

Digital devices now play a prominent role in social life. Discuss how screen use may affect relationships either within or outside the family.

If you were to ask any acquaintance, friend or family member to imagine an existence in which they are separated from technology, mainly from the comfort and security that the presence of a mobile phone brings, then naturally you would expect an adverse reaction of fear and unwillingness. The concept of functioning without modern day devices seems foreign to many in today's society, particularly for the younger generation; they would likely find great difficulty in recalling a time without the convenience and overwhelming presence of screens. A study by Vincent (2006)¹ found that people form emotional attachments to their mobile devices for a variety of reasons, such as their reliability and the fact that they allow us to connect more easily with the people we love. Contrarily, the research also identified negative emotions associated with prolonged, intense reliance on mobile phones such as panic upon separation from the device, and anxiety based on knowing either too much or too little about a person. One key factor in this attachment to mobile phones is the prominence of social media, which has emerged particularly within the last decade; social, meaning media that must 'relate to activities in which you meet and spend time with other people'². One can infer from this definition that increasing use of digital devices in recent years would have an impact on a person's relationship with others. Therefore, the key question to consider is this: is this relationship a positive one or a negative one?

There is evidence to suggest that digital devices can have a positive impact on relationships, both platonic and romantic. Sociologist Keith Hampton argues against many people's predisposition that mobile phones and social networking websites act as a catalyst for loneliness and isolation. In his 2011 article '*Core Networks, Social Isolation and New Media*'³, Hampton hypothesises that there is no relationship between a person's amount of internet use and the number of core discussion confidants they have; that is, the number of people in which they feel comfortable discussing important and pressing matters. Interestingly, the findings of the study show a strong, positive correlation between mobile phone ownership, social media usage (identified as instant messaging services and uploading photos online) and the size of a person's core discussion network. Those who own a mobile phone and use social media on their device were found to have core discussion networks averaging 34% larger in size than those who did not. Internet users were also 55% more likely to have a core discussion confidant outside of their family. Therefore, this study supports the idea that technology has a positive impact on relationships as it helps to facilitate social interaction.

¹ Jane Vincent (2006) Emotional Attachment and Mobile Phones in Knowledge Technology and Policy 19 (1) pp 39-44.

² Meaning of social in English. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/social>

³ Hampton, Keith & F Sessions, Lauren & Ja. Her, Eun. (2011). Core networks, social isolation, and new media: How Internet and mobile phone use is related to network size and diversity Information. Communication & Society. 14. 130 - 155.

A report published by Pew Research Center in 2014⁴ focuses more specifically on the impacts digital devices have on romantic relationships, highlighting both advantages and disadvantages. 27% of internet users who were married or in a relationship reported that the internet had impacted their marriage or partnership; out of this percentage, 74% said it had done so in a positive way. The report identified digital devices as a facilitator of positive communication, for example by allowing partners to resolve arguments, or to feel closer as a result of online interactions. On the other hand, the report also outlines how the devices can often create feelings of tension within relationships. This can be induced in several different ways, including arguments about the amount of time a partner spends online (1 in 4 people have felt that their partner was distracted by their mobile phone during time spent together), or becoming upset upon discovery of something a partner has been doing online. This report therefore illustrates the complexity of the impact of digital devices on relationships; perhaps there are other factors to consider when evaluating the overall impact, for example the degree of trust, respect and honesty in individual relationship cases, as this may influence how interactions with technology are construed.

The ubiquity of technology in today’s society means that the initiation and development of romantic relationships differs significantly from years ago. This idea is explored in *Modern Romance*⁵, written by actor Aziz Ansari and sociologist Eric Klinenberg. The book documents research from sociologist Michael Rosenfeld into the ways in which couples in the U.S.A. first meet, and how this has notably changed between the 1940s, 1990s (just before the arrival of online dating websites such as Match.com) and the 21st century. In 1940, the most common way for a pair to meet was through either family or friends. Roughly 12% met in the local neighbourhood, for example at church, and a similar percentage of people met in social spaces such as bars and restaurants. From these statistics, one can infer that opportunities for romance were most often found nearby, and it was uncommon for people to travel far for a relationship. This is supported by evidence from 1932, presented in Figure 1, which shows that only 17.8% of marriages in Philadelphia were between people from two different cities, whereas around 1 in 3 were between two people living within a 5 block radius of one another. Progressing forward to the 1990s, around 40% of couples met through friends, and 20% in social spaces. However, the period of time between the 1990s and the present has undeniably seen the most drastic and noteworthy change in the way romantic

