Effects of Mobile Phone Use on Face-to-Face Interactions and Relationship Quality Among Punjab University Students in Lahore

Hafsa Qamar[1]

Abstract

This study investigates the effects of excessive mobile phone use on face-to-face interactions and relationship quality among university students. While mobile phones provide continuous digital connectivity, their overuse can reduce attention during in-person conversations and weaken interpersonal bonds. Using survey data, the research identifies patterns of phubbing, digital distraction, and emotional disengagement that contribute to communication strain and decreased relational satisfaction. The findings indicate that excessive phone use creates barriers to meaningful interaction, diminishes emotional presence, and negatively influences both familial and peer relationships. The study underscores the need for balanced digital practices and recommends awareness-building strategies that promote healthier in-person communication habits.

Keywords: Mobile phones, face-to-face communication, social interactions, relationship quality, phubing.

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[1] MS Media Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore

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INTRODUCTION

Mobile phones have transformed modern communication by offering instant access to information, entertainment, and social networks. While their advantages are widely acknowledged, concerns have emerged regarding their impact on face-to-face interactions and interpersonal relationship quality. Face-to-face communication is essential for emotional expression, empathy, and trust-building through nonverbal cues such as tone, gesture, and eye contact. Excessive mobile phone use can reduce engagement in real-life interactions as individuals divide their attention between digital content and the people around them.

Behaviours such as checking phones during meals, gatherings, or personal conversations can lead to feelings of neglect, diminished listening, and reduced relationship satisfaction. Digital communication lacks the emotional richness of direct interaction, making it less suitable for maintaining deep social bonds. By drawing on existing research and empirical data, this study examines the extent to which smartphone dependency alters communication patterns and interpersonal relationships among university students. The study ultimately aims to raise awareness about balanced mobile phone use and promote healthier relationship practices.

Questions of the study

The questions of this study includes:
1. What are the effects of mobile phone use in personal communication and social relationships?
2. What are the specific behaviors (phubbing, digital distraction) that leads to reduced engagement?
3. In what ways, the role of mobile phone addiction can be assessed in reducing social engagement and responsiveness in personal relationships?

Problem statement

In contemporary digital life, mobile phones have become indispensable; however, their excessive use poses a major challenge to effective face-to-face communication. Frequent engagement with mobile phones during conversations disrupts eye contact, reduces attentiveness, and weakens emotional bonds. Overuse has been linked to relationship dissatisfaction, loneliness, and social isolation. Despite growing awareness of these issues, many individuals find it difficult to regulate their phone use. This study examines how excessive mobile phone engagement affects direct interpersonal interactions and the overall quality of relationships among university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of research identifies the negative consequences of excessive mobile phone use on social interaction and relational quality. Studies show that even the presence of mobile phones during conversations lowers interaction quality and reduces feelings of closeness (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013; Brown et al., 2016). Excessive smartphone use correlates with reduced engagement, weaker nonverbal communication, and diminished emotional connection (Elsobeihi & Naser, 2017).

Rotondi et al. (2017) found that heavy smartphone users report lower well-being from social interactions, as time spent with friends becomes less meaningful when mediated by digital devices. Chaudhry (2015) argues that attachment to communication technologies fosters mobile phone

addiction, which interrupts interpersonal communication patterns. Experimental studies also reveal that mobile messaging during co-present conversations reduces perceived interaction quality (Abeele et al., 2016). Overall, research suggests that mobile phone overuse interferes with relationship development and restricts the depth of interpersonal interactions.

Theoretical framework

Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) explains how communication media differ in their ability to convey psychological presence. Face-to-face communication is considered the richest medium due to its combination of verbal and nonverbal cues, which foster emotional connection and relational depth. In contrast, mobile communication—particularly texting or browsing during conversations—offers low social presence and limits emotional involvement.

Among university students, constant mobile phone engagement can reduce attentiveness, hinder empathetic responses, and weaken relational ties. Social Presence Theory therefore provides a relevant lens for analysing how overdependence on mobile devices diminishes communication richness and disrupts interpersonal dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative, survey-based research design was adopted to investigate the relationship between excessive mobile phone use and the quality of face-to-face communication. The sample comprised 30 students from the Department of Communication and Media Research at the University of Punjab. Data were collected using an online questionnaire administered through Google Forms. The instrument measured mobile phone usage patterns, perceived effects on communication, and relational dynamics with peers and family.

