



“He sounded angry  
over text”  
The impact of  
technology on couple  
attachment and  
relationship  
functioning

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*“My partner, when we are together or we are hanging out, going to a restaurant, for example, or anywhere, he’s checking his phone, I’m checking my phone, instead we should use this time to speak with each other, (...) sometimes I am talking to him, but he is just checking the news or sending messages to his family members, and I ask him “are you hearing me? can you listen to me?” because he is not really focused on me, he is just focused on his phone” - Participant*



Does technology connect us or  
fuel disconnection?

Photo credit: Eric Pickersgill

# Rationale

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Practice: Ongoing experience of couples seeking counselling complaining about conflict that is carried out either exclusively or predominantly through technology and not in-person. Increase in anxiety and difficulty communicating.

Social Consciousness: Addiction to our phones, computers etc. is moving into public consciousness and is receiving media and research attention

Personal: As someone who studies addiction, observing the impact of technology in my own life- divided attention, etc.

# Rationale

Americans spend on average 11 hours a day with electronic media (Neilson, 2014)

The Internet and constant engagement with technology is changing our brains (Carr, 2011)

Devices create psychological distance in face-to-face social interactions (Turkle, 2011)

Smartphones cue our evolved needs for self-disclosure and responsiveness and have the capacity to undermine in-person interaction (Sbarra et al., in press.)

Technology use is now receiving consideration as a behavioural addiction (Alter, 2018)

# Research Question

HOW DOES  
TECHNOLOGY USE  
IMPACT OUR  
ROMANTIC  
ATTACHMENTS?

# The Study Part 1

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Forty-four phone interviews



35 participants identified as women,  
7 as men and 2 as non-binary



Average participant age: 29

# Interview

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Asked participants to describe their daily technology use

Asked participants to describe how they use technology in their romantic relationships

Asked about potential benefits of technology

Asked about potential negatives or concerns around technology use

Asked about how technology impacts closeness and security in relationship



# Analysis

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Thematic analysis



Two reviewers  
coded separately



Compared themes  
and were in  
agreement

# Themes

## **Concerns about use of technology:**

- Overused as communication tool
- Toxic 'third space'
- Miscommunication
- Distresses new relationships

## **Perceived benefits of technology:**

- Helps navigate long distance relationships
- Allows for constant connection
- Tool for self-regulation
- Safer meeting space for queer community



Concerns about use of technology

# Overused as a communication tool

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- using technology to communication topics that are better discussed in person
- perpetuates anxious and avoidant ways of relating
- normalizes surveillance and expectations of immediacy

*“we both use more [technology] than we should”*

*“when we share our location with each other, and sometimes I think there is some inaccuracy between like where you actually are, and it's not always accurate and I think that has caused miscommunication before. Or how long you've been there, it says where you were active some minutes ago, and if it's not right, like, “you told me you were somewhere else” but you were here like 5 minutes ago. And it's not always right, and that definitely caused miscommunication before.”*

# Overused as a communication tool

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*“I wonder sometimes if I’m becoming dependent on it (...) so it almost seems that if I had a better relationship, I could hang up my phone, turn my computer off and actually spend more time with him face-to-face and be more present, in those moments I think we actually connect. It might be the most helpful or beneficial thing that I could do...”*

# Toxic 'third space'

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- Technology is used as a tool to withhold communication

*“when we have a conflict normally I block him (laugh) I block him because I don't want to hear anything else”*

*“when I block him on WhatsApp and Facebook because I don't want to talk, he sends me a email. “*

- Conflict avoidance becomes “online confrontation”

*“It was like... when you are texting, you feel free to say something that you wouldn't be able to say in person, so... sometimes you kind of can regret... this is like the worst (laugh) when you wanna say something, you feel more free to say it. “*

*“I hate that people can just send out whatever thought they have, whatever immediate thought is in their brain (...) you don't just say the first thing that comes into your mind all the time, or if you have time to think about things, then you might respond differently. But when you can just respond with what you're feeling the moment you're feeling it, that can be dangerous (laugh)”*

# Miscommunication

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- Communicating over text/email/social media leaves much to interpretation including tone, choice of words, etc.

