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**The Smart Phone as a Conflicting Third Party  
in Interpersonal Relationships**

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University of Portland

Department of Communication Studies

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**ABSTRACT**

Given technology's constant advancements, cell phones affect interpersonal relationships with unanticipated consequences. This qualitative analysis investigates the ways smart phones impact conflict in interpersonal relationships. Typically, research has investigated conflict in which mediated communication is a vehicle of conflict. This study looks at smart phones as a reason for conflict. More specifically, we explore how smart phones act as a conflicting third party within interpersonal relationships.

An interview methodology provided data that were analyzed in this study. Eight thematic categories emerged from the data, wherein smart phone participants described how smart phone use generated conflict. The eight categories identified were: barrier to meaningful communication, jealousy of smart phone interactions, technology-induced communication problems, disrespect, face-to-face preferred for conflict, acceptance of smart phone interruptions, accommodation and avoidance, and unmet expectations.

The implications of this study are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Research on computer-mediated communication and conflict has evolved over the last twenty-five years. In the last ten years, a newer variant of computers has entered everyday life: the smart phone. Unlike original cell phones, smart phones accomplish many of the same tasks as computers. As smart phones seep into public and private contexts, additional opportunities for conflict emerge. The involvement of smart phones in interpersonal conflict can be seen when a mother tells her child to put their phone away during dinner, or when spouses become angry because their partner is on the phone instead of talking to them. As smart phones become more integrated into daily social life, conflict may arise as an unintended consequence of the way new technology is used.

Unintended consequences are not unusual with new technology. This research explores the question, how do smart phones create or impact interpersonal communication, and more specifically, how do smart phones act as a conflicting third party in interpersonal relationships? Two areas in cell phone use cause concern: the users' lack of awareness of surroundings when using a cell phone and the users' treatment of interpersonal relationships while on a cell phone. The first concern relates to safety and social awareness. The second concern relates to how we structure our interactions with two parties simultaneously. The latter is the focus of this paper.

Given the continual upgrades to smart phone technology and affordable pricing, people are becoming more and more connected to the world and the lives of others. Particularly, smart phones connect people more constantly. Many people value their phone as their life and have it with them always. It is rare for individuals to turn off their phones. This ability to constantly connect has major implications for interpersonal relationships. Yet, little has been done to describe the practices of smart phone users, especially in relation to interpersonal conflict.

The purpose of this paper is to further investigate smart phone communication as it relates to interpersonal conflict. First, we will look at existing research related to cell phones, next we will describe the methods used to study conflict issues in relation to smart phones, and finally we will present results with discussion.

*What is a Smart phone?*

Today, phones do not just provide users with the ability to make phone calls from anywhere. Smart phones allow users to surf the Internet, watch videos, get directions, check social media, take and send pictures, read and compose emails, and write text messages. According to PC Magazine, a smart phone is, “a cellular telephone with built-in applications and Internet access.”<sup>1</sup> With all of the built-in functions, smart phones turn the “once single-minded cell phone into a mobile personal computer.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, whereas cellphones of the past had a single function, a telephone call, today’s smart phones are basically miniature hand-held computers. The first smart phone was created in 1994 by IBM and called the Simon Personal Communicator, but it was not until 2002 that smart phones became popular with the BlackBerry phone’s focus on email.<sup>3</sup> In 2007, Apple’s iPhone changed the industry forever, and today smart phones are widely used and produced. The technological advancements of mobile phones alter the ways in which people use cell phones. Cell phones are no longer simply mobile phones used to make calls and send text messages. Most cell phones today are smart phones, meaning they can access the Internet, take and send pictures and videos, connect to social media, provide directions and play games.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia\\_term/0,2542,t=Smartphone&i=51537,00.asp](http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia_term/0,2542,t=Smartphone&i=51537,00.asp)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia\\_term/0,2542,t=Smartphone&i=51537,00.asp](http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia_term/0,2542,t=Smartphone&i=51537,00.asp)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia\\_term/0,2542,t=Smartphone&i=51537,00.asp](http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia_term/0,2542,t=Smartphone&i=51537,00.asp)

*Smart phone prevalence in today's society*

Today, cell phones are one of the most widely owned devices, especially in the United States. It is rare to come across someone who does not own a cell phone. A study done in 2005 by the Pew/Internet and American Life Project found that “nearly half of American teens have a cell phone. About a third of middle school teens own a cell phone” (Cooper, 2009). Although cell phones were initially developed as a mobile medium for communication, they have developed into much more. According to Cooper (2009), “The plethora of features packed into a modern cell phone makes it a simultaneously a communication center, an information center, a record keeper, an historical archive, an organizer and an entertainment center.”

The proliferation of smart phones does not stop with the number of people who own them. People also have a habit of keeping their phones turned on. According to a 2008 study by Pew Internet and American Life project, 52% of all American cell phone owners report keeping their phones on all the time, and 81% of users who only own a cell (and not a landline) always keep their phones turned on (Miller-Ott, 2012). Additionally, this study showed that among Americans aged 18 to 29, “31% reported feeling like they have to answer their cell phones even when it interrupts a meal or meeting” (Miller-Ott, 2012). The increase of cell phone users combined with their constant accessibility makes them a constant companion. They not only are a vehicle by which conflict may be conducted, but also become a generator of conflict as people adapt them for a multitude of uses.

