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## Parents' Perceptions of Smartphone Use and Parenting Practices

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### Abstract

Technology use in one's life has generally explored why people use certain technologies, how they use technology, and the effect of such usage on our personal relationships. To date, however, few studies have explored the use of using smartphones and its effect on parenting practices. The present study sought to understand parents' perceptions of their smartphone use's effect on their children and parenting practices. Grounded in a social constructionism perspective, interviews were conducted with 12 parents inquiring about their smartphone usage. Five themes emerged: (1) Disengagement, (2) Concern for Future, (3) Change in Social Norms, (4) Boundaries, and (5) Cognitive Dissonance. These findings indicate some remarkable effects parental smartphone use is having in the lives of study participants. Results and implications are discussed.

### Keywords

Parents, Smartphone, Technology, Internet, Phenomenology

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## Parents' Perceptions of Smartphone Use and Parenting Practices

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*Technology use in one's life has generally explored why people use certain technologies, how they use technology, and the effect of such usage on our personal relationships. To date, however, few studies have explored the use of using smartphones and its effect on parenting practices. The present study sought to understand parents' perceptions of their smartphone use's effect on their children and parenting practices. Grounded in a social constructionism perspective, interviews were conducted with 12 parents inquiring about their smartphone usage. Five themes emerged: (1) Disengagement, (2) Concern for Future, (3) Change in Social Norms, (4) Boundaries, and (5) Cognitive Dissonance. These findings indicate some remarkable effects parental smartphone use is having in the lives of study participants. Results and implications are discussed. Keywords: Parents, Smartphone, Technology, Internet, Phenomenology*

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Technology use has long been on an accelerated curve when considering adoption and use rates. Following the advent of electricity in 1873, it took 46 years for one-quarter of the American public to adopt its use. Since then, adoption rates of other technological advances, have increased at an exponentially greater rate, with the telephone reaching one-quarter of the American public in 35 years, television in 26 years, mobile phones in 13 years, and the web in only seven years (Desilver, 2014). This accelerated rate of technology adoption is evident today as the number of users and uses of the web increases, as well as the proliferation of technologies like cell phones and smartphones (Pew Research Center, 2014a). The World Wide Web currently has reached near-saturation levels of adoption among many demographic groups (Perrin & Duggan, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014a) With the majority of internet users expressing positive attitudes regarding their use of the technology, it is likely adoption rates will continue to increase (Pew Research Center, 2014b).

Trends in research on media and the Internet frequently explore how people use technology, why technology is used, and the impact technology use is having on individuals and social systems (Anderson & Smith, 2015; Hertlein, 2012; Lebo, 2015; Perrin & Duggan, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015). Smartphones are used for nearly anything—work, home, school, social networking, etc. (Anderson & Smith, 2015; Lebo, 2015; Perrin & Duggan, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015). Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) found five motives of internet use: “interpersonal utility, pass time, information seeking, convenience, and entertainment” (p. 185). These uses encompass both social and personal needs in ways that reflect the personality, cultural, and attitudinal characteristics of the individual users (Kang & Jung, 2014; Nassiri, Hashembeik, & Siadat, 2012). Kang and Jung (2014) concluded, “The smartphone is an individualistic medium even though it is used for social interactions and collectivistic purposes” (p. 384).

## **Technology, Smartphones, and Parenting**

Technology has radically changed the practice of parenting (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). For example, parent monitoring of children while using the media is relatively common (Martins, Matthews, & Ratan, 2017). One of the main areas of research thus far has explored how parents are using technology for surveilling and monitoring their children. Parents who exhibited styles characterized by a need for greater control such as Authoritarian were more likely to employ such systems, whereas children of Authoritative parents were most likely to cooperate with the use of such monitoring systems.

When looking at how parents utilize and regulate technology use within the home, many studies have found that parental attributes such as parenting style influence children's use of technology (Nakayama 2011). Another study found the largest group of internet-using children, with multiple access points, had parents that fell into the authoritative group as opposed to permissive, laissez-faire, and/or authoritarian (Valcke et al., 2010). This study corroborates other research suggesting parents' use of internet technology was a significant factor in how children such technologies (Hefner, Knop, Schmitt, & Vorderer, 2018; Leung & Lee, 2011).

Parents also use technology to mitigate potential problematic interactions facilitated by technology use such as internet addiction, risky online behavior, cyberbullying, complications with psychopathologies such as anxiety or depression, and physical ailments such as childhood obesity (Leung & Lee, 2011; Mian, 2014; Morgan, 2013; Veldhuis et al., 2014). Much of this literature focuses on a parent's role of moderator and protector of the child's online behavior through regulation of the time a child spends on electronic devices; some of the factors influencing parents' interpretation of these roles are parental characteristics such as parenting styles (Gold, 2015; Hendricks, 2015; Leung & Lee, 2011; Veldhuis et al., 2014).

