Full length article

Can I connect with both you and my social network? Access to network-salient communication technology and get-acquainted interactions

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ABSTRACT

Although recent research has found evidence that the mere presence of a cell phone or other communication device has negative effects on the reported quality of face-to-face interactions (e.g., Misra, Cheng, Genevie, & Yuan, 2014; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013), no prior study has examined how individuals' actual access to communication devices during an interaction may affect that interaction, either negatively or positively. This was the focus of our study. Seventy-five previously unacquainted dyads engaged in a get-acquainted interaction over Skype. In the experimental dyads, one member unobtrusively (out of the view of his or her interaction partner) checked his or her cell phone and Facebook while interacting with the other. In the control dyads, neither partner had cell phone or Facebook access. Regardless of condition, participants rated the interaction positively. Generally, being connected to one's social network had no effect on the interaction. A comparison of our results with those of recent studies (e.g., Przybylski & Weinstein) led to the conclusion that divided attention from the presence of a communication device may be detrimental for an interaction only when the network members cannot be accessed.

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1. Introduction

In the recent past, there have been major changes in the way people communicate and connect with one another (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Srivastava, 2009). A majority of Americans now own both a computer and a cell phone (Pew Research Center, 2015); furthermore, those who have a smartphone (estimated to be 79% of Americans as of late 2015; see comScore, 2016) can use it like a computer — to send and receive messages and to access the Internet, including email and social media. Rainie and Wellman (2012) refer to the changes in the way people connect as a "triple revolution" — the Social Network, Internet, and Mobile Revolutions. They argue that these revolutions have created a new social operating system referred to as "networked individualism." This new social operating system allows individuals to be connected to their own unique social networks anytime and anywhere, which provides a combination of independence and connectivity. However,

this increased hyperconnection with multiple others at a distance exists side-by-side with the traditional way humans have and will always connect: face-to-face interaction. Networked individualism and the divided attention that ensues have unexplored implications for face-to-face or "here and now" interactions (Misra, Cheng, Genevie, & Yuan, 2014) that are essential to the formation and maintenance of friendships and romantic relationships.

Research has begun to examine how communication with partners and friends through the use of social media (i.e., Facebook) and cell phones can sometimes facilitate, but in other instances impair, relationships (Carpenter & Spottswood, 2013; Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Felmlee & Faris, 2016; Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; Miller-Ott, Kelly, & Duran, 2012). However, we know far less about how being hyperconnected with multiple others at a distance affects people's behavior in specific face-to-face communications. With the increased frequency of "dual front interactions" (Humphreys, 2005, p. 10), in which individuals attend simultaneously to an immediate, face-to-face interaction partner and to distant others through networking media, comes an increased need for new research. As noted by Przybylski and Weinstein (2013, p. 237), "Recent advancements in communication technology have

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enabled billions of people to connect more easily with people great distances away, yet little has been known about how the frequent presence of these devices in social settings influences face-to-face interactions."

This study considers people's reactions to a get-acquainted interaction as a function of whether or not they were able to simultaneously receive messages from their social network through communication devices. To provide a context for this research, we first present a brief review of three related empirical and theoretical literature: (1) self-disclosure and relationship formation, (2) effects of divided attention, and (3) norm development in different contexts of communication. Then, we summarize the findings from two recent studies that have explored the related issue of how the presence of a communication device affects social interactions.

1.1. The importance of self-disclosure for relationship development

Perhaps the most central component in the development of close relationships is the act of revealing personal and intimate information, or self-disclosure. According to social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), relationships increase in breadth (variety) and depth (intimacy) of self-disclosure over time, particularly if the interaction is rewarding. Indeed, when self-disclosure occurs smoothly, it can facilitate understanding, trust, and interpersonal unity between individuals (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993), including over computer mediated communication (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011; Joinson, 2001; Utz, 2015). Self-disclosure is often a reciprocal process, in which one individual discloses information while his or her interaction partner listens to the incoming information; then, the two switch roles and continue to go back and forth throughout the interaction (Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, & Wallpe, 2013).

