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The Role of Smartphones and Technology in Sexual and Romantic Lives

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Introduction

Gender and sexuality are undergoing profound changes in the 21st century. For example, there is legal equality for sexual minorities in the UK and attitudes toward homosexuality continue to improve (McCormack 2012). Public discussion of sex and sexuality has become normalized, and romantic relationships are increasingly egalitarian (Giddens 1992). In this context, technology has revolutionised sexual and romantic lives (Waskul 2003), freeing sexuality from the role of reproduction and enabling greater exploration of sexual pleasure (Attwood and Smith 2014).

Technology, particularly in the form of smartphones, has revolutionised the ways in which romantic relationships are experienced (Coyne et al 2011), and there is a growing body of research that investigates the effects of smartphones on couples' social and romantic lives (see Hertlein and Ancheta 2014). However, there is less focus on the impact they have on the romantic and sexual activities of people in long-term relationships. To this end, this qualitative research used interviews with a diverse sample of 30 heterosexuals in romantic relationships lasting at least one year to develop understanding of the influence of technology, and smartphone apps in particular, on people's romantic and sexual lives.

This research found that couples today use smartphones to keep in touch – not just to organise the logistics of daily life, but also for the emotional work of caring and comforting. Participants spoke of the importance of texts and phone calls – short communications to check how the day was going or remind their partners that they were loved. It is also a central part of leisure time, arranging trips and dinners out or spicing up sex lives through flirtatious messages or erotic pictures and videos.

Yet the pervasive use of technology in relationships also comes at a cost. For some participants, it can serve to question the fidelity of partners, and fatally undermine trust. While the majority valued technology in their lives, they still expressed frustration at the tensions it caused in their relationships. Whether it was their partners spending time and money on smartphone apps, prioritising smartphones above communication in the home, or encroaching onto sexual activity and bedroom routines, participants spoke of the negative effects that technology could have. Even those participants with strategies to deal with these issues still sought ways to minimise the stresses that result from technology in their lives. Thus, for all the benefits, there are still tensions that are fostered by technology, and smartphones in particular. While people develop strategies to deal with these issues, there is a role for technological innovations to help ameliorate these problems.

Methodology

In-depth interviews were undertaken in February 2015 with 30 people in heterosexual relationships from across England. Participants were aged 18-55, and were required to have been in a relationship for at least one year and engaged with at least two forms of social media. There were a diverse range of participants in terms of class, ethnicity, age and educational background. An equal number of men and women were interviewed. Interviews

were semi-structured and focussed on a number of issues around relationships, technology and how these intersect. The interview schedule was designed to develop an understanding of the positive and negative influences of technology in relationships, and follow-up questions were asked to fully explore the meanings and experiences of technology in participants' lives.

Interviews were undertaken by a team of researchers affiliated with the *Centre for Sex, Gender and Sexualities* at Durham University, and led by Dr Mark McCormack. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes on average, and were transcribed and analysed using an inductive approach that identified themes that emerged across transcripts. Emerging codes were discussed and developed into focused codes and broader themes (Braun & Clarke 2006). This research does not seek to find generalizable statistics or make definitive claims about how technology is used in relationships, but rather develop an understanding of technology usage in relationships that is rooted in the narratives and experiences of peoples' lives, drawing on the richness of qualitative interview data to do so.

Ethical approval was gained from Durham University, and this included ensuring that participants gave informed consent. Key components of the ethical process include that confidentiality is maintained, and this includes ensuring all data is kept anonymous. Participants were also able to opt out of the research at any time, and given the opportunity to review and amend the transcript of their interview. Funding for this research was provided by Durex™. Dr McCormack maintained academic independence in all aspects of the research process and writing of the report and executive summary.

The Benefits of Smartphones in Relationships

Interview data demonstrated that technology and smartphones are **central to the organization of romantic relationships** for most participants. All but one participant owned a smartphone and those that did had regularly communicated with their partner on it at some point in their relationship.

Participants spoke about how they value of smartphones during the early stages of relationships, particularly for keeping in contact between dates (see also Bergdall et al 2012). Rather than being used solely for organizing dates, participants spoke about how smartphones were an integral component of communication in the early stages of dating, and vital in establishing romantic relationships. This was particularly true of participants aged under 35, with one woman in her thirties saying:

I'd say that at the start, it played a big part in our relationship because we would text each other and that's actually how we stayed in touch. We met and had sex obviously, but we kept in touch by text and emails and that built the foundation of our relationship.

