Self-admitted pretensions of Mac users on a predominantly PC university campus

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(Received 17 November 2009; final version received 2 January 2010)

The present qualitative research study addressed the overall research question of college students’ pretention dynamics in the context of a university setting. Thirty-five Mac users were interviewed on a university campus that exclusively supports PC machines. Mac users shared four self-admitted pretensions related to using Macintosh computers. First, participants asserted that Apple brand computers set social trends and that owning a Mac was perceived to make one to stand out positively. Second, Mac users shared their personal views that Macs are superior in technology and that PC technology is simply attempting to mimic Apple’s strides forward. Third, Mac users described various perceived social stigmas associated with owning Macs, such as the “artsy” label, the “cool” factor, and common socio-economic assumptions associated with Mac ownership. The fourth dynamic of participants’ self-admitted pretensions concerned their tendency to vocalize personal opinions of Mac’s superiority, with the aim of “converting” PC users.

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des ordinateurs PC. Les utilisateurs de Mac ont reconnu qu’ils partageaient quatre préjugés par rapport à l’utilisation des ordinateurs Mac. Tout d’abord les ordinateurs de marque Apple vous marquent comme étant à la page sont perçus comme donnant une image positive de vous. Ensuite les Macs possèdent une technologie supérieure alors que la technologie PC semble n’être qu’une simple tentative pour imiter les avancées de Mac. Il y a ensuite des points négatifs que l’on associe à la possession des Macs comme le côté «bohème» et le facteur «sympa». Le quatrième point, c’est la tendance à crier haut et fort ce qu’on pense de la supériorité de Mac dans le but de «convertir» les utilisateurs de PC.

Las pretensiones reconocidas de los usuarios de Mac en un campus universitario donde prevalecen los PC

La presente investigación cualitativa trata de la dinámica presuntuosa de los estudiantes en el marco de un contexto universitario. Treinta y cinco usuarios de Mac han sido encuestados en un campus universitario que preconiza el uso exclusivo de los PC. Los usuarios de Mac según sus propios testimonios compartían cuatro pretensiones en relación con el uso de los ordenadores Macintosh. En primer lugar los ordenadores de la marca Apple establecen modas sociales y la posesión de un Mac da la impresión de que Vd ofrece una imagen positiva. En segundo lugar, la tecnología de Mac es superior mientras la tecnología de los PC no es más que un intento para remediar los avances de Mac. En tercer lugar hay ciertos estigmas sociales acerca de la posesión de Macs, entre otros la etiqueta «bohemiio» y el factor «majo». En cuarto lugar se nota la tendencia a expresar sus opiniones sobre la superioridad de Mac con el fin de «convertir» a los usuarios de PC.

Keywords: Mac; Macintosh; Apple; computers; qualitative research; PCs

Introduction

As technology becomes more prevalent, its impact on American culture has grown increasingly cogent. Technology, especially developments such as computers, the Internet, and other forms of media, increases the amount of information to which individuals have access (Giovannini, 2008). Pyati (2007) explains that with the increase of knowledge, individuals’ methods of learning and communication will change to appropriately fit with the developments of technology. In light of this, society’s dependence on technology grows. Holdren (2008) reports that technology stabilizes a society’s economic, sociopolitical, and environmental conditions.

Within society, children and students specifically experience exposure to technology at younger ages. Eteokleous (2008) reports that students’ dependence on technology begins when teachers integrate computers and other forms of technology in their classrooms in order to facilitate learning. As this integration occurs, studies show that the students exposed to technology within classrooms tend to prefer its use over traditional methods of accomplishing the same educational objectives. For example, Denton, Madden, Roberts, and Rowe (2008) reported that students preferred electronic forms of grade indicators rather than hand-written reports. The authors also found that when students received criticism of their work electronically, rather than in writing, they accepted the criticism more positively. Selwyn (2007) similarly reported that students also seem to respond positively regarding the incorporation of media technology into the classroom as well as daily life. Specifically, students responded positively to technology-related activities when tested for their enjoyment or dissatisfaction with various programs. Also, students report from their own self-perceptions
that technology aptly fits with their desired personal lifestyles, so technology integration within the classroom was a natural extension of their lifestyle milieu.

Regarding technology and communication, Saba and McCormic (1986) propose that computers offer a way of personal “searching” and that technology facilitates self-discovery and interpersonal communication. Card, Moran, and Newell (1983) explain that, as individuals increase their experience with interactions with technology, they develop specialized methods of communication that cater to a technology-dependent culture. Significantly, the Graphic User Interface technology, first made popular by Apple computers, initially sparked the origin of society’s new technological communication forms.

It has only been within the last 35 years that personal computers have held a significant role in society. Initially, microcomputers were found almost predominately in government offices or large corporations. During the developmental stage in 1975, Steve Jobs joined what was then known as Homebrew Computer Club. From this, in 1976, the first Apple computer was released, and the Apple Computers, Inc. began. The original purpose of the Apple Company was to bring personal computers to the consumer market. Though contemporary society now depends largely on personal computers, Apple’s promotion of them at that time was phenomenal (Vader, 2008). These innovative, “personal” computers changed the trajectory of future computer design, function, and usage.

