk and Tumbat 2005; Buchanan-Oliver and Schau 2019; Fuschillo et al. 2025; Muñiz and Schau 2005; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Our research deepens both the CBR and CCT literature by defining the brand faith development process across five phases, capturing the progression of spiritual consumer-brand

relationships from initial attraction to deep conviction. Importantly, we show that sacredness is not confined to extraordinary settings, but can emerge through ongoing interactions with mundane brands in everyday life. We also examine how consumers can lose faith in brands, highlighting the dynamic aspect of spiritual brand relationships. This framework provides a comprehensive view of how spiritual connections with brands emerge and evolve over time.

Second, we identify facilitating and inhibiting factors at the consumer, brand, marketplace, and societal levels that influence how spiritual relationships between consumers and brands change over time. This analysis contributes to the consumer–brand relationship literature by revealing broader structural and cultural conditions that shape the formation, durability, and fragility of spiritual connections between consumers and brands. In developing this contribution, we respond to calls for deeper examination of how “marketplace dynamics, market actors, and megatrends” shape consumers’ spiritual experiences (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019, 394). The secular spirituality literature has increasingly recognized that secular entities like brands can act as substitutes for traditional religious structures (Carrette and King 2004; Ozanne and Appau 2019; Shachar et al. 2011). However, prior work has not provided a framework explaining how consumers, brands, and the marketplace interact to enable and constrain spiritual consumer-brand relationship development. Our paper demonstrates how individual factors (e.g., spiritual aspirations, religious affiliations) enable consumers to derive spiritual satisfaction from brands instead of or in addition to other entities. Brands can respond through actions that enable or constrain consumers’ achievement of spiritual aspirations (e.g., purpose-driven storytelling, ethically-infused products and services). Marketplace factors (e.g., ideological climates, perceived threats) structure the ways consumers navigate spiritual relationships with brands. In

the following section, we introduce the theoretical concept of faith and explain how and why it provides the ideal lens for analyzing spiritual relationships between consumers and brands.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

Faith

The concept of faith provides the theoretical lens that enables our analysis of spiritual consumer-brand relationship development processes. The exploration of faith extends beyond religious studies into diverse academic fields due to its impact on individual spirituality and its role in coping with adversity and fostering existential meaning (Harris et al. 2018). Both Kierkegaard (1985 [1919]) and Tillich (1957) emphasize that faith includes belief in and a commitment or relationship to God or another entity that embodies a person’s ultimate concerns. Scholars have expanded beyond a Western Christian focus to encompass the diversity found in polytheism, indigenous spirituality, and secular spirituality to redefine faith as a universal human quest for meaning in both religious and non-religious contexts (Hick 1988; Streib 2001). While earlier literature often defines faith as a state of mind or being, such as an unwavering belief to religion, we follow more recent conceptualizations that view faith as a dynamic personal journey, shaped by cultural contexts and found in religious and non-religious contexts (Fowler 1981).

Faith, spirituality, and religion, while interconnected, each play unique roles in human experiences. All three contribute to a sense of existential meaning and can involve personal encounters with the transcendent. Spirituality refers to a broader experience of a mysterious



power that enriches life meaning beyond the physical world, often sought through personal reflection, volunteerism, and belief in a divine presence (Beaudoin 2007). Religion, by contrast, is institutionalized through structured beliefs and practices in religious communities (Smith 2004). Faith is more personal than religion because it is based on a personal journey of meaning-making, rather than participation in a collective framework. Unlike the broader nature of spirituality, faith centers on a specific entity or set of values (Emmons 2000).

Following this holistic perspective, Fowler describes faith as “an orientation of the whole person, giving purpose and goal to one’s hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions” (Fowler 1981, 14). Faith comprises not only a state of belief but a way of seeing and knowing, whereby “one commits oneself to that which is known or acknowledged, and lives loyally, with life and character being shaped by that commitment” (Fowler 1981, 11). As individuals encounter human struggles to find life meaning, their faith can transform and evolve (Laurencelle, Abell, and Schwartz 2002). Fowler’s (1981) theory of faith as a dynamic relationship between individuals and entities they consider sacred provides a widely used theoretical lens for analyzing spiritual development from childhood through adulthood. Applying this faith concept to our research, we propose that consumers’ relationships with brands can also be understood as processes of spiritual meaning-making, influenced by personal growth and contexts. This provides a framework for analyzing how consumers develop spiritually significant relationships with brands and how these relationships evolve to contribute to consumer identity and purpose.

We integrate these prior theorizations to define faith as a process of actively believing in, valuing, and committing to a sacred entity that enhances life meaning. More specifically, *believing* activates hopes and goals oriented toward an anticipated state of the future enabled by a sacred entity; *valuing* considers the sacred entity a center of morality; and *committing*



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3 reinforces spiritual relationships to a sacred entity by acting consistently with beliefs and values.  
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5 These three processes unfold interdependently, with each reinforcing and being reinforced by the  
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7 others. Believing, valuing, and committing are all necessary for faith development, with none  
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9 preceding or causing the others in isolation. This definition bridges multiple theories across  
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11 disciplines, which we examine in relation to each process below.  
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17 *Believing.* Believing in a sacred entity involves a process of actively embracing hoped-for  
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19 visions that go beyond physical evidence, supported by motivated reasoning where conflicting  
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21 information is downplayed instead of objectively evaluated (Beruchashvili, Moisio, and Gentry  
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23 2015). People believe that sacred entities have power that transcends individuals’ capabilities for  
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25 achieving futurity—a state or quality of the future that is central to a person’s sense of life  
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27 purpose (Fowler 1981). These visions vary with the object of faith: some religious traditions  
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29 promise rest or glory in an afterlife (Tillich 1957), environmentalism invokes visions of  
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31 sustainable futures (Johnston 2014), and brands may offer the image of an achievable utopia  
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33 (Belk 2022; Kozinets 2001). Future-oriented visions shape how believers live, linking present  
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35 actions and hoped-for outcomes to enhance a sense of higher purpose (Fowler 1981).  
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42 *Valuing.* Valuing underscores a process whereby individuals come to adopt the mission  
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44 or teaching of a sacred entity as a center of moral principles. Valuing unfolds as a spiritual  
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46 process when frameworks for morality are viewed as originating beyond the physical realm  
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48 (Taylor 1989). Taylor (1989, 100) emphasizes that individuals often locate the source of their  
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50 moral commitments outside themselves, in “a larger, more encompassing reality which claims us  
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52 because it is good.” Sacred entities, such as gods, act as agents determining what is right or  
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wrong and what is meaningful or meaningless (Blanchard et al. 2008). The moral frameworks of many religions involve a sense of absoluteness and universal applicability, which helps to justify individuals' actions relative to religious morality and fosters a connection to something larger than oneself (Durkheim 1973; Kohlberg and Power 1981). In developing faith, individuals endow a specific entity with moral superiority that enables the pursuit of higher values through personal growth or societal improvement (Fowler 1981). As individuals integrate sacred entities into their moral framework, faith becomes deeply engrained in their lives (Dholakia 2016).

*Committing.* The process of faith also involves committing through acts like praying, worshiping, volunteering, donating, sacrificing, and participating in faith communities (Stark and Finke 2000). Previous literature suggests that these acts deepen a practitioner's faith, serving both as expressions of inner convictions and as formative exercises that shape one's spiritual identity (Durkheim 1915). For example, as Muslim converts conduct repeated practices such as prayer and fasting, these acts "constitute and solidify [their] moral commitment over time" (Winchester 2008, 1763). Acts of faith extend beyond mere ritual; they foster self-transcendent motivations like benevolence and generosity, reflecting the character of the sacred entity in individual and community life (Pargament, Ano, and Wachholtz 2005). This reciprocal enhancement of faith-driven actions and self-transcendence illustrates how committing acts reinforce a spiritual journey, which includes believing, valuing, and further committing.

While scholars in religious studies, sociology, and psychology have theorized faith as a spiritual process, its dynamic development has not been examined in consumer research. However, previous research has explored facets of consumer-brand relationships that are relevant to understanding spiritual experiences with brands, such as religious-like brand devotion,

transcendental customer experiences, and rituals in brand communities. In the following section, we explore how a more dynamic, processual theorization of faith can deepen extant understandings of spiritual relationships between consumers and brands.

Spiritual Consumer-Brand Relationships

Two streams of literature are particularly relevant for understanding spiritual relationships between consumers and brands. First, the consumer-brand relationship (CBR) literature theorizes relationships across functional, affective, and identity-based dimensions, grounded in the foundational application of interpersonal relationship theory (Albert and Merunka 2013; Fournier 1998; Khamitov et al. 2019; Park et al. 2010). Second, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research explores various ways in which consumers derive spiritual satisfaction from secular brands (Belk and Tumbat 2005; Fuschillo et al. 2025; Muñiz and Schau 2005; O’Guinn and Belk 1989), as well as brands intentionally designed to provide spiritual utility (Carrette and King 2004; Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Ozanne and Appau 2019). While these streams offer valuable insights, they devote limited attention to the developmental processes by which spiritual consumer-brand relationships take shape and evolve.

Applying the concept of faith to the consumer-brand relationship context, we define brand faith as a process whereby consumers come to believe in, value, and commit to a brand as a sacred entity that acts as a center of spiritual meaning. Using this lens, we examine below how existing literature relates to the core faith dimensions of believing, valuing, and committing. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate the value of a faith lens for studying consumer-brand relationships and highlight important gaps that such a lens can address.

*Believing in Brands.* A wealth of research highlights cases that exemplify consumers believing in brands as platforms for meaning. Within the CBR literature, believing in a brand is typically studied through constructs such as brand trust, attachment, and love (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Park et al. 2010). These constructs reflect consumer confidence in the brand's reliability, symbolic consistency, or emotional significance. However, this literature tends to frame brand belief in affective terms, underemphasizing the ways that believing in a brand can take on spiritual dimensions.