Population and sampling

The target population for this study consists of university students, who are frequent users of mobile phones in both academic and social contexts. The sample was selected through convenience sampling from the Department of Communication and Media Research.
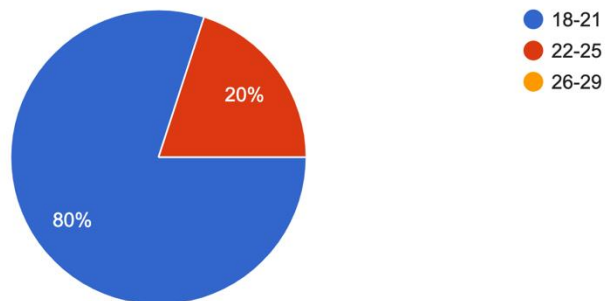
Research Methods

Participants were selected from the Department of Communication and Media Research at the University of Punjab. An online survey questionnaire was used as the primary research instrument and was administered to 30 students who use mobile phones daily. Students often interact with peers during university hours and with family members after university, making them suitable for examining shifts between digital and in-person communication. The survey, conducted in March, was shared via Google Forms, enabling participants to respond at their convenience. This method facilitated efficient data collection and supported the study's aim to explore how mobile phone usage influences communication in both academic and home settings.
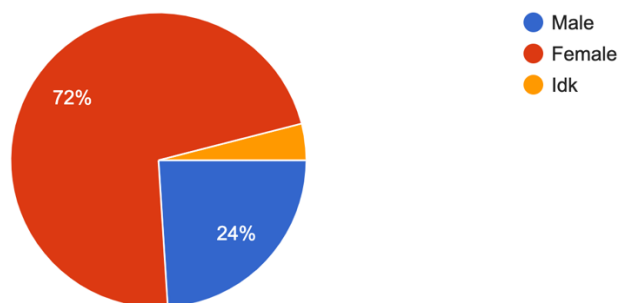
DATA ANALYSIS

Age Group
25 responses

The survey shows that 80% of respondents are between 18 and 21 years of age. A smaller portion, 20%, falls between 22 to 25 years of age, while none of the respondents belong to the 26 to 29 age group.
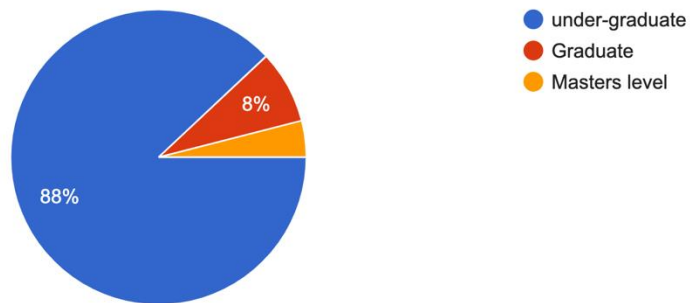

Gender
25 responses

Among the respondents, 72% identify as female, and 24 % identify as male.
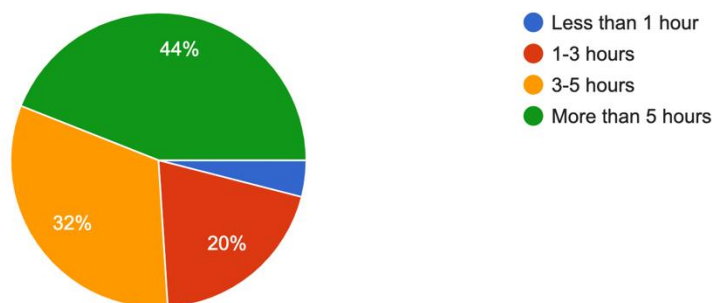
Current level of study
25 responses

The survey result shows that 88% of respondents are currently enrolled at the undergraduate level. While 8% of the students have graduated, 4% of the respondents are pursuing a Master's degree.