Advertising played a prominent role in bringing Apple computers into the hands of the public. Jobs desired to design a computer that was “user-friendly” enough so individuals would buy it (Stein, 2002). In doing so, the idea of the computer changed from mega-machines into a personal, individually usable device. The first significant advertising venture occurred in 1984. This commercial aired once, during the Super Bowl. It introduced the idea of a personal computer outside of the corporate realm (Stein, 2002). This Apple commercial received prominent attention but, at the end of the decade, Microsoft and Intel made significant headway into the personal computer market. Subsequently, Apple released another major advertising campaign in 1997, carrying the slogan “Think Different.” In doing this, Apple specifically targeted those who felt like outsiders in the corporate world, and those who hoped to affect global change (Shields, 2001). Apple’s advertising continues to reach out to a specific audience. “Think different” remains the predominant Apple slogan, but recent ads also include statements such as “A Mac just works. Period” and “Get a Mac” (Bulik, 2006). Apple’s “Mac guy” in various ads typifies cool and trendy individualism. Market research reports that Mac users tend to feel cool, trendy, and superior (Bulik, 2006).

Because of Apple’s effective advertising and their ability to bring the “personal” computer to the average person, Apple computers initially prospered. In 1986, Apple Inc. held a 16% computer market share and followed behind IBM as the top computer retailer (Bulik, 2006). Apple lost its place in the market share, however, with the rise of Microsoft in the 1990’s (Jade, 2007). Competition has long existed between PCs and Apple (Grossman, 2005). Recently, Apple has undergone various structural and marketing changes. These changes helped to re-established Apple in the marketplace and also brought about advances in technology that have given Apple relative technological edge in their field. Some examples of the advances include the iPhone, the three-pound, fully functioning MacBook Air, and the Time Capsule, a device that automatically backs up information stored on the computer (Levy, 2008). Within these developments, Apple diverges from traditional PC technology, typically emphasizing Apple’s innovation.
We found few scholarly articles in peer-reviewed journals that focused on Macintosh computers. Particularly, after searching the databases of ERIC, PsychInfo, Education Full Text, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, EBSCO, Business and Industry, Academic Search Complete, and Google Scholar, we found only one scholarly article by Lam (2001) that empirically addressed Macintosh computers. In his research, Lam (2001) focused on the bond between Mac users and their computers. Lam, in summary, described the dedication of Mac users as parallel- ing that of religious devotion. They were committed with loyal zeal and devotion, like people committed to philosophical or religious beliefs.

Given the lack of scholarly research on this subject, we chose to utilize a qualitative research design in order to explore Mac users’ social influences. Qualitative research is often the best method of research when conducting exploratory research where few published studies exist (Johnson & Christenson, 2004). Due to the inductive nature of qualitative research, our qualitative study should provide a foundation of research upon which other researchers may build (Silverman, 2006). Since little to no previous research exists on this topic, we focused our study on the social influences of Mac users. The overall research question involved: “How do Mac users come to experience their worlds relative to social influences?” As such, the main focus of this study centered on social influences. Elsewhere (Firmin, Firmin, Muhlenkamp, & Wood, 2008), we addressed different influences pertaining to Mac users’ perceptions. Our present study allowed participants to share their opinions and stories centering upon their experience with their Macintosh computers and how these users have come to frame their understandings and self-identities as computer users.

Method
We generated a qualitative, phenomenological research study that addressed the research question of how college students viewed their use of Mac computers in an educational milieu. In contrast to industrial or work settings, we explored how students came to understand their use of Macintosh computers within the context of the classroom, dormitory, and library usages. Consequently, our research question addressed the dynamics that students in an education setting typically undergo as they use their machines in order to enhance their college learning. Our research question also gave attention to the social-variables that naturally exist when students interact in higher education contexts.

Participants for this study came from a private, selective, comprehensive university located in the Midwest, which enrolls around 3000 students. We sent an email to the entire student body, asking students to self-identify if they personally used a Macintosh computer while being a student at their university. Within three days of our email, we received a total of 335 replies from student Mac users. Compared to past research projects we previously had conducted at the university, using this same general method of garnering initial contact for research participation, Mac users seem to demonstrate an unusual eagerness to identify themselves as Mac users and to volunteer as potential research subjects.

Roughly 85% of the student body at this university lives in residential, on-campus dorms. The university provides full wireless Internet service throughout the entire campus. The college also provides each dorm room with a PC computer and full computer support services for those PC computers. Though provided with Internet
capability, no technical support is offered for Mac users. In spite of having PC computers provided and no technical support available for Macintosh computers, slightly over 10% of the student body chooses to use Macintosh computers.

In order to obtain our research sample, we generated a list of 35 students from the total pool of 335 self-identified Mac users, using a table of random numbers. Our sample consists of 20 males and 15 females, ranging in age from 18–23 years old. The participants, who spanned from freshmen through senior year, included two Hispanic students with the other students being Caucasian. Since minorities comprise 6% of the population on this campus, the relatively low proportion of minority students in our study is generally proportional to that of the student body.