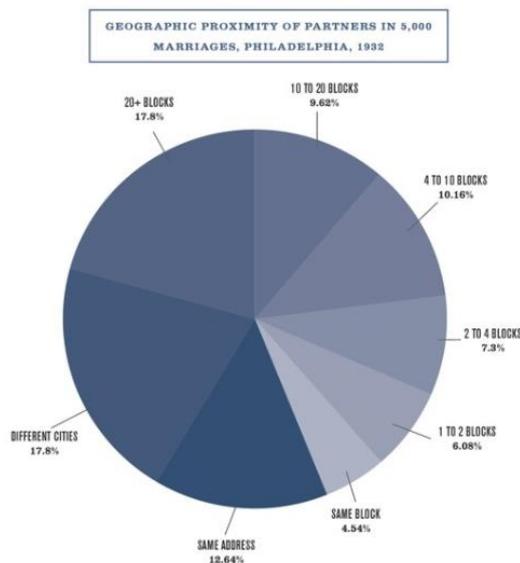


Figure 1 – Geographic proximity of partners in 5,000 marriages in Philadelphia, U.S.A., 1932
Source: *Modern Romance*⁵

⁴ Pew Research Center, February 2014, “Couples, the Internet, and Social Media” Available at: <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2014/Couples-and-the-internet.aspx>

⁵ Ansari, A., & Klinenberg, E. (2015). *Modern Romance*. New York: Penguin Press.

relationships are established. In 2000, 10% of people in relationships had said they met their partner online, a statistic which increased to 25% by 2010. A study by psychologist John Cacioppo⁶ found that from 2005 to 2012, one-third of married couples had met online, specifically through an online dating website. This shows the rapid growth in modern technology and how people have used it to initiate romantic relationships; a growth on a scale that has rarely been seen before, if at all. The number of people who met online was found to be greater than those who met at work, at school and through mutual friends combined. These ways of meeting were once ordinary, but the rate of their occurrence is declining and instead the formation of relationships through technological means is becoming the norm in society.

Social psychologist Sherry Turkle explores some of the negative consequences that prolonged use of mobile phones can have on relationships. In her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*⁷, Turkle provides an in-depth explanation of some of the side effects that communication through digital devices, specifically texting, can have. Focusing on the younger generation, she argues that people have become overly reliant on text-based communication; perhaps this is because it grants people the time to consider the words they want to say beforehand, as opposed to the spontaneity associated with over-the-phone conversations. This can have detrimental impacts to the point where a person's ability to have impromptu conversations is compromised, as an increase in communication by texting results in areas of the brain which aid conversation being used less often. Broca's area⁸, a region of the brain located in the left frontal lobe of the language-dominant hemisphere (usually the left hemisphere), is associated with one's ability to speak spontaneously. This would affect relationships in a negative way since people would find it more difficult to hold a conversation with others, for example they may sometimes find it difficult to speak in a clear or logical way. Therefore, people's intentions may be misunderstood.

Psychology professor Albert Mehrabian developed a communication model⁹, in which he found that a meagre 7% of communication is through the actual content of a message; the leading component of communication is body language which accounts for 58%, followed by the tone and pitch of one's voice at 35%. This provides evidence to oppose texting, as it

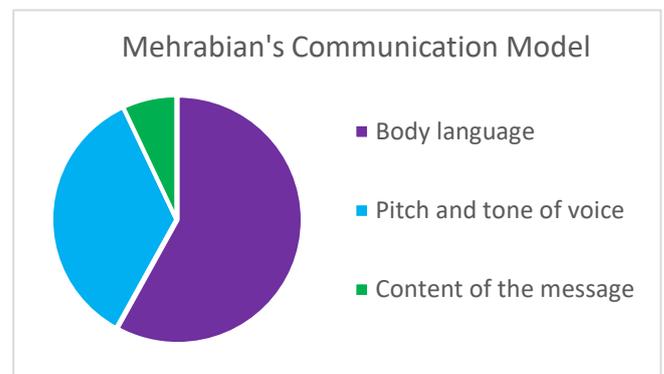


Figure 2 – Pie chart showing the proportions of different aspects of communication, as discovered by Albert Mehrabian

⁶ Cacioppo, John & Cacioppo, Stephanie & C Gonzaga, Gian & Ogburn, Elizabeth & J Vanderweele, Tyler. (2013). Marital satisfaction and break-ups differ across on-line and off-line meeting venues. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 110, no. 47(2011): 18814–19.

