Social influences related to college students' use of Macintosh computers on an all-PC campus☆

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ABSTRACT

In the present qualitative research study, 35 Mac users were interviewed in a university campus that exclusively supports PC machines. We particularly explored the Mac-users' social influences, saving technological and other influences for future reports. Results showed Mac users to possess significant connections with other Mac users on the university campus. The Mac users in our study indicated that positive, past exposure, including Apple's advertising of Macs, had sharp influences on their decisions to become and remain Mac users.

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The rapid infiltration of technology into today's society currently is shaping many aspects of modern culture. Giovannini (2008), for example, concludes that various technology factors, such as the public's general increasing accessibility to the Internet as well as the continued advancement of various media forms, result in greater exposure and access by individuals to information than ever before. Additionally, Pyati (2007) advocates for an expanded use of technology as instruments of information and education. Pyati explains that, as technology develops, individuals' methods for learning and communicating will adapt to fit these mediums of technology that better facilitate both learning and communication processes. Further, Holdren (2008) describes society's current dependability on technology both to maintain the well being of individuals and to sustain economic, sociopolitical, and environmental conditions. In addition, Holdren explains the intricate balance between these constructs, demonstrating the value of each and their vital role in society as well as how each construct innately is tied to the influence of technology. As a result, often a contemporary, cogent role of science and technology remains facilitating stability within society.

Furthermore, individuals within society, specifically children and students, are experiencing greater exposure to technology at younger ages than previous generations. Eteokleous (2008) reports this phenomena and details efforts of school systems and teachers to integrate computer usage and various other technology-related tools into the students' forms of learning. In fact, numerous studies are showing that younger generations of students, who have grown up accustomed to the presence of technology, generally prefer its use over the traditional methods of accomplishing the same actions that do not involve technology. Denton, Madden, Roberts, and Rowe (2008), for example, found students to prefer electronic forms of grade-indicators rather than hand-written reports. In particular, when students in the sample received the critiques of their work electronically, they were found to perceive these criticisms in a more positive light than when the same critiques were given in writing. Not only does the literature report today's students to have embraced the use of technology, but students also seem to hold positive perceptions regarding further integration of technology into daily life. Selwyn (2007), for example, specifically investigated students' self-perceptions regarding various computer-based activities and their personal enjoyment or dissatisfaction with these programs.

Overall, Selwyn found students to react positively to these technology-related activities. Additionally, students reported their own self-perceptions that technology aptly fit their desired, personal life-styles.

In addition, Wertheim (1999) describes the various effects of modern technology on society as a whole, and many of her findings focused on technological advancements initiated by Apple, Inc. Card, Moran, and Newell (1983) further this idea in their discussion of computers' impacts on communication. They proceed to explain that, as individual members of society continue increasing their daily interactions with technology, they also will develop specialized methods of communication that cater to a more technologically-dependent culture. Of significant note is that the origin of society's new, developing communication-forms stem from the Graphic User Interface technology, first made popular by Apple computers. Saba and McCormick (1986) also summarizes the dynamic, computer-related views society has held and the effects these views have had on individuals' ability to understand themselves. He proposes that computers today are becoming outlets for personal "searching," and that often technology facilitates both self-discovery and new forms of interpersonal communication.

Computers historically have not had the same prevalent role in society that they hold today. In fact, when micro-computers initially surfaced, they were found almost exclusively in government offices or large corporations. It was during this stage, when computers were still relatively young, that Steve Jobs founded Apple Computers, Inc. in 1976. The original purpose of this company was to introduce personal computers to the consumer market. While modern technology and society heavily depends on individuals' use of personally-owned computers, Apple's promotion of personal computers at that time was quite a phenomenon (Vader, 2008). These innovative, "personal" computers changed the trajectory of future computer design, function, and usage. Jobs explained: "We started out to get a computer in the hands of everyday people, and we succeeded beyond our wildest dreams." (Booth & Jackson, 1997, para 6).