Our study employed Firmin’s (2006a) format of interview waves, within a phenomenological, qualitative research design. As such, each participant underwent an in depth interview which focused on students’ perceptions of Mac computers’ utility, appearance, and the social influences of Mac users. Participants shared their perceptions and stories, as is common protocol in the qualitative research vein (Fontana & Frey, 2003). We tape-recorded all interviews and these were transcribed for later analysis. After considering the interviews’ content, we followed up with some students whom we believe to be key participants, thus employing a second wave of interviews.

When analyzing the interviews, we used an open (Maxwell, 2005) coding, inductive process (Marshall, 2002). Since no previous studies previously have been published on this topic, axial coding was not practical and open coding was more consistent with the study’s exploratory intent. Frequent meetings among the article’s authors facilitated the coding process and provided checks for consistency of analysis. When reading through the transcripts, we used constant comparison methods when generating potential codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This means we continuously compared the transcripts to one another, looking for any repeating words, phrases, or sentiments that were common among the participants. In order to keep the data manageable, some similar categories were combined into a more major category at times. NVIVO-8 qualitative research software also was used to help analyze data. We used this technology only to enhance human capability, not to replace the role of the individual in carrying out intuitive work (Lewins & Silver, 2007). Following Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), the process of transitioning from codes to themes involved asking key questions, conducting organizational review, visually displaying the findings, and concept mapping.

The research team’s discussion of potential themes enhanced the study’s internal validity. Naturally, one researcher can aptly analyze data and provide valid findings. However, the assurance of valid findings often is strengthened when multiple qualitative researchers participate in the process of analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Only those themes on which the entire research team agreed are included in the article. Generating a qualitative research data trail also enhanced the internal validity for the study (Daytner, 2006). This involved creating a direct link between each reported theme in our transcripts through identifying specific paragraphs within the interview conversations. Data trails can prove helpful to those who wish to check the validity of our study or who hope to someday replicate or build upon our present study (Firmin, 2006b).

Third, member checks (Merriam, 2002) were incorporated among various participants. In doing this, we shared our findings with research subjects and gathered their feedback as to whether our results accurately reflected their perceptions. Each individual
with whom we checked generally agreed with our results. Fourth, internal validity for the study was enhanced as we elicited participation from an independent researcher with expertise in qualitative methodology (Flick, 2006). This expert checked the steps we took, the validity of our process, inspected our data audit and provided feedback regarding linking the transcripts data with the results. Fifth, saturation (Silverman, 2006) occurred when analyzing the transcript data. Specifically, after approximately 24 interviews, our participants generally shared similar sentiments – with little new insight being added when subsequent interviews were added to the sample. In the qualitative tradition of experts such as Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Neuman (2006) we believe our sample size was both ample and appropriate for the context of this specific study.

In sum, internal validity is a key construct in delineating apt qualitative research (Cope, 2004). To the degree it is present in a given study, one may provide greater confidence in the reported themes accurately representing the overall sentiments of the research participants. Both in the study’s design and implementation, we believe this project demonstrates the rigor expected of a solid research study, by established qualitative research standards (DeWet & Erasmus, 2005).

Results
Mac users shared four self-admitted pretensions related to using Macintosh computers. First, participants asserted that Apple brand computers set social trends and that owning a Mac was perceived to make one to stand out positively. Second, Mac users shared their personal views that Macs are superior in technology and that PC technology is simply attempting to mimic Apple’s strides forward. Third, Mac users described various perceived social stigmas associated with owning Macs, such as the “artsy” label, the “cool” factor, and common socio-economic assumptions associated with Mac ownership. The fourth dynamic of participants’ self-admitted pretensions concerned their tendency to vocalize personal opinions of Macs’ superiority, with the aim of “converting” PC users.

Mac users positively stand out
Participants consistently stated their perception that owning a Mac causes them to stand out. A variety of factors fostered this general sentiment, one being the predominance of PC computers on this particular college campus. As previously noted, the university supplies a PC in every dorm room where over 85% of the student body is residential. Brittany, for example, explained that, while she typically does not seek attention from others, her Mac has that effect on others, nonetheless: “Um, I think I stand out more because [the university] is more of a PC [campus], and to be the person who’s sitting with a Mac, rather than a PC laptop, I think you stand out more as an individual, because you’re sitting with a Mac.” Participants typically indicated that they do not pull-out their Macs in front of others in order to be seen – but when others do see the machines – they take note. In sum, Mac users noted that, since they were the campus minority users, people were more likely to notice them and their atypical computer.