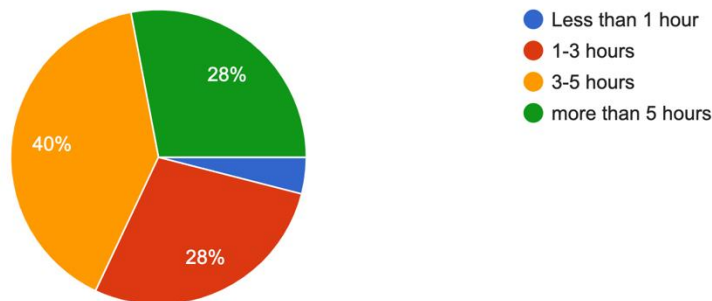How often do you use your mobile phone in a day?
25 responses

In terms of daily use of mobile phones, 44% of the respondents report that they use their phones for more than 5 hours a day. Further, 32% use their phones for 3 to 5 hours, 20% use their phones for 1 to 3 hours, and only 4% report usage of less than 1 hour a day.

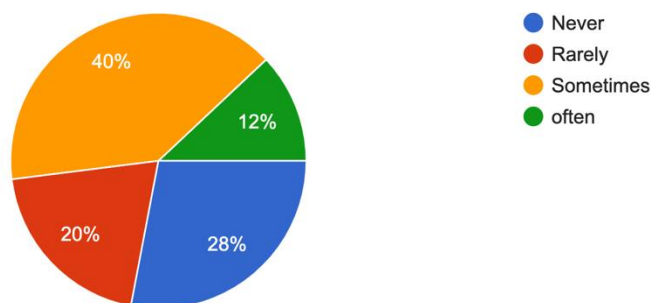How many hours per day do you spend on social media platforms?
25 responses

Upon being asked about time spent on social media, 40% of the respondents report 3 to 5 hours spent on social media daily. The 1–3 hours and more than 5 hours options are both chosen by 28% of the respondents each, while only 4% report less than 1 hour on social media daily.

Do you use your mobile phone with family or friends during meals?
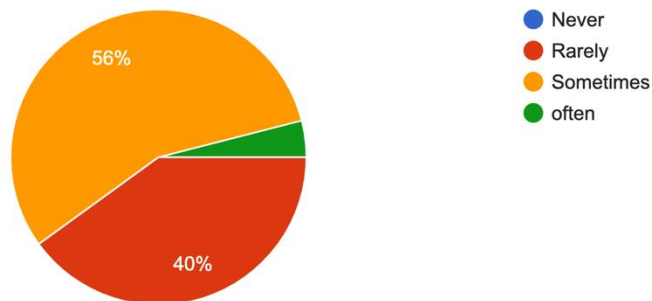25 responses

Regarding using mobile phones while dining with   family   or   friends,   40%   of respondents report that they use them occasionally, while 28% report never using them. Additionally, 20% hardly ever use their phones when they eat and 12% report using them often.

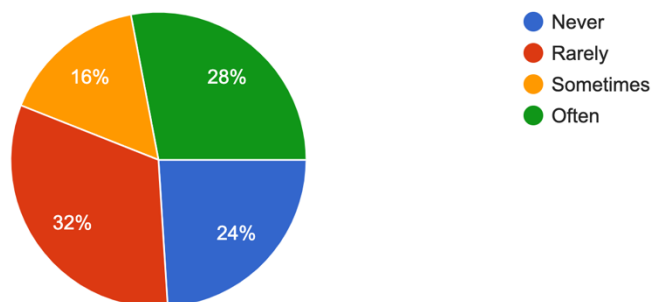How often do you find yourself using your phone in social gatherings?
25 responses

More than half of the respondents (56%) claim to use their phones occasionally during social gatherings. Meanwhile, 40% claim to rarely use them, and only 4% admit to using their phones often during social gatherings.