*Related research*

Present research on smart phones and conflict is sparse. Most research examines mobile phones use in public space, focusing on phone calls (Katz and Aakhus, 2002; Katz, 2008; Ling, 2004), and on safety. Other research examines phone use among romantic relationships (Duran,

Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011; Horstmanshof & Power, 2005). Research on safety suggests that cell phone use restricts users' ability to pay attention to their surroundings. This is seen most commonly in driving while on the phone. Users have difficulty managing two social situations – the phone and the road. Therefore, many states have banned using mobile phones while driving, because it impairs the ability for people to focus. Similarly, research has found that individuals on their mobile phones in public are much less likely to help or even notice others. Banjo (2008) demonstrates that phone-users were less likely to smile at bystanders, and less likely to help someone than those who were not using a cell phone. Overall, cell phones are shown to distract users and negatively impact their ability to pay attention to their surroundings. Few have researched the impacts of smart phones on interpersonal conflict, with one exception being Duran, Kelly and Toraru (2011) who found that cell phones contributed to conflict in romantic relationships. Yet, research on how smart phones create interpersonal conflict is of great importance due to the proliferation of smart phones and their constant presence and use. More and more, people are using their phones while they spend time with others. People constantly negotiate between being physically present and mentally absent by using their phone in public settings. They must navigate between the physical world and the virtual world, simultaneously engaging in face-to-face and digital interactions. Technological advancements change the way cell phones are used, making research important. Some researchers suggest that cell phones “affect every aspect of our personal and professional lives either directly or indirectly” (Katz and Aakhus, 2002). By highlighting the ways smart phones contribute to conflict, we might find better ways to manage our smart phone use and, thereby, minimize detrimental effects on relationships.

## THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Relational communication is the main use of cell phones (see e.g., Katz and Aakhus, 2002; Katz, 2008; Ling, 2004). People rely on cell phones to communicate, share, include and validate. Although being able to contact others is one of the most liked qualities of cell phones, being continuously available for others' contact is also one of its most disliked qualities (Baron, 2008; Baron and Ling, 2007). This tension has been seen through the lens of perpetual contact (Katz and Aakhus, 2002) and relational dialectics theory (Baxter and Simon, 1993). Duran et al. (2011) found that the timing of calls and texts created conflict around issues of autonomy and connection for couples.

### *Physically present, yet mentally absent*

Cell phones are recognized for giving people the power to be in 'perpetual contact', a phrase coined by Katz and Aakhus (2002). With the ability to be contacted at any given moment, cell phones allow people to surreptitiously withdraw from the physical world to engage with the virtual world. However, the idea of simultaneously being physically present and socially or mentally absent due to cell phone use is not new. Kenneth Gergen (2002) termed this phenomenon 'absent presence.' Cooper expands on how "absent presence occurs at home: "Young teens can 'hang out' on the phone while other activities are going on, such as cleaning the bedroom or using the Internet. Movement does not restrict conversation or text messaging; there is never a reason not to be in 'perpetual contact'" (Cooper, 2009). For Gergen, cell phones increase the potential for people to become isolated from the physical present and immersed in a technological presence (Gergen, 2002). Overall, research demonstrates that cell phones make it difficult to separate public and private space.

**Irresistibility of the Call: Theories**

Theories about cell phone usage draw from a number of perspectives: shifting social norms of interaction in public space, cross talk, caller hegemony and co-presence. Caller hegemony is the idea that phone calls take priority over all other existing interactions, because of the sense of obligation the receiver feels to the call and the anonymity of the caller. Goffman's concept of cross talk is communicating non-verbally to co-present individuals while engaged in a verbal conversation with a distant other. The idea of co-presence is an individual who is engaged in a face-to-face interaction with another individual, who then gets interrupted by a secondary interaction. The co-present individual is left waiting while the other party partakes in another conversation.

*Expectancy Violations, Hierarchy, Smart phones and Conflict*

Violations of expectations and perceptions of social hierarchy contribute to conflict around smart phones. Each communicator expects to have primacy of the listener's attention. Current research focuses on the conundrum that cell phone users find themselves in when they simultaneously engage in face-to-face and virtual interactions. In other words, cell phones require people to juggle being both physically present and mentally occupied in a virtual world. For example, when someone receives a phone call they must navigate between two social "worlds". They have their primary interaction with the person with them, and then the secondary interaction i.e. the phone call. Decisions on how to react to this interruption are made by both the recipient of the call and the person with them. People have to decide if they want to interrupt their primary interaction, and how they want to do it. The secondary person has to decide how they are going to react to being interrupted by another party (i.e. phone call). Research

demonstrates that mobile phones make people rank their interactions, and more often than not, people will answer the call, even if it is just to say “I’ll call you right back”.

Talking on a cell phone in public space brings competing forces for attention. Current research on cell phone use and communication focuses on cell phone use in public spaces. Rich Ling noted that cell phones require the “management of parallel front stages” (Ling, 1997). In other words, people must juggle their physical surroundings (the public space) and their private phone conversation. Ling (2002) also uses the term “double front stage” to refer to the two social realms a person on a cell phone occupies. Another way to frame the two social realms is to view them as co-present versus remote interactions (Ling, 2002). Co-present interactions occur when a person is in a physical interaction with another person, and then becomes interrupted by a third party (i.e. a phone call). The primary person must now negotiate two interactions, as one conversation takes priority over the other. Banjo (2008) noted that a caller may send non-verbal cues to the person they are interacting with face-to-face, or ask the distant other to wait, and must apologize to the distant other upon returning attention to the phone call (Banjo, 2008). Although interruptions by third parties are common, Bangerter et al., (2010) notes that dealing with interruptions is quite complex. “Dealing with interruptions in collaborative tasks involves two important processes: managing the face of one’s partners and collaboratively reconstructing the topic.” Goffman (1976) calls the decision of which conversation takes precedence “accreditation”. Whoever gets “accredited” has more value at that point in time, a situation with conflict potential.

#### *Managing co-present individuals*

In addition to managing two interactions, individuals must also manage the obligations of each interaction. Cell phone users are both obligated to the caller and the person they are

physically with. These obligations are due to expectations from both parties – the person on the phone and the person physically with them. Humphreys (2005) notes that, “In some circumstances, managing the expectations of one relationship may be detrimental to the other” (Humphreys, 2005). Expectancy violations can be a source of conflict (Folger, Poole, Stutman, 2013).

Bangerter (2010) examined how the conversational role of the interrupted person is a negotiated process that is connected to the notion of facework. According to Bangerter (2010):

Suspending a conversation is potentially face threatening, because, often, only the target is solicited by a third party. Other participants are thus kept waiting. This leads participants to perform redressing behaviors (politeness) such as apologizing or justifying. Thus, participants do not just stop or start talking with each other but coordinate getting into and out of conversation.