⁷ Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology And Less From Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print.

⁸ Website providing information about the function of Broca's area <https://memory.ucsf.edu/speech-language>

⁹ The Trouble with Texting <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-novel-perspective/201301/the-trouble-texting>

would mean that when two people message each other it may only be 7% effective. When discussing sensitive issues in particular, one might find it easier to communicate via text message to avoid revealing emotions of distress or to maintain a feeling of control in the conversation. However, misinterpretations of one another's intentions or thoughts (which would be exacerbated through texting) would ultimately lead to disagreements and disputes between two people. Therefore, an increasing dependence on digital devices for communication is not without negative impacts, as this could be a contributing factor to failed relationships and friendships.

There may be risks associated with allowing unsupervised access to digital devices from a young age. A 2011 study from the American Academy of Pediatrics¹⁰ focuses on the negative consequences that exposure to social media can have on children and adolescents and the relationships they have with others. Younger people have a limited ability to self-regulate¹¹, meaning they lack the complete ability to control their thoughts and emotions. Consequently, this makes them more vulnerable to the dangers of social media, for example cyberbullying. A study by the American Sociological Association¹² found that cyberbullying is considerably more likely to occur between two students who are or were previously friends rather than between two strangers. 5.8% of nearly 800 students interviewed had fallen victim to cyberbullying, and 9.1% had been perpetrators. The prominence of this type of bullying between school-age children, as opposed to it being face-to-face, is perhaps because they find it easier to communicate when there are no direct consequences and they cannot see the impact that words have on the victim. In *Alone Together*, Turkle interviews a high school student who 'allows herself to say mean things' online since she doesn't 'see the impact it has'. This is an example of how increased screen usage facilitates hurtful interactions between young people, which in turn will have a detrimental impact on relationships. Severe cases of cyberbullying can induce mental health issues such as anxiety and depression; conditions which are known to commonly isolate children from their peers. Another issue discovered in the AAP study is the emergence of a phenomenon known as 'Facebook depression'; depression triggered by frequent use of social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter. This is thought to be due to the intense nature of online content, for example viewing posts made by friends which may evoke feelings of jealousy, and as a result there is an increased risk of social isolation. This means the time children and adolescents spend developing relationships in social situations is liable to decline.

Before drawing a conclusion to the aforementioned question, it is important to consider that the majority of research into digital device usage and the resulting repercussions in relationships has taken place in Western society (particularly in the U.S.A). As a result of this, various studies may be culture-bound to an extent, meaning that the findings focus on the characteristics and features of one distinct culture as opposed to a broader sample.

¹⁰ O'Keeffe, G. S., Clarke-Pearson, K., & Council on Communications and Media. (2011). The impact of social media on children, adolescents, and families. *Pediatrics*, 127(4), 800-804.

¹¹ Article on self-regulation <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/anger-in-the-age-entitlement/201110/self-regulation>

¹² Felmlee, D., & Faris, R. (2016). Toxic Ties: Networks of Friendship, Dating, and Cyber Victimization. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 79(3), 243–262.

Therefore, findings from these studies may not necessarily generalise to other cultures with complete accuracy.

The evolving phenomenon of technology and the impact it can have on all types of relationships is one of a complex nature; it can not simply be categorised as having a 'positive' or 'negative' influence over us. It can, however, vary from person to person as each of us are likely to have our own experiences and stories on how technology has impacted our lives. For example, families and friends of those who have committed suicide due to cyberbullying would most likely have a remarkably different attitude towards technology in comparison to a couple, now married or in a committed relationship, who first met through an online dating service, or two relatives living in different corners of the world who regularly use video communication to stay in close contact. Despite this, one could confidently make the conclusion that screen use has an undeniable impact on both the development and preservation of relationships. Due to the sheer magnitude at which mobile phones, computers and other forms of constantly evolving technology are present, it would be impossible for there to *not* be an impact.

Word count: 1997

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