On the other hand, brands increasingly fulfill spiritual roles traditionally held by religious institutions (Einstein 2008; Mathras et al. 2016; Shachar et al. 2011). CCT research makes this shift evident in analyses of the cult-like beliefs observed among Apple communities (Belk and Tumbat 2005), as well as consumers who use the mythic narratives of brands like Hummer to transform their ideological beliefs (Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler 2010). Similarly, the Apple Newton brand community shares future-oriented beliefs that "their faith will be rewarded" through optimistic future expectations for the brand's discontinued products (Muñiz and Schau 2005, 741). However, the concept of faith moves beyond the existence of beliefs to focus on the developmental process of believing, which is intrinsically motivating and directed toward hope for the future. Hope is essential for motivating future-oriented believing, as expressed by the Christian Apostle Paul in Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." Prior research finds that brands like Weight Watchers and Vespa can provide hope by giving consumers narratives and other symbolic resources to construct a sense of purpose or salvation through brand relationships (Beruchashvili et al. 2015; Fuschillo et al. 2025). However, faith draws attention to believing as an active process that unfolds through an

evolving relationship between consumers and brands that become objects of belief. In summary, prior CBR and CCT research has examined consumer beliefs and hopes, but without a focus on how hopes begin and continue to motivate believing as an active spiritual process.

*Valuing Brands.* Valuing unfolds as consumers view brands as sacred entities and centers of moral principles. Wang, Sarkar, and Sarkar (2019) note the elevation of brands to a status that influences identity and morality. Additional work further suggests that brands perceived as purposeful and morally grounded can contribute to eudaimonic well-being (Williams, Escalas, and Morningstar 2022). Yet, the spiritual process of valuing also involves seeing the brand as a source of existential significance that helps consumers orient themselves toward what feels meaningful, right, and hopeful. Belk et al. (1989) show that in sacralizing market offerings consumers endow them with significant moral and spiritual weight. Many Star Trek fans, for example, view the brand as emblematic of utopian values and moral codes (Kozinets 2001). This spiritual valuation fosters a sense of moral righteousness, where opposition to competing brands is seen as a stand against perceived corporate evil, a narrative underscored by the “satanic myths” surrounding figures like Bill Gates in the eyes of Apple fans (Belk and Tumbat 2005, 210). Sacred entities connect individuals and societies to moral values that have profound influences on behavior and decisions (Durkheim 1973). While prior literature has established the moral impact of spiritual brand meaning, it has yet to theorize how such valuing relates to parallel processes of believing and committing. The concept of faith allows us to integrate insights from consumer–brand relationship and consumer culture theory research to better explain how brands come to function as secular anchors of morality in consumer lives.

*Committing to Brands.* Prior research also provides examples of consumers committing to brands through individual and collective action (Muñiz and Schau 2005). By actively participating in brand-related activities, consumers build deeper, more meaningful brand relationships (Cutright et al. 2014). Consumer–brand relationship constructs like brand evangelism (Becerra and Badrinarayanan 2013), brand devotion (Pimentel and Reynolds 2004), and brand loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001) reflect varying degrees of consumer commitment to brands. However, these constructs often conceptualize commitment as a static outcome, rather than exploring how consumer and brand actions interact with brand-provided meanings to sustain spiritual believing and valuing over time.

Consumers also engage in acts of faith that demonstrate or reaffirm commitments, such as rituals, pilgrimaging, quintessence, gift-giving, evangelizing, collecting, and inheritance that help to sacralize market offerings (Belk et al. 1989). Fuschillo, Cayla, and Cova (2025) find many of these spiritually laden acts influence consumer narratives of brand-mediated salvation. These acts strengthen existential connections with brands, exemplified by the clothing worn and rallies participated in by Harley Owners Group members, which reinforce self-transcendent aspirations and moral values such as altruism (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Consumers also sacrifice resources to evangelize brand values to others (Becerra and Badrinarayanan 2013). Similarly, public testimonies given within Weight Watchers communities parallel religious confession rituals (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010). Although such acts have been documented, we examine how active commitment by consumers interacts with brand activities and external cultural and marketplace contexts to support and affirm spiritual believing and valuing.

In sum, prior research lacks theory that integrates the faith dimensions of believing, valuing, and committing that can cultivate spiritual relationships between consumers and brands.

A theoretical lens of faith allows us to analyze how consumers develop these relationships through actions that embody these three interrelated processes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Context: Consumer Faith in Apple and Tesla

We explore consumer faith in Apple and Tesla, as research and popular media show that consumers often form faith-like connections with these brands and the values they represent (Burrows 2010; Lekach 2019). Focusing on these brands allows us to examine faith development in contexts where spiritual relationships between consumers and brands are more likely to emerge, rather than in heterogeneous contexts where they may be less pronounced. Apple and Tesla also provide comparative cases. Apple offers premium but attainable electronics and has undergone leadership changes, while Tesla offers luxury electric vehicles and energy products under consistent leadership since 2003 (Lekach 2019; Moorman 2018). These contrasts allow us to explore how consumer faith evolves through both product shifts and brand disruptions.

Data

*In-depth Interviews.* The first author interviewed 21 consumers between April and July 2021. We recruited initial participants from personal connections, a student-led website of a U.S. public university, and Craigslist (an online classified advertisement website). Subsequent participants joined through snowball sampling. We recruited consumers who self-identified as having “strong relationships” with or being “fans” of Apple (12 participants) or Tesla (9



participants). This enabled a broad exploration of consumer experiences of both spiritual and non-spiritual aspects of their brand relationships. Interviews were conducted in English averaging about one hour. We conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews following the procedure outlined by McCracken (1988). The first author conducted all interviews via Zoom video conferencing, and participants provided verbal informed consent during the session.

Interviews were transcribed, totaling 664 double-spaced pages. Interviews began with grand tour questions, where participants introduced their life histories (McCracken 1988). Participants were asked to share their diverse experiences and emotions about the focal brand from the time they first recognized it until the present. At the end, the interviewer asked participants about their life meanings and goals, their views on religion, and their spiritual concerns to capture internal and external influences on their brand relationships. The interview guide is included in web appendix A. All names of the interview participants were pseudonymized. Table 1 shows the profile of the interview participants.

To further investigate the longitudinal brand faith development through life histories, we created a biography for each interview participant using a biographic approach described by Rosenthal (2004). These biographies enable us to explore how interactions between consumers' life journeys, brand actions, and the marketplace influence spiritual consumer-brand relationships. Two samples of these biographies are available in web appendix E.

**TABLE 1**

**INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT SUMMARY CHARACTERISTICS**

Pseudo-nym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Focal Brand Relationship	Ethnicity and location of residence	Religious identification
Alex	21	Male	Student	Apple	European, USA	Not religious
Amy	23	Female	Student	Apple	European, USA	Not religious
Anika	24	Female	Graduate student	Apple	Indian, USA	Hindu

Christian	28	Male	Taxi driver	Apple	African, USA	Christian
Coco	27	Female	Hairdresser	Apple	European, USA	Christian
Kim	33	Female	Entrepreneur	Apple	East Asian, Korea	Not religious
Mark	32	Male	Administrator	Apple	European, USA	Not religious
Mary	52	Female	Banker	Apple	European, USA	Christian
Sim	23	Female	Student	Apple	East Asian, Korea	Christian
Soo	22	Female	Student	Apple	East Asian, Korea	Formerly Christian; currently not religious
Will	22	Male	Student	Apple	European, USA	Formerly Christian; currently not religious
Yoon	25	Female	Student	Apple	East Asian, Korea	Not religious
Dale	33	Male	General crew	Tesla	European, USA	Christian
Heather	43	Female	Traveler	Tesla	European, USA	Catholic
Karen	38	Female	Entrepreneur	Tesla	European, USA	Not religious
Larry	25	Male	Crypto trader	Tesla	European, USA	Christian
Lee	24	Male	Student	Tesla	East Asian, Korea	Not religious
Myung	35	Female	Housewife	Tesla	East Asian, USA	Christian
Ping	22	Male	Freelancer	Tesla	African, USA	Christian
Riss	24	Male	Entrepreneur	Tesla	Indian, USA	Christian, not regularly practicing
Sami	26	Male	Graduate student	Tesla	Indian, USA	Hindu

*Netnography.* We collected data between July 2021 and Sept 2022 from two online brand forums: Tesla Motors Club and MacRumors. Tesla Motors Club, launched in 2006, is the largest independent Tesla community, with over 225,000 members (Tesla Motors Club 2023). MacRumors, launched in 2000, is the largest independent Apple community, with over 1 million members (MacRumors 2023). Both forums operate independently from the brands and host a wide range of discussions. These emergent online interactions can provide more naturalistic accounts than interview-based recollections (Kozinets 2019). The first author engaged as a netnographic researcher by observing and participating in discussions in both forums.

To analyze longitudinal development of brand relationships, we created biographies for twenty forum users following a novel hybrid approach blending netnographic (Kozinets 2019) and biographic research methods (Rosenthal 2004). To identify users, we used the Scrapy Python Library (Mitchell 2018) to extract posts from both forums. We crawled data from two

subforums, ‘Tesla, Inc.’ on Tesla Motors Club (99,126 posts from August 2006 to September 2021) and ‘Apple, Inc and Tech Industry’ on MacRumors (155,322 posts from October 2006 to September 2021). Due to the large number of posts, we used a dictionary-based text analysis to identify posts relevant to the faith concept (see web appendix B). Following the procedures for creating a customized text-mining dictionary (Marinova, Singh, and Singh 2018), we developed a dictionary of brand faith with 69 terms and wildcards (e.g., epiphany, pilgrim; see web appendix C). Using this dictionary, we filtered 13,698 posts from the dataset of 254,448 posts.

