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| Cultural Artifact Analysis Essay: Cell Phones |
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“Reading culture means bringing forward for analysis and reflection those commonplace aspects of everyday life that people normally think of as simply being there, a part of the natural order of things” (George and Trimbur 3). The cellular phone is a mainstay in today’s culture making it an artifact that is an ever evolving representation of our times. The technology of cellular phones was initially invented so that people could use a phone without the physical restriction of being tied to a land line. But modern use of the cell phone has developed to become way more than just making and receiving phone calls. The cell phones of today are mini computers capable of managing a person’s social life, music collection, travel directions, business schedule, vacation photos, and more. Besides being functional, cell phones also have the unique ability to be intricately personalized giving consumers an ongoing platform of personal expression. Cell phones have even altered the way that people communicate and interact with one another, creating new rules of etiquette and ethics that have not yet been universally agreed upon.

Most cell phones come equipped right out of the box with a clock, alarm clock, calculator, speakerphone, calendar, camera, camcorder, GPS, ringtones, voice recorder, games, internet connectivity, etc. Contemporary cell phones have large data storage capacities and even keyboards, making them look and operate like a computer that fits in the palm of your hand. With all that a cell phone can do it’s no wonder that it is instrumental in so many different facets of society. For example, in corporate America, the cell phone has become the common tool that people use to communicate quickly to anyone from anywhere. Its use allows deals to be done fast and efficiently, sometimes with just a few button strokes. With a cell phone you are always connected, if there’s a problem you can be immediately notified and proactive in obtaining a solution. The mentality for owning a cell phone used to revolve around it being handy to have in an emergency-type situation. If you were to get into a car accident or witness a robbery you would have the ability to call for help right away. And because of that ability cell phones carry with them a certain sense of safety and security, people feel protected by having their cell phones with them at all times. Contrary to that, sometimes constant connectivity will create an addiction in people where their cell phone is being used so much and so often that it turns into an unhealthy obsession. Using a cell phone becomes an addicting thing because of how much it can do for you and by how personalized you can make it.

I believe you can attribute some of the success of cellular phones to their distinct aptitude for personalization. People like to have things their way and a cell phone allows each user to ‘make’ the phone their own. These various customizable features give each person the chance to modify their cell phone in highly specific ways so that the product will look and behave however they want it to. By personalizing the cell phone the consumer is truly making it their own and in turn cultivating an ongoing interest in the cell phones behavior and appearance. The cell phone has grown in our society to become an extension of who a person is. It can contain data about someone’s entire life and is a tangible representation of their lifestyle and personality. Especially in younger generations, where the use of cell phones in daily life has been widely adopted, the cellular phone acts as a symbol of being cool or being connected with your surrounding community of friends and family. Communicating with each other is being done more in the form of sending text messages than in actual conversation. Today’s youth our learning and creating a brand new type of language, by sending text messages in codes and abbreviations like “lol.” Just as June Jordan worked with her students to create a language closer to their cultural roots with “Black English” (Jordan), modern culture has created an entire catalog of textual lingo that has revolutionized social interaction and defined a new type of ‘text messaging’ language. The changes that cell phones have made to daily modern culture’s language and communication styles have been monumental. The cell phone has made such an impact in the way we communicate in fact that new inter-personal rules of etiquette have yet to be established.

The rapid rise in use, coupled with the endless barrage of abilities and applications, has created new problems in our society when discussing the appropriate etiquette of using a cell phone in public. Who hasn’t been in the situation where some stranger begins talking to you and as you reply you realize that they are using a Bluetooth to talk hands free on their cell phone. While it’s an embarrassing situation, it is also mildly impolite. Is that person so disconnected from his surrounding that he didn’t realize the repercussion of his actions and how he is affecting the people around him? Telephone conversations used to be something between just the two people talking, but nowadays cell phone calls are bellowed in grocery stores and airports for all to hear with no sense of privacy or restraint. Further disagreements with the use of cell phones arise from the continued use of them while driving despite the inherent risks and danger that it puts everyone in. Since people are constantly connected to their friends and family with their cell phone it seems that they are then less associated and potentially disconnected to the people that around them.

Raymond Williams believes that “culture is ordinary” (Williams), and since cell phones have become so commonplace I believe they have definitely established themselves as an artifact of our modern culture. To affirm just how in grained cell phone use has become to our daily customs and habits, here some statistics that solidify its popularity. There are approximately 5 billion text messages sent everyday in America. Currently nine out of ten Americans owns a cell phone and the average age that kids get their first cell phone is eight years old (with a total of 35% of all eight year olds currently have a cell phone). For the teenage demographic, 80% own a wireless device and five out of ten say that their social life would be severely worsened without their cell phone. Sometime in 2010 cell phone subscriptions will reach 5 billion worldwide, that 70% of the entire world’s population owning a cell phone (cellphones.org)! Further studies break down the use of cell phones in America regarding race and age.

According to the Nielsen Company, teens send an average of 2,779 texts per month. Comparatively senior citizens receive on average 30 text messages per month. African Americans talk and text with their cell phones more than any other racial group with 1,300 minutes of talking time and 780 texts per month. Whites send 566 text messages per month and talk for 647 minutes, Asian/Pacific Islanders use 697 minutes of talk time along with 384 texts per month while Hispanics talk for 826 minutes and send 767 texts per month (Blackburn). More than anything else these statistics show that all cultures have adopted the daily use of the cellular phone. Owning a cell phone is not for just the rich, or for the young, but all backgrounds and personality types. Cell phones have been accepted everywhere making them a significant and commonly used cultural artifact to modern civilization.

The dynamics of a cell phones capacity are constantly evolving and improving giving people new and different reasons to own one. The use of cell phones has changed the way the world does business and the way people interact with one another. Because of cell phones a new textual language has been created and adopted by popular culture that continues to drive the evolution and maturity of their language. No other contemporary cultural artifact embodies the technological genius and raw excess of capitalism like the cell phone. It is used widely by all types of diverse cultures and has been adopted by the younger generation to an overwhelming extent. A cell phone contains a person’s life; their personal pictures, favorite music, social networking sites, friends, etc. It is customizable to adjust specifically to all different genders, ages, and races. While cell phones haven’t been around for a very long time they certainly have made a definitive mark to modern-day culture.

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