Students further described a compounding factor that increased their tendency to draw attention – the distinctiveness of Apple brand computers. Mac users often attributed Apple’s general reconcilability to product labeling and advertising, which
together create an easily identifiable brand of machines. JoAnna, for example, captured the essence of what many participants shared as she described the extra attention her Mac receives because of a general increase in Mac awareness: “Um, well I think that there’s, you know, even though Macs are becoming popular, there’s still a select few that have them I guess, in proportion, so I think just seeing somebody on their laptop with, uh, the little apple on the back of the thing, you know, people automatically know that’s a Mac.” Our participants further explained that Macintosh computers were designed with particular attention given to aesthetics, and they attributed this fact to Macs’ distinctiveness and their own tendency to naturally draw attention while using their Mac on campus. Moreover, students found the appearance of Macs to stand in sharp contrast with that of PCs, and they believe that often others’ perceptions of Macs are consistent with their own perceptions of Macs’ aesthetic appeal. Allison summarized this sentiment among campus Mac users as she compared the appearance of typical PCs with typical Macintosh computers:

The fact that they are so much more aesthetically pleasing than PCs. PCs, they’ve somewhat been stereotyped for this, but it’s all, I think in a way it’s true. They’re kind of boxy. Just, you know, they’re a box that runs programs for you. The Mac, the Mac has been put together with beauty and function both in mind, so, um, just the looks make it stand out.

Overall, our participants felt that the general public’s increased awareness of Macs has resulted from increased exposure to them, both through daily interaction with others who own Macs and through seemingly effective advertising. Further, students described Mac’s popularity as having a cyclical effect, meaning that as Mac usage increased, public exposure to Macs also increased. Our participants felt that the result of this increased familiarity with Macs was positive, and additionally contributed to Mac’s perceived popularity. Stephanie described the sentiments of most participants, specifically emphasizing her perception of recent increases in general Mac-awareness and its impact on various social dynamics:

I think that people really notice them and I guess Macs have always been more noticed. A few years ago, there were a lot less people who had them, so if you noticed people with Macs, there’s more of an oddity on this campus, but now more and more people are coming to realize how good they are and so I’ve had conversations with people just because we both have Macs and I never knew them or anything. So I think that people will notice it, like, “I have one!” or “I’ve been looking at consumer reports about Macs, so now I want to talk to someone who has one.”

Our participants further attributed Mac’s tendency of making people stand out to be the results of effective advertising. Student Mac owners repeatedly described Apple Inc.’s advertising as being highly effectual on a personal level. Generally, participants in our study felt that they specifically were effectively targeted by Mac’s advertising schemes. Additionally, once the advertising hooked the participants of our study into becoming Mac users, the advertising was seen as having a positive reinforcement effect regarding how others perceived the Mac user. Daniel shared sentiments of Mac advertising and its seeming effect of other’s perceptions of him as a Mac user:

I would say [other people,] they’re interested that I’m trying to do things differently… Apple’s slogan is “Think Different,” so yeah. It’s trying to do things that we’ve done, that we do all the time, in a different way. Try and see it from a different angle. So, maybe, you know, [Mac users are] interested in approaching problems from a different...
angle. I’m interested in kind of keeping up with the times a little bit. Um, and just flexible, I guess, trying to change different things.

**Macs have superior technology**

The second self-admitted pretension related to using Macs reflected our participants’ general views that Macs are superior to PC technology. Students’ views developed both experientially, from reported lack of technical problems with Mac computers, and emotionally, resulting from advertising and other social factors. As a result, participants came to develop strong sentiments that Macs’ functions were superior to PCs. Michael aptly captured the view of participants as he described his own admitted bias for Macs:

You get this mentality, it’s like little kid syndrome, like, you get the new toy and your new plaything is better than everyone else’s. It’s the same thing that transfers over to computers. It’s totally advertisement that plays into it, but you get this feel that like “Hey, I have a Mac, it’s cooler!” kind of thing. My computer’s better than yours kind of thing. It’s weird… it’s kind of like my Mac works really well and I don’t have as many problems as other computer people so, I don’t know, it just seems like it’s better so having a Mac makes me a little better, in a weird sense. And no one’s going to admit that, but they get the feeling.

Clearly unashamed to vocalize their biases, participants further suggested that Apple Inc. had advanced in technology to the point that PCs currently were attempting to “copy” Mac’s technology. Again, surprised by the frankness of our interviewees, we listened to their repeated insistence that Macintosh was at the forefront of technology. Nathan captured the general sentiments of our participants as he compared Mac technology with PCs:

There are a lot of functions inside the operating system that PCs can’t do. It’s hard to explain. Just switching between applications is a lot faster. Running multiple applications at the same time is a lot faster. Just the overall look of a Mac is so much more neat and clean than a PC. A lot of the things that Windows has been trying to copy so many years, but they’ve always been about five years behind.

Unyielding in their allegiance to Macintosh computers, students additionally persisted during interviews to describe Mac benefits. Often, Mac functions were contrasted with PC technology in light of admittedly biased perceptions. Our participants further elevated Macs’ abilities as they described specific technological advancements they perceived to trump PCs technology. Mitchell, for example, like many of our participants, attempted to justify his claims of Mac’s superior functioning:

Well, did you ever see that commercial back in the day, uh, I think it was Nike, “Anything you can do, I can do better?” That’s pretty much what the Mac does. Um, Macs, as soon as they come out with something to do, the PC will eventually do it, too. Like the speech recognition. I mean my computer talks to me all the time. If there’s a problem, then it’ll be like “Oh, printer is out of paper.” And I’ll be across the room and I’ll be like, oh, go put it in. Um, just little things like that. They’re very innovative in that sense because they’re always improving their operating systems.