Next, we sorted all forum members based on the frequency of their use of terms from the brand faith dictionary and grouped forum members into top, middle, and bottom groups. We randomly chose seven users from the top group (four MacRumors, three Tesla Motors Club), seven from the middle group (three MacRumors, four Tesla Motors Club), and six from the bottom group (three from each). These users had been active on the forum for 2 to 11 years, with lifetime postings ranging from 41 to 1,637 (see web appendix D). Their varied posting histories and faith-relevant content reflect a wide range of brand involvement. Lastly, the first author read all 5,792 posts from the twenty users and created brand faith biographies by summarizing expression changes in terms of their relationships with brands. Two sample biographies are available in web appendix F. We use pseudo IDs to protect participant anonymity in quoted online data (Kozinets 2019).

### Interpretive Data Analysis

We used interpretive data condensation procedures to identify emergent themes in our dataset (Miles and Huberman 1994). We followed the grounded-theory procedure by Strauss and

Corbin (1994), adapted to examine the longitudinal development of brand faith. The three authors held regular meetings to discuss findings. We iterated between open and axial coding of the interview transcripts, interview participant biographies, online forum data, and forum user biographies. The first author first conducted open coding for 21 interview transcripts and biographies using nVivo 12 qualitative analysis software. Next, the first author and two co-authors conducted axial coding to reveal categories and linkages within and across data (Strauss and Corbin 1994). Then, the first author coded a sample of Tesla and Apple forum posts to compare themes with interview findings, followed by coding the forum user biographies. Throughout our analysis, the first author and two co-authors continuously compared the interpretations with relevant theories until reaching theoretical saturation.

**FINDINGS: ANALYSIS OF HOW BRAND FAITH DEVELOPS**

Our analysis shows how brand faith unfolds through a multi-phased development process. We find five distinct phases—intuition, association, reflection, affirmation, and universalization—through which consumers deepen their spiritual relationships with brands. This development moves through a series of fluctuations, such as moments of doubt and testing, which can converge toward resolution and a deeper spiritual connection in later phases.

Throughout these phases, consumers perform active roles as agents who construct spiritual meaning by believing in, valuing, and committing to brands. Consumer factors (e.g., spiritual aspirations and concerns, religious affiliation, and life stage), brand factors (e.g., brand storytelling, brand ethos, and product quality), and marketplace factors (e.g., ideological climate, spiritual context, and existential threats) can facilitate or inhibit brand faith development.

We illustrate our analysis using excerpts from our full dataset, but we draw heavily on two interview participants, Kim (Apple) and Karen (Tesla), whose experiences illustrate biographic insights and illuminate broader trends observed across our data. Kim is a 33-year-old woman based in South Korea who recently completed a PhD. She describes herself as deeply curious, analytical, self-reliant, and someone who has always gravitated toward solitary pursuits—especially involving technology. Kim has used Apple products for more than 15 years, describing them as central to her academic and personal life. Karen is a 38-year-old woman operating a business in Massachusetts. She describes herself as a lifelong fan of science fiction and someone who closely follows current events, technological developments, and cultural trends. She is single, without children, and maintains a strong, socially embedded network of friends—many of whom work in engineering and tech-related fields. Though she does not own a Tesla vehicle due to financial constraints, she actively follows brand updates, participates in online communities, and has visited dealerships out of personal interest.

By intertwining these consumers' stories with those of other participants, we aim to show how brand faith develops through believing, valuing, and committing at a detailed and personal level, while ensuring our analysis captures a wide spectrum of experiences and perspectives. Committing unfolds through acts of faith, and web appendix G provides a detailed typology with examples of these acts to supplement descriptions in our analysis. Although consumers experience faith in different ways, we identify five phases of brand faith—intuition, association, reflection, affirmation, and universalization—as key periods in consumer spiritual engagement with brands. Table 2 summarizes these phases with data illustrations, and we explain the processes of faith development that unfold within each phase over the following sections.

TABLE 2  
FIVE PHASES OF BRAND FAITH

	Phase 1: Intuition	Phase 2: Association	Phase 3: Reflection	Phase 4: Affirmation	Phase 5: Universalization
<b>Believing</b>	Become intuitively attracted to a brand, based on partial understanding that ignites imaginations and fantasies.  “It was an interview about Elon Musk. And he was talking about his different journeys in life and talking about his humble beginnings in South Africa. And that was very interesting, because I've been to South Africa. I wanted to find out more about Tesla.” – Heather, Interview participant	Strengthen conviction in the brand’s superiority and symbolic truth through interpreting experiences in ways that support initial intuitive beliefs.  “They [Apple] are dominating the market when it comes to technology, and they are getting into many different fields. And, I feel that somehow they’re the best in pretty much everything that they’re trying to do. And, they have a variety of products that are much better than the other brands that are in the market right now.” – Anika, Interview participant	Reflect on whether conviction in the brand’s superiority can be sustained or redefined in light of doubts about brand direction or consistency.  “I’ve been a believer in Apple products since their inception. However, I have to ask, ‘Is Apple Dead?’...I haven’t lost faith in their ability to innovate and surprise, but I think we’re due a bit of evidence that something great is coming...” – Madison, MacRumors; 5/25/2013	Affirm belief in a brand’s future trajectory and centrality to personal meaning, viewing prior doubts as minor aberrations.  “I was not very sure about the auto drive. But, I’m sure Tesla read people’s minds that they cannot [fully] trust or drive in the autopilot mode 100%. So, to address people’s doubts, I’m sure Tesla has developed many safety features to reduce that doubt.” – Myung, Interview participant	Embrace the brand as a holistic belief system aligned with spiritual aspirations and visions for the future.  “It’s the mission that matters more than anything else... The customer service and everything that Apple offers, you are completely empowered to achieve some pretty amazing missions... If something’s complex, how can the capabilities of Apple products help me simplify that? Because that’s all you really need to do.” – Mary, Interview participant
<b>Valuing</b>	Embrace symbolic and mythic values represented by the brand.  “What is going through social media and the news about this company [Tesla] that produces electric cars is a very interesting thing and topic to read about. So, that was much of my main catch about the brand Tesla... I felt the brand Tesla is just a unique company with unique strategies and opportunities for the future.” – Ping, Interview participant	Endorse the brand’s distinctive value as both symbolically meaningful and practically useful.  “There was an epiphany moment when I realized that this is a wonderful brand. Going into the retail store of Apple is an amazing experience. Once you buy one, you buy another and then you buy another... They prove themselves again and again and again... every single time. So every single outreach point to their end customers is the same quality.” – Mary, Interview participant	Reassess, revise, or reject connections between personal and brand values in light of dissonant brand experiences.  “I think it [Apple] is like love hate. I love their products... But, just [as] a brand itself, I don’t really trust it. And, when they’re politically doing something wrong, I feel very bad buying their products. But, I am very attached to it. I just keep coming back. So, it’s a love hate, I love their products, but do hate that they’re causing problems and making me feel this way.” – Amy, Interview participant	Elevate the brand to a sacred entity by aligning the brand with higher values, such as service to the greater good.  “I think Apple gives me something with concrete [tangible] benefit. Whether it is a phone or a product, this [Apple] God gives me something very concrete [tangible] in my hands. But, [a religious] God never gave me like \$1,000 worth of something. It is not like Apple gifts [its products to] me... I guess it [belief in Apple] is spiritual or religious.” – Soo, Interview participant	Uphold the brand’s values as a moral compass, a standard of what is right or wrong.  “Right now I have complete faith that they [Apple] will continue to do the right thing and continue to make products that really help my life... I have faith in the direction of their company ...I know they have goals of reducing their emissions being more environmentally friendly, donating to certain social justice causes and other types of issues. So, I do like their goals as a company.” – Mark, Interview participant



Committing	Start to conduct some acts of faith (e.g., collecting, gift giving) motivated by intuitive attractions.	Conduct acts of faith (e.g., pilgrimaging) to collect more information about the brand.	Conduct acts of faith (e.g., communion) to resolve inner conflicts.	Conduct acts of faith (e.g., sacrificing) to reinforce their reasons for supporting the brand.	Conduct acts of faith (e.g., evangelizing) to help others understand and embrace the brand's future-oriented and ethical values.
	<p>"I think a lot of my friends and family members got me to be involved in Apple products... At the same time, while I heard many friends talk about it, I also saw many adults have iPhones and carry its laptop. I constantly saw its logo." – Alex, Interview participant</p>	<p>"I have been to the Tesla store. But, as I said, I'm not in a position to buy a car. But, I do want to know, and I'm also curious on how they manufacture cars and things. So, probably sometime I'll hopefully visit a factory as well." – Sami, Interview participant</p>	<p>"Here's the letter I'd like to send to Elon Musk... Elon, these issues are not hard to fix, but some will take more effort than others. But if you fix these issues, Tesla will go from a good company with great products to a great company with outstanding products!" – Daniel, Tesla Motors Club; 11/09/2021</p>	<p>"There is no general research that has been certified regarding the proven safety of the autopilot feature in the vehicle... So, it's a concern to me at the moment. But maybe I'll see how it develops and behaves... I am researching it on the internet and checking to see [that] whether it was a false alarm or something... I basically discuss with my friends, check [info] on the Facebook page, or wherever Tesla fans are." – Larry, Interview participant</p>	<p>"The initial reason I started driving for these rideshare services is to bring the EV and the Tesla brand to more people... I've done about a thousand rides... What's great about ridesharing is that the riders are experiencing a real-world trip in the Tesla... They get to see how the Tesla shines at those tasks... I'm getting people into a Tesla before they realize they really want it!" – TexasYogi, Tesla Motors Club; 8/21/2013</p>

### Phase 1: Intuition

We find that strong initial attraction to a brand, fueled by its symbolic and mythic qualities, ignites consumers' imaginations and fantasies in a way that feels intuitive and does not require conscious reflection. Magical and mythic elements play crucial roles in initiating faith (Fowler 1981), and we find that intuitive faith derived from these elements forms a crucial foundation for a deeper and more enduring relationship with the brand.

