



The action of looking at a mobile phone display as nonverbal behavior/communication: A theoretical perspective



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the now-common action of looking at a mobile phone display, thereby offering insight into the present communication situation in an era in which the use of high-performance mobile phones has become ubiquitous. In this study, the action of looking at a mobile phone display is considered nonverbal behavior/communication. This study applies a basic, general model to elucidate the present situation of face-to-face communication in light of the increasing prevalence of social interaction via mobile phone use. The results derived from the model include mobile phone users' increasing social power and an accumulation of potential discontent in relation to different interpretations. This study concludes that in an era of high-performance mobile phones, the social context in face-to-face communication can be influenced by the act of looking at a mobile phone display.

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1. Introduction

In 2012, the ITU reported that the number of mobile cellular subscriptions in the world had reached 6.8 billion, which corresponds to a global penetration of 96% ([Press Release in ITU official page](#)). As the number of mobile phone users (including smartphone users in this study) increases, we have observed that individuals look at their mobile phone displays with significantly greater frequency than previously. Prior to 2000, a majority of users employed only the talking function of their mobile phones. Currently, however, mobile phones are used for a variety of functions including reading mail, accessing web and location-based services, and playing music. The convenience and portability afforded to users by their mobile phones has supported a trend among users to look at their mobile phone displays regardless of whether they are within range of mobile service.

Previous studies have raised concerns over the action of looking at mobile phone displays, citing potential physical harm to users. For example, both pedestrians and drivers could cause traffic accidents while being distracted by texting ([Nemme & White, 2010](#); [Schwebel et al., 2012](#)). Recently, however, mobile phone use has also raised concern in a social context. The *Wall Street Journal* published a column ([Shellenbarger, 2013](#)), "Just Look Me in the Eye Already: The Workplace Perils of Staring at Our Phones and Elsewhere; The Ideal Gaze Lasts 7 to 10 Seconds", in which declining eye contact as a consequence of mobile phone use was

highlighted as a growing concern. One reason cited for decreasing eye contact is the frequency and repetition with which individuals check their mobile devices. The column emphasized that decreasing eye contact negatively influences individuals' sense of emotional connection and their ability to influence or impress others.

[Baron and Campbell \(2012\)](#) investigated gender-based differences in mobile phone use, finding that female users employed mobile phones more frequently than male users to intentionally avoid interaction with strangers or acquaintances. The authors also observed a trend in which experienced users, when faced with undesirable social interactions, looked at mobile phone displays rather than pretending to talk. [Nakamura \(2007\)](#) studied the behavior of Japanese mobile phone users, claiming that the action of looking at a mobile phone display deserves further study in the context of face-to-face communication.

In the present study, the action of looking at a mobile phone display is considered nonverbal behavior/communication. We therefore propose a model integrating motivations for and interpretations of this action. The model draws on the results of previous studies to define relevant variables. The results are subsequently discussed in the context of face-to-face communication theory.

2. Research on mobile phone use

2.1. In public spaces

Current research on mobile phone use in public spaces is divided into two camps. The first focuses on physical threat.

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Pedestrians or drivers using their mobile phones are unaware of their surroundings and can thus cause accidents while distracted by handheld devices (Nemme & White, 2010; Schwebel et al., 2012). Many previous studies have cautioned against mobile phone use while in transit in an effort to avoid repeating incidents ending in physical harm that have repeatedly been documented by the media.

The second camp focuses on the sociability of mobile phone users. By the middle of the first decade of the millennium, issues related to mobile phone use in public spaces were raised regarding telephone conversations, with studies highlighting factors such as annoyance, discomfort, manners, and ethics, among others. Ling and Donner (2009) reviewed the debate on emergent norms in public spaces. Since then, the focus of research has gradually shifted to include all elements of mobile phone use (e.g., texting, browsing the web, using location-based services) that have affected daily life and changed the nature of modern sociability. Turkle (2011) asserted that mobile phone use in public spaces diminishes sociability. In contrast, de Souza e Silva and Frith (2012) proposed that mobile interfaces 'lead to the construction of new types of spaces filled with meaning and sociability' and that 'location-aware devices have the potential to connect people with others nearby.'

This controversy is indicative of the rapid increase in the use of mobile phone displays in public spaces and thus highlights the need to investigate and define acceptable limitations surrounding their use. Users' motivations for looking at mobile phone displays, for example as an intentional strategy to avoid acquaintances or strangers, must therefore be classified.

