

Cultural literacy essay sample

[Business](#), [Company](#)



Part I: Cover Letter

This paper was written with a very specific goal in mind: to examine American popular culture today in terms of the technological devices that are used. Originally, the topic was going to be the smartphone in general; however, upon closer examination, the iPhone itself was such a pressing cultural phenomenon that it became the focus.

The arrangement of the paper was designed to first introduce the reader to the object itself without defining it. Although it is assumed the reader knows nothing about the subject, the purpose is to give them an image; unless they are culturally blank, they will know what a cell phone is, and perhaps even have an idea of the scene that is presented. After the discussion begins, the tone changes to a more academic tone, giving the audience a sense of the facts of the cultural phenomenon itself.

The purpose of this discussion is not to make a judgment on the increasing popularity of the iPhone, nor is it meant to act as a commercial for the iPhone, although many positive descriptions are given. Instead, it is meant to be a discussion of the cultural reality of America's obsession with the idea of the iPhone, and the overarching issue of how an object becomes "cool."

Part II: Unplugged: The iPhone and Changing Cultural Landscape

There is a game that my friends and I play when we go out to eat. Upon arriving at our table, we eat take out little plastic, metal and glass boxes from our pocket and place them face-down on the table in a pile. They stay there for the remainder of the meal. If anyone picks up their little box, they pay the bill; if no one picks up their box, we split the cost of the meal

between us. I often look around during these times and see other tables full of people with their heads down, engaged on their own little box, ignoring the people they are with, in favor of interacting with people they are not physically with at the time.

The box itself is small; it fits in the palm of the hand, and is controlled by the touch of a finger. It connects the user to anyone and anything in nearly any location. Its use is ubiquitous; it crosses cultural boundaries and language barriers. Even though it appears similar to other smartphones, it is a cultural phenomenon unlike any other; it is present in media, music, and other popular culture around the world. However, America has taken the love affair with the iPhone to a whole different level; the cultural mystique and aura surrounding the iPhone in America is certainly unique.

The word " iPhone" is not translated into Chinese, or Spanish, or any other language; they are adopted, forcefully inserted into the language as a new cultural reality. According to one marketing expert, the iPhone's success is due to the incredible ability Apple has to take a functional device and make it-- for lack of a better word--- cool (Wall Street Journal).

American mainstream culture has an obsession with all things cool. The definition of what is " cool" changes on a regular basis, but the iPhone has remained relevant for longer than trends usually last. It started as an advanced smartphone with a touch screen; little more than an music player connected to a PDA. However, the iPhone evolved; it started the app craze, introduced smartphone GPS technologies, and became a cultural symbol for wealth and success. The symbolism is not unwarranted; it is a very expensive device, and without some level of affluence, it is impossible to

afford one.

The smartphone in general has changed the face of literacy and human interaction around the world. The iPhone allows the user to read books, magazines, and newspapers; it allows the user infinite access to the cumulative knowledge of humankind to this point in history. Outside of its purpose as a phone, however, most people in America use it to update social media, look at pictures, and settle any factual disagreements or queries that may come up in conversation. In this way, the iPhone has exposed some of the weaknesses of humankind: a tendency towards laziness, for example, and complacency.

Back to the game played in the restaurant: humans are a restless animal. Without entertainment, our brains quickly become bored; the rise of the smartphone, and particularly the iPhone, has ensured that anyone with one of these devices is never bored. When conversation dwindles, instead of searching for a new topic or reviving discussion, it is easy for users to slip out one of these devices and begin to entertain themselves. How did this become America's cultural reality and cultural expectation? The answer lies in the unique business concept of Apple itself.

Watching an advertisement for the iPhone is an interesting experience. The iPhone itself is hardly mentioned; in the first iPhone commercial released, the feature of the commercial is the phone playing *Pirates of the Caribbean*, one of the most popular movies of the year ("The First Real iPhone Ad"). In one of the more recent advertisements, the phone itself is not even shown until the end of the advertisement; instead, it features the Williams sisters of tennis, playing ping pong with the speaker ("Apple iPhone 5 ad featuring

Venus & Serena Williams - Dream (2013)"). The phone is shown only at the very end of the advertisement, and even then, very briefly. This seems to be a strange choice in advertising for a company that is trying to sell a functional device, and yet, it is an incredibly potent cultural trigger.

What makes these advertisements so effective for the American psyche?

Well, considering that Apple is trying to sell a functional device, it seems strange that they should employ so much whimsy in their advertisements.

However, in the context of their business model, this makes perfect sense.

Apple's primary goal is not to sell iPhones, but to sell the concept of the iPhone; they have every intention of creating customers for life, not merely for the duration of time that the customer utilizes the product. They achieve this end by making the iPhone cool, and attaching the idea of "cool" to the Apple brand as a whole.

Consider, for instance, the series of commercials Apple did concerning "I'm a Mac, and I'm a PC"-- the Mac is young, hip, confident, and slightly self-deprecating, while the PC is portrayed as older, less confident, and trying painfully hard to be cool ("15 funny Apple ads"). Many young people will associate strongly with the actor playing the Mac in these ads, while seeing the individual playing the PC as old and out-of-style, perhaps similar in social status with their parents or other adult in their lives that they deem to be boring.

This cultural dichotomy is an incredibly powerful, potent one. It reaches back into a decades-old American meme: the new idea overturning the old; the new generation taking over for the older generation. It is a cultural meme that has been in existence since the "rebel without a cause" caricature

became popular in American media.

Apple has been wise to target the younger audience in this way, because if they can get the younger generation used to the software on their iPhones, then they may create Apple users for life. Computers are an ever-present part of reality today, and many young people will continue to work on computers for the rest of their lives. Accustoming children and young adults to their software and hardware-- hooking them on it-- gives Apple a distinct advantage over their competitors.

The reasons why Americans latched onto the iPhone with such fervor are varied and complex, but much can be said for the careful marketing strategy at Apple. The functionality of the device itself is excellent, but not excellent to the point where the device should become a cultural phenomenon; that must be attributed instead to a clever marketing campaign focused directly on American youths' collective psyche.

References

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