### **The Impact of Phone Use on Parenting Practices**

Parental engagement plays a larger part in the child's development than technology use behaviors of the child. Further research on parental engagement with a child when using technology found that parents were less engaged with their children when reading using digital technology than when reading in print (Korat & Or, 2010).

There are a few models that attempt to address the broader impact of technology on individuals and relationships. As mentioned above, Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) apply the Uses-and-Gratifications Theory to assess why people use computer-mediated-communication technologies, of which, the internet and smartphones fall, found that "internet motive statements yielded five interpretable factors: interpersonal utility, pass time, information seeking, convenience, and entertainment" (p. 185). These motives for using technology correlate well with findings from smartphone and internet researchers who look at how people are using their smartphones and the internet on a daily basis (Perrin & Duggan, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015). This model, however, does not address the impact on families or relational systems.

Another model is Haddon's (2006) domestication model. In this model, the way in which technology is integrated into the family system is explored. This model provides a dedicated focus on how families adapt to changing technologies and how technology consequently adapts to meet the needs of the family. At the same time, the model stops short of actually talking about impact on the family rules, structures, and processes.

One such model attempting to conceptualize the effect technology has on family life is the sociotechnological model (Lanigan, 2009). In this model, are four components that attempt to explain how technologies "affect family life: technology characteristics, individual traits,

family factors, and extrafamilial influences” (Lanigan, 2009, p. 588). Using the sociotechnological model allows researchers to examine the impact a given technology has on an individual and family by exploring the interplay between individual traits such as personality, goals, and attitudes; the characteristics of the technology or its capabilities and uses; family factors such as family processes, stages of development; and extrafamilial influences such as the workplace, marketplace or community (Lanigan, 2009). In its attempt to be inclusive of many other models explaining technology adoption and use, the sociotechnological model becomes very individualistic in nature, only allowing for a limited look and understanding of how technologies affect an individual and thus their family and extrafamilial systems. To gain a more systemic understanding of the impact technology has on an individual, and relationships that individual is a part of, a more nuanced framework is needed. Taking a systemic approach to understanding the impact technology has on individuals and families, Hertlein (2012) introduced a multitheoretical model for understanding the technology in couple and family life. This model was later refined and renamed the Couple and Family Technology Framework (CFT Framework) (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). The Couple and Family Technology Framework (Hertlein, 2012; Hertlein & Blumer, 2013) provides the first comprehensive model for understanding the impact of technology use on relationships. At its core, the CFT Framework considers the ecological influences of technology that alter both structure and process of relationships (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). Technology affects structure of relationships through redefined rules, redefined roles, and redefined (or undefined) boundaries. Likewise, characteristics of technology affect relationship initiation, relationship maintenance, and relationship dissolution (Hertlein, 2012). Further, within the CFT Framework, relationship maintenance is further divided into people’s level of commitment and intimacy (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013).

Changes to both process and structure due to technology use can be seen individually, relationally, and societally (Bauerlein, 2011; Hertlein & Blumer, 2013; Turkle, 2011). Examples include engagement with technology while at social events, constant connectivity; and multitasking, where attention on a task is split and divided (Bauerlein, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2012; Turkle, 2011). These changes to individual structure due to technology use have caused a “revision of etiquette assumptions” and thus caused an alteration in individuals’ behavior toward technology (Birkerts, 2015, p. 34). Relationally focused, changes to structure occur as relational rules, boundaries, and roles are redefined to make room for technologies constant companionship. At the societal level, changes to structure due to technology are evident as changes to social norms and etiquette take place (Birkerts, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2012; Rainie & Zickuhr, 2015). Birkerts (2015) illustrates this idea when stating that because of technology, “the same hours-later or day-later response that had been perfectly acceptable is now often seen as rude” (p. 34). Thus, using the CFT Framework, it becomes evident the great impact technology has on individuals, relationships, and society. This impact technology is having on humans relationally, needs to be further explored and understood.

Changes to relational processes because of phone use may manifest as fluctuations in emotional closeness during communication, disengagement or distraction, as well as affect relationships as one multitasks, and allows for intimacy in the relationship (Bauerlein, 2011; Turkle, 2011). Finally, Turkle (2011) suggests a pattern of technology dependence in today’s society exists and reflect a change in societal processes. Consequences of this behavior fuel feelings of guilt, neglect, and disengagement. Further, dependence on phones decreases one’s ability to concentrate, experience intimacy and solitude, and while at the same time decrease their quality of work (Bauerlein, 2011; Turkle 2011).

