

Love and hate in the world of the iPhone

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"I'd buy almost anything that's shiny and made by Apple" says a stereotypical "customer" quoted in *The Onion*, a satirical fake online news organization.¹ Although only a parody, more than a single grain of truth can be gleaned here. Apple is said to have succeeded in developing a "deep [personal] connection with the consumer," to the point where "Apple engineers a nigh-fanatical devotion to its products."² In short, Apple successfully markets itself as a conscious lifestyle choice, the cool kid on the block.

So what happens when an Apple product disappoints?

Enter the iPhone, a smartphone which has by most measures been a runaway success since its release. Already in October 2008, Apple reported that iPhone sales had already topped 134 million phones,³ making Apple the world's third largest mobile phone supplier.⁴ MacWorld magazine reports in 2009 that Apple's overall customer satisfaction rate was at 80%, 14 points above its closest competitor.⁵ In other words, most people really like Apple products. That leaves 20% of Apple consumers, however, who are not so delighted.

Why might some people be less than enamored with the iPhone? For one answer, look to Virginia Heffernan's NYT article, whose title lays it right out: "I Hate My iPhone." Heffernan recounts that she had enthusiastically looked forward to her iPhone purchase, only to find herself hesitant to actually dare touch the device, feeling like "a sullen new mom, not ready for her role." In the end, she was daunted by what she characterized as the phone's smugness, coyness, and coldness: "with its know-it-all suggestions, the iPhone seemed to want to be more human, more helpful, jollier than I was!"⁶

Heffernan is not alone in her exasperation. Wendy S. Donnell, a writer for PC Magazine, also hates the iPhone, saying that although it is gorgeous, "iPhone and I got together too soon." Donnell identifies herself as a "Mac person" whose apartment could

¹ (Onion News Network 2009)

² (Smith 2007)

³ (Starrett 2008b)

⁴ (Starrett 2008a)

⁵ (Dalrymple 2009)

⁶ (Heffernan 2009)

easily be confused with an Apple store. Having eagerly bought an iPhone shortly after their release, however, she found herself disappointed by inaudible calls, poor reception, slow EDGE, and a difficult keyboard. She is now yearning for a less sexy but smarter phone.⁷

“Conchita” from Germany expresses the same sentiment even more directly on the “i hate my iphone” website, where she writes the following:

I hate my iPhone. It is like a disappointing love story with someone who is handsome and tells you how wonderful he/she is but does not know the basics of human behaviour at all. This narcissistic device is so proud of itself that its battery is always empty because it takes so much time to be busy with itself. It cant phone, it cant send sms (thats for ordinary people), you need always two hands and a lot of attention to handle it because this electronic diva is so sensitive and "special".⁸

These iPhone haters thus conceive of their phones as people who have betrayed them, a particularly powerful metaphor. Heffernan’s iPhone is a child, one which “was built never to be cradled.” Others couch the expression of their disappointment in language which is otherwise reserved for disillusionment in love. Their iPhones are eagerly awaited lovers, sure to delight, but who instead have let them down. And judging by the tones of acrimony and despair in the “I hate my iPhone” confessions, it was a long fall.

Do all iPhone users express such intense feelings about their iPhone? Compare the following two lists. One was compiled by an iPhone hater, the other by an iPhone lover:

	10 reasons I Hate My iPhone⁹	The Top 10 Things I Love About My iPhone¹⁰
1	It’s trying to kill me.	Slide to Unlock
2	It doesn’t want me to have memories.	The Home Button
3	It wants me to lose friends.	Horizontal / Vertical View
4	It wants me to lose business.	Rich Web Browsing
5	It’s pretty, until you start to use it.	Zoom Gestures
6	It’s trying to lose me.	iTunes Cover Flow
7	It doesn’t like being charged up.	YouTube
8	It’s noisy as hell.	Everything is Synced
9	It doesn’t want to disturb me.	Everything is Integrated
10	It’s jealous.	iPhone is Simple

Clearly the iPhone hater is more emotional, attributing his iPhone with sentient thoughts and motivations. The explication of the final point is especially revealing. Here the writer complains about being tied to a contract with the O2 service provider as condition of the

⁷ (Donnell 2008)

⁸ (Conchita 2007)

⁹ (clopinettes 2008)

¹⁰ (Iskold 2007)

iPhone purchase, saying how he feels “[t]rapped like you might feel when you’re with a beautiful but violently jealous girlfriend who, it turns out, you just got pregnant.” By contrast, the iPhone lover praises the various iPhone features in less metaphorical language, succinctly stating that the smartphone is “the best gadget I have ever owned.” Similarly, in an article that offers an alternative view of the iPhone written by Joel S. Domingo, a colleague of Donnell’s at PC Magazine, the journalist opens by writing that the iPhone is “just a brilliant product.”¹¹

It seems that while both groups offer concrete reasons underlying their opinions, the iPhone lovers have not lost sight of the fact the iPhone is nothing more than a device – a gadget or product – although some exceptions can of course be found. Domingo for instance does admit that the iPhone is “damn sexy,” but this is the only expression of iPhone personification in his piece. Perhaps more telling is a comment by “Tharomas,” a self-admitted iPhone lover, who nevertheless has some issues with the product. As he writes, “Now with anything you love the romance does wear off. I think we are at that stage.”¹² Here then we see the first hints of the disillusioned lover. The link between owner and iPhone is likened to the relationship between lovers, yes...but only at the first signs of that relationship going sour.

In conclusion, Apple’s marketing strategies have succeeded in creating a devoted group of consumers who typically express well-reasoned explanations for why they value Apple products, usually revolving around the various intuitive and useful features of the device. Even the majority of iPhone haters take pains to explain that they really are Mac people at heart, and think that the iPhone is simply gorgeous. These people had anticipated once again falling in love with an Apple product, but instead discovered that even Apple beauty can be deceptive. And when Apple disappoints, then what was in good times no more than a nifty device suddenly appears in language as much more than that. Disappointment in Apple products thus manifests itself as betrayal of the personal bonds created between Apple and the consumer, akin to the bitter disillusionment that only those people closest to us could ever possibly engender: our lovers and children.

References

¹¹ (Domingo 2008)

¹² (Thoaromas 2009)

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