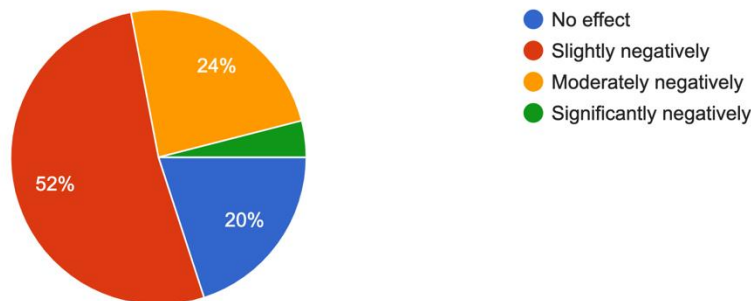Have you ever felt that your mobile phone use has interfered with your face-to-face interactions?
25 responses

When asked how mobile phone use affects face-to-face communication, 32% of the respondents believe it seldom has an effect, and 28% believe that it does so frequently. Another 24% replied that they never have such an effect, and 16% admit that occasionally it does occur.

How do you think your mobile phone usage affects your communication with your family members?
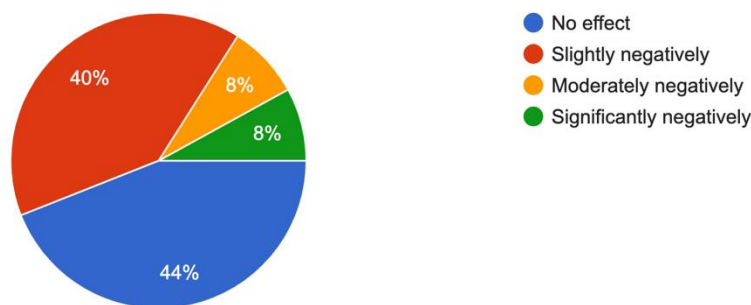25 responses

The survey result shows that 52% of participants report slightly negative on the effect of mobile usage on communication with family members, while 24% report moderately negative, and 4 % of respondents report significantly negative. In addition, 20% of respondents show no effect of it.

Do you believe that mobile phone use has affected your relationship with your friends?
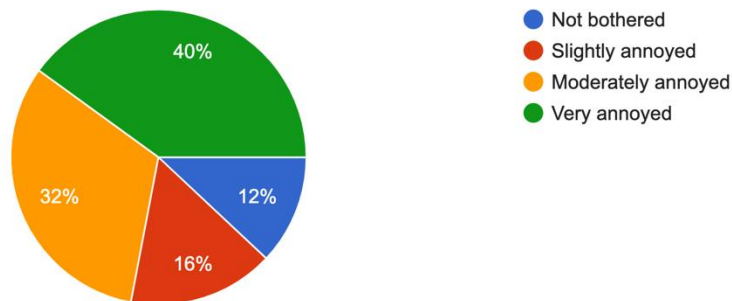25 responses

The survey results report that 44% of participants show that a mobile phone does not affect the relationship with Friends, while 40% support a slightly negative effect. In Addition, 8% % of respondents report a moderately negative effect & and 8% of respondents report a significantly negative effect.

How do you feel when someone you are talking to is constantly checking their phone?
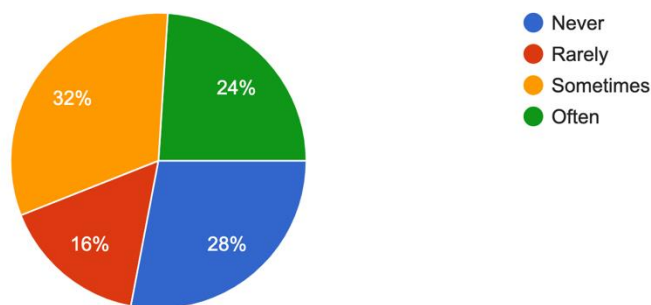25 responses

The results shows that almost 40% of the respondents can be annoyed observing the other person around is constantly looking at their phone. However, 32% respond that they are moderately annoyed. Further, 16% of respondents report that they are slightly annoyed, and 12% report that they are nøt bøttherd by it.