Research demonstrates that people “typically suspend the original (primary) conversation, deal with the interruption (initiating a secondary conversation), and reinstate the primary conversation” (Bangerter, 2010). What compels people to accept the interruption while with others? Several researchers invoke the theory of hegemony.

Caller hegemony suggests that the main characteristic of phone conversations is the “asymmetrical relationship between the caller and the answerer” (Banjo, 2008). Hopper found that even when people were in a heated argument with a loved one, they would still answer the telephone. Although Hopper examined landline phone use, his work is used as a springboard by other researchers to examine cell phone use. In other words, the caller acts, and the answerer must react to the call. According to Banjo (2008), “Caller hegemony is more likely to happen when the distant others initiate the call than when the cell phone users themselves do.” Banjo (2008) found that, “cell phone users often struggle between proximate other and distant others. One of the reasons that cell phone users are reluctant to initiate conversations or awareness of

proximate others is because they feel obligated to their phone call” (Banjo, 2008). Caller hegemony is maintained by the social norm to give high priority to a ringing phone and to answer it (Banjo, 2008). Humphreys (2005) views the idea of caller hegemony as a building block for examining cell phone use. According to Humphreys, “Though caller hegemony still exists to some degree, mobile phones and new telephonic technologies can disrupt the asymmetry of the traditional caller-answerer relationship. Answerers are no longer always at the mercy of callers. People also use cell phones in negotiating their social responsibilities to their interaction partners.” This control is largely because cell phones have caller ID, and therefore can represent social hierarchies. This is especially true when the caller ID is unavailable, which falls in line with caller hegemony – not knowing who is calling places the power with the caller (Humphreys, 2005). Research indicates that despite caller ID, most people still answer their cell phone. Thus, research suggests that the feeling and social norm to answer phone calls is strong, despite the knowledge of who is calling or one’s immediate company.

Another theory used by researchers is cross talk, which is communicating non-verbally to co-present individuals while engaged in a verbal conversation with a distant other. Humphreys uses cross talk as a model to examine cell phone use from two perspectives: how people conform to familiar rules of social interaction in public spaces, and how people break these rules (Humphreys, 2005).

One way individuals engaged in a cell phone conversation manage this dual front is to communicate non-verbally with the person they are physically with. Humphreys (2005) observed this often involves eye rolling or holding up one finger to signal the interruption would not take much longer. Ling (1997) touches briefly on the secondary party. They are “left in a particularly stressful sort of suspended status in that they are asked to wait. They are not dismissed, rather,

they are left hanging.” In essence, the original party is left in what Ling (1997) calls a “social juxtaposition.”

#### *Impact on Co-present individuals*

Although little research focuses on the physical companion left by the individual on the phone, Ling (2002) identifies that co-present individuals must also process the experience as they become secondary to their companion’s phone conversation. Ling identifies the role of the secondary individual is to provide space and privacy to the individual on the phone, but does not go into great detail regarding how this is achieved. Humphreys (2005) attempted to explain how the secondary party felt, and surmised that a ringing phone can be considered a ‘third person’. “Rather than physically approaching the dyad, a cell phone call to a person engaged in a face-to-face interaction may lead to social anxiety on the part of the person left out of the phone interaction” (Humphreys, 2005). Humphreys noted through his observational study that people “feel awkward,” “annoyed” or even “put off” when their companion is on their cell phone. While waiting for their companion to be return to their conversation, the person left out engages in a number of common behaviors. Mainly, this co-present party either eavesdrops on their partner’s conversation or provides them with privacy, either by making themselves busy or by providing the person with physical space for privacy, such as by turning or looking away (Humphreys, 2005).

The act of reemerging from a secondary conversation back to a primary conversation has also been studied. Research suggests that this negotiation is equally as difficult and uncomfortable as getting out of a conversation to take a separate call (Ling, 2002). Bangerter (2010) identified three variables that affect the coordination of topic reinstatement and face management: duration of interruption, conversational role of the target (speaker v. listener), and

conversational role of the target may affect the responsibilities of the conversational partners for topic reinstatement (Bangerter, 2010). Ling (1997) notes that rebuilding the original conversation can be particularly difficult if the original party “is only begrudgingly willing to accept its back stage status” while the person was engaging in a phone call. Taken together, cell phones and technology complicate social interaction by providing more direct interruptions that people feel obligated to answer and shifts social boundaries.

### **Cell phones and Conflict**

Research examining conflict involving cell phones is rare and limited. A study done by Miller-Ott (2012) examined the use of cell phones and romantic relationship satisfaction. Cell phones were shown to be a source of conflict in relationships when couples created rules about when to call/text and over availability and frequency of contact. Arguments over cell phones and arguments regarding cell phone use were identified. According to Miller-Ott (2012), “partners were happier with the use of cell phones in their relationships if they reported having rules about not discussing interpersonal issues or fighting over the phone.” Miller-Ott’s research suggests that cell phones are a source of relational conflict, and people do not like limits on their cell phone use. In relation, Duran et al. (2011) found that conflict between romantic partners involving cell phones stemmed from the tension between autonomy and connection. People did not like to have rules placed on their cell phone usage. More specifically, Duran et al. found the cell phone was a source of autonomy-connection conflict when a partner was frequently contacting someone of the opposite sex. They also found that of couples who created cell phone rules, most addressed the timing of calls and text messages.

**Theory in relation to Present Study**

Taken together, expectancy violations, cross talk and hegemony lay the groundwork for the involvement of smart phones in conflict. Overall, little is currently known about smart phone use, and even less is known about smart phones and interpersonal conflict. Most strikingly, text messaging is rarely examined. Current studies focus on phone calls. They do not look at other forms of distractions – such as social media notifications, games, text messages, and Internet use. This is in part due to the fact that most studies were conducted while cell phones were still very primitive. With the incredible fast pace of technological advancements, cell phones have become “smart phones”. Essentially, phones are miniature computers. They provide users the ability to connect to the internet, call and text, take and send pictures, email, and participate in social media – all on the go. With these advancements, the cell phone has become more than a device to call people away from the home. It is a device that connects people to the world, in every possible way. No longer is the user merely responding to a caller, she or he is also monitoring incoming email and pings that are reminders of tasks and meetings. With respect to interpersonal communication, smart phones interrupt face to face connection time as the smart phone user prioritizes “other” communication via the smart phone distraction. These advancements must be taken into account when examining smart phone use today and the ways in which it influences social interaction.