Further, our participants shared their own personal views that the future of computers, and PC advancement in general, lies with Macintosh technology. Overall, the Mac
users we interviewed described Macs’ performance as innovative and they further “predicted” that PCs may lose some popularity as a result. Krista re-sounded the claims of many participants as she described her view of future technology:

Honestly, I do see in the future there being, like, Mac having more of a prevalence, because people, I think, are realizing just like, like the product itself and like how good it is. And honestly, I would see, I wouldn’t be surprised if in ten years or maybe less than that, I’m not really an expert, but, if eventually more people owned Macs than, you know, Windows computers, or Microsoft. I think if the campus wants to keep up with the rest of, you know, advancing technology, they’re going to have to keep getting more Macs.

Ownership social stigma
The third self-admitted pretension associated with using Macs is the various social stigmas associated with Mac ownership. The first of the three main stigmas our participants shared was that of Mac users being viewed as “artsy.” Macintosh users repeatedly used this term when describing both their Mac and others’ perceptions of them as a Mac user. Carrie, for example, described her physical machine as “more artsy, and not as analytical, I guess.” She later continued, describing her perception of Mac users as those who “are more typically outside-the-box kind of people.” Our participants explained that this perception of Mac users as being “artsy” was a result of seemingly effective advertising by Apple, Inc. Further, student Mac users felt that Macs’ technology was specifically targeted for those who embrace change and for the younger, “more innovative” generation. Grant clearly illustrated the opinions of most participants that “artsy” individuals aptly fit Macs’ target marketing audience:

I think that they [typical Mac users] tend to be more… it would be more of a designer, artsy people, instead of like mathematical engineer people… I think in some ways, that’s who the company appeals to first. I think just the very way that they’re trying to move forward, where as I think that some people don’t really want to change.

Additionally, our participants expressed that Macintosh products both fit an “artsy-musician’s” personality and practical needs. Generally, students described the Mac’s appearance as having high appeal to those who value aesthetics. Moreover, our participants explained that many applications relating to graphic design, music, and editing are made exclusively for Macs or only fully function on Macs. Consequently, many students, such as Lauren, described Macs as the perfect “fit” for those who consider themselves as artistic:

I think people, because I’m more, people like know I’m more like right-brained and more creative, just because, like, what I am involved in and everything. And so I think a lot of my friends that don’t use Macs are just like, “Oh, that’s so good for her because she’s, like, artsy.” And so, that’s how I think a lot of people classify me as because I’m a Mac user.

The second main social stigma associated with Mac ownership is the “cool” factor. Our participants explained that often others will purchase Macs with underlying motivations of getting on board with what our participants described to be the latest trend – Mac computers. Students such as Benjamin suggested that owning a Mac had become the “in-thing,” and others viewed Mac users in this light: “Um, some would
probability see it as a ‘Oh, he’s just trying to be cool, because he has a Mac and Macs
are all the rage now.’” Students also added that Apple Inc.’s advertising played a
cogent role in furthering Macs’ “new-cool” stigma. Appearances in movies as well as
various, strategic advertising placements were reported to have effectively impacted
the general stigma that labeled Macs as “cool.” Naomi, for example, summarized
many students’ opinions as she described her perception of Mac’s reputation:

Um, you know, I think that the whole Mac image is becoming more cool now. Like, it’s
sort of becoming a trendy thing to do, so there’s a lot more people that are having Macs,
but I think generally it’s, I think people who have Macs are considered to be more
creative, and more like laid-back and having fun…

Students also explained that, in their perceptions of popular culture, often “dif-
ferent” was equated with “cool,” and our participants proposed that this principle held
true for Macs as well. As one of many variables, Mac users suggested that the reputa-
tion Mac’s have for being unique promotes their popularity. Additionally, many
students, such as Justin, explained that the minority-status of Apple computers
contributed to their popularity – it was because not everyone owned a Mac that using
one was seen as cool: “Maybe we [Mac users] just want to be different. It’s a new fad
and that type of thing. Definitely the ‘underdog’ syndrome and that sort of thing. Just
different, which people are always going to go for.” Many participants expressed
concern that PC users easily could misunderstand the enthusiastic sentiments of Mac
users toward their computers. Summarizing most other participants, Carley clarified it
is not that she views herself as cool, just her computer: “I kind of think that other
people think that Mac users are stuck up and kind of look down at PCs… they’re like,
‘You have a Mac, you think you’re so cool.’ People think that about Mac users, that
they’re really partial. I don’t really care, I just really prefer Macs.”