*Intuitive Faith in Apple.* Reflecting on her early memories of Apple, Kim traces her connection with the brand to a moment in childhood:



“My first encounter with Macintosh was when I was nine at a drugstore. There was a big computer with a beautiful rainbow mark on it... [After that] when I was a high school student, I googled to find an mp3 player with big hard drive. When I saw Apple iPod, I remember that the [rainbow] mark was from Apple. I remembered the logo because the logo itself was beautiful... So, I made my mom to go there [Apple store] and buy it for me. And no one else used the iPod or any Apple product at the time around me.”

Kim begins to form an early relationship with Apple through a memorable encounter with the brand’s rainbow logo—a visually striking image that lingers in her mind. The logo’s aesthetic distinctiveness and symbolic allure spark a sense of wonder and imagination, allowing her to believe in the brand’s uniqueness without the need for conscious reflection. This symbolic attraction begins to take on more personal significance as Apple comes to signify not only aesthetic beauty and innovation, but also a distinctiveness that resonates with Kim’s emerging preferences and aspirations. Persuading her mother to buy the iPod when few others used Apple products reflects an act of faith that begins to commit Kim to a relationship with the brand.

*Intuitive Faith in Tesla.* Karen’s narrative shows a similar pattern of intuitive faith. She described her passion for science fiction aligning immediately with Tesla’s futuristic vision, making her especially receptive to the brand. Around 2017, she began following the company after reading an article about Elon Musk:

“About four and a half years ago, I remember reading an article about Elon himself... I remember just being really interested in the whole concept of having cars that are electric and no longer have to utilize fuel or gas. That was something that really stuck out to me. I am really excited about the technology of the future, the idea of vehicles being autonomous... It

[Tesla] makes me think of the future and what's to come. And, I've always been like a science fiction fan. I like Star Trek and Star Wars and like The Twilight Zone, and it [Tesla] kind of makes me think of cool, like tech, and gadgets and all that type of stuff."

In this intuition phase, Karen begins believing in the brand's mythic promise as a force shaping the future. A resonance between her sci-fi imagination and Tesla's vision elevates her perceptions of electric cars and autonomous driving into the realm of future-oriented fantasy. This belief is accompanied by early valuing, as Tesla evokes a sense of alignment with Karen's identity as a lifelong science fiction fan. Through this lens, she sees Tesla not just as a car company, but as a symbol of a future she hopes to be part of, where innovation, autonomy, and planetary sustainability come together.

Karen also begins committing to the brand through an act of faith: pilgrimaging to a local dealership to interact with the vehicles in person. She says, "I just wanted to get to see them up close... Oh my god, it was awesome. It was a really cool experience." The visit is visually exciting and emotionally memorable, creating a connection to the brand's symbolic world.

Intuitive faith, initiated through symbolic resonance, is also reflected in Ping's account, "They [Tesla] are the next big thing... At the next level of technology, we will focus on global challenges. We are moving away from fuels and petroleum. I think Tesla is a unique company with very good strategies that are focused on the future." Like Karen, Ping's faith is grounded in an intuitive sense that the brand represents a meaningful and transformative direction for society. These expressions illustrate how narratives of imagined futures shape early spiritual connections to brands, even before consumers can fully articulate why those connections matter. Notably, Ping is also a devout Christian—yet his admiration for Tesla expresses a spiritual imperative that aligns with, but is not confined to, institutional religion. He explains, "Tesla reminds us that we

are all obliged to make the world a better place. My mission is aligned with this brand.” Secular brands can activate spiritual sentiment by providing transcendence, moral vision, and a sense of collective purpose—traits typical of religious systems reimaged in a marketplace context (Beaudoin 2007; Belk 2022).

*Facilitating and Inhibiting Factors.* Consumers’ intuitive faith in Phase 1 is facilitated by the interplay of personal, brand, and marketplace-level factors that make them especially receptive to this initial attraction. At the personal level, Kim’s early relationship with Apple is shaped by life stages and existential concerns. “I was a kind of loner, I mean, an outsider, [throughout] my whole school life,” she recalls, reflecting a childhood marked by social isolation and a turn toward technology for comfort and self-expression. Apple offers a symbolic solution to her need for belonging and self-definition. At the brand level, both Apple and Tesla offer emotionally evocative and symbolically rich messaging. For Kim, Apple’s rainbow logo leaves a lasting sensory impression, while the brand’s emphasis on creativity nonconformity through its stated mission to “think different” affirms her identity and aspirations. Similarly, Tesla’s brand narrative centers on futurism and technological progress, values that resonate with Karen’s fascination with science fiction and innovation. At the marketplace level, cultural disillusionment with traditional institutions further enables consumers to develop intuitive faith in brands. “I don’t have any faith in pretty much most political leaders in our country,” Karen explains. She views Elon Musk as an embodiment of the moral and mythic dimensions of Tesla, and as a charismatic leader she views in contrast to her disillusionment with political figures<sup>1</sup>. While not all participants in our data express faith tied to charismatic leadership, a leader’s vision can serve

<sup>1</sup> Our interviews took place prior to Musk’s controversial and very public role in Donald Trump’s 2024 presidential campaign and administration, so Karen and others did not consider Musk a political figure at this time.

as a catalyst for belief, reinforcing the brand's symbolic authority and spiritual appeal. In a cultural climate where brands increasingly serve as sources of aspirational meaning, consumers like Kim and Karen initiate intuitive faith in brands.

Previous literature shows that consumer-brand relationships are shaped by how a brand's visual and functional features match individual preferences and aesthetic tastes (Fajardo, Zhang, and Tsiros 2016). However, brands' mythic and symbolic aspects can also lay a foundation for faith development by sparking imaginative beliefs and introducing new ways to value life. These elements enable brands to transcend their material offerings and become sources of existential meaning and imagined future, echoing the early stages of religious faith development (Fowler 1981; Streib 2001). Intuitive faith marks the beginning of a deeper spiritual relationship.

While the intuition phase is critical for establishing an initial connection and sparking faith, it is subject to vulnerability. Intuitive faith relies on emotional responses to a brand's symbolic qualities, making consumers susceptible to disillusionment if brands fail to meet elevated expectations. Superficial engagement at this stage can also be quickly broken by more compelling alternatives. The following section investigates successful navigation from intuitive faith, represented by Phase 1, to a conscious, informed faith represented by Phase 2.

## Phase 2: Association

Following intuitive faith, consumers start to associate symbolic perceptions of the brand with new information and experiences. Associating symbolic understanding with practical knowledge is essential to adopting spiritual philosophies (Emmons 2000). We find that because consumers are motivated to strengthen and support their intuitive conviction in a brand, they

amplify information that supports their beliefs while downplaying conflicting details through a motivated reasoning process (Kunda 1990).

*Associative Faith in Apple.* For Kim, this phase marks the association of her initial symbolic attachment to Apple with accumulating cognitive and experiential knowledge. Drawn first to Apple’s aesthetics and symbolism, Kim begins to gather practical knowledge through product use and ongoing research. She reflects:

“At that time, I listened to music a lot, so I needed an mp3 player with the big storage. And, iPod was the only mp3 player with HDD... I was really satisfied with this experience [using iPod], and not just with the functionality but also the design. Apple gave a kind of membership and sense of belonging to the brand... I kept searching online and read the [specs] of Apple products. They were really interesting products.”

At this stage, Kim’s belief begins to emerge as her conviction in Apple’s functional reliability becomes associated with, and interwoven into, her faith in the brand’s symbolic meaning of creativity, distinction, and community. Her belief is continually reinforced through hands-on experience, product performance, and accumulated knowledge. The convergence of cognitive validation (e.g., product use, research, expertise) and symbolic resonance (e.g., innovation, alignment with values) begins to build her conviction that Apple is a superior brand. As her knowledge grows, her valuing of the brand evolves to a lived appreciation and deeper understanding of Apple as both practically beneficial and symbolically meaningful. She explains, “When I go to the Apple Store, the employees of the store guess, ‘Oh, do you have a job related to Apple?’ And, I say, ‘No, but I’ve known and used these [Apple] products for a very long time. I have a lot of knowledge on them...I know more about Apple [than HP or Samsung, which I

used before]. It made me the believer of this Apple religion.” Accumulating experiential expertise about Apple leads her to consider the brand as a meaningful presence in her life and associate her identity with the brand. From this point, she starts to anchor her belief in the brand as a kind of lived religion.

Kim’s committing becomes visible through repeated actions, such as keeping her personal blog, which she began not for others, but as a space to “organize my thoughts and my experience.” Over time, however, it evolved into a platform offering guidance on Apple’s note-taking apps, stylus precision, and ecosystem. The blog serves both as a digital archive of practical know-how and as an act of faith involving sharing and evangelizing.

*Associative Faith in Tesla.* A similar pattern emerges in Karen’s case, where initial intuitive attraction is deepened through an active process of information seeking that reinforces her emerging conviction in the brand’s superiority. Karen explains:

“Maybe three or four months from when I first found out about Tesla, I liked to research and dig into it. And then I kind of formulated thoughts and opinions at that point... On a daily basis, I read something or did some type of interaction that involves Tesla, whether it be reading an article or talking to a friend about it. Checking out its website and googling Tesla to see what is out there. From that, I could see that they are on the forefront of electric vehicles. They’re doing amazing things with technology and that’s how they set themselves apart. I can’t think of [an]other company in the market to say that about... I know some people complain about Elon’s political views. But right now, I’d say that I have 10 out of 10 faith in Tesla confidently... The connection [with Tesla]—innovation, progress, moving forward—like, that is the association in my head I have.”