*“Sometimes he just texts me and I think he’s aggressive or he’s angry, and I just ask “are you mad at me?” and he just answers “no, I’m not mad at you”, I think that's because of miscommunication through texting.”*

*“For example, he wrote to me “I am going home but my bus stops in front of the shopping center. Do you want something from there?” and then I told him “No, no, I don't want anything”, because I want him to come home. You see? And then he just understands that I don't want anything but he goes and stays there for two hours. And then, two hours later he comes home and I tell him, “why did you send me that message if you don't care about the answer?” and then he just tells me “oh, I asked if you wanted something and you told me no”, and I answered, “all right”, you see?*

# Miscommunication

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*“Sarcasm doesn't play well through text, and I'm pretty sarcastic, so for sure, definitely, it definitely causes issues (...) it's like, sometimes been misinterpreted, you know, like the tone or something, maybe I'm just busy and my text is very short, you know, kind of “yes, no, sorry”, this kind of thing, so they just assume that I'm mad at them and in reality I'm just really busy, and the other time I'm just trying to, you know, quickly answer the question and I just don't have the time so I can't explain more, so it's misinterpreted”*

*“And I thought it was like, when somebody says K is like, it means they're mad or whatever, and so I was like “are you mad at me or something?” because I got a K. So we made a agreement, we never just K each other, ever (laugh) instead of Okay or whatever”*



# Distresses new relationships

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- New pressure to define relationship in an online space (Facebook status, profile pictures, etc.)

*"if you are in a relationship you should be always, not always, but it should reflect that you're in a relationship online, like a lot of people, for example, post photos of their relationship, just like "here is me and my boyfriend", or "here is me and my girlfriend", but it seems to be a expectation for people who use social media because if you don't, like I have friends that have partners and don't post any photos on social media and their partners get upset about it, but why do you wanna show the world that you're in a relationship? But our relationship was public we used to, I don't know, post about each other all the time, and kind of make it clear like "oh yeah this is us"*

- Getting to know someone, building relationship attachments while communicating almost solely online or through text

*"Especially in the beginning, because... I don't know, there were a few words, or the way that me and him wrote that could seem like something, but it wasn't, and then, after we talked more in person, and then I knew the way that he expressed his tone, and then I recognized that, after, the way that he wrote. So then, more in the beginning, and then after I guess we knew the mechanisms of us writing and saying things."*

# Perceived benefits of technology

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# Helps navigate long distance relationships

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*“It helps to feel more connected, times when I’ve been away or he’s away it’s nice to, you know, like FaceTime, to keep us close”*

*“Especially being in a long distance marriage, I mean, I wouldn’t be able to kind of have any connection if we didn’t have like, I mean, me and his daughter use FaceTime a lot, it’s kind of the best way to keep in touch and feel connected to them, and we text and its kind of constantly during the day. (...) I guess without technology I wouldn’t be able to maintain my relationship”*

*“No matter what time of the day it is, he can send something, I can see it when I’m free, when I have time. And I can send him something and I know he will see it. So we keep in touch, no matter where we are”*

# Allows for constant connection

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- Participants overwhelmingly saw the ability for constant connection to be positive for their relationships

(in answer to how much they text) *“I think every hour, because we are working from morning to the afternoon, and during the work we are texting each other for example “are you okay? what are you doing?”, and he’ll send me “yeah, I’m fine, what are you doing? what’s happening? what’s up?”, so I think every hour we are texting each other.”*

*“all day long, I wake up, I talk to him, and we just continue so (laugh) I don’t know how to say a number, it’s just a lot (...) It’s kind of sharing the day, what you are doing, what you are not doing, the things that are happening, or not happening, so I don’t know, maybe 50 texts, or more...”*

# Tool for self-regulation

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- Used as a tool to slow down reactions/responses during conflict

*“You have the opportunity to make sure that you are saying what you think you are saying, and that’s given me the opportunity to take a step back and do things more logically and I find that has been really helpful to resolve a lot of conflicts.”*

*“We have all of our conflicts in written form, because it gives us chances to consider... positions really carefully and then give it back to the other person, and it's especially helpful for me because I...I prefer to communicate like that if it is an emotionally charged subject.”*

*“Yes, we have [resolved conflicts over text]. Because then we calm down and we say, like, not just what is bothering us, but we try to understand the other person, and see like “hey, you said this, and this was, I didn't feel nice”. And it's also like, when you text you have a record of what has been said, so you can say “hey, this part that you said, I don't like it” or “I find it, it's not nice, it makes me feel bad”, or something. So it's easier to make the other person see what’s going on”*

# Safer meeting space for queer community

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*“for queer people. I think online dating has been even more important than for straight people in terms of providing a space that feels safe and where people can meet people.”*

*“I hooked up with a few men on that website, and I felt like I had a chance to get to know them first. I had a chance to... make some initial contacts and exchange emails, and then continue their discussions on email, maybe send some pictures, and then have a sort of build up, and sometimes a build up might be six months, sometimes it might be two years, but then eventually I might travel to where they live, and then visit them. I find that a much more meaningful way to meet somebody. For the people that I get to know better and then even after we meet and might sleep together, maybe we click, maybe we don't. But it's a nice experience. and then after that I can choose to stay in contact with them even though I don't know if I'll ever see them again. You know. We can still once in awhile send a message and say “what's new in your life? How are things going?”*”

# Discussion



Does technology create the problem, or does it exacerbate anxious and avoidant attachments?



Is using technology as a tool for self-regulation adaptive, or does it perpetuate conflict avoidant strategies?



How do we integrate these concepts into couple work?

# Study Part II

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- Case study of couple whose presenting problem was technology's impact on the relationship, 'Alice' and 'Chris'
- Couple completed 10 sessions of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy
- Couple completed Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) 32-Item pre and post therapy
- Both scored low on Affective Expression both pre and post. DAS scores moved out of distressed range post intervention

|       | Pre DAS Score | Post DAS Score |
|-------|---------------|----------------|
| Alice | 103           | 118            |
| Chris | 105           | 115            |



# Transcript Session 1

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**C:** ... There is I think a lot of things that happened before that and shut a part of me down... so coming home from work, and then, there is, you have that little window between 7 to 9, where, that would be a nice time to talk, maybe develop some emotional intimacy, often times and I'm not saying this to accuse you, but it is a true fact that, I get home and then there is the iPhone, so, I've commented to Alice, sometimes your phone is more important than your family, like, there is a lot of time, for me probably more television, and, watching whatever, and she is more the phone. So, I feel like I can't break through that phone, I can't actually like "how was your day?", heart to heart, face to face, the technology is in the way for sure, a hundred per cent.

# Transcript Session 3

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Alice: I probably have been on the phone a little bit more than I should be... but not at the same time, cause I'm not doing [online business] right now, so

Chris: I found that you were actually a little bit less

Alice: yeah? Okay. So I'm doing better

(laugh)

Chris: Online business is usually low on the summers, so

Therapist: yeah, so the more you put the phone away and focus on Chris, more he feels “I'm important, you're paying attention in me, you wanna be with me”, right? So you both had your shields up, that stop contact between the two of you. So putting those shields down, because then there's the interesting stuff, like, what's here? What do we have? What do we want to build? What's missing? What's great?

Chris: I was feeling so guilty when I hear that, cause you're absolutely right. I think one time Alice said to me, you're like a roommate, you're not like my husband. And that's how she feels, it's not like I'm not her husband, I am the husband, but it's in many senses, yeah, like, wow. And that's, I just feel tremendously guilty when I hear that.

# Discussion



Discussion of technology using attachment language



Finding ways for couple to state attachment needs



Both benefitted in some ways from physical barrier and it felt frightening to change



Alice's phone use was not the problem, rather a symptom of disconnection and resentment in the couple



Alice's phone represented an escape from the confines of the relationship and a place where she felt needed and accepted

# Thank you!

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