Additionally, the stigma that Macs are cool and different served as initial
motivation for a particular subset of our participants in purchasing their machines.
Repeatedly, the idea that using a Mac makes one stand out establishes Apple comput-
ers as ideal targets for those seeking the latest trend. Like many participants, Amanda
cited Mac’s contrast to PCs as personal motivation for her purchase of a Macintosh
computer: “It was um, May 2005, so I got it right when I graduated from high school.
And everybody was like, no, you need a Dell. And I was like, I don’t want a Dell.
I want a Mac. I want to be edgy and cool.” Further, a particular group of our Mac users
explained that often social influence from others contributed to their initial desire to
purchase a Macintosh. These students represent a significant subset of the entire
sample of participants, and they seem to differ in their initial motivations for Mac
usage. Max, like many of these particular students, found that his interactions with
other Mac users and their perceived stigma as being “cool” ignited his own desire to
purchase a Mac:

Many of the downright “cool” people that I knew used Macs. So it was the “cool” factor.
For example one guy, he writes and makes music and is in photo shoots and he’s always
got his Mac out. And so that iconic “coolness” that goes along with it… in addition to
people I know. Just that it’s the really cool person, a lot of them had Macs. So there was
that overall aura of good’ole Apple.

Another dynamic associated with Macs’ “coolness” stigma regards a particular sub-
set of Mac users who resent the recent surge of Apple’s popularity. This resistance stems
mainly from individuals who consider themselves “original” Mac users – those who were using Macs before the recent popularity and “cool” stigma. Peter aptly explained the tension between the two sub-groups within the general category of Mac users:

There is this elite-ness of “Oh, you’re a PC user. Well I’m a Mac user.” Initially, it [Mac users] was this very small group of people who were in the digital arts and then they started expanding out. So then you even have an arrogance of within-Mac users. It’s like, “Oh, I’m a real Mac user because I use it for that, whereas you just use it for Microsoft Word.”

Further, students who considered themselves “real” Mac users simply are not impressed when newer users seemingly “show off” their Macs, especially when the motivation for these purchases was the “cool” stigma. Despite their shared positive opinions regarding Macs, the motivations of these two sub-groups of Mac users resulted in pretensions on behalf of the “originals” toward newer users. Mackenzie summarized the sentiments of this sub-group of participants as she shared her opinion of “trendy” Mac users:

What I think will come to bear more and more is the division even in Mac users between those who believe that they’re the “purest” and use it [Mac] for what it’s supposed to be used for and those who don’t. I know in my own, people are like, “I got a Mac!” And they’re trying to impress me because I have one, and I’ve gotten really snobby towards them because I’m like, “You got it so you can surf the internet! You’re not actually using it to create what a Mac is supposed to do.”

Others assume their socioeconomic status
The third main social stigma our Mac participants commonly shared is that of economic status. Because Apple products typically have significantly higher price ranges than their PC counterparts, students shared that often non-Mac users will assume Mac users are wealthy. Andrea, like most other participants, described her experiences as a Mac user and the resulting view she perceived others have of her regarding money:

And so that probably communicates to some people, like, the cost, it probably would communicate to someone, like, well, she’s the kind of person that can afford that kind of computer. And that’s not the thing I want to communicate, but it probably does.

We note that Mac users did not consistently portray themselves as being financially affluent. Perceptions are not always true to reality. Nonetheless, the stigma evidently tends to stick. Sarah, for example, shared the opinion of most Mac users as she described reactions of others when they learn she owns a Mac: “Others probably see Mac users as rich. Yeah, I’ve heard a lot, like, a lot of people will be like, ‘Whoa, you’ve got a Mac!’… But, um I got the cheapest one, so it’s not like I bought a two thousand dollar computer. But I think overall, it has this, like, stigma of, like, a rich-person-only gets a Mac.” Additionally, our participants were highly attuned to the stigma associated with Macs’ price because, in fact, they did admit to spending more money on their respective computers than their PC-owning cohorts. However, overall, Mac users did not regret paying the extra money and, conversely, advocated that paying for the added benefits of owing a Mac was well worth the extra cost. Renee voiced the opinion of most participants as she explained her view of the added cost in terms of value:
I guess that there’s a stigma because of how much they cost. Some people assume that you come from a wealthy family frequently. When people see my Mac or I talk about it, a lot of people make a comment about how much they cost. I don’t know, I think that the cost is worth it. My family’s not super rich, but we like to pay for quality.

**Mac evangelism**

The fourth self-admitted pretension relative to Mac usage is the tendency for Mac users to vocalize their computer preferences. Often this takes the form of bragging about personal, positive Mac experiences. As many participants shared, people typically do not provoke these pro-Mac comments but, rather, participants shared they regularly feel compelled to voluntarily submit their individual opinions. Mark, for example, recounted an experience, similar to that of many participants, in which he lightheartedly touted Macs:

Um, I kind of created the opposition [from non-Mac users] by waving it in their face, “Hey look I’ve been using my Mac for months now and it hasn’t crashed!” and Dad’s like “That’s, that’s great.” It really kind of cheezed him off when I put up this background [on his PC] that said “Blue screen of death: not an option on Mac,” and he was like “That’s just… now you’ve gone too far.” But, yeah. [smiles]

Students also shared their desire to talk about Macs with PC users and their efforts to channel conversations toward the benefits of owning Macintosh computers. Most often, these pro-Mac conversations were reported to arise on occasions when PC users vocalize sentiments regarding minor technical PC difficulties. Summarizing stories that many participants shared, Kim recounted occasions where she advocated Mac usage during times of “PC crisis”:

I always end up bragging to [my mom] about how, if something doesn’t work on hers but it works on mine, then she gets all flustered or if something’s going slow or something’s breaking down, and I’d tell her about it. I’d say, “Well, if you had a Mac, that wouldn’t happen!” And she’s like, “But I have to have it for this [for work].” So, we’ll see in the future what happens….You know, I’m trying to change them over and see the light.