Karen’s initial intuitive attraction to Tesla motivates her to actively seek out information and experiences that she can associate with a nascent conviction in the brand’s superiority, as a company “on the forefront of electric vehicles.” Karen’s unwavering positivity reflects a process of motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990; McLaren 2021), where she acknowledges criticisms (e.g., Elon Musk’s political views) only to quickly downplay them and reaffirm full faith in Tesla. Rather than neutrally weighing mixed signals, she selectively filters and interprets information in ways that protect her emerging brand faith. Her narrative also exemplifies valuing the brand as a source of both symbolic and practical goodness. She associates the brand’s mission and the “amazing things” it accomplishes with her valuation of technological progress, innovation, and future-forward thinking. This association enables Karen to see the brand as an extension of her goals and identity.

Committing emerges for Karen through consistent acts such as tracking Tesla’s activities and engaging in discussions with fellow enthusiasts. Her sustained involvement amounts in some cases to what Belk et al. (1989) describe as acts of sacrifice—voluntary devotion of personal resources as a deep commitment that helps sanctify secular objects. Our findings show how symbolic attraction initiates meaning-making and co-evolves with emerging knowledge, laying the groundwork for actions that may take on sacrificial qualities, as consumers deepen their emotional and cognitive investment in the brand.

*Facilitating and Inhibiting Factors.* Several factors facilitate or constrain consumer engagement in this phase of integrating symbolic meaning and cognitive understanding. At the individual level, a growing personal need to preserve and rationalize initial brand faith often stems from underlying desires for coherence in one’s life narrative. Kim’s desire to “research



and dig into” Apple topics daily becomes a ritualized act of seeking. She begins to rely on the brand as a symbolic and practical anchor that helps sustain her sense of self.

At the brand level, facilitating factors include the brand’s ability to maintain coherence between product design, functionality, and symbolism. When brand offerings consistently reflect core brand values, consumers are more likely to interpret their experiences as validating existing beliefs. Karen, for example, connects Tesla’s consistent innovation and technological leadership with her personal admiration for progress, reinforcing her conviction that “they are on the forefront of electric vehicles.” This consistency motivates her continued search for information, filtering out of contradictory messages, and reinforcement of belief through cognitive and emotional investment. At the marketplace level, the abundance of online content, including tech journalism, user reviews, and launch events, creates a cultural infrastructure that encourages the ongoing engagement that supports faith development.

The association phase of brand faith, akin to a honeymoon period where positive attributes are magnified, is crucial for brands as it sets the stage for either faith strengthening or disillusionment (Blut et al. 2011). Moving beyond the theories of Piaget (1952) and Fowler (1981), which heavily emphasize cognitive processing in constructing meaning, our analysis explains how symbolic values reinforce consumers’ early brand attraction based on motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990). This can lead to a biased evaluation of the brand, where positive aspects are magnified while negative aspects may be downplayed or ignored (McLaren 2021). However, as consumers spend more time and money with a brand, increased information and experiences also create susceptibility to doubts or questions that can destabilize faith.

### Phase 3: Reflection

Doubts are central to faith development (Fisher 2017; McLaren 2021). During the reflection phase, instead of abandoning initial convictions in the face of contradictory information or experiences, many consumers actively seek validation to align prior perceptions with a more nuanced understanding of the brand. Although negative brand information and experiences can pose challenges to faith, consumer actions can enable resilience through doubt.

*Reflective Faith in Apple.* Kim’s narrative exemplifies this reflective process. Trained in analytic philosophy and attuned to skepticism, Kim nonetheless forms a strong symbolic conviction in Apple’s superiority. However, following Steve Jobs’ death, she entered a period of doubt, questioning whether Apple could sustain its innovative capacity and visionary identity:

“There was a short period of time having doubt about the brand Apple, after Steve Jobs died, who was the icon of Apple. So, I tried gadgets from other brands... I tried HP computers and also a Samsung Galaxy Tab... I spent a lot of time to resolve my doubts by searching [for] information about the brand more.”

Kim’s faith in Apple, initially inspired by the brand’s innovative ethos under Steve Jobs, was put to the test following his passing. Her period of reflection—exploring other brands and extensively researching Apple—illustrates a deliberate effort to reconcile prior convictions in the brand’s superiority with the evolving identity of the brand. Kim confronts doubts rather than disengaging or merely accepting brand change. She experiments with alternative brands and devotes considerable time to discerning whether her conviction in the brand can be sustained or must be redefined in light of new leadership and direction. As her reflective work unfolds, Kim actively reassesses the alignment of Apple’s current identity and the values she long associated

with the brand. During this time, she begins to notice signs of change, complaining that “sometimes their new products are not that innovative.” These moments of dissonance prompt her to reassess what she values in the brand, considering whether Apple’s evolving direction still reflects the admiration that initially inspired her faith.

During this period of reflection, Kim maintains ongoing engagement with Apple, continuing to commit to the brand through acts of faith that help resolve inner conflicts triggered by her doubts. Rather than disengaging from the brand, she turns to ritualized behaviors, including maintaining her personal Apple blog, watching product announcements in real time, and experimenting with new Apple devices. These acts of faith proactively manage dissonance and reconstruct a sense of alignment between the brand and her personal values. Doubts and testing are natural, and they serve as valuable opportunities to deepen and solidify faith, reflecting the dynamic ups and downs common to spiritual relationships (McLaren 2021).

*Reflective Faith in Tesla.* In contrast to Kim, Karen’s experience illustrates a more anticipatory form of reflection, emerging not from direct brand failures or leadership disruptions but from imagined scenarios and internal value checks. She asks herself, “If it was a case that there was a hostile takeover, or shareholders wanted to throw him [Musk] out... I’d definitely have more of a negative opinion or impression at that point.” Karen proactively rehearses hypothetical disruptions to test the resilience of her conviction in Tesla’s superiority. These moments of internal reflection suggest not a weakening of belief, but a deepening of it. Through quiet reflection, doubts and questions can prompt deeper spiritual relationships with brands.

To resolve uncertainty regarding value alignments, Karen sustains her commitment to Tesla by interacting with brand communities. She explains, “There are a few groups on

Facebook that I joined... I follow some pages on Twitter... I have a sound[ing] board that I can talk to and kind of bounce ideas and have discussion with, which is awesome. That’s what makes it that much better.” Similar to religious communion, this act of faith serves to recommit Karen to the brand through ritualized behaviors allowing her to maintain alignment between Tesla’s evolving identity and her personal convictions.

We similarly find that online brand forums function as collective spaces for navigating uncertainty, restoring coherence, and reinforcing faith through peer interaction. Petron, an active member of the Tesla Motors Club from 2013 to 2021, began participating in the forum by posting an expression of his conviction in the greatness of Tesla. However, in February 2014, this user began describing doubts stemming from reliability issues:

“I love EVs and want Tesla to do great but sometimes they really get it wrong. Last summer we couldn’t charge at a Supercharger and get towed... Yesterday, on the way to Tahoe the car would not Supercharge in Vacaville – same fault as before... Now, we’ll see if they actually fix the problem this time.” (02/12/2014)

Petron’s post hints that the user still wants Tesla to succeed, but repeated service failures cause the user to rethink whether the brand can retain its superiority in the future. About two weeks later, Petron describes that Tesla serviced their car “for 8 days, which we didn’t mind for a quality job and which we felt we got in the end” (02/28/2014). However, Petron’s doubts continued to resurface on the forum through continued product failure issues, such as wall connector malfunctions, the introduction of connectivity charges, and door handle issues with Model 3, which were exacerbated by lengthy wait times for customer service. Despite these concerns, Petron continually participates in discussions that celebrate Tesla’s evolution and defends the brand actively against competitors: “This pisses me off. I wonder if this is [Amazon

CEO] Bezos poking back at Elon?” (12/29/2020). Despite ongoing frustrations, Petron sustains commitment to the brand through continued product use and forum evangelization.

*Facilitating and Inhibiting Factors.* Reflection is facilitated and inhibited by multiple factors across personal, brand, and marketplace levels. At the personal level, both Kim and Karen enter the reflection phase with strong predispositions: Kim as a philosophically trained skeptic and Karen as a tech-oriented business person. Their capacity for critical evaluation, combined with emotional investment in the brand’s ideals, enables them to face dissonance without immediate disengagement. At the brand level, Tesla’s positioning around sustainability and innovation reinforces Karen’s admiration and gives her a stable basis for anticipatory reflection. However, when brand actions diverge from these symbolic expectations—as in Petron’s experience with Tesla’s service inconsistencies—reflection becomes riskier, forcing consumers to test whether their faith can be reestablished. At the marketplace level, community structures play a pivotal role. Karen turns to social media groups for real-time value alignment, while Petron leverages the Tesla Motors Club forum to openly articulate and negotiate his doubts. These digital environments function as collective sensemaking spaces, providing emotional and epistemic support that facilitates the endurance of consumer faith.