Some participants spoke of messaging each other hundreds of times a day in the early stages of the relationship, with one participant saying he sent "literally thousands and

thousands of messages". However, a common theme was that the level of communication on smartphones diminished as the relationship progressed. Here, smartphones were praised for **enabling brief messages of love and affection** when couples are apart. As a 22 year old man said, "I just text her during the day to check in with her, so she knows I'm thinking of her."

In addition to these forms of relationship maintenance (Bergdall et al 2012), participants also spoke about the use of smartphones for mundane activities, including organizing leisure activities and planning housework and other duties during the day. All participants with smartphones did this, with some arguing that these communications decreased the likelihood of arguments by averting potential issues before they occurred.

Participants also discussed the value of smartphones and technology in **fostering conversation when together**. One participant said:

I don't know what older people used to speak about, they didn't know what was going on in other peoples' lives. There is only so much you can talk to about with somebody you see everyday – these [social networking] sites give us talking points.

Similarly, another asked, "What did people used to talk about before they could use their phones to show people YouTube videos and stuff like that?" He added, "You couldn't use phone calls to speak to people and find out where they were when you're meeting up with them."

The other key theme related to the benefits of smartphones was for the benefits they had in **enhancing participants' sexual lives**. 20 participants discussed sending flirtatious or sexual messages to each other, while 12 had sent pictures of a sexual nature to each other. One participant aged 27, said: "We've taken sexy pics of me, but not of sex. They were sexual, scintillating but not slutty." Another female participant, aged 55, said of her smartphone:

When I discovered it could record little videos, I did silly little strip-teasey routines for a laugh. It was fun, yeah, I really enjoyed it... When I first met my partner, I also filmed myself masturbating, and I hoped he could pick up some tips, but I didn't want to do it in front of him, so I filmed it. I remember it was quite exciting and was worth doing.

While this narrative came from the oldest participant, the younger participants appeared to be more open to using their smartphones in this sexual capacity (Gordon-Messer et al 2013); highlighting a possible generational difference. One man, aged 25, spoke of the value of smartphones in filming sex. He said, "It gives you different perspectives of sex and enables you to see what you're doing in a different way. We can also text and sext when she's away which is great too".

Some participants who had not sent sexual pictures were open to the idea, particularly if in the future they were not in a relationship. One women aged 32 said:

My friend does it all the time, she's just got loads of cocks on her phone. I can have his dick in real life though, so no need for pictures. If I was single then I would probably do it more, it would be exciting, the anticipation of it I guess.

8 of the participants have also **filmed themselves having sex** with their partner, either together or using skype or other messaging services with camera facilities. This often occurred on laptops or tablets rather than smartphones, and was praised as a way to keep in contact and maintain sexual relations when apart. As other research has shown (Dir & Cyders 2014), there was no evidence of negative effects from sexting or the filming of sex. Thus, participants recognized the benefits that smartphones and technology had in their romantic relationships, both emotionally and sexually.

The Costs of Smartphones on Relationships

While participants overwhelmingly valued smartphones and technology in their lives, they also recognized that their pervasive usage came at a cost to their relationship. For some participants, it served to **question the fidelity of partners**, and undermine trust. One participant said:

It's just an open door. There are so many ways you can get away with things. It's been said before - the delete button is so easy to use. You can hide anything. Somebody could be cheating on your for months and you wouldn't know about it because they can delete everything.

Similarly, another participant said

When the first iPhone was purchased by him I used to call it the third person in our marriage and I hated her with a passion, she used to sit between us, and I really disliked her... it has become a third arm for a lot of people.

While these views have resonance with research that sees trust undermined through the use of social networking sites (e.g. Cravens, Leckie and Whiting 2013), they were articulated by just 4 participants—three of whom stated that smartphones had been used as a way of facilitating cheating by partners in the past. Four participants also discussed tracking their partners' activities through monitoring their use of social networking sites, apps and their texts.