There are two sides to disclosure — self-disclosing and being the recipient of self-disclosure — and research indicates that both sides contribute to liking. For example, Collins and Miller's (1994) meta-analysis of several studies provided evidence that people like individuals who self-disclose to them and like those to whom they self-disclose.[1] Furthermore, in a study that focused on get-acquainted interactions, Sprecher, Treger, and Wondra (2013) separated the two disclosure roles by having only one member of each pair self-disclose for the first segment of interaction while the other listened; then, the members switched roles in a second interaction. The researchers found that both roles were associated with liking of the other, enjoyment of the interaction, and closeness to the other. However, those in the role of receiving self-disclosure (listening) reported more liking and other positive impressions after the first interaction than did those in the role of self-disclosing. Because hyperconnected people may be more likely to check their communication devices in an interaction when their partner is taking a speaking turn (as opposed to when they themselves are self-disclosing), the interpersonal connection that derives from attending to another's self-disclosure may be especially affected negatively by media multi-tasking.

Self-disclosure occurs not only in face-to-face settings, but is also common in social networking contexts (e.g., text messaging, Facebook chat; Misoch, 2015). In fact, multiple studies have found that people sometimes prefer to initiate private disclosures through a social network medium, compared to more traditional face-to-face interactions (Chiou, 2006; Misoch, 2015; Taddei, Contena, & Grana, 2010). These findings have implications for understanding the outcomes of interactions for hyperconnected people. Those

who are hyperconnected may sometimes self-disclose and receive self-disclosure simultaneously with different individuals, both in a face-to-face setting (or a video-chatting interaction) and in a distant location through cell phone texts or computer-mediated communication.

1.2. Multitasking and divided attention in communication

The process of communicating with multiple others simultaneously through different communication channels has created a unique form of multitasking. Recent research has shown that multitasking via media, particularly social media and cell phones, offers particular challenges. Although the causal directions are unclear, multitasking with electronic media has been associated with problems of concentration and focus, difficulty with performing tasks, and symptoms of anxiety (Becker, Alzahabi, & Hopwood, 2013; Brooks, 2015). In a recent study, Thornton, Faires, Robbins, and Rollins (2014) found that participants' performance on complex cognitive tasks deteriorated when the experimenter's cell phone (versus a notebook) was in sight. This was replicated in a classroom setting; performance on more complex tasks deteriorated when a student's own phone was in sight, even if it was not being used.

Not only does multitasking hold potential negative effects for the person juggling the interactions, but it may also have negative effects for her or his face-to-face interaction partner. Krishnan, Kurtzberg, and Naquin (2014) observed individuals who were participating in a negotiation task and found that individuals who were randomly assigned to multitask by checking cell phone messages during the negotiations achieved less favorable outcomes from their negotiation attempts. They also were described by their partners as being lower in professionalism and trustworthiness, which suggests that their partners were less satisfied with the interaction, as compared to when neither individual was multitasking.

Other theories regarding the effects of mobile communication on interactions focus on the interpersonal consequences of divided attention. For instance, Turkle (2012) argued that mobile communication can have negative effects on face-to-face interpersonal relationships by "making concerns about maintaining wider social networks salient" (p. 238). In this theory, Turkle suggests that the presence of a phone can lead people to give less attention to immediate, face-to-face communication because they are also thinking about their social network. A related concept is that of *poly-consciousness*, in which people's access to communication technologies can divide consciousness between immediate ("here and now") interaction settings and more distant settings, which undermines the immediate interaction conversation (Misra et al., 2014). The implications of the above research and theory is that multi-tasking, divided attention, and the presence of a cell phone may interfere with one's ability to become acquainted with another.

At the same time, several recent studies suggest that multitasking does not always have negative outcomes and may even have beneficial cognitive outcomes. For example, multi-tasking can effectively provide a necessary avenue to interact with multiple others all at once in order to accomplish various goals (e.g., David, Xu, Srivastava, & Kim, 2013). In addition, certain people prefer to switch between multiple tasks within the same time block, and such "polychronic-oriented" individuals can be more satisfied with work that involves multi-tasking (Arndt, Arnold, & Landry, 2006). Furthermore, people who are hyperconnected generally report that they do not have problems attending to everyday tasks and interpersonal relationships (Smith, 2012).

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[1] They also provided evidence that people self-disclose to those whom they like.