2.2. With familiar persons

Today, individuals often rely on their mobile phones to maintain or develop relationships with familiar people (parents, siblings, children, peers, and friends). For example, parents may ensure that their children carry mobile phones to assuage safety or other parental concerns (Matsuda, 2008), and college students may similarly use mobile devices to connect with their parents. In addition, it has been argued that students need mobile phones to fulfill their familial roles, to share experiences, and to receive emotional support from their parents (Chen & Katz, 2009). Pierce (2009) established a positive correlation between the absence of social anxiety among teenagers (feeling comfortable when talking with others) and their ability to make friends online. Although it is widely considered unacceptable behavior, some young adults in intimate relationships use mobile phone functions to monitor their partners (Burke et al., 2011).

Though many studies characterize mobile phones as indispensable tools in the construction and/or maintenance of familiar relationships, the mobile phone itself is intrinsically ambivalent. Mobile phones can be used to connect with individuals who are otherwise unable to engage in face-to-face communication for geographic or social reasons. Some people may therefore become uncomfortable when their conversation partners look at the displays of their mobile phones without permission, a sentiment that often goes unexpressed. However, others accept such 'looking' and do not feel uncomfortable when their conversation partners do this (Nakamura, 2013). Thus, there are various, sometimes contrasting, ways in which familiar persons perceive the action of looking at a mobile phone display. Therefore, a 'normative guideline' of the action remains to be constructed.

2.3. Nonverbal behavior/communication

Subjects of nonverbal communication are diverse, and nonverbal signals can be expressed through multiple channels ranging

from subtle (e.g., voice intonation) to more obvious signals involving gestures. Knapp et al. (2013) summarized historical trends in nonverbal research (pp. 21–25). Since the 1950s, the amount of scientific research has significantly increased. The 1960s showed an explosive increase in the number of research topics. For example, Goffman (1959) and Goffman (1963) analyzed human behavior from a social performance/presentation perspective. Hall (1966) identified four types of informal spaces, whereas Kendon (1967) highlighted the significance of eye movement as behavior. Based on their psychological experiments, Argyle and Dean (1965) proposed an equilibrium theory regarding compensation behavior to adjust spaces and eye movements. Such research related to sociability, body movement, space, and gaze supports the basic idea that the action of looking at a mobile phone display is an example of nonverbal behavior/communication. In the 1950s and 1960s, scholars proposed many basic theories about face-to-face communication and developed several tenets of nonverbal behavior/communication that inform research on this subject today. In the 1970s, nonverbal research attempted to address public interest and summarize as well as synthesize related literature. After the 1970s, scholars continued to specialize or identify ways in which a variety of nonverbal signals worked together. However, they have consistently focused on 'raw' physical movement rather than gestures, e.g., using a hand tool such as a mobile phone. Even as recently as 2010, the social implications of mobile phone display use had yet to be adequately addressed.

The action of looking at a mobile phone display has become a ubiquitous part of modern life, occurring in public and private spaces alike. As an action that necessitates some degree of physical movement, the act of looking at a display screen thus necessarily involves nonverbal signals. Moreover, users may look at their mobile phone displays with strong intent even when this action is non-essential (Nakamura, 2007). Research has indicated that some users intentionally look at their mobile phone displays to avoid unwanted conversation, similar to the way in which one may have traditionally used a device or read a newspaper (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012; Baron & Campbell, 2012). Currently, the action of looking at a mobile phone display should be regarded as a complicated nonverbal behavior that occurs either intentionally or unintentionally. Further research focusing on the action of looking at a mobile phone display as nonverbal behavior/communication is therefore needed.

3. Mobile phone use in Japan

In Japan, mobile phones spread widely and rapidly in the 1990s; subscription numbers equated to about half of the total population until the end of the decade. In 1999, the largest telecommunications company, NTT docomo, started its 'i-mode' service, which enabled e-mail and web access by providing Internet capabilities on mobile phones. Thereafter, the most popular use of mobile phones shifted from telephonic communication to e-mail (Okada, 2005). Such usage inevitably forced many people to use their mobile phones while looking at the displays but not talking. In the first half of the 2000s, the number of e-mail and web users on mobile phones rapidly increased, and they soon began to involve mobile phone usage in all circumstances of their daily lives. Okabe and Ito (2005) indicated that many passengers in Japanese trains silently operated their mobile phones without talking. Furthermore, it became concurrently popular to use the camera function installed on many mobile phones. Some users learned to share their daily information with colleagues (Kato et al., 2005), increasing opportunities to look at mobile phone displays. Before the worldwide popularity of smartphones such as the iPhone 3G in 2008, the multitasking high-performance mobile phone was widely used in Japan.

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