Of the research conducted involving cell phones and communication, most focus on the recipient of the phone call and how they manage the dual social interactions. They ignore the other physical party and their reaction to the interruption. Some studies note that bystanders tend to become irritated by cell phone use in public places, such as restaurants and buses, because of the loud talk, and noises that phones make (i.e. ringing and notification beeps), (Ling, 2002). The

attention given to interpersonal relationships focuses on romantic relationships. Little attention is given to conflict as a result of phone use. Research often discusses the role of the co-present second partner, and some studies briefly touch on their feelings about being interrupted, but it is not studied as a pre-cursor to conflict. Research illustrates that individuals must negotiate their physical and mental presence, and that cell phones make the boundary between public and private difficult to maintain. Research also indicates that cell phone use in public spaces is viewed as annoying and disruptive.

Although this study examines smart phones as a reason for conflict, some research has been done that looks at smart phones as a vehicle for conflict. When looking at the smart phone as a vehicle by which conflict is conducted, “reduced cues theory” and “social presence theory” come into play. Because smart phones are used like computers, they can also be related to computer mediated communication (CMC) theories. Most relevant to this study are social presence theory (Short, J., Williams, E., & Christie, B., 1976) and reduced cues theory (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). Social presence theory assesses the degree to which a medium allows communicators to experience others as being psychologically present. Reduced social cues theory argues that reduced nonverbal cues and the diminished presence of social context lead to more uninhibited behavior than would occur during face-to-face interaction.

## **HYPOTHESIS**

This study examines the smart phone as a conflicting third party in interpersonal relationships. I use Folger, Poole and Stutman’s definition of conflict; it is “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatibility and the possibility of interference from others as a result of this incompatibility” (2013). The study focuses on the smart phone’s third party ability to interrupt interpersonal interactions. I hypothesize that issues of hegemony, cross

talk and expectancy violations contribute to the incompatibility of interdependent parties who are both trying to meet personal goals and sometimes interfere with each other's abilities to do so.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Data were collected through extended interviews and a closed ended questionnaire. A qualitative approach was chosen for this exploratory study in order to obtain more detailed responses than possible through a survey, and to allow for follow-up questions. A total of seven college students from a small, private university on the west coast participated. Participants were selected at random from the cafeteria on the university campus. I sat by the fireplace near the coffee station and approached people in line for coffee who were using their smart phone and asked if they had time to participate in a study. Interviews were conducted at a table near the fireplace. Five participants were female and ranged in age from 19-21. Two were male and ranged in age from 21-22. The participants were a mix of music, education, communication and sociology majors. IRB approval was received for this study.

A list of discussion questions was established for the interviews (see Appendix A). Questions were designated to capture the participant's experiences with interpersonal conflict related to smart phone use, and what differences they perceived of conflict over the phone versus conflict occurring face-to-face. Participants also completed a close-ended survey at the conclusion of the interview, which was used to obtain any information that may have been left out of the interview (see Appendix B). All data collected were tape recorded and transcribed for coding. An interpretive/critical approach was used to analyze the data (Fairclough, 1989). Based on Fairclough's (1989) suggestion, three independent dimensions of analysis were used. In the first stage, description, a coding scheme was developed by letting the data suggest the categories

for analysis as recommended. The emerging themes were labeled for each reply (unit of talk) and placed into the themed categories.

During the second phase, interpretation, I explored the emerging themes and combined them to reflect the current theoretical status of cell phone and conflict research.

In the final stage, explanation, best representative quotes were identified for a given category based on re-reading and re-checking the units of talk included in a given category. Thus, out of many similar statements the essence of any one category was captured in the quotes.

## **RESULTS and DISCUSSION**

Overall, data from interviews suggested how a smart phone brings conversations with a person so they are able to communicate with anyone at any given moment. Interpersonal conflict was shown to arise when an individual prioritizes the interaction that is happening on their phone over a meaningful face-to-face interaction they are having with another person. Smart phones caused the most interpersonal conflict when the phone became a barrier to face-to-face interaction.

Eight different categories emerged from the data coded when participants discussed their smart phone use and their feelings towards others' smart phone use. The eight categories are: barrier to meaningful communication, jealousy, technology-induced communication problems, disrespect, face-to-face conflict method, acceptance of smart phone interruptions, accommodation and avoidance, and unmet expectations. Several participants claimed to engage in each of the major categories and the analysis indicates the prevalence of each of these categories in their interpersonal interactions.

*Barrier to meaningful communication*

One of the most prevalent themes that surfaced from interviews is how smart phones created a barrier to meaningful communication. Meaningful communication refers to any form of interaction that was viewed as important to one of the involved individuals. Conflict was found to occur between individuals when the phone became a barrier to interaction and caused major conflict when it occurred habitually. Regardless of the interpersonal relationship type (friend, parent, romantic), people cared when others were on their phone while they were trying to engage in a meaningful discussion or do something together, and the other person was not fully engaged because of their phone use. This was particularly relevant for romantic interpersonal relationships, when individuals were spending time together and one person was also engaged with their phone. Sarah recalled a time she felt alienated on a date:

“Well I was on a date one time and this guy was constantly checking his phone, it just made me second guess whether he was really interested in it, or, you know whatever, it was kind of frustrating... just because I felt like I wanted to get to know him like as a person and so because he was on his phone it took his attention away from getting to know me or my ability to ask him questions just because I felt like he was checking into that stuff as opposed to engaging with me.”

The feeling of being a second priority during a face-to-face interaction was frequent among participants. For Sarah, her frustration was caused by her date’s attention to his smart phone instead of to her. In this way, the phone blocked Sarah’s ability to communicate with her date, making her feel unimportant. Similarly, Katie expressed a dislike when she was trying to interact with people on a deeper level who were on their smart phones.