Brand factors become especially critical during this phase, as they can inhibit or facilitate reflection processes. When a brand fails to uphold its expected identity and moral position, the reflection phase may lead to disillusionment. Negative brand actions can result in unfavorable media coverage, creating clashes with consumers’ beliefs and expectations, and prompting them to re-evaluate their commitment. This risk is illustrated vividly in the case of Dupont, an active

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2  
3 user of MacRumors from 2015 to 2018, who posted a thread with a title, “APPLE: The Eulogy”  
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5 with an image of lightning in a dark sky with Jesus holding an iPhone:  
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8 “Apple is not what it used to be. Constant failures with follow-up apologies just can’t sustain  
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10 this company any longer. With the last releases of Apple products, I’ve just gotten tired. It  
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12 just fails after failing and failing... Every single product in Apple’s lineup has a fault... So  
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14 when you see a crowd at Apple Stores, they’re not buying anything; they’re trying to fix their  
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16 devices!... This is the end of the road... This is The Eulogy. Apple: The Company of  
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18 Yesteryear. I honestly haven’t been impressed with anything Apple has released in the last 5  
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20 years. Apple is not indestructible. Wait! Look at the numbers! Everything they built is going  
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22 to fade... NO HOPE, NO CHANGE, NO MAGIC FROM APPLE.” (Dupont, 12/3/2016)  
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26 What distinguishes this case is not just the brand’s repeated shortcomings, but a belief in  
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28 the brand’s inability to restore symbolic alignment with important moral values over time.  
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30 Earlier in the faith development process, Dupont may have interpreted the same crowded Apple  
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32 Store as evidence of the brand’s popularity or success; now, the user takes this observation as  
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34 proof of failure and decline. Motivated reasoning continues to shape faith development during  
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36 the reflection phase, but continued disillusionment can refocus consumer motivation toward  
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38 seeking and finding negative brand meanings. Dupont’s eulogy signals a symbolic severance  
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40 resembling bereavement, where the user grieves a loss of hope and identity previously found in a  
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42 relationship with the brand (McDonald 2020). Unlike brand loyalty betrayals (Reimann et al.  
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44 2018), spiritual doubt compels consumers to confront existential tensions between their personal  
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46 values and the brand’s evolving identity.  
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51 Previous studies have viewed consumer doubts as detrimental to brand relationships,  
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53 suggesting skepticisms that erode trust (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán 2001). Instead,  
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our research suggests that doubts can act as a catalyst, prompting consumers to critically evaluate the alignment between a brand's promises and its actual performance rather than merely accepting brand narratives. Overcoming doubts provides an opportunity for strengthening faith by reassessing a brand's authenticity, akin to the service recovery paradox, where customers often view companies more favorably after they effectively resolve a service failure (McColl-Kennedy and Sparks 2003). However, we emphasize not just brand actions, but also consumer actions and motivations to restore their faith. This adds a dynamic layer to understanding how consumer faith can be restored and enhanced, highlighting the crucial role of consumers in co-creating meaning and shaping their brand perceptions.

#### Phase 4: Affirmation

After reflecting on the brand in light of observed failures and negative information, we find consumers affirming their faith in the brand's superiority by linking it with higher values and recasting previous doubts as minor aberrations. Through affirmation, consumers develop personal myths that sanctify the brand and grant it the benefit of the doubt, enabling them to maintain faith through future disruptions.

*Affirmative Faith in Apple.* As described in the previous phase, the death of Steve Jobs prompted Kim to question Apple's future and whether it could uphold its legacy of innovation. However, her experience with the Apple Pencil becomes a pivotal moment of reaffirmation:

"Apple Pencil was not the product that Jobs invented... He always said, 'You can write letters with your fingers, so we don't need a pencil.' So, he didn't like the idea of inventing



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3 this Apple Pencil... Tim Cook was the one who led the invention of Apple Pencil. So, yeah,  
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5 after the invention of Apple Pencil, I got my faith back... With the invention of Apple Pencil,  
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7 it literally changed my life into a paperless life. I can have all of my books to read on iPad...  
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10 Even after finishing my PhD, I don't have many books on my shelf.”

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12       Experiencing the Apple Pencil—an innovation introduced under Tim Cook’s  
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14 leadership—marked a turning point in Kim’s reaffirmation of brand faith. It restored her belief  
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16 that Apple could still innovate in meaningful ways, even without Steve Jobs, allowing her faith  
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18 to shift to a conviction in the brand’s broader vision. The Apple Pencil also deeply resonated  
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20 with her pursuit of a paperless, efficient lifestyle, aligning with her values of simplicity and  
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22 innovation. For her, Apple is not merely a functional tool, but a brand that enables a meaningful  
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24 way of life. Kim’s actions reflect ongoing rituals of faith that involve personal sacrifice. When  
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26 the Apple Pencil launched, she mobilized her mother for a time-sensitive errand: “I made my  
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28 mom go to the store and buy it... It was the first day that this Apple Pencil product landed in  
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30 Korea. My mom said, ‘You made me go to the store and buy this pencil thing in 16 minutes,’ so  
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32 yes, you are a believer.” This moment reflects sacrifice by proxy, as she mobilized a family  
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34 member for a time-sensitive, brand-driven errand. The same sacrificing acts of faith conducted  
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36 out of exploration or enthusiasm in earlier phases now reflect a deeper existential conviction.  
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45       *Affirmative Faith in Tesla.* A similar pattern of reaffirmation and commitment can be  
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47 seen in Karen’s relationship with Tesla. Unlike earlier phases marked by fascination or hopeful  
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49 expectation, her belief is now stabilized by deliberate mental and emotional work, tested and  
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51 strengthened through hypothetical concerns and self-questioning. She acknowledges, “I hope  
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53 [Tesla] continues. Hope it isn’t doing anything to mess it up,” an admission that reflects prior  
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3 uncertainty. However, instead of disengaging, she used these reflections to reaffirm her faith in  
4 the brand's direction: "I really get excited because I'm so positive and hopeful about what's to  
5 come regarding that stuff [autonomous vehicles]."

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10 Valuing for Karen also matures beyond appreciation for product and service quality, to  
11 elevate Tesla as an embodiment of shared moral ideals: "I've been a huge climate change person  
12 for years... the idea of having products that are practical, simple, that are not doing damage to  
13 individuals or to our planet is crucial for me." Tesla's technological mission is thus interpreted  
14 through an ethical lens. When imagining the brand's disappearance, she says, "I'd be very  
15 disappointed... it'd be more about the idea of getting cars that are more autonomous and  
16 sustainable... [without Tesla] we're going to have to wait longer to get there." For her, Tesla's  
17 role is to advance civilization. This framing reflects how the brand has become aligned with  
18 Karen's values of responsibility, futurism, and societal good.

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31 Continued committing is evident in Karen's repeated, ritualized acts of faith that  
32 reinforce her support of the brand, despite lacking the opportunity to purchase a Tesla vehicle. "I  
33 go on the website, I follow Tesla on social media, I look at the tweets, I pay attention to all that  
34 type of stuff." These ongoing behaviors reinforce and justify her reasons for supporting the  
35 brand, reminding herself of Tesla's innovations, values, and vision in ways that keep her belief  
36 emotionally and cognitively grounded.

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45 Dadair, a user of Tesla Motors Club from 2018 to 2021, exemplifies the process of  
46 affirming faith by responding to user complaints about Tesla charging station failures:

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49 "Since we have no idea why they [Tesla chargers] aren't on, it only makes sense to give  
50 Tesla the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps there's a power problem upstream, perhaps there's  
51 some other reason we don't know (12/04/2019)...I very much doubt that the problem is with  
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the cars (cold, battery types or size, something else). Most likely, Tesla or the electrical companies are still learning about them. I’m sure it’ll be sorted out soon enough. We get the newest. We get the fastest. We also get to be where problems are worked out.” (12/27/2019)

Dadair’s decision to give Tesla “the benefit of the doubt” could be interpreted as brand loyalty. However, unlike conventional loyalty based on consistent product performance and satisfaction, Dadair’s faith in Tesla remains intact despite tangible product failures and mixed signals from the brand. His justification for these challenges points to a deeper commitment, where Tesla represents not only a brand but also a moral cause and a hope for the future that aligns with his personal values. Consumer actions in the face of doubts can constitute a leap of faith (Kierkegaard 1985 [1919]), which reflects a willingness to look beyond current setbacks, believing that the brand’s mission—focused on innovation, sustainability, and pushing technological boundaries—will ultimately prevail. Challenges associated with this leap are reframed as necessary sacrifices for the larger cause represented by Tesla’s vision and values of innovation, which reflect consumers’ hopes for the future and a sense of morality.

*Facilitating and Inhibiting Factors.* At the personal level, affirmation is facilitated by a consumer’s emotional, cognitive, and spiritual capacity to reinterpret doubt through a lens of symbolic continuity. Consumers engage in what we term spiritual myth-making, where brand failures are linked to narratives of personal growth, self-alignment, and reaffirmation. This process is often grounded in the consumer’s identity work and life narrative: brands become part of how individuals make sense of who they are and what they stand for. For example, Kim’s shift to a paperless academic life enables her to see Apple not just as a tech company, but as a

tool for intellectual and moral progress. Similarly, Karen's environmental commitments allow her to interpret Tesla as a partner in a larger mission of planetary care.

At the brand level, affirmation is more likely when the brand maintains symbolic continuity, even amid change. While charismatic leaders like Steve Jobs can embody a brand's ethos (Belk and Tumbat 2005), our research shows that faith can be sustained through brand offerings that feel consistent with the brand's identity. Kim's reawakened belief after the release of the Apple Pencil demonstrates how consumers can shift from leader-driven to brand-driven faith. When brand offerings reflect consistency with core values, such as innovation, design integrity, or moral progress, they can enable consumers to reinterpret doubts as temporary setbacks or even as supporting events in a broader personal myth of self-transcendence. At the marketplace level, affirmation is supported by cultural narratives, technological trends, and consumer communities that co-create and reinforce brand mythology. Like the Star Trek fans Kozinets (2001) describes, participants like Dadair contribute to a shared mythology of Tesla by offering communal interpretations and reframing failures as necessary steps toward a greater mission. These collective efforts help sacralize the brand as an entity offering meaning that transcends products or individuals. In this affirmation phase, consumers justify and rationalize the brand's actions, even when faced with negative information, creating personal myths that sanctify the brand and allow them to maintain their faith through future disruptions.

#### Phase 5: Universalization

Through repeated cycles of reflection and affirmation, consumers can ultimately embrace a brand as a holistic belief system aligned with their spiritual aspirations for the future. They

internalize brand ideals as a personal life mission or purpose, aiming to cultivate a meaningful and moral future for themselves and society. While not all consumers in our data reach this phase, as consumers develop universalized faith, their actions take on an ethical and existential intensity as the brand becomes a moral reference point giving direction to broad domains of life.

