

## **CELLULAR PHONES INFLUENCE(s) AND IMPACT(s) ON SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

This paper seeks to explore how cellular phones (cell phones/mobiles) have influenced and impacted social interactions and interpersonal relationships. There have been a number of suggested theories and studies that have been contributed to the rising popularity and commonality of cell phones as to how they are affecting the way individuals are interacting in society. Some of these include, a change in the concept of time and space (Fortunati, 2002), lack of face-to-face interaction (Thompson and Cupples, 2008), the maintenance of relationships, social absences, and social dependency (Reid and Reid, 2004). In addition to these ideas, it has also been suggested that the use of cell phones has had a negative affect on social relationships, grammar, and increased social anxiety (Tully, 2003).

### **BACKGROUND**

Technologies are an ever-changing aspect of this day and age. New gadgets and ideas are always trying to simplify life and bring people closer together. The cellular phone was first developed in Sweden in 1956, but had no conveniences about it, nor did the average person have access to it. It weighed 90 pounds, and was as inconvenient as having a landline with a 10-foot long cord. Following several trials and developments, in 1978 Bell Labs, working with Motorola created the first generation of a cellular network (Fortunati, 2002). Although this first generation network was not approved by the FCC until 1982, it brought into focus the ability to create a

form of communication that would allow anyone to make a phone call when it was convenient for them.

Following improvements within the second and third generations of cell phone networks and accessibility, cell phones went from becoming an item of luxury for those who could afford it, to an everyday necessity. For anyone operating in the modern world, in addition to being able to make phone calls on a cellular phone, in 2000 SMS (Short Message Service) was introduced to allow individuals to send a message to someone else's mobile device without the necessity of making a phone call.

Today, the global cellular phone market now stands at approximately 1.8 billion subscribers, and is forecasted to reach 3 billion by the end of 2010 (Reid and Reid, 2007). In contrast with instances in the past, having a cell phone of your own is more of the social norm vs. not having a cell phone of your own. Cell phones are taking over on a global level not just a local level, which allows individuals to have the sense of security that wherever they go, they will be able to remain in social contact with those whom are in their social networks.

Communication and the way that individuals interact with each other is a huge dynamic of sociology. The cell phone is changing the way in which all of this interaction occurs, which makes it sociologically relevant. With the creation and accessibility of cell phones, more and more individuals own their own cell phone, and using them everyday to communicate within their social network. Cell phones also make individuals available anywhere, and anytime, which changes the way that individuals are choosing to interact in social settings with other individuals.

In this paper I will show how the cell phone has had an impact on social relationships and social interactions in today's society. I will first show how the concept of having a cellular phone has changed the concept of social space and time among social relationships and interactions.

Second, I will show how individuals have shown to have some form of a dependency to the use

and possession of a cellular phone. Following that, I will provide research that demonstrates how SMS (Short Message Service) has taken on its own form of communication in relationships, and has become more predominate in comparison to voice calls. Lastly I will provide an overall conclusion of the impact that the use of cellular phones has had in regards to social interactions and interpersonal relationships.

### *The Change of Space and Time/Proximal Relationships*

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of using the telephone has always been a fixed mentality in regards to accessibility. The phone was located at a fixed location, usually in a home or office, and you would have to be in that location where the phone was in order to be able to receive and answer incoming phone calls. This bore the concept of “sitting and waiting by the phone” for someone to call, since at one time it was the only option. With the development of technologies, there have been ways to alter this mentality; there was the creation of the answering machine, which allowed for you to access messages from missed phone calls when you returned home, which did not always allow for a prompt relay of a message nor reply, and more recently the creation and distribution of the cellular phone.

Cellular phones have taken this concept and spun it around on itself. With the development of cellular phones, individuals are able to remain in close and instantaneous contact with members of their social network regardless of where they are in the world. In addition to keeping up with social relationships, individuals have also been able to increase productivity with their work because they can be hundreds of miles away from the office, and still have instant access to their e-mail, documents and contacts wherever they are (Tully, 2003). There is no longer a disconnection.

The concept of being accessible anywhere and anytime has shown to have both positives and negative results in a social setting; older generations for example have typically been scornful of younger generations pulling out their cell phones in restaurants, classrooms, public transportation and other public spaces (Banjor, Hun and Sundar 2007). Cell phone usage in a public place typically generates a negative response when used in close approximation to other individuals, as it is seen as a disturbance to their personal space, with little or no consideration from the cell phone user.

Social interaction signifies that we are aware of the existence of others, as well as implies active engagement between two or more parties (Banjor, Hun & Sundar 2007). Cell phones have allowed individuals to surpass time and space and have any conversation that they choose, wherever they choose. With public conversation comes public invasion, meaning that you are invading into other's personal spaces by talking out loud about your own personal spaces coming off as inconsiderate and/or rude which links to alienation of oneself.