“Like at any time when I’m really trying to connect with them, like if we are just hanging out at home I’m not that picky about it but like if we’re at something that I’m trying to have a shared experience with someone and they’re on their phone I get really upset about it, so, I know my dad since he uses his phone so much for work like he always has it, and um especially he used to have it at meals like all the time, all the time, and in the middle of any given conversation or any given situation he would pick up any phone call that came in or be emailing, and it’s

frustrating because then I don't feel like he's there with me, he's like half there but not all the way."

The idea of a person being only "half there" due to smart phone use was echoed by each participant. This juggling of one's attention affected some differently than others. For Rachel, she was most upset when her boyfriend used his phone to communicate with his mother while he was with her.

"I was like 'you don't understand how much it hurts that you prioritize that relationship over this one, on a permanent basis.' There's times, like obviously there's times when that's more important, family's more important, but not when she's just checking what you're doing and just asking what you're having to eat at dinner."

In this way, smart phone use illustrates the ability for an individual to engage in multiple conversations simultaneously. For the other party, in this case Rachel, this upset her because she saw it as her boyfriend prioritizing someone else over her, and she was mad because that other person was not even there. Participants made clear that conflict arose when individuals were engaged in a face-to-face conversation, and that during that interaction one person interrupted it by using their phone, and that it was the simultaneousness of the individual trying to both engage with them face-to-face and do something else on their phone that upset them. This idea of dual-interactions relates to the concept of cross talk. However, it is the reverse of cross talk. Instead of communicating non-verbally with the co-present individual while on the phone, smart phone users engage in non-verbal communication with their phone, while simultaneously maintaining the verbal face-to-face conversation. This "reverse cross talk" was a common occurrence during interviews. Sam recalled a time when this happened to him:

"It's when they're like when you're talking to them and they just start playing Angry Birds or something like that, you kind of think you're more, or a little more insignificant or less insignificant I guess to them than you think, than you wanted to be. Like they perceive you as really not being worth their time, like they want to multitask or you're boring."

Sam alluded to the idea that when someone chooses to engage on their phone while talking to someone, it makes the other person feel less important and not a priority. This idea of prioritizing feeds into a second theme that arose from the interviews: disrespect.

### *Disrespect*

The notion of disrespect was common when describing scenarios involving smart phone use during face-to-face interpersonal situations. Sam recalled a time when his girlfriend got upset with him because he was using his smart phone while at dinner.

“My girlfriend once got upset with me for using it at the dinner table for a date when we first started going out. I used it to check a score of a game, and that didn’t go over well at all. So she told me about it and I kind of got to thinking, ‘Yeah it was probably rude to interrupt a face-to-face conversation with a piece of technology,’ so I don’t do it anymore.”

Sam did not initially view his behavior as disrespectful, suggesting how normal phone use while with others has become. However, co-present individuals felt that it was disrespectful for people to prioritize what was happening on their smart phone over the face-to-face conversation they were having together. Thus, the relational message sent by this choice to interrupt the conversation was seen as disrespect by participants.

### *Technology-induced communication problems*

The third theme was that phones caused conflict when they made communicating more difficult rather than easier because the technology didn’t work the way it was supposed to. This was mostly seen with text messaging. Kate recalled how this happens frequently and creates conflict by confusion and assumption of understanding.

“I know especially with coordinating times or like trying to meet up with someone it’s really confusing when it’s over text. Because either people don’t use punctuation right or like the text message doesn’t go through or something and then you might be mad at someone for not responding or not meeting up with you but it’s really the text message that didn’t go through so it’s not their fault.

Kate recalled a scenario:

“I was biking and I wanted to go to Target with my friend and I sent her a text message that said like ‘I’m on my way back I’m almost there’, and then I got home and she had left with another friend without me and I was really upset because I really wanted to go. And then I was mad at her and when she got back we later realized that my text hadn’t even gone through so she didn’t even realize what was going on but I didn’t know that cause I just assumed that it had gone through and my phone said it went through.”

Like Kate, participants recognized the problems when their smart phones did not work the way they should. When messages do not reach the intended person, they create confusion and frustration, and ultimately conflict. Rachel alluded to the idea that with a smart phone it is also easier to misinterpret messages.

“There’s like the simple things like someone will send a message like ‘oh yeah I’m just leaving now’ or ‘I’ll be there in 5 minutes’ and then you’re like okay and you go wait downstairs in the rain and then they don’t show up for 20 minutes. So if you say you’re just leaving now you better be in the car driving.”

For participants, much of their conflict stemmed from a miscommunication due to either a message not being received due to technological failings, or because a message was misinterpreted. This leads into the third theme: face-to-face is the favored medium for conflict.

#### *Face-to-face conflict method*

The third theme was the strong preference of face-to-face interaction when dealing with conflict. Participants believed that face-to-face interactions were better for dealing with conflict because of the ability to pick up tone of voice, and nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions. This idea connects to social presence theory. Researchers, such as Walther (1996), use social presence theory as a base to explain how impersonal CMC is due to its lack of nonverbal and relational cues. Originally developed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) social presence is defined as the degree of salience between two communicators using a communication medium. Short et al. (1976) suggested that people perceive some media as having a higher degree of social

presence (e.g., video) and other media as having a lower degree of social presence (e.g., phone). More importantly, the medium with a high degree of social presence is seen as being sociable, warm, and personal, whereas a medium with a low degree of social presence is seen as less personal. Social presence theory explains why participants saw face-to-face as the best method for dealing with conflict, and preferred it over smart phone communication.

Participants expressed that emotion and non-verbal communication was lost on text messages, and there was a greater risk at confusion and misinterpretation because of this. The phone diluted the conversation to words alone, which participants felt hindered their ability to accurately express themselves and be understood. There was an underlying belief that people easily take text messages the wrong way and interpret them more negatively than they were intended, which could lead to more conflict than if the individuals spoke over the phone or face-to-face. Julia echoed this idea:

“I think there is something to be said about being able to see someone’s facial expressions and hearing you know their voice and how they’re saying a certain something rather than just seeing words and having to interpret them, you know, how you think they meant them.”