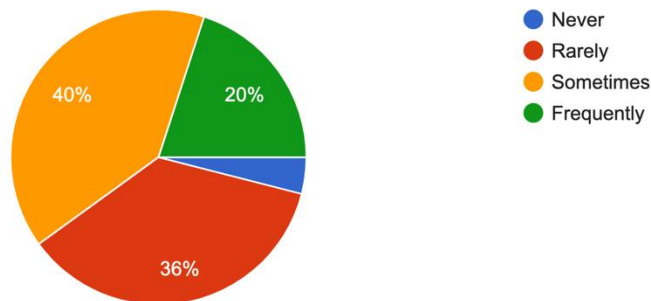Do you use your phone as a way to avoid face-to-face conversations?
25 responses

The   results reveal that 32% of the respondents   sometimes   use   their phones to escape face-to-face communication. Furthermore,   28% say that   they never use their   phones   for   this purpose, and 24% say that they often do. Moreover, 16% of the respondents report that they seldom use their phones to escape face-to-face interaction

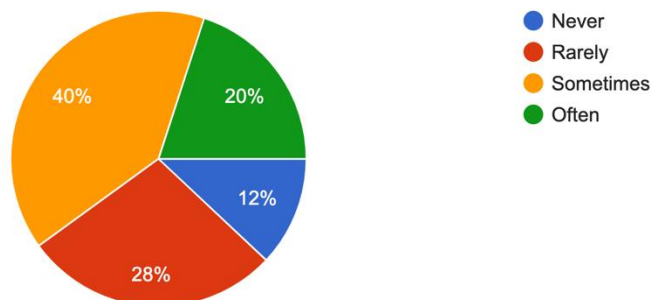How often do you check your phone during conversations?
25 responses

The results show that 40% of the respondents admit to sometimes using their phones as a means of escape from interactions. Conversely, 36% admit that they never do. Additionally,20% affirm that they always use their phones during interactions, and 4% affirm that they never use their phones as a means of escape from interactions.

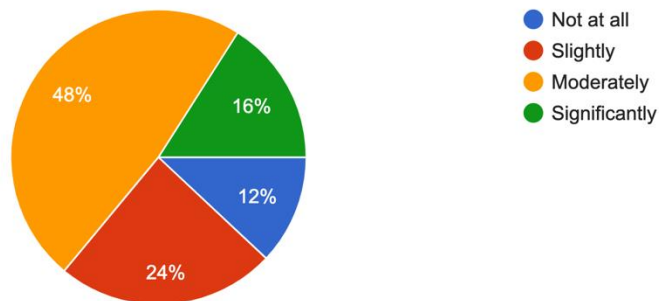Have you ever felt ignored because the person you are talking to is using their phone?
25 responses

The findings indicate that 40% of respondents occasionally feel ignored when the individual they are conversing with is on their phone. Furthermore, 28% indicate that they rarely feel ignored, 20% frequently feel ignored, and just 12% of the respondents indicate that they never feel ignored when someone is on their phone while they are conversing.

Do you think that mobile phones have made face-to-face communication less meaningful?
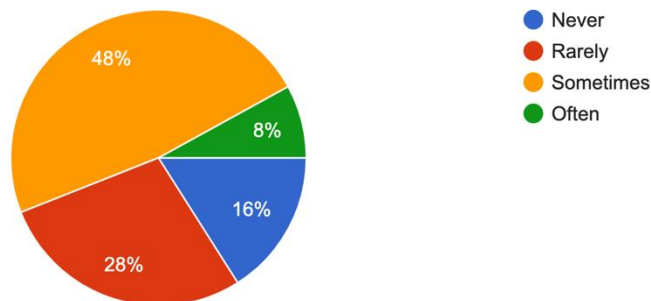25 responses

The results show that 46% of respondents sometimes agree that face-to-face conversations have been devalued by mobile phone usage. In addition, 24% of respondents slightly agree to the above, and 16% believe that it has had a deep impact on face-to-face conversations. In contrast, 12% of the respondents do not agree that mobile phone usage has influenced in-person conversations in any way.

Have you ever argued with someone over their mobile phone use?
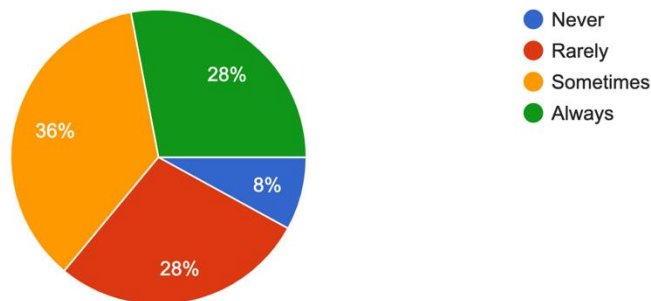25 responses

The results show that 48% of the respondents have sometimes argued with someone over their mobile phone use. Additionally, 28% report that they rarely engage in such arguments, while 16% say they have never argued about mobile phone usage. Only 8% of the participants admit to often having conflicts related to phone use.