A trend that is becoming more apparent is present absences; this is the concept of how an individual's presence in a social setting changes regardless of their *physical* presence, they are only half-present (Fortunati 2008). After a ring or buzz of their mobile phone, they are drawn away somewhere else, away from their present situation and/or conversation. Through observation, researchers have found that individuals typically will not hesitate to interrupt an ongoing conversation to answer the ringing of their cell phone. This has several repercussions. In answering the ringing cell phone, the individual who is presently being conversed with, has described feeling a sense of being left alone, which can cause social anxiety, as well as resentment/annoyance towards the individual who answered the phone call (Humphreys 2009).

The change of space and time through the use and accessibility of cellular phones has changed the way in which people communicate with other individuals. With the ease of being

accessible anywhere at anytime, individuals are finding that they are becoming dependent on their cell phone on a day-to-day basis. Cell phones are allowing individuals to stay in a constant connection with anyone and everyone in their social network. In the next section I will explain how this dependency is being seen, created and acted upon by individuals.

### *Cell Phone Dependency*

As mentioned above, cell phones are becoming increasingly popular among the general population. Due to their increasing popularity, more and more people are obtaining them for themselves. In having a cell phone, individuals are becoming reliant on them from day-to-day to stay in contact with other individuals in their social networks, as described throughout this section.

Cell phones are not a new concept for all generations. There are individuals who have grown up in the cell phone age, and do not think anything of it. Today, 45% of adolescents aged 12-17 possess a cellular phone in the United States (Leung 2008), making it one of, if not the, most popular way to communicate with other individuals. While cell phones have become less of a status symbol and more of a fashion statement, they have also created an unspoken social dependency.

Leisure boredom, which is a category of dependency to cell phones described as an individual who is found to become bored with their current situation, has proven to lead to cell phone dependency (Leung, 2008). For adolescents and young adults, as leisure boredom arose, they were more likely to be found engaging in SMS messages, making phone calls, accessing the internet from their phone or playing a mobile driven game. Once there is an element of boredom his or her attention is drawn immediately to his or her cell phone device for an instant connection

to someone, somewhere. Through a series of surveys it was shown that the higher rate of leisurely boredom, the more frequent use of a cell phone occurred (Leung 2008).

Sensation seeking behavior has also linked adolescents and young adults to have the desire to take risks with relationships, rules and roles (Leung 2008). Individuals seek out entertainment and avoid boredom; as with anything there are appropriate times and inappropriate times. This concept translates over to cell phone use as well, people will use their cell phones at appropriate and inappropriate times, simply to satisfy a social urge/want/need. This category was supported significantly by relationships between individuals who were cell phone addicted via sensation seeking, demonstrating that the cell phone was used more for entertainment, information and social connectivity (Leung 2008). For example, an individual using their cell phone on the side of the road when they break down vs. using their cell phone to just say 'Hi' to someone, or chitchat with another person.

Self esteem, a third dependency category examined the standardized idea that individuals with low self esteem typically do not communicate as much with others, and are more prone to expect a negative response from those whom they do contact. However, it is thought that individuals who have low self esteem will actually use their cell phone more to try and establish social networks, and build relationships without having all of the pressures of a face-to-face encounter with an individual, as well as to try and reach out to other individuals (Reid and Reid 2007). Research shows that individuals who have low self-esteem seek out more frequent use of the cell phone to seek to establish new relationships and try and gain an element of control in their social relationships. This makes it easier for individuals with lower self-esteem to form and maintain social relationships.

Along with the factors listed above, many individuals have stated that they cannot imagine *not* having their cell phone with them on a daily basis. The integration of cell phones

into our daily lives is exaggerated in how younger generations talk about not being able to imagine themselves without their phones now (Thompson & Cupples 2008). Their imaginaries include cell phones; their senses of self are tied up with this technology as is evident in the following quotations:

I just can't imagine myself without a cell phone now. . . when I don't have my phone I always feel like I'm missing something . . .

(Samantha, 14)

My phone's always in my skirt pocket at school so it's just always there. And if I, like, leave it in my locker by accident, or it's in my bag, I panic 'cos I don't know where I've put it 'cos I'm used to having it in my pocket . . . it's just a permanent part of you.

(Michelle, 15, emphasis added)

Individuals are forming an attachment to their cell phones, which enables them to think that they cannot function without their cell phone on a day-to-day basis. There are many factors that lead to cell phone dependency, such as leisure boredom, sensation-seeking behavior and low self esteem as described above. Another aspect of the cellular world that contributes to dependency and changes the way in which we socially interact on a daily basis is SMS Text Messaging.