Like Julia, participants were in agreement that facial expression and tone of voice were key aspects of communication, especially in conflict, and without them it is much more difficult to communicate effectively and solve conflict. Also, the notion of misinterpretation was viewed as a common pitfall for communication conducted over the phone. This relates to an aspect of reduced social cues theory called flaming (the uninhibited use of language or inappropriate acting out), which stems from low social presence (Sroull & Kiesler, 1991). Participants viewed smart phones as low social presence and less personal than face to face interactions. Thus, participant responses suggest that when dealing with conflict, they want feel as psychologically

present as possible. Sally also saw phone communication as more problematic than face-to-face communication because of the ease of misinterpretation, specifically for text messaging.

“Yeah and I think it’s easier for people to get confused as to what people mean like misunderstanding can happen a lot easier over text because, I mean, you text someone and you forget what you said, so if they take it a different way you’re like ‘Wait what did I even say?’, versus if you’re having a conversation you can immediately say ‘Oh I didn’t mean that I meant something else’.”

Participants noted that, of all media for engaging in conflict, text messaging was their least preferred. The fear of miscommunication during a conflict led participants to prefer face-to-face interactions in order to be able to correct and avoid misinterpretation during conflict. Sarah brought up the idea of understanding as well, but from a conflict solution point of view:

“And I think when you take away the face-to-face or just the voice part of it... you just lose so much.... You lose so much of the ability to empathize and understand what you’re your, what whoever your trying to talk to is saying, and word out of context are very dangerous.”

For Rachel, face-to-face communication was more effective because it allows people to see the impact of the conflict on the other person, and therefore gives them the opportunity to react to that. This is not present in phone communication. Overall, face-to-face was the preferred medium for engaging in conflict because it was believed to be more effective at getting messages across, while phone calls and text messages were viewed with caution due to the potential for misinterpretation and the lack of non-verbal communication.

#### *Acceptance of smart phone interruptions*

The fifth theme was the acceptance of smart phone use as a normal and often integral part of interpersonal conversations. In other words, smart phone use was an expected behavior among interpersonal interactions. Related to this is participant’s feelings towards other people’s phone use were contextually and relationally dependent. Unless engaged in a meaningful conversation

or event, most participants did not care if others were on their phone. By far, participants noted that they did not care if their friends were on their phones while with them, and were more apt to care if a significant other was using their phone. For Rachel, only dates were classified as “no phone zones”.

“Depends on the situation. If it’s not like a one on one, just... If you’re not doing something that’s, trying to think how to phrase it, if it’s not a date, and if it’s not... Yeah, if it’s not a date then it’s okay with me if you’re on your phone. Not permanently obviously, but like if you need to text someone.”

Participants echoed Rachel’s acceptance of smart phone use while with others, particularly for friends. Participants acknowledged that they did not care if their friends were on their phone while with them because it was normal and not meant to be personal. It suggests that it is expected and accepted for smart phones to be involved in interpersonal friendships. Julia noted how phone use while with friends is normal:

“Like, with my girlfriends I’m like whatever, like we are all on our phones all the time, like whatever, we all have our phones out, you know someone texts us we text right back. But yeah mostly it’s just kind of you know normal I think, especially with people our age, its more normal to have your cell phone out and it’s not as looked down upon.”

Julia’s acceptance of phone use while with friends suggests the extent to which smart phone use has become an inherent and acceptable, almost expected, behavior while engaging with friends face-to-face. Sally noted how it was the subject of the conversation that determined if phone use was acceptable, rather than the relationship.

“Umm, it kind of depends on the situation. I guess if we were having a conversation and then you’re like stopping for like extended periods of time then I would probably be a little bit more upset than if we were casually discussing something. But we are both kind of multi-tasking that would be different. But usually I like to have a conversation and not be interrupted by other things.”

Overall, participants demonstrated a great understanding and awareness of smart phone use by their friends, family and romantic partners. For most, smart phone use was contextually

dependent and became a problem when it occurred during a conversation that was meaningful to the other individual. Otherwise, participants viewed smart phone use as an everyday occurrence that was acceptable in most situations.

#### *Accommodation and Avoidance*

Even though participants shared their dislike of others' phone use, most people noted that they rarely commented on their friend's phone use and did not expect others to comment on their own phone use. This was the seventh noted theme. In other words, although all participants were somewhat bothered by their friend's phone use, most accommodated the behavior. Particularly, people felt uneasy about addressing their friends about their phone use. They were most comfortable addressing it with a romantic partner, and least comfortable addressing an acquaintance and a parent. Humor and avoidance/accommodating were the most common tactics of dealing with smart phone use conflict. People acknowledged that they did not care if their friends commented on their phone use, and that they did not expect their friends to comment. Julia recalled that her friends don't comment unless her phone is blocking what she should be doing.

“With my friends they don't ever really comment so it's usually not an issue. If they were to comment it would be like we're out having fun and I was texting someone and getting upset by the conversation we were having and they were like put it away like your ruining your time.”

Similarly, Katie noted how her friends did not comment because of the hypocrisy of the accusation:

“I think my friends are less-likely to comment on my phone use. Like I think with friends it's, like everyone is on their phone, so they're not going to call you out on it because they're doing the same thing.”

Given that smart phone use was viewed as a normal behavior between friends while interacting face-to-face, participants demonstrated surprise and a lack of care when it came to being asked to

get off their phone. Most said they would eventually put it away if asked, usually after they finished up with what they were doing. Sam recalled a time when his girlfriend asked him to get off his phone:

“Ummm well at first I was kind of taken aback I guess, because I didn’t think she would call me out on that. But uh, and maybe I was a little offended that she thought that me taking like 10 seconds to quickly check something was really a deal, but uh, eventually I kind of came around.”

Normally, Sam admitted that he wouldn’t put his phone away if a friend commented on his use.

Rachel echoed this behavior:

“Friends, friends I don’t care either. It wouldn’t really bother me, and it shouldn’t bother my friends but if I did I wouldn’t react either negatively or positively, I think I would just be like ‘Okay, that’s fine.’ I wouldn’t stop, but maybe it depends on the friend.”

