

The Role of Mobile Phones in Romantic Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

The definitions of key concepts in the title are: mobile phone is a “wireless handheld device that allows users to make calls and send text messages, among other features” (techopedia.com); romantic relationship is being a couple, which includes possibility of marriage and sexual exclusivity (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2014).

OVERVIEW

Dr. Licoppe (Licoppe, 2004) at Telecom ParisTech, Dr. Haddon (Haddon, 2003) at the London School of Economics & Political Science, and Drs. Katz and Aakhus (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) at Rutgers University are among the earliest scholars examining the role of cell phones in relationships. Dr. Ling (Ling, 2012) at IT University of Copenhagen, Dr. Rettie (Rettie, 2009) at Kingston University London, Dr. Gershon (Gershon, 2010) at Indiana University, and Drs. Robert Duran and Lynne Kelly (Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011) at the University of Hartford are among the leading experts in the area of the impact that cell phones have on romantic relationships.

Just as cell phones, along with other Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), have

become essential to relationship maintenance in friendship and family relationships (Tong & Walther, 2011), so too have they emerged as “key actors in the life of many American couples... They negotiate over when to use it and when to abstain” (Lenhart & Duggan, Feb. 11, 2014). Romantic partners often feel closer because of frequent texting throughout the day (Pettigrew, 2009) and they sometimes experience tension or conflict over cell phone-related issues (Duran et al., 2011; Lasén, 2011). Cell phones have taken on importance in the initiation of romance (Byrne & Findlay, 2004; Rettie, 2009) and may play a role in the dissolution of relationships (Gershon, 2010).

The focus of this chapter is on the role of cell phones in romantic relationships, from initial attraction to long-term committed arrangements including marriage and cohabitation. Romantic relationships are significant in people’s lives and to their psychological and emotional well-being (Caron, Lafontaine, Bureau, Levesque, & Johnson, 2012; Gordon, Heimberg, Montesi, & Fauber, 2012). It is no wonder, then, that scholars have taken an interest in communication technologies, like the cell phone, that have the potential to enhance and disrupt these relationships in substantial ways.

CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN THE ROLE OF MOBILE PHONES IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The work of important mobile communication scholars in the early 2000s, particularly Rich Ling, Christian Licoppe, James Katz and Mark Aakhus, uncovered key processes and concepts that ultimately ignited interest in cell phone use in romantic relationships. Ling (2004), for instance, argued that cell phones enable “micro-coordination,” more “finely graded coordination” (p. 70) with individuals able to change plans regarding time and location even after they have started toward a destination, a process relevant to couples as they attempt to spend time together. Cell phones also allow for hyper-coordination, which is using the phone for self-presentational and relational maintenance purposes as in joking, chatting, and flirting (Ling & Yttri, 2002). Ling (2004) identified how text messaging, because it is asynchronous and allows for careful editing of one’s words, has “sparked a type of quasi-mediated form for developing romantic relationships” (p. 151) and noted that text messages may also be used at the end of romantic relationships. Around the same time, Licoppe (2004) introduced the concept of “connected presence” (p. 135) to reflect how the mobility of the cell phone enables continual connection with another “in which the boundaries between absence and presence eventually get blurred” (Licoppe, 2004, p. 136). Katz and Aakhus (2002) coined the term “perpetual contact” to describe the state of constant connection to others via cell phones, and Baron (2008) later used the phrase “always on.” These concepts were ripe for application to romantic relationships as such relationships are likely candidates for connected presence, hyper-coordination, and use of text messaging in relational development, and research tended to follow these threads.

Thus, this chapter presents the intellectual history and current status of knowledge pertaining to cell phone use in the development, maintenance,

and dissolution of romantic relationships. In terms of relational maintenance, research has centered on four issues: staying connected with a romantic partner, cell phone satisfaction, managing divided attention, and cell phone rules. Additionally, several measurement scales created to operationalize key concepts with regard to cell phone use in romantic relationships are presented and discussed as are directions for future research.

Area 1: Relationship Development

There is a growing body of research demonstrating that cell phones are playing an important role in the initiation and development of romantic relationships. One of the earliest studies, based on a study of Australian adults, found that men were more likely to make the first move to initiate a relationship by telephone call than women were, but women were as likely as men to make the first move via a text message (Byrne & Findlay, 2004; Smith & Duggan, Oct. 21, 2013). Other studies provide further support that text messaging in particular is a preferred means of communication in the earliest stages of romance (Cupples & Thompson, 2010; Duran, Kelly, & Frisbie, 2013; Kelly et al., 2012a; Kelly, Keaten, & Millette, 2012b; Lasén, 2011; Ling, 2004; Rettie, 2009), although one study of African American and Puerto Rican young adults revealed that calling was also used in the initiation of relationships and was the primary way to get to know the other person (Bergdall et al., 2012).

In the majority of studies in which texting was found to be the preferred means of interaction to launch a romantic relationship, participants expressed a sense that texting enables them to deal with rejection more easily. New Zealand teens in Cupples and Thompson’s (2010) study said texting allows them to avoid the embarrassment of possible rejection, a finding consistent with Kelly et al. (2012a). Cupples and Thompson (2010) stated: “As romantic connections deepen, texting proves to be a far less awkward way to get

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