### *SMS Text Messaging as a Social Interaction*

Short Message Service (SMS/Text Message) was first developed in 1990 in an effort to allow operators to notify customers when there was some type of a service issue or a network problem. This service has now become one of the most common ways in which individuals use their cell phones to communicate with others. In 2002 80% of all cell phone users in the United States were 'Talkers', however by 2006 that number was almost reduced by half, dropping to only 42%, with the other 58% being 'Texters' (Fernando 2007).

Many researchers have expressed concern that the increased use of SMS messaging will cause face-to-face interaction to become non-existent, as well as poor grammar by frequent

users. Research has shown however, that text messaging between individuals can actually create stronger ties between individuals as well as act as a buffer to face-to-face interactions with a new individual. Communicating through a text message allows individuals to not only take their time composing a more thought out reply, but it also alleviates the pressures that accompany a first encounter/face-to-face meeting.

With the popularity of SMS messaging, individuals are using it more and more, and in an effort to send more text messages, a new language is being created that is making experts worried that grammar will be overlooked. Individuals who are regular texters have created new acronyms for various words to get their point/idea across faster than if they were to type out the entire message. For example; LOL is the same as saying Laughing Out Loud, OMG is equivalent to Oh My God, and finally TTYL, which refers to Talk To You Later.

SMS/Text messaging has become more popular among younger generations in comparison with older generations. Sending and receiving text messages is a form of communication with others that can be secretive and discrete; parents/teachers cannot intercept or have access to what is being sent back and forth. In 2001 Nokia conducted a worldwide survey of 3,300 people, under age 45, over 80% of those that were surveyed reported that text messaging was the most used function on their mobile phones (Reid and Reid 2004).

With its popularity growing at an exponential rate, text/SMS messaging has also become a new way for individuals to form new relationships, and strengthen existing ones. Teens admitted spending nearly an equal amount of time talking as they do texting each month. The feature is so important to them that if texting was no longer an option, 47 percent of teens say their social life would end or be worsened – especially among females (54 percent compared to 40 percent of males) (CTIA Survey 2008). In addition, individuals claim to see text messaging as a comfortable, easy and effective means of communication for younger people (Thompson and

Couples 2008). Without the pressures that come along with a voice or face-to-face conversation, text messaging allows individuals the time to spend composing their thoughts and making edits to their responses before sending them to others.

Composing thoughtful responses to text messages also allows for an element of privacy at any given time and /or place for individuals to communicate, thus relating back to the change in concept of Space & Time. Messaging back and forth allows for an often unseen and unheard communication between individuals, as well as fewer limitations to where and when they can communicate, and text messaging has served more for 'filler' communication, and less for functional/practical communication between individuals.

Filler messages relate to messages regarding, friendship maintenance, romantic, social functions, and/or boredom and loneliness. A study on a group of undergraduates showed that only about one third of the text messages that were being sent were actually functional/practical information; the rest was a combination of filler messages (Reid & Reid 2004). Social interactions via text message seem to serve as more of an instant personal contact with someone else, without having to worry about your personal appearance and actual interaction.

Sending and receiving text messages is a new concept for most generations, and changes the way in which individuals are required to interact. By communicating through text message, individuals are not required to interact with others socially in a face-to-face manner, they can do it all via messaging. While this is a convenient way and discrete way to communicate with another person, it has changed the way that individuals are reacting with others not only in a social setting, but also in how they are maintaining their existing relationships, and building new relationships.

## *CONCLUSION*

Our society today is one that is based on technology, and technological advances. Technology as a whole will always have an effect on the way that individuals function in society, and while there has not been a lot of research on the effects of cellular phone use, it has both positive and negative consequences. Cell phones in their small time in existence have changed the way in which individuals are interacting with each other.

Cell phones have provided avenues for individuals to stay connected on a new level that does not depend on space or time, but is readily accessible at any time, anywhere. Never being disconnected has allowed social networks and relationships to be strengthened as well as new relationships formed. Cell phones have also allowed individuals all over the world whom, without the cell phone would never have access to all of the networks, assets and information that they do via the mobile phone.

While it has provided a new avenue to social networking and interactions, the change in the space and time concept has also had a negative affect as well. Many of us have likely experienced a situation where we have been in the presence of a cell phone user who is engaging in some form of rude behavior that lacks respect for the individuals around them. Cell phones have changed the way that individuals socially interact. Individuals are communicating more via text messages and cell phones than they are face-to-face, changing our social environment. Individuals have become enveloped in their cell phones and less aware of their social surroundings, missing out on possible new social interactions.

There is still a lot of future research still needs to be done on the long-term affects of the mobile phone and social relationships. Something that should be looked at is how the mobile phone effects relationships over time, as well as what the long term health effects are, and how the access and use of cell phones varies through different socioeconomic classes. However, you

can see how in its short history, cell phones have already had a huge impact on the way individuals interact with one another.

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