*Universalized Faith in Apple.* Kim’s narrative exemplifies the universalizing phase of brand faith development. After years of intuitive connection, experiential association, and reflective reaffirmation, Apple is a sacred presence woven into her identity and life vision:

“Apple is my brand and my religion because Apple made my dreams come true twice already. I think making my dreams come true is the territory of God... The first dream that Apple made come true was the invention of iPhone. When I was a little girl like seven or eight years, I wished I could carry my encyclopedia in my pocket. My hobby was surfing the internet itself, and before the internet era, I used the encyclopedia a lot. With this new smartphone, I could literally carry the internet in my pocket... that made my dream come true... The second dream was about a paperless life. I hate papers. Sometimes you can find bugs in old books, and you often get paper cuts on your fingers. With the invention of Apple Pencil, it literally changed my life in a way into a paperless life... The paperless life—it was the second dream that Apple made come true.”

Kim’s account exemplifies the culmination of brand faith in the universalization phase. Apple has become sacred to her life and aligned with her vision of a meaningful, purpose-driven future. By attributing to Apple the fulfillment of her personal dreams and locating it “in the territory of God,” Kim frames the brand as a spiritual agent with life-shaping influence. Unlike brand trust, which is grounded in expectations of reliability and consistency (Chaudhuri and

Holbrook 2001), Kim's belief is contingent on the brand's ability to give shape and meaning to her aspirations and worldview. Her values of knowledge access and streamlined productivity are inseparably intertwined in Apple's values, as the brand becomes a moral reference point through which she interprets what constitutes a better, more purposeful life.

Kim's commitment deepens through her acts of evangelizing, such as persuading her mother to buy Apple products, sharing transformative experiences, and weaving the brand into her everyday academic and creative life. By living her faith through these acts of faith, Kim allows Apple to "animate [her] and give shape to the force field of [her] life" (Fowler 1981, 14). Her narrative reveals how brand faith, when universalized, evolves into a comprehensive belief system that shapes one's moral orientation, self-concept, and engagement with the world.

Similar to Kim's biography, Mark, a 32-year-old interview participant describes:

"Apple was the catalyst for me to look more into minimalism as a concept. I like it in my devices, but I also like it in other areas of my life. Like my bedroom, or how I design my apartment, all those things.... It [Apple] means, like, structure and organization that ties a lot of things in my life together very nicely in a way that I appreciate. It streamlines things in a way that I can get the most out of what I'm doing with my time."

Apple acts as more than just a provider of products for Mark; the brand serves as a catalyst for adopting broader values such as minimalism, influencing the design and organization of his living spaces. Mark's alignment with Apple leads to a broader reorganization of his time and physical environment, suggesting that the brand has been internalized as a framework for living intentionally and efficiently. In universalized brand faith, the brand's values are adopted as moral principles guiding a consumer's vision of what is better or right.

Yoon, a 25-year-old interview participant, illustrates the expansion of brand faith into social domains, saying, “I don’t really want a boyfriend who uses Galaxy [Samsung branded phone]... I don’t hate people who use Galaxy, but I will try to persuade them that they should use Apple as well.” Apple, for Yoon, becomes a symbol of compatibility, value alignment, and moral belonging. Brand faith can operate as a lens for evaluating others and making decisions about intimacy, trust, and lifestyle alignment.

*Universalized Faith in Tesla.* While Karen’s journey with Tesla unfolds across phases of intuitive attraction, reflective engagement, and growing affirmation, at the time of our interview, her faith only approaches universalization, where the brand offers a holistic sense of hope and direction for the future:

“First and foremost, I have faith in their [Tesla’s] mission objective overall. Obviously, in order to buy a product, you have to have faith in it. I have a very positive and good impression of that company. I certainly think, with technology in our society, that stuff excites me. And I hope that companies like Tesla continue to forge ahead. It makes me feel so optimistic about the future.”

Karen integrates Tesla into her broader worldview as a source of existential hope and moral direction. Unlike earlier cases such as Kim or the Apple participants whose faith was grounded in everyday interactions with products, Karen does not describe regular use of Tesla products and has not purchased them due to economic limitations. Instead, her commitment is rooted in what Tesla stands for. She repeatedly affirms belief in Tesla’s “mission” and expresses hope that the company “continues to forge ahead.”



Heather is an interview participant who owns a Tesla Model S and exemplifies the experience of universalized brand faith, saying, “Tesla means the world to me right now...It’s [Tesla’s] integral to my life. I can’t imagine not having it... Tesla is making a legacy. Our children and grandchildren will become used to electric cars, and they might replace gasoline cars one day.” Heather’s faith in Tesla extends from environmental concern into an “integral” guide for multiple facets of her life. Like Karen, Heather affirms belief in Tesla’s broader mission and legacy, expressing hope for a more sustainable future. However, unlike Karen, Heather’s faith is reinforced through daily, embodied interaction with the product, allowing Tesla to function as a source of emotional regulation, moral reassurance, and existential support.

*Facilitating and Inhibiting Factors.* At the personal level, the growing prevalence of spiritual-but-not-religious orientations plays a role in enabling consumers to reach universalized brand faith. Some informants, like Kim, reject organized religion and formalized belief in God while seeking existential meaning, purpose, and self-realization through the market. Other informants, like Ping who we introduced in Phase 1, continue participating in organized religion but draw on the availability of secular spirituality and market symbolism to supplement more traditional religious spirituality. At the brand level, Apple facilitates universalized commitment through consistent delivery of symbolic utility. Its minimalist design and seamless ecosystem reinforce a coherent ideological narrative centered on creativity, simplicity, and control that mirrors Kim’s self-concept. This allows the brand to serve as a steady compass through which consumers interpret both personal goals and broader life direction.

At the marketplace level, Mark’s case reveals how neoliberal cultural ideologies create fertile ground for brand faith to reach universalization. Despite self-identifying as “a natural skeptic” and dismissing religious belief—“I believe in what I can see”—he expresses “complete

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3 faith” in Apple’s ability to “do the right thing.” This paradoxical confidence reflects the  
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5 influence of neoliberal market logic, where brands, rather than institutions like church or state,  
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7 are imagined as legitimate, future-oriented actors capable of delivering both personal value and  
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9 moral leadership (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Mark’s belief is ideologically authorized by a  
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11 cultural system that equates innovation with virtue and performance with truth. For consumers  
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13 like Mark, who demand tangible and visible evidence, the marketplace offers a compelling  
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15 source of spiritual conviction. The neoliberal ethos encourages individuals to construct belief  
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17 systems from personal experience, facilitating spiritual devotion through purchase decisions.  
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24 **DISCUSSION**  
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28 Our research reveals how consumers come to rely spiritually on brands over time. We  
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30 conceptualize this phenomenon as brand faith—a process of believing in, valuing, and  
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32 committing to brands that act as centers of existential meaning. This process unfolds across five  
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34 interconnected phases—intuition, association, reflection, affirmation, and universalization—each  
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36 marked by shifts in perception, emotional investment, and spiritual significance. Unlike  
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38 traditional consumer–brand relationship models, brand faith reveals how consumers come to  
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40 experience brands as spiritual companions. Through cycles of hope, doubt, reaffirmation, and  
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42 universalization, consumers weave brands into their evolving sense of life purpose.  
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47 Our analysis also uncovers factors facilitating and inhibiting brand faith development. At  
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49 the individual level, factors such as spiritual aspiration, life stage, and prior religious orientation  
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51 shape openness to brand faith development. At the brand level, future-oriented storytelling,  
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53 symbolic coherence, and ethical resonance can foster or undermine faith-building. At the  
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marketplace level, broader cultural discourses, ideological climates, and existential threats create fertile—or hostile—ground for the cultivation of brand faith.

By articulating this process and its facilitating factors, our research offers new theoretical pathways for understanding how consumers actively seek and sustain spiritual meaning through evolving relationships with brands. Theorizing brand faith as a process of spiritual development moves the concept of consumer-brand relationships beyond functional or emotional partnerships into the realm of spirituality. As traditional institutions continue to evolve, the phenomenon of brand faith underscores a remarkable feature of the postmodern marketplace: in the quest for meaning, some brands have transcended products and services to become spiritual anchors. Our analysis contributes to consumer research examining brand relationships and secular spirituality, demonstrating how brands become sacred and how consumers accept them as sources of spiritual fulfillment and moral guidance. We explain this contribution in the sections that follow.

### Spiritual Consumer-Brand Relationship Development

This research advances consumer–brand relationship (CBR) and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research by introducing brand faith as a spiritual connection between consumers and brands. While the CBR literature has explored emotional, symbolic, and identity-based connections (Batra 2019; Fournier 1998), it has largely overlooked how brands may come to serve as sources of spiritual meaning, ethical guidance, and existential anchoring. Similarly, while CCT research has long examined the sacralization of consumption (Belk et al. 1989; O’Guinn and Belk 1989), less is known about how ongoing, personally sustained, and morally significant brand relationships evolve into sacred forms of consumer faith.

We address these theoretical gaps by developing a process model of brand faith development that unfolds across five phases. In the intuition phase, consumers become intrigued by a brand based on intuitive attraction sparking fantasy and imagination. In the association phase, consumers engage in motivated reasoning, cognitively elaborating and interpreting experiences in ways that reinforce the brand’s symbolic truth and perceived superiority. The reflection phase involves reassessing this conviction in light of doubts about the brand’s consistency or direction. In the affirmation phase, consumers reaffirm their belief by reinterpreting prior doubts as temporary inconsistencies, ultimately reinforcing the brand’s alignment with their deeper values. Finally, in the universalization phase, consumers embrace the brand as a holistic belief system aligned with spiritual aspirations and visions for the future.