On the other hand, participants showed uneasiness about commenting on their friend’s phone use. Most admitted that even though it bothered them that their friend was on their phone, they did not comment. Sam expressed a feeling of inability to change the behavior, which caused him to not comment:

“Usually I don’t really react to it, it just kind of bothers me, but with some people it’s almost like beyond correcting... like with friends or whatever, it doesn’t happen that much, it’s not really that big of a deal but it does kind of wear on you when they’re doing that.”

For Sam, addressing his friends about their phone use was not worth it because it did not bother him that much, and it was not constant enough to create a problem. This notion of habit was a big part of when and why people chose to comment on someone’s phone use. Sally agreed with this idea, that it was when phone use was constant that it was worth addressing:

“Yeah, not as not as much. I think I’m always afraid to say like ‘Hey I think I’m more important than who you’re talking to’ but if it’s like a constant thing I’ll ask and be like ‘Okay what’s so important that you have to be talking right now?’ Like especially if we’re having a deeper conversation about something and then

they're like clearly distracted by something on their phone I'll usually ask them so at least then we're having a conversation about that too."

However, most admitted that they simply don't comment at all. Sarah's response to other's smart phone use was avoidance and accommodation:

"I don't really say anything, I just, sometimes I just well like I'll just keep talking and sometimes I'll just try and gauge whether they are really listening to me so I'll stop and like look at them and like see if they're listening and they'll either look up and be like 'Oh yay' or respond to something I'm saying or they'll be like 'What'd you just say?' and then I can kind of gauge based on their response whether it's even a good time to talk to them just based on their attention is somewhere else."

Sarah touched on how obvious it is when another is engaged in something else, and her behavior suggests that most people accommodate other's multitasking. This relates back to the concept of caller hegemony, and affirms Banjo's (2008) argument that caller hegemony is maintained by social norms. In this case, participant responses suggest that it is a social norm to give high priority to a ringing phone and to answer it.

#### *Jealousy of smart phone interactions*

One interpersonal relationship that was not as accommodating was romantic partners. The eighth theme was jealousy within romantic relationships, when one individual was communicating with another individual while with their significant other. Julia noted how this quickly created conflict:

"Like he would be texting someone even before we were dating like he would text someone and I would honestly just be like, try and look and try and figure out who it was. Sometimes I would ask. I remember one time specifically before we were dating and he was texting another girl and I was obviously hurt um, and we actually had a discussion about it I was like 'You are obviously texting her to like make me jealous, so. You need to stop.'"

Julia touched on Katz's notion of perpetual contact, and the negative implications of the ability for anyone to contact you at any time. Rachel also noted how easy it was to think the worst of incoming smart phone communication:

“Then there's always the umm... misunderstandings about other people texting certain people, and so like you see texting messages on people phones and like, I would automatically assume the worst I think, even without seeing it, you just see the name it's like 'Shit.' Uh yeah so that definitely, that definitely happens.”

Because of the tension between connection and autonomy inherent in relationships, messages over the phone to one individual leave the co-present individual out of the interaction, and left wondering who and what the side conversation is about. This leads to conflict because often the co-present individual wants more connection, while the recipient of the message wants autonomy.

### *Unmet Expectations*

The ninth theme was the idea of expectations for phone use. People expected others not to be on their phone while they are with them. When this expectation is not met, conflict arose.

Expectations depended on the relationship and the circumstances. Dates were the most commonly referenced instance of this. Megan recalled a time when she was on a date and her boyfriend was texting his mother the entire time.

“I remember there was a time a cheesecake factory when his mom was texting right before, or as we were going to sit down, he got his phone out, and I was like ‘\_\_\_ really? Really?’ And he was like, ‘Oh she just asked what we were doing.’ That's great why does she need to know what we're doing now? Why can't she know in a couple hours when we're done?”

In this case, Megan expected her boyfriend to pay attention to her and became upset when he actually chose to pay attention to his mother. This is an example of caller hegemony, as Megan's boyfriend feels compelled to answer his phone even though he is already engaged in a face to

face interaction. Megan's boyfriend illustrates how phone calls and texts take priority over all other existing interactions, and suggests that even if the caller is known the sense of obligation does not change. This leads into the second expectation, which is priority of relationships. Participants noted that they expected to have the person's full attention when they were face-to-face, and that other interactions would be secondary. When this was not the case, when people prioritized their phone interaction first over their face-to-face interaction, people became upset. Megan recalled that again, this is determined by the topic of conversation:

“It's usually, it's I'm, I'm upset, we are having a fight, or... having a kind of... talk, a serious talk, and I'm upset, and obviously upset, but his, his relationship with his mother is a totally different thing, but anyways she calls a lot so if she called - early on in our relationship - if she called while we were having a discussion, he would answer. And that used to bother me a lot. So eventually I had to say 'Look you can't so that. Like it's, it's really disrespectful to me you're not prioritizing us when you do that.’”

Overall, unmet expectations for relationship communication lead to conflict because instead of a failure to communicate, one party chooses to give their attention to their phone, rather than the person. This sends a relational message that they are not as important, which makes the other party unhappy and leads to frustration and ultimately conflict.

### *Takeaways*

Taken together, it can be reasonably concluded that smart phones act as a conflicting third party in interpersonal relationships because individuals become distracted by their phone and others view the device as a barrier to communication when it is used when two people are engaged in a face-to-face interaction. The theory of caller hegemony can be used to explain the recipient's desire to interrupt a conversation with another one. In this case, it was often because they felt capable of multitasking and that it was socially acceptable. When an individual chooses to give attention to their phone, they are sending a relationship message to the person they are

with that they are not as important. This prioritization of a smart phone over a face-to-face interaction leads to interpersonal conflict due to feelings of insignificance, especially when it is habitual or occurs during a meaningful conversation.