Additionally, Mac users not only take advantage of opportunities to promote Macintosh computers, they also view themselves as “Mac representatives.” Our participants generally felt that because of Apple computers’ tendencies to stand out and because often others take notice of their machines, student users should expect to tell others about their Mac. Michael, for example, concurred with most interviewees’ sentiments as he related the frequency with which he promotes his Mac:

If I ever get a chance that anybody’s using a PC, I’ll try to throw in a comment about how my Mac is better or how a Mac would be better for them. Especially when they’re working on something that is Mac specific, or that Macs are specifically known to function more streamlined or better. At that specific task, I’ll usually say, “Hey, you know, maybe you should look into a Mac” or if somebody has an issue and they’re getting frustrated, I’ll say, you know, “I’ve never had that problem with my Mac.”

Participants shared that their main objective when discussing Macs with others is to “convert” PC users. Additionally, student Mac users personally held to the superiority of Macintosh computers so firmly that they frequently are purposed to vocalize
their sentiments. However, our participants also clarified that their objectives in advocating for Mac computers were not (entirely) to bash PCs but, rather, to increase awareness regarding the benefits of owning Macs. Alyssa, for example, shared a personal experience similar to that of many participants, whereby a Mac user introduced her to the benefits of Apple computers:

My roommate actually, um, she got her Mac [during her] freshman year and she just wouldn’t shut up about it. So, eventually, I’m a big skeptic when it comes to, like, new fads. I was like, “Yeah, whatever. You’re just still really giddy, because you just got a new computer.” But, um, after awhile, she was still really giddy about it, and you just eventually see the benefits of it and how nice and sleek and pretty it is. And her influence won me over.

Our participants shared that often “conversions” result from continually talking with PC users about the benefits of Macs. Further, most interviewees hoped that PC users would seek out more information regarding Macs and offered their repertoire of knowledge willingly. Caleb summarized the views of most participants in this regard as he explained his perceived altruistic motivation for vocalizing his own Mac preferences:

So, I mean, I expected it [my Mac] to make me stand out. And then you can always hope that people will come over and ask you about it, and then you’ll tell them how great Macs are! I hope it helps, helps me not stand out in a better way for my own personal benefit, but just help me stand out so other people can reap the benefit of owning a Mac as well.

Discussion
For the first time in American history, notebook computers have outsold traditional desktop computers (“Notebook,” 2008). Consequently, the importance of understanding the perceptions and thinking processes of notebook users will only intensify in the upcoming years. We believe, consequently, that the present research study makes a valuable contribution to the overall understanding of notebook computer users. Obviously, this study does not address any ultimate-answer issues. However, given that no recently published research exists regarding Mac users, be we believe that the present exploratory study provides a solid foundation upon which future researchers can build.

In discussing the study’s results, we comment on six potential implications and speculations regarding the research results. First, we suspect that a changed dynamic likely would occur if someday Mac computers were to become more popular on this particular campus. For example, what if, say, the university gave all students a choice of having a PC or Mac in their respective dorm rooms? Assuming more students would become Mac users, we suspect that this would significantly change the dynamics of our findings. Naturally, the features of the Mac would not change (i.e. it would continue performing the functions that our participants like) – but the perceived coolness, uniqueness, and alternative-mystique would be gone.

It seems to us that the perceived alterantiveness is an endearing feature to the Mac users in our study. That is, they did not feel oddball or out of place, being a minority-user on this university campus. On the contrary, they embraced their unique standing and, if this status were to be taken from them, we sense that generally it would not be received well. In one sense, this is both Apple Inc.’s bane and boon. That is, Apple benefits in that they seemingly possess a solid market niche for a group of college
students who are unusually loyal to the product. On the other hand, if Apple is ambitiously successful in enlarging the college student market, then there is a seeming danger that they may lose (or significantly weaken) this particular group of individuals as a foundational base. The fact that Apple does not draw a high percentage of the overall college student population is a source of pride to these particular students, making them feel unique and special.