Do you set any boundaries for mobile phone use during social or family gatherings?
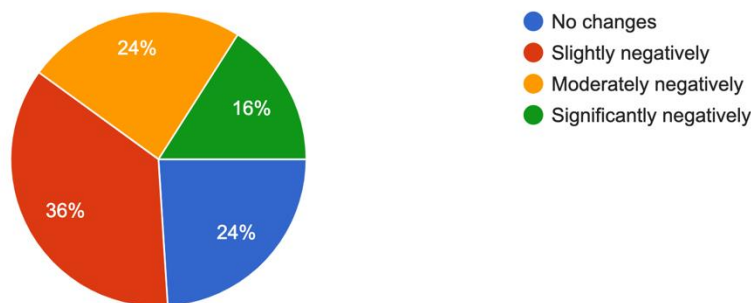25 responses

The results show that 36% of the respondents sometimes set boundaries regarding mobile phone use during social or family gatherings. Additionally, 28% report that they rarely establish such boundaries, while another 28% say they often do. Only 8% of the participants admit that they never set any boundaries when it comes to mobile phone use in these settings.

Have you noticed any changes in your relationships since the increased use of mobile phones?
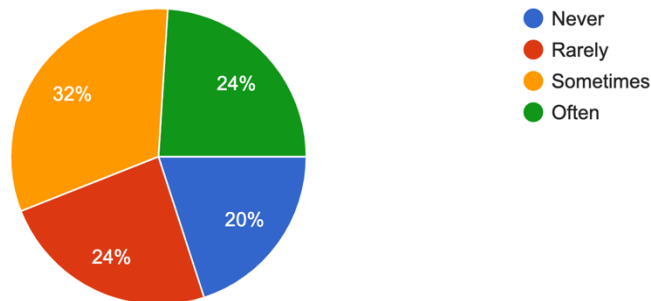25 responses

The results reveal that 36% of the respondents have noticed slight negative changes in their relationships due to mobile phone use. Meanwhile, 24% report experiencing moderate negative effects, and 16% say the impact on their relationships has been significant. On the other hand, 24% of the participants feel that their relationships have not been affected at all.

Have you ever made a conscious effort to reduce your mobile phone use to improve your relationships?
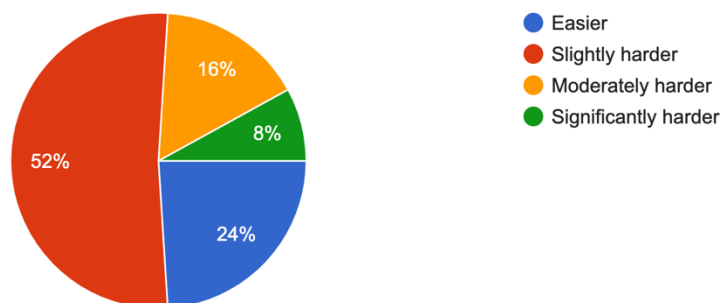
25 responses

The result shows that 32% of respondents say they sometimes try to limit their usage. Another 24% report making this effort often, while an equal percentage (24%) admit they rarely do. Meanwhile, 20% of the participants say they have never made such an effort.

Do you believe that mobile phones have made it easier or harder to maintain relationships?
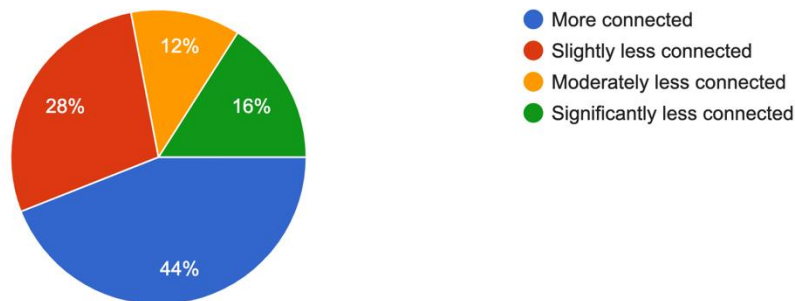
25 responses

The result shows that a majority of respondents (52%) believe that it has become slightly harder. Additionally, 16% feel it has become moderately harder, and 8% think it has become significantly harder. On a more positive note, 24% of participants say that mobile phones have made it easier to maintain their relationships.