The great majority of participants valued technology in their lives, yet they still expressed **frustration at the tensions it caused** in their relationships. One key theme was how smartphones led to social distance between partners when at home together, often through multitasking when interacting with their partner (see Krishnan, Kurtzberg and Naquin 2014). One male participant in his twenties said that "Sometimes when we were cuddling I would play on the game behind her head. Sometimes I would play on the apps rather than cuddle my partner". One female participant said, "I'll be on Facebook and he'll be on a sporting app while we are both in bed; then we realize that we are literally sitting in bed together, but living in different worlds".

Another participant raised smartphone apps as a particular distraction in her relationship:

He is obsessed with [names app] and often plays it on his phone and iPad. He'll do that in the pub when we're with friends, which drives me insane. And he'll do it when we're watching a film, so he's not concentrating and then he'll ask what is going on in the film which is ridiculous...it really annoys me because it's very uncivilized.

Others, particularly those 30 or older, discussed work intruding into their relationships because of smartphones. One said, "I have clients texting me at 5 in the morning cancelling their sessions. I think it would be better if I had a shut off period where I wasn't allowed to use my phone after certain times."

Participants also felt that smartphones impacted upon sexual activity, with 12 of the 30 having **delayed sex because of smartphone use**. One participant said they had delayed sex when "in the middle of my Candy Crush game", while another said that he did so, "As a form of 'I can't be arsed'." He added, "So maybe we would have both gone to bed at the same time and so to not take things any further I might make myself look busy on my phone".

Participants spoke of smartphones impacting on sex in other ways as well. One woman in her thirties said, "I may want sex and he might not be aware of that, because he's distracted on his phone". Others spoke about hurrying sex in order to respond to a text message or notification. While half of participants spoke of smartphones impacting on sex in this way, this tended to be temporary infractions rather than more permanent disruptions to sex. As one participant said, "I'll make him wait until I'm done with my updates, but I'll still have sex with him".

Strategies to Deal with Smartphones in Relationships

While frustration existed as a result of smartphone use for the majority of participants, most had developed strategies for dealing with these issues. The key strategy that people used was to **organise times when smartphones were banned from use** in the house. A number of rules were developed by participants, including not having smartphones easily accessible at dinner, out with friends, during sex or before sleeping. One participant said:

In the last few months, I've tried to have a ban on her using her phone in the bedroom..... We're now trying to use the bedroom now for just sleeping and sex and do things like reading in other places.

Others spoke about deleting particular apps because they recognized it was impacting too much on their free time. One participant said "I just knew I was spending too long on this game, so I deleted it. It was bad for the relationship and for my work". Participants also spoke of **deleting sexual photos** while others did not send explicit pictures because of worries over other people seeing them if their phone is lost or on display at work.

However, while participants highlighted a number of strategies they had developed, these were not always effective. One participant said, "Smartphones are just this huge distraction

from each other. We still find ourselves sat on our phones rather than engaging with each other". Similarly, another participant highlighted the persistence of the issue:

She always gets in trouble because we'll just be sat there chatting and all of a sudden she'll be on Facebook. And I'll say, 'Hi, I'm here'. I've actually messaged her whilst she's on Facebook to say I'm still here. Then, she'll get embarrassed and put her phone down.

Another participant commented, "It infuriates me and we fight about it, but it keeps on happening. It's fine at dinner, but he'll use his phone everywhere else". Thus, while strategies were developed, these tended to be successful only in particular contexts and settings with issues persisting in other venues.

Summary

Technology, and smartphones in particular, have had a tremendous impact on the way relationships are started, consolidated and maintained in the 21st century. This research found that couples today used smartphones for diverse reasons with a range of benefits; these included increased communication while apart and the offer of emotional support. Participants spoke of the importance of texts and phone calls - short communications to check the day was going ok or reminding their partners they were loved. Smartphones are also a central part of leisure time, arranging trips and dinners out or spicing up sex lives through flirtatious messages or erotic pictures and videos. Yet for all the benefits, tensions related to smartphone use and technology more broadly still exist. While people have developed strategies to deal with these issues, these only work in particular contexts and have not resolved the issues meaning that tensions remain in specific areas of their romantic relationships. Participants recognized these issues, and there is a role for technological innovations to help ameliorate them in the future.

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