## CONCLUSION

This exploratory inquiry began by asking, “How do smart phones act as a conflicting third party in interpersonal relationships?” In comparing the results, eight noteworthy categories emerged from the data: barrier to meaningful communication, jealousy of smart phone interactions, technology-induced communication problems, disrespect, face-to-face preferred for conflict, acceptance of smart phone interruptions, accommodation and avoidance, and unmet expectations. Caller hegemony was found to be a strong indicator for smart phone behavior in interpersonal relationships, and explains the struggle users experience between proximate and distant others due to feelings of obligation. Knowing who was calling did not lessen the feeling of obligation felt by phone call recipients. Caller hegemony was also found to be confirmed by social norms, which allows individuals to give priority to their phone, supporting Banjo (2008)’s assertions. Interestingly, “reverse” cross talk was a common occurrence (e.g. texting and talking face-to-face, or playing a game on the phone and talking face-to-face). All participants recalled a time when they either engaged in reverse cross talk themselves or experienced it from another. Expectancy violations were also found to be a large aspect of smart phone conflict for interpersonal relationships. Participants agreed that there were certain times (i.e. dates, meals, meaningful conversations) that smart phones should not be used. When smart phones were used during these situations, conflict ensued.

Some potential problems with this study are that the sample size is small. A quantitative study could help establish the prevalence, reliability and validity of the themes of these

perceptions. In addition to the open-ended interview questions, I also asked 15 closed ended questions to pick up on details that may have not come up during the interview. Results interesting because some answers to the closed ended questions contradicted the responses during the interview. Particularly in regards to how often people actually used their phones during face-to-face interpersonal interactions and how conscious they were about putting it away. During the interviews, people often said they put their phone away or didn't use it very much, however on the survey nearly all of them read incoming messages within minutes of receiving them, and many also replied within minutes. Therefore, social desirability, or the desire to say the proper thing, may be a limitation of my study.

Further research should examine why people attempt to engage in multiple conversations and which social interactions on smart phones are the most used while an individual is also involved in a face-to-face interaction. Also, examine the role of latent conflict relating to the avoidance and accommodating tactics for smart phone use. Additionally, future quantitative research might compare norms for different age groups and communication settings, such as meetings, romantic dinners, family dinners and classes. This exploratory study could become the basis for a quantitative study once more is known about the reasons for smart phone conflict.

The results presented here indeed suggest that smart phones are viewed as a conflicting third party during face-to-face interpersonal interactions that are meaningful, because smart phones take attention away from the individual. The act of using the phone while with another person sends a relational message that they do not matter as much as the interaction on their phone. This leads to interpersonal conflict because the person feels insignificant and dislikes the fact that they are not important enough to ignore a secondary interaction. Given the prevalence

and popularity of smart phones, this tension between face-to-face and smart phone interactions will only increase.

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**APPENDIX A**

## Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about a time when you had an argument that related to cell phone use?
2. Have anyone ever asked you to get off of your phone? Describe this.
  - a. Note relationships
3. Can you recall a time when conflict escalated over text? Expand.
4. What difference, if any, do you perceive in escalation that occurs from face to face vs. text or text vs. phone call or face to face vs. phone call?
5. Have you ever used your phone at dinner? Describe a time someone reacted to your phone use. What were you looking at that took your attention? What was their reaction? How did you respond? What about the reverse?
6. When someone else is on their phone while with you, how do you feel?
7. Have you ever gotten frustrated with someone over their phone use? Why were you upset? Describe the scene. How did their phone use make you feel?
8. Has phone use ever sparked/added to an argument? Describe. What was the climate afterwards? (Stormy, cloudy, sunny). Did the conflict erupt again? Which medium (phone, text, face to face).
9. What is your preferred medium for conflict? (text, phone call, face to face)
  - a. Tell me more about your preference. Is it the same for family, friends, work, romantic partner?
10. How do you usually react and solve conflict?
11. If someone comments on your phone use, how do you react?
  - a. Mom
  - b. Friend
  - c. Significant other

**APPENDIX B**

## Survey Questionnaire

1. Take a look at your phone. How many conversations via text message do you have going on today?
  - a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. 4
  - e. 5
  - f. More than 5
  - g. More than 10
  - h. More than 15
2. How many did you have from yesterday?
  - a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. 4
  - e. 5
  - f. More than 5
  - g. More than 10
3. How quickly do you respond to messages on your phone?
  - a. Within minutes
  - b. Within the hour
  - c. Within the day
4. How quickly do you respond to messages on your phone while in class or busy?
  - a. Within minutes
  - b. Within the hour
  - c. Within the day
5. How quickly do you read and respond to emails on your phone?
  - a. Within minutes
  - b. Within the hour
  - c. Within the day
6. To what extend does phone use related to your job create conflict?
  - a. Occasionally (once a month)
  - b. Often (once a week)
  - c. Frequently (more than once a week)
7. What do you use your phone for? (circle all that apply)
  - a. Calls
  - b. Texts

- c. Emails
  - d. Social media (twitter, facebook)
  - e. Surfing the internet
  - f. Watching videos
  - g. Listening to music
  - h. Directions
  - i. Taking notes
  - j. Calendar
  - k. To take pictures
  - l. To play games
8. Rank in order from most to least (5 being the least, 1 the most) the top five ways you use your phone on the above question.
9. Rank in order from most to least, when you use your phone most:
- a. Night (5pm-midnight)
  - b. Daytime (11am-5pm)
  - c. Morning (6am-11am)
  - d. In class
  - e. At work
  - f. During meals
10. Do you use your phone while in the car with someone else?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
11. Do you have your phone with you during meals?
- a. In your pocket
  - b. On the table
  - c. Turned off
  - d. On silent
  - e. In bag/not with you
12. Do you use your phone during dinner with others? How often:
- a. Occasionally
  - b. Often
  - c. Every time
  - d. Never
13. If you receive a text while eating a meal with someone, do you read it and respond?
- a. Read only
  - b. Read and respond
  - c. Do not read
14. Would you rather text or call someone?
- a. Call
  - b. Text

15. When someone else is using their phone while with you, how do you typically feel?
- a. Neutral
  - b. Upset
  - c. Angry
  - d. Happy
  - e. Irritated
  - f. I am on my phone too so I don't care