Do you think that mobile phones have made people more or less socially connected?
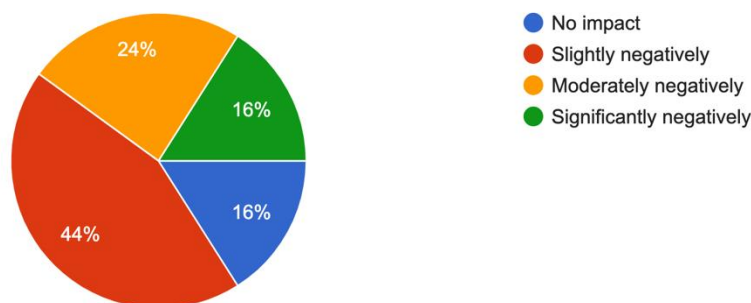25 responses

- ● More connected
- ● Slightly less connected
- ● Moderately less connected
- ● Significantly less connected

The survey result found that 44% of people believe mobile phones have made us more connected, while 28% think they're slightly less connected, 12% feel moderately less connected, and 16% believe they're significantly less connected.

How do you feel about the impact of mobile phones on your overall social life and relationships?
25 responses

- ● No impact
- ● Slightly negatively
- ● Moderately negatively
- ● Significantly negatively

The result shows that 44% of respondents feel it has had a slightly negative effect, 24% say it's been moderately negative, and 16% believe it's been significantly negative. However, 16% report no impact at all.

Results summary

The findings indicate that excessive mobile phone use significantly affects communication patterns and relationship quality among young adults. High levels of daily mobile phone engagement, particularly during

meals and social gatherings, contribute to emotional disengagement, reduced attentiveness, and interpersonal conflicts. A substantial proportion of respondents reported feeling ignored or frustrated during interactions involving concurrent phone use.

Approximately 70% of participants acknowledged that mobile phones negatively influence face-to-face conversations, and over half reported declines in family communication quality. Although many respondents acknowledged that mobile phones help maintain digital connectivity, the overall results highlight a decline in the depth of real-life relational experiences. These findings underscore the need for healthier digital habits to preserve meaningful in-person communication.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a consistent pattern of reduced face-to-face engagement among students who frequently use mobile phones. High daily mobile phone use—especially during meals, gatherings, and conversations—aligns with previous research indicating that phubbing and digital distraction undermine interpersonal connection. The large proportion of respondents reporting feelings of being ignored or annoyed when phones were used during interactions supports the notion that digital interruptions disrupt social presence.

The results also highlight variations in relational impact across different contexts. Family communication appears more negatively affected than friendships, possibly because family interactions often involve expectations of undivided attention. Students' admissions that they sometimes use mobile phones to escape interaction further underscore the role of digital devices as avoidance tools, contributing to emotional distancing.

Although some respondents noted that mobile phones enhance digital connectivity, this perceived benefit does not offset the decline in relational quality observed in face-to-face contexts. These findings emphasise the increasingly paradoxical role of mobile phones: while fostering constant connectivity, they simultaneously impair meaningful social engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that excessive mobile phone use significantly undermines face-to-face communication and relationship quality among university students. High levels of digital engagement contribute to emotional disengagement, reduced attentiveness, and interpersonal strain. The behaviours identified—phubbing, digital distraction, and avoidance—collectively weaken social bonds and diminish the richness of in-person interactions.

Although mobile phones facilitate digital connectivity, they cannot substitute the depth and emotional presence of direct communication. The findings underscore the need for interventions that promote mindful mobile phone use, digital-wellbeing awareness, and boundaries during social interactions. Encouraging balanced technology habits may strengthen interpersonal relationships and preserve the quality of human connection in an increasingly digital society.

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