Macintosh computers initially prospered because of these innovations, and in 1986, Apple, Inc. held a 16% computer market share and followed behind IBM as the primary computer retailer (Bulik, 2006). However, with the development of Microsoft in the in the 1990s, Apple had lost its edge and the company was struggling (Jade, 2007). Recently, Macintosh computers and Apple, Inc. have undergone renovations that have helped recover the company back on its feet, and many of these recent changes have resulted in ground-breaking technology, again establishing Apple as a competitive brand of computers and technology (Soojung, 2008).

While searching the technology literature, we were surprised to find almost no articles relating specifically to Macintosh computers. In fact, only one peer-reviewed journal article expressly relating to Mac usage could be found in the data bases of ERIC, PsychInfo, Education Full Text, EBSCO, Google Scholar, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Business and Industry, and Academic Search Complete. To the best of our knowledge, Lam (2001) is the only researcher to date who specifically has investigated the constructs associated with using Mac computers. In his research, Lam focused on reporting various dynamics related to the devotion of those who use Macs. He further discussed this tendency for Mac-users to remain loyal to Apple's computer brand, and drew connections between elements of his participants' "Mac-devotion" and religious devotion.

Lam (2001) was not the first to associate computers and technology with various social constructs. McReynolds (1990), for example, described the prevalence of metaphorical thought in today's society and its impact on public views of technology. Further, McReynolds emphasized the expanded ability for creativity when metaphorical thought processes become involved, and he carefully unfolded an outline of significant, historical, technology-related developments that hinged on capacities to think creatively within the context of empirical science.

Since the founding of Apple, Inc., Macintosh technology has, in fact, sought to compete with the seeming monopoly of personal computers (PC) by means of developing creative innovations that are unique to Macs and are not part of PC technology. Instead of trying to replicate what PC previously accomplished, creativity often has led Apple in directions that accent the differences in technology, function, and appearance between Macs and PCs, rather than their similarities. Levy (2008) described many of Apple's latest products, which include the iPhone, the MacBookAir, a three-pound, fully functioning, laptop, and the memory-saving device Time Capsule, which automatically backs up documents preventing the loss of information. Levy further emphasized the generally innovative nature of these and many other Macintosh products. Grossman (2005) summarized the historic competition between Apple and PC, reporting many innovative strides Apple has made forward, specifically beginning in the 1990s. The authors additionally contrasted the current PC technology with Apple's innovations.

In sum, given the paucity of research literature on this subject, we employed a qualitative research design in order to best further (empirically) investigate Mac-users' social influences.

Qualitative methodology was selected since it often is the best research means when conducting exploratory inquiries were few published studies exist (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The inductive method of qualitative investigation provides a foundation upon which further researchers can build in generating hypotheses to be tested in quantitative designs (Silverman, 2006). Since evidently almost no research previously has been conducted on this subject, we focused the present study specifically on the social influences of Mac users, saving the report of technological and other salient influences for future research articles. The emphasis of the present study was to provide the perspectives of Mac-users' social worlds, allowing them to tell their stories—in the qualitative tradition (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007)—and to obtain their vantage points as to the influences that others have on their decisions to use the machines.

So that it is clear for the reader, the research question in the present article does not address why college students use Mac computers. Our research question is broader than that. Rather, we desire to understand the general phenomenon of how Mac users have come to understand their Mac-use world. We did not approach the study with arbitrary objectives or pre-conceived research questions to answer. Rather, we employed traditional qualitative research protocol, in the phenomenological research modality. Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe:

> Phenomenological interviewing is a specific type of in-depth interviewing.... Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview. It rests on the assumption that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated. The purpose of this type of interviewing is to describe the meaning or a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share. (p. 104)

In this paradigm of qualitative research inquiry, the objective is not to appraise consequent implications. Grounded theory and other types of qualitative research methodology sometimes fulfill this objective (Lundberg & Young, 2005). Phenomenological qualitative research, however, typically does not (Limberg, 2008)—and we do not endeavor to fulfill that aim in this particular article.