## Purpose of Study

Despite the vast amount of research on why people use smartphones, there has been far less research on why parents in particular use media. In today's technologically advanced world, smartphone users have been "plunged into a state of continuous partial attention" that has been described as "continually staying busy-keeping tabs on everything while never truly focusing on anything" as a result of dividing ones' attention, keeping an eye on the physical world while taking leave in the digital made possible by the smartphones in their hands (Bauerlein, 2011, p. 91; p. 92). This divided attention, as parents attempt to multitask their way to unlimited productivity, comes with switching costs as they consciously or unconsciously switch their attention from one task to another, often from the digital world of their smartphone to the physical world where their children reside (Bauerlein, 2011; Meyer & Evans, 2001). Considering parents are gatekeepers for their children regarding technology usage, we wondered what role these technologies are playing in the lives of parents, and what effect they are having on children. The purpose of this study is to examine parents' awareness of potential costs of their smartphone use, by ascertaining parents' perceptions of the effect their smartphone use has on their children. The research question was: What effects, if any, do parents perceive their smartphone use to have on their children?

## Role of the Researchers

Both authors are White middle-class, heterosexual married individuals with young children. One was working toward a master's degree in MFT; the other is a faculty member in a master's MFT program. The first author's investment in the project was the completion of his master's degree. The faculty member in the MFT program has a research agenda focused on technology in the family and was able to mentor the first author in the project. In addition, the faculty member was the primary developer of the Couple and Family Technology Framework. Given the faculty member's experience, however, it became important to the project that she not be involved in the initial coding as to not unduly influence the process and decision making. The faculty member became involved again once the first author wrote the Findings section.

## Method

Aligning with Creswell's (2013) views of social constructivist philosophy guiding research design, this study was designed to gain insight into the subjective meanings smartphone using parents create and hold regarding their smartphone use and parenting, to better understand the digital world in which we currently live. Using a phenomenological research design, the authors employed individual interviews with the social constructivist lens to address our interest in how people have constructed their settings, and what are their perceptions and truths are. Part of this also looks at the consequences of people's behavior and the consequences for those with whom they interact (Patton, 2002). This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

## Participants

Twelve parents who use smartphones participated in this study ( $N = 12$ ). Participants ranged in age from 26-54 years of age. All participants were the parent of at least one child under the age of 18, with the majority being female ( $n = 10$ ). The average number of children per participant was 1.9. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. Most

participants were students at a university in the Southwestern United States. With regard to their experience with smartphones, participants reported a level of comfort using smartphone technology with nine reporting being very comfortable, two highly comfortable, and one reporting being not comfortable using smartphones. Participants reported using smartphones an average of two and a half hours per day, with each use estimated to be an average of 21 minutes in duration. The most frequently reported smartphone use activities in this study were social media, texting, phone calls, media consumption and capture (picture and video) GPS, and internet use (browsing, shopping, and reading news).

## Design and Procedure

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the phenomenological qualitative design of the study employed individual interviews of participants aimed at gaining insight into attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions of participants to further the understanding of what effects parental smartphone use may be having on today's children. Individual interviews of participants were selected as the means to collect data because of the immense amount of rich detail that could be obtained in a relatively short amount of time. These interviews, conducted by the first author, were approximately an hour in duration and yielded common themes held between individual parent participants and were used to illustrate the collective view of smartphone use in today's parenting.

**Individual interviews.** Participants were recruited to take part in individual interviews conducted on a university campus in the Western United States. Interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted 60 minutes. Prior to the individual interviews, demographic data was collected. Participants were asked to respond to 20 open-ended questions from the semi-structured interview guide read by the interviewer in order to explore and gain insight into the use of smartphones in parent's lives. The interview guide was developed by the first author. Questions in the guide were informed by the writings of Sherry Turkle and Mark Bauerlein and organized using the Couples and Family Technology Framework developed by Hertlein and Blumer (2013). These questions aimed to ascertain individual participant attitudes, practices, and opinions regarding their smartphone use in the presence of their children. Questions such as, "*When have there been times your parenting abilities were compromised as a result of your smartphone use?*" and "*Describe a time, if at all, where you have justified your cell phone use at a social event centered on your child?*" were developed and used in the guide in order to gain greater insight into parents attitudes and experiences. Follow-up questions were used to clarify the information presented. The questions in the guide inquired about processes and structure as related to and grouped under three primary domains: a) relational, b) individual, and c) societal as outlined in the CFT Framework (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013).

