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In Ones and Zeroes We Trust?: Money, Religion & Bitcoin

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In this paper, we explore the interconnected nature of money and religiosity through the context of the cryptocurrency, Bitcoin. Based on consumer narratives from interviews, archival data, participant observation and a netnography, we analyze how consumers employ discourses of religiosity and faith to unite a heterogenous community.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“...what one formerly did for the ‘sake of God’ one now does for the sake of money, that is to say, for the sake of that which now gives the highest feeling of power and good conscience.” (Nietzsche 1997, 123)

Campbell (2003) once argued that to understand any society’s values, one just had to search for its tallest buildings. Where once places of worship reigned supreme, today skyscrapers to capitalism eclipse their dominance. Money has always been intermingled with notions of faith and consumption (Simmel 1978). From a shared belief in the stock market prices, the value of gold as money, or believing in national currencies as a method of payment, money operates on the virtue of keeping faith (Graeber 2014). Concurrently, consumption and religion have also shared an uneasy but intermingled relationship (Weber 2002). While we have a rich understanding of how consumers spend money and the behaviors it evokes (e.g. Sundie et al. 2011, Zhou, Vohs, and Baumeister 2009, Liu and Aaker 2008, Di Muro and Noseworthy 2013), there is a lot more to be explored when it comes to the socio-cultural and historical sociality of money in and of itself (Belk and Wallendorf 1990). There is growing consensus that in a post-2008 financial crisis world, money’s fundamental value is being redefined. The earthquake of the financial crisis has shaken faith in the citadels of banking and monetary authority, paving the way for alternatives to emerge. Modern money as we know it is primarily created by governments and conferred legitimacy by the state banks (Ingham 1996). However, there is speculation that money is likely to become a pluralistic entity in the coming years (Dodd 2014).

Money demands faith and belief which is shared by a diverse community. There has been widespread recognition in consumer research that there is a search for the sacred in the seemingly profane, in both consumers’ pursuit of brands and consumption in general, and in religions’ turn to the marketplace to compete with other faiths and attractions (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, Muñiz and Schau 2005, McAlexander et al. 2014, Belk and Tumbat 2005, Sherry and Kozinets 2007). Zelizer (1997, 18) argues that money is “profoundly influenced by cultural and social structures”. In this paper, we explore this connection between religiosity and money through the context of the cryptocurrency Bitcoin (Zohar 2015, Maurer, Nelms, and Swartz 2013, Bjerg 2016, Humayun and Belk 2016).

Bitcoin takes the notions of belief, trust and faith to an all new extreme. Bitcoin was created by a person or group that still remain anonymous even if multiple false prophets have emerged to stake and patent the blockchain technology. While the notion of digital cash that could flow across geographic borders had been a cryptographers’ dream for many years, “Satoshi Nakamoto” made this a reality when he posted the white paper in 2008 laying out the blueprint for a decentralized peer-to-peer currency that would be enabled by the blockchain (Nakamoto 2008). A copy of the first block ever created “the Genesis Block” now rests in the Coin Room at the British Museum, cementing Bitcoin’s cultural and iconic status in monetary history. From its early days, Bitcoin has been repeatedly projected to soon die. Yet despite all the bad press, it continues to live on. Initially Bitcoin had limited appeal in terms of an exchange of value beyond the tech-geek community. It had been idiosyncratically used for buying pizza and alpaca socks. However, Silk Road, the online illicit market, captured the public imagination as a vivid manifestation of

Bitcoin as a value-generating entity. Today more mainstream businesses accept Bitcoin, from Ernst & Young to Swiss Railways and as of March 3, 2017, Bitcoin had surpassed the value of an ounce of gold, trading at \$1,268.

Bitcoin is not backed by anything of value, such as gold, or state banks like those that underwrite fiat currencies. It represents a rare intersection of technology, ideology and religiosity (Davis 2004, Noble 1997, Kozinets 2008). Based on consumer narratives from in-depth interviews, archival data, ongoing participant observation at Bitcoin/Blockchain events and a netnography, we analyze how discourses that employ dimensions of faith and religiosity emerge in trying to unite a diverse community of believers.

Our findings reveal that many consumers keep faith in Bitcoin’s underlying technology, even though they do lose faith in people. The algorithmic code’s neutrality is often pedestalized in contrast to human error. Our contributions here are threefold. First, we provide an analysis how in our digital world, the notion of money may end up changing and come to mimic the secular and agnostic nature of brands. Second, we contribute to understanding how notions of religiosity emerge in this community’s search for faith and belief, even though some of their discourses critique religion. As in the case of Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) the form of myth-making and religiosity displayed connects a dispersed community of believers who are searching for the sacred in the seemingly profane. Furthermore, our analysis shows how the boundaries between religiosity, technology and ideology seem to become ever more porous in our pervasive consumer culture (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Our analysis highlights the notions of belief and faith that money demands of its community. Although money has been viewed as serving eroding functions in society over the years, *reinvented*, it can still be a source of sacred and profound meanings for its consumers.

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