



KATINA MICHAEL

High-Tech Lust: *An Overwhelming Desire to be “With” our Device*

Are you in love with your Android or Apple device? Do you have a *deep affection* and suffer from *separation anxiety* [1] when your smartphone is not within arm’s length of your bed at night?

Don’t worry, you’re not alone. Rossiter [1] differentiates between “brand love” and “brand liking” which is significant. When it comes to our high-tech gadgetry people are likely to be able to cope better with being separated from a partner or child than being separated from a vital piece of technology which goes with them everywhere.

I have been thinking much about what it means to be “in love” with an inanimate object – with a device that, lacking electrical pulses, would be completely “dead” and without function. At least a block of wood that serves as a dinner table facilitates the joy of a family meal, and is more visually appealing than a computer that is not plugged in. Well, at least to me anyway...

One reason why I believe some people are “in love” with their Android or Apple devices is because their contents reflect so much of who they are. Without these devices, they cannot be contacted instantly. Stored on these devices are montages, pictures and video snippets, favorites, lists, and contacts. They are in love therefore with aspects of the self, and this is not entirely negative. It is only that the high-tech device, e.g., the smartphone, is often misunderstood as being an extension of the body, when in fact it is the other way around [2].¹ Meaning it is the smartphone that drives  because without the human it would not have any  basic value.

These days we are so habituated to getting that instant message, whatever form it takes, that it has become a welcome distraction from the everyday and mundane. I see many mothers at parks on smartphones welcoming the relief from baby talk, even if only for a few minutes. But at the same time, at home, it can be used as an excuse to be taken away from household responsibilities. Who wouldn’t prefer to talk to a friend or write on someone’s wall instead of cleaning bathrooms, scrubbing floors, or vacuuming?

Some months ago I came across an article on Lew Terman, current IEEE SSIT Secretary, and former President of IEEE. In this article [3], Lew reflects on his late father Fred Terman, who many people consider to be the “father of Silicon Valley.” Of his father, Lew reflects on childhood memories: “He would drop what he was doing, answer the question, make sure I understood the answer, whatever it was. I would leave, and he would go right back to work... He never said, ‘Wait a minute, I am in the middle of writing this thing, could you come back when I’ve finished the page?’ or, ‘don’t bother me now, but I’ll talk to you later.’”

I was convicted by this paragraph. I recollect the number of times I have told my own young children that I am busy with “work,” and that I will be with them as soon as I finish this email or that call, while they are hanging off my legs. They tell me at these times that “I am not listening.” I retort that I can hear them, and that I am listening, it is only that my actions fall short. I know it is time to stop, when they come

over to me and place their hand in front of my computer screen or hit the keys randomly on the keyboard so as to bring my activity to an abrupt halt.

So I go back to thinking about “high-tech love.” And I reckon we have it wrong with our premise. Today, I think we shouldn’t be thinking brand liking or brand love, but be defining “high-tech lust.” Lust can be defined as: “an overwhelming desire or craving.” When we couple it with technology it is an overwhelming desire or craving to be “with” our device, all the time.

I have seen first-hand and on numerous occasions, people become strongly agitated or extremely fidgety, emotionally fall apart, and constantly crave to be reunited with their high-tech device when they have left it behind or it is misplaced. I cannot describe it in any other way than there every thought is obsessed by its absence. It is an acute attack, and it can go on for hours until the device is found and they are holding it in their hands again. Most of us, whether we like to admit it or not, have experienced something of this “separation anxiety.”

Corporations know this; they see it in our daily smartphone activity monitoring logs which tell them about our behaviors. If you think no one is watching, every time you pick up your handset, let alone press a button on it, then think again. We are being sold the idea that we can now wear this technology so it is always with us and we cannot forget it behind accidentally. Soon, we will be told we can have a corporal union with it, and be one with these utilities, and have it reside inside of us too! We will indeed become bearers of technology, not just wearers of technology.

We are moving too quickly. Desires and cravings if not tempered can work to have negative consequences. We are being locked into a life of electronic chains. We might not yet be wearing GPS monitoring bracelets like parolees, but that too will come even if in the guise of a pair of digital glasses.

The folly is in that we are willingly beckoning in these times without thinking about the social implications for us and for future generations. Rather than lusting for our high-tech gadgetry we should be lusting for life – there is a difference.

We once complained of the working conditions in large factories or even underground mines. Today we have excellent lighting, the most advanced ergonomic furniture, and yet we have become enslaved to the mobile office. Just before day breaks we are working on our computer or smartphone; night comes and we are still there pounding out messages. The darkness can resemble being underground.

The discerning Rafael Capurro has written of this information overload in a keynote speech [4]. He uses words like: “burnout,” “*surmenage*” (i.e., “excessive work”), and being “completely exhausted.”

When high-tech lust turns ugly it becomes high-tech disdain. We can develop a dislike, and even disgust for technological apparatus. We may even seek in-part or total separation away from it. It becomes the opposite of brand love; it becomes brand hate.

Some parents regret the day they handed their child an Internet-enabled computer, registered an e-mail address or bought a smartphone for them. But we should never be surprised at the usage patterns of the younger generation. They are only mimicking our behaviors and at even greater speeds.

References

- [1] J.R. Rossiter, “A new C-OAR-SE-based content-valid and predictively valid measure that distinguishes brand love from brand liking,” *Marketing Letts.*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 905-916, 2012.
- [2] E. Kac, *Time Capsule*, 1997; <http://www.ekac.org/timec.html>.
- [3] “First a technologist, then a leader among them, a Terman seeks to spur humanitarian engineering”, *Stanford Engineering: Meet our Alumni*, Apr. 2010; http://engineering.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/terman_lew.pdf.
- [4] R. Capurro, “Medicine in the information and knowledge society,” presented at *Eur. Summit for Clinical Nanomedicine and Targeted Medicine (CLINAM)* (Basel, Switzerland), June 23-26, 2013; http://www.capurro.de/Medicine2_0.html.

Footnote:

¹Kac writes: “It is almost as if the body has become an extension of the computer, and not the other way around. This, perhaps, only reflects technology’s general outlook, since organic life is indeed becoming an extension of the computer, as the emerging vectors in microchip technology clearly point to biological sources as the only way to continue the exponential process of miniaturization, beyond the limits of traditional materials.”

Katina Michael is with the School of Information Systems and Technology at the University of Wollongong, Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia, 2522. Email: katina@uow.edu.au.