## Analysis

Recorded data from the individual interviews were reviewed and transcribed by graduate students on the research team and the first author, prior to further analysis. Data analysis was conducted primarily by the first author and guided by the phenomenological analysis method described by Giorgi (1985, 2012; see also Dahl & Boss, 2005) until saturation was achieved. Each interview was analyzed according to the following process: 1) The researcher first read through the entire interview in order to gain an impression of the whole. 2) The researcher then reread the interview and coded it line-by-line, identifying "meaning units" that stood out to the researcher (Giorgi, 2012, p. 5) and considering how the meaning units related to the phenomenon of interest in the study. This process was repeated, with the

analysis of each interview building upon the preceding interviews. As the researcher moved forward with the analysis, he integrated the analyses of the interviews and narrowed in on the primary themes. Through further reflection, comparing these primary themes with the original data, the researcher developed a coherent organization and description of the results that represents the participant's experiences with their smartphones; the description is presented below.

**Rigor.** In order to address rigor as Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) suggest, codes were cross-checked to verify themes using a peer examination method to address the dependability of the study. Multiple researchers, the author, a fellow graduate student, and the committee chair, independently coded data and codes were checked for accuracy between coders in order to verify codes and the subsequent themes. Researchers engaging in the coding process for the study were both graduate MFT students and a faculty member. Transferability of the current study was established through the gathering and presentation of thick, descriptive results. The code-recode strategy was employed as well as peer examination during the analysis of the data to ensure the dependability of the results. Further, credibility and confirmability of the study were addressed using triangulation as questions from the semi-structured interview guide were developed with multiple members of the research team, the author and the committee chair (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

## Findings

The goal of this study was to examine parents' perceptions of the effect their smartphone use has on their children by inquiring about parents' awareness of costs smartphone use may be having as Bauerlein (2011) suggested, due to cognitive switching from a smartphone screen to things in the physical world around them. Five primary themes emerged: (1) Disengagement, (2) Concern for Their Children's Future, (3) Change in Social Norms, (4) Boundaries, and (5) Cognitive Dissonance.

### Disengagement

Awareness of and discussion around the relational costs of disengaging from the present moment with children, partners, or family and friends, was found to lead parents to express concern for current smartphone use behavior as seen in themselves and others. Parent participants reported while using their smartphones becoming disengaged from the present moment and distracted. This disengagement was not always immediately recognized by the parent, and in some cases, was pointed out to them through the actions of other parents, their children, or that of a younger generation. These parents that did not directly report being disengaged because of their smartphones, often recounted times their children, spouse, or parent-friends brought the disengagement to their awareness. One such parent recounted, "it made me think when my daughter told me, mommy you're always on your phone, watch me!" This statement illustrated well the disengagement that many parents report engaging in while not fully being aware of how disengaged they are or for how long.

Parents expressed concern over disengagement as not only affecting their own parenting practices but also being seen in older parents too. Parents reported this disengagement as being problematic across the parenting lifecycle, as exemplified in this parent's dialog:

I could use my mom as an example. She comes over to visit, to like visit the baby and stuff, and she-she's really into Weight Watchers. She's lost like 100

pounds, which is crazy, and awesome, but she'll come over, and she's like on the W-Weight Watchers like Connect. It's called Connect, it's like their version of Facebook, and she's just like really glued into her phone, and I'm like "Mom" (laughs) "Like, you wanna visit?" Because we only see her like every other weekend or something for, you know, she comes over for a few hours, but-but she's really on her phone a lot. And I'm like, "you're missing our visiting time" and, you know, seems like sometimes when you visit with people, it's like what they do just sit in a room together and just scroll through their Facebook... It doesn't feel good as her child.

Being and feeling distracted and disengaged from the present was also reported by some parents as engaged in purposely as a coping mechanism, both to avoid present stressors and to relax after a long day. One parent reported, "I usually use it as a distraction method, away from something I don't want to do." As well as with family and friends, "I think I've seen parents get on phones to shut down from dealing with kids," "I know a lot of moms that just, oh I need some wine, but during those times they're on their phone too. Like it's kinda become a trend and a coping mechanism in a way." Some parents even expressed that they felt this type of behavior was needed:

If you go to any park, you'll see mothers on their smartphone and you'll hear them mommy shaming and all that but it's like, you don't know that I didn't spend six straight hours watching my kid throw a ball in a hoop and now they're occupied, and I can do something else. So, I think there is a lot of judgment on mothers for escaping that way, but um I also have felt the necessity to do that.

Thus, smartphone technology was reported as being used as a means of mental and emotional escape from everyday family stressors and that the disengagement and distraction were not always seen as negative. This dichotomy possibly contributes to the lack of insight into personal and familial costs this smartphone-induced disengagement may have in the lives of some parents.