Second, advertising obviously is a powerful medium, particularly to cohorts in a younger generation (Feldman, 2001). The results of our study suggest that advertising may be most powerful when it is combined with social influences. In the present context, the ads run by Apple generally were viewed by our participants as having been potent. That is, they were influential in the students’ ultimate decisions to purchase a Mac. However, most students indicated that it was not the ads alone that made the final decision for them. Rather, it was the physical perception that the advertising generated – combined with experiences they underwent when observing the Mac users around them. Overall, the people who genuinely used Macs were congruent with or similar to the students’ perceptions (that had been created in the advertising) of what an end-product Mac user should be like and should act like. Viz, the Mac users that these individuals knew truly were (from their perspective) cool, artsy, edgy, and the like. Consequently, the aura suggested by the advertisements, positively reinforced by the personal experiences of the participants, appears to be what made the bottom-line differences in the decisions of the students who eventually became Mac users.

Third, the Mac computers appeared to deliver what they promised. That is, Apple markets its brand as being superior in quality to PCs. From the perspectives of the individuals in our study, they believed this assertion to be true. It was beyond the scope of the present study to appraise whether or not Mac users actually experienced more or less problems with their computers than do PC users. The self-report of this group, however, was that Macs are highly reliable machines. Moreover, they were said to perform the added-value functions that Apple markets as being superior to typical PCs. Additionally, we note a finding that we did not encounter in this study. Namely, not one participant in our study was unhappy with their Macintosh computer. On the contrary, all of the individuals were enthusiastic – die-hard – users. Each participant described himself/herself as being dedicated to Macs for the foreseeable future and it was beyond them to consider switching back to a PC. In short, Apple Inc. evidently not only has created an air of high quality with respect to the Mac computer but, from the perspective of our students, the company delivers what it advertises.

At the time of writing the present article, Mac seemingly possesses a corner-of-the-market niche. The Mac users generally described themselves as feeling they were personally congruent with the (overall) stereotype portrayed in Apple’s advertisements. Students who enjoy being thought of as being different, edgy, artsy, affluent, and to some degree – superior – seemingly are a nook market for the present Mac computer. Furthermore, at the time of present writing, there are no popular alternatives for these students. That is, Apple does not have a nationally known, popular brand that competes for these particular students vis-à-vis Mac’s qualities. PCs, in one sense, can be thought of as a commodity. Whether one purchases, say, an Acer or Dell or Hewlett-Packard, or another brand of PC computer – they generally are in the same category. Naturally, various corporations market machines of various speed, weights, sizes, capacities, and the like. But no other PC maker – or other alternative computer
corporation – seriously competes with Apple’s grip on the type of student that participated in the present study. For now, Apple seeming owns this particular niche.

The findings of the present study are quite congruent with the only other published study of Mac users. Particularly, Lam (2001) found that Mac users possessed a bond with their computers. They were loyal to them and possess a zealot’s devotion to them. The results of our present study were broader than Lam’s – but of particular significance in this present discussion is that eight years have elapsed between the two studies. Evidently, Apple’s clutch on Mac users is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it has been present, at least to some degree, for some time. As the Apple corporation continues exploring and evaluating its marketing strategy, they evidently have a potentially strong hold on a particular cross-section of college students. Expanding markets, therefore, should be done with significant care – considering the seemingly solid one that has been a mainstay for some time.

We draw particular attention to the implications of this research for education, campuses, and university policies. Students in our study indicated that the potential educational use of the Mac computer generally is under-estimated and under-utilized. They noted their perceptions that Macs were superior, not only in style, but also in ways that should matter to students and university administrators. Reliability is a cornerstone need for all university-use of computers. Students are infamous for completing their work shortly before it is due. Unreliability of equipment not only provides frustrations to students and administrators – it also hinders the overall learning that takes place when students do or do not complete their assignments. According to the students interviewed in the present study, administrators would do well to take notice of the Mac’s reported superior technology and consider its potential adoption on a more wide-scale campus use.

Moreover, students also described the Macintosh computers to be generally superior in overall function to their PC counterparts. That is, the actual applications of the Mac were said to potentially enhance the students’ educational experiences in ways that surpassed typical PCs. Campus administrators, therefore, would do well to further explore this matter empirically. No research studies evidently have been published on the topic to date. If the Mac users’ assertions are founded, then campus administrators should consider modifying current bents to supporting PC computers (exclusively or predominantly). The ultimate objective of a university, of course, is student learning. If the Mac machines are found to better enhance and facilitate this objective – then it naturally follows that additional funding, human resources, and adapted IT polices might be warranted across most US university campuses.

Limitations and future research
This present study based its findings on perspectives from primarily Caucasian students. Future studies should seek to incorporate viewpoints of Mac users from minority ethnicities in order to broaden the study’s external validity. A key component for establishing the external validity of qualitative research is replication (Firmin, 2008). In light of this, repeating the present study at universities of various types, areas of the country, size, and other variables will help to reaffirm or deny the present findings. Further, this present study focused only on college students’ perspectives of Mac computers. Future studies also should examine the views of high school students. And finally, future researchers may also wish to examine the perceptions of non-Mac users regarding Mac users and Apple computers in general. Studies such as these could
examine, not only the general attitude and perceptions of Mac users by PC users, but also could examine whether the PC users and Mac users interviewed in this present study name the same pretensions in regards to Mac users.

References