This analysis extends CBR theory beyond prevailing interpersonal metaphors (e.g., brands as friends, partners, or trusted allies) by revealing how consumers experience brands as sacred companions in their life journeys. While constructs such as brand attachment, love, and identification have been shown to predict consumer-brand relationships, they primarily emphasize emotional closeness, symbolic congruence, or social bonding (Albert and Merunka 2013; Fournier 1998; Khamitov et al. 2019; Park et al. 2010). Brand faith, in contrast, is existentially motivated and spiritually sustained—grounded in belief, reverence, and enduring moral alignment. We offer a framework for understanding how brands operate as vehicles for meaning-making and personal growth, especially in cultural contexts where many institutions offering existential orientation are receding (Carrette and King 2004; Pew Research Center 2021). We also show that consumer-brand relationships are shaped by experiences of doubt. Rather than leading to detachment, doubt can serve as a generative force prompting reflection, reaffirmation, and the deepening of consumer-brand relationships.

We extend the CCT literature by illuminating how sacredness emerges through repeated, reflective use of mundane brands in everyday life. For our participants, sacredness unfolds through acts of faith that connect consumer hopes and values to a brand—from an intuitive attraction that leads to a store pilgrimage to later applying the brand’s values as one’s own life philosophy. Across our data, participants describe how certain brands evolve into moral reference points, aspirational guides, or sources of inner clarity. Prior literature has emphasized sacredness emerging through rituals, collective myths, or extraordinary brand experiences. However, we find that sacredness is not confined to the exceptional, but it can emerge through everyday brand connections that carry moral, emotional, and existential weight.

By tracing how belief in brands emerges and evolves through affirmation and transcendence, as well as doubt and disillusionment, our findings offer a detailed account of how brands become embedded in consumers’ spiritual lives, and how the marketplace increasingly serves as a site for belief formation, moral aspiration, and the ongoing pursuit of meaning.

### Facilitating and Inhibiting Factors of Brand Faith Development

The emergence and endurance of brand faith are shaped by a constellation of factors that operate at personal, brand, and marketplace levels. By identifying these multilevel factors, we shift attention from individual traits or brand tactics to the broader spiritual, ideological, and structural conditions that make brand faith more or less possible. In doing so, we address calls to consider how “marketplace dynamics, market actors, and megatrends” (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019, 394) influence the development of spiritual meaning in consumer life, particularly in a

secularized, post-institutional era. We also provide context explaining how and why consumers construct spiritual narratives about their brand relationships (Fuschillo et al. 2025).

*Personal-Level Factors.* At the personal level, brand faith is shaped by consumers’ internal spiritual dynamics, including spiritual aspirations, religious orientations, life stages, and perceived life fulfillment. These spiritual conditions facilitate consumers’ existential seeking based on a desire for coherence, transcendence, and moral anchoring amid uncertainty or disruption. Life transitions such as entering adulthood, career upheaval, or social isolation often unsettle previous belief systems and leave consumers searching for new sources of meaning (Arnett 2002; Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger 2009). In these moments, brands can offer more than symbolic identification, becoming spiritually resonant platforms for ethical navigation and future orientation.

Following this broader pattern, prior literature suggests that consumers sometimes turn to brands as moral reference points, which are tools for restoring ethical clarity and reaffirming personal values. Brand faith arises not only from a need for ethical consistency and moral centering (Mathras et al. 2016; Shachar et al. 2011), but it is shaped by personal factors such as spiritual yearning and emotional vulnerability. Importantly, these spiritual dynamics are fluid states, influenced by context, life transitions, and evolving personal needs. As consumers confront new uncertainties or reevaluate prior beliefs, their spiritual orientation may shift. In these moments, brands that offer consistent moral clarity and emotional grounding can become anchors of faith, helping consumers endure and make sense of change.

*Brand-Level Factors.* Brand factors play a crucial role in shaping whether intuitive faith can develop into sustained brand faith. Our findings emphasize the importance of purpose-driven

storytelling, moral coherence, and experiential credibility. Tesla and Apple both gained spiritual traction by articulating visionary goals (e.g., technological innovation, sustainability), but more importantly they reinforced those ideals through consistent messaging and performance. For instance, participants described how Tesla's visible innovations (e.g., safety features) helped resolve earlier doubts and reaffirm faith in the brand's ethical mission. While prior research has shown that brand stories can inspire mythic resonance (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Holt 2004), our work adds that spiritually motivated consumers actively monitor alignment between brand actions and professed values. In this sense, brand faith is supported by consistent demonstrations of moral alignment between brand vision and perceived brand actions.

Moreover, future-oriented and morally principled brand leadership can endow brands with symbolic superiority. Elon Musk and Steve Jobs, for example, are often viewed as visionaries whose actions reflect a higher mission. Brand leaders can function as moral authorities, whose personal ethos strengthens spiritual bonds between consumers and brands. Yet, this deep reliance on brand leadership and brand consistency also exposes a vulnerability: as brands evolve or external narratives shift, belief can become uncertain, prompting cycles of doubt, re-evaluation, or even disillusionment. Consumers remain alert to breaches in moral coherence. Brand faith is not only cultivated by charismatic leaders but can also be challenged by them. This highlights the vulnerability consumers face when investing sacred meaning into brands whose political and commercial interests may conflict with spiritual values.

*Marketplace-Level Factors.* At the marketplace level, macro-cultural dynamics such as secularization, neoliberal individualism, postmodern fragmentation, and existential threats (e.g., climate change, institutional failure) provide fertile conditions for brand faith to develop. As



traditional institutions—religious, communal, or governmental—lose their moral authority or integrative function, brands increasingly step into the void to offer ethical orientation, ontological stability, and new imagined futures. Our informants frame their relationships with brands as a way to align personal actions with a positive vision of the future. A post-institutional landscape parallels the rise of secular spirituality, where consumers seek meaning outside religious structures (Carrette and King 2004; Einstein 2008; Husemann and Eckhardt 2019).

These conditions are further shaped by neoliberal ideology, which reframes social and moral responsibility as a function of individual consumption choices (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Thompson 2004). Within this framework, the marketplace becomes a central arena for pursuing spiritual goals. Consumers invest in brands that appear to advance collective ideals such as sustainability, innovation, or social justice to experience a sense of morality and purpose in an uncertain world. At the same time, postmodern and liquid cultural dynamics (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) intensify the demand for consumable meaning making.

Taken together, our analysis shows how personal factors, brand factors, and marketplace factors interact to shape the emergence and durability of brand faith. While our model explains how brand faith can develop and deepen, it is equally important to recognize why many consumers do not progress through this process. Brand faith depends on a convergence of multi-level factors: a spiritually receptive consumer, a morally and inspirationally resonant brand, and a marketplace that supports secular spirituality. Absent these factors, intuitive interest may remain fleeting or symbolic engagement may never intensify into existential commitment. Many consumers do not experience the personal vulnerability or spiritual openness that render them receptive to faith-like attachments. Others may resist spiritual investments in for-profit entities, seeing such relationships as inauthentic, manipulative, or morally suspect. In all phases of brand

faith development, consumers can lose motivation to resolve inconsistencies between brand values and actions. However, when these factors align, brand faith can become a powerful source that offers consumers meaning, purpose, and existential grounding in an uncertain world. In such cases, the consumer–brand relationship transcends mere preference, evolving into a companionate bond that supports personal growth and life navigation. From intuitive to universalized brand faith, the connections consumers form with brands can create existential bonds that help consumers feel more intentional, grounded, or connected to a larger purpose.

### Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations, but it also provides paths and recommendations for future research. First, this research reflects on the dual nature of the brand faith development as both a source of empowerment and vulnerability for consumers. While brand faith can fill spiritual voids, particularly in an era where traditional forms of spirituality are in decline, it also places consumers in a vulnerable position, where their spiritual well-being is contingent on the actions and narratives of commercial entities. Future research should delve into this dual nature, exploring how brands can navigate their influence responsibly and whether brands can balance commercial objectives with the spiritual dimensions of consumer engagement.

Second, our research focuses on Apple and Tesla, which are technology brands with established consumer communities. While this allows us to analyze the development of brand faith, future research can explore how brand faith develops in less established and non-tech brands. Investigating brands across industries and product lifecycles could provide a more nuanced understanding of brand faith development. Third, our study centers on cultural contexts shaped by Christian traditions, which may influence how consumers engage with brands as

sources of spirituality and meaning. Cross-cultural research is needed to examine how brand faith manifests in different cultural settings and whether its phases transfer or require adaptation across contexts. Fourth, our data likely overrepresent consumers who have experienced very positive spiritual connections with brands. This may limit our ability to fully capture the trials, tensions, and failures of brand faith. Future research could focus on disenchanting or disengaged consumers to examine the nuanced boundary conditions of brand faith development.

Finally, future research could draw on our novel combination of netnography and biographic analysis to investigate individual users' longitudinal changes in online forums, which combine biographic techniques, text mining, and netnography. This approach offers a nuanced perspective on changes in individual consumers' participation and behavior in online brand communities, providing valuable insights into the development of consumer-brand relationships over time. Future studies can leverage this methodology to explore other contexts and platforms, enhancing the depth and breadth of consumer behavior research. Continuing research into the phenomenon of brand faith will deepen interdisciplinary understanding of spirituality and relationships between consumers and brands.

## DATA COLLECTION STATEMENT

The first author conducted 21 in-depth interviews between April 2021 and July 2021. All interviews took place remotely through Zoom video conferencing due to ongoing concerns about the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time, the second and third authors also contributed to editing interview guides, interpreting the ongoing findings together, and creating biographies of the 21 interview participants. After several months of observation, the first author conducted netnographic participation and formal data collection from July 2021 to Sept 2022, gathering and analyzing data from the Apple Inc. and Tech Industry forum on MacRumors and the Tesla Inc. forum on Tesla Motors Club. The first author also created a text-mining dictionary to identify faith-related discussions, filtered posts with it, randomly selected 20 users, and developed biographies for them. The second and third authors substantially contributed to interpreting the online forum data and co-developing the biographies. While the first author served as the primary data analyst, all three authors reviewed, discussed, and revised the analyses collaboratively through regular meetings. All interview transcripts, biographies of interview participants, online forum posts, and biographies for online forum users are stored in a OneDrive cloud folder managed by the first author and shared with the second and third authors.

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