Although not all parents recognized the ways in which they disengage from the present with the use of smartphone technology, many parents shared experiences of instances of disengagement and distraction from the physical world around them when their smartphones were present "sometimes I'm not fully present, I'm doing other things on my phone," one parent recalled. Additionally, another parent stated, "watching the kids [there are times] where I'll space out ... they'll be like mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, and it's like hold on let me finish this text, I'm totally disengaged with them and in my conversation." Becoming aware of and discussing the relational costs of disengaging from the present moment with children, partners, or family and friends, seemed to lead parents to expressing concern for current behavior that is seen, the potential for that behavior to be exhibited by children, and the effect that might have on the future. Directly addressing this one parent reported "that's when it kinda became more problematic and I put in more boundaries."

### **Concern for Their Children's Future**

While considering the social cost of smartphone use and behaviors involving smartphone use, such as disengagement and distraction, parents expressed concern for the future and for their children who engage with smartphone technology. Many parents expressed concern for children in the future and the learned behavior they may be picking up when using technology:

It's normal to come home and pick up a phone and kind of tune out... when they are watching iPad they will completely tune out. It's like hello, hello, hello, so yeah, it's concerning... That's normal for them, they've seen it their whole life, so that's probably what they'll grow up to do.

When these costs of smartphone use were realized, the parents seemed to exhibit a greater level of concern for children and the future of our society. While speaking about the changes brought about by smartphone use and the costs of said use one parent asserted, "I think it's only going to get more and more prevalent and I think kids just need guidance...having set parameters in place helps."

Some parents expressed developing technology-specific boundaries and rules as a result of their concern for negative behaviors being learned, engaged in, and becoming more socially acceptable. One parent reported "I'm trying to teach my kids not to get lost in their phones and to be present." The parent later reported creating a technology-specific boundary to help teach this principle, "there are no phones at the dinner table...also when watching movies together I have to say look you're either gonna watch it and be immersed in this or you need to put your phone away."

Additionally, many parents expressed a desire for their children to exhibit more pro-social behavior when dealing with smartphones and other technology in the future, than what they currently engage in and model for their children, "we build this kind of addiction to it and then our children see that and are like oh there's a game, I want my own games... so I think it kinda becomes a cycle, and they kinda repeat what we do." In an effort to avoid this, some parents reported "putting limits on time, and limits or using it for certain things," when letting their children use smartphone and other technology.

### **Change in Social Norms**

Parents in this study frequently expressed differences in social norms resulting from the proliferation of smartphone and other technology in their families today as compared to their families of origin. Overall, parent participants reported feeling that they are expected by work and educational entities to be available always, both day and night, pulling them away from their families and children:

I feel this sense of urgency that would not have been there ten years ago, when it wasn't as convenient. Because before you'd be like oh well, I'll just get to it when I get into work, if I don't have access to it. Or oh I'll get back to you tomorrow when that's my time to respond to people but now it feels like this sense of urgency and maybe it's just a personal thing where I feel obligated to respond now more than I would have before.

This expectation was reported to be viewed as a change in social norms, which has taken place within the lifetime of the parents, "when I was growing up we didn't have cellphones and you just left a message on a machine and people got back to you when they could," "now I feel like I've got to be available 24/7 and I've got to text back right away or I'm ignoring someone and being rude." One parent said, "I feel like a jerk if I didn't, or I feel like I, you know, I don't like ignoring people ... I just don't like the thought of a text just sitting on my phone waiting." These feelings were reported as occurring even when in the presence of children or a spouse. Another parent stated, "I don't want to keep people waiting ... if you get a text and you don't respond in three or four hours, you're purposefully ignoring it." This parent continued to assert

that there is a “social construct that everybody is available within four hours ... people are supposed to be much more accessible now.” This feeling of needing to always be available whether it be for work, friends, or children, was reported to be associated with a persistent sense of urgency experienced by parents, “I feel like I have to respond you know, it’s like, it puts that urgency behind it.” Another parent responded, “I kind of have an inner fear, like I have a duty to respond to things ... and respond to them right away, so its urgency I guess.”

Parents alluded to a profound sense of urgency, which is felt and present today that may not have been just a decade ago. One parent reported, “if someone from thirty years ago was watching this, they’d be like what is happening? ... If we were flash frozen and then some future civilization came back, they would just see us all sitting and looking at our phones.” Findings from this study indicate that many parents created a mental hierarchy of communication methods to help determine the level of urgency that is socially expected to be felt, depending on who was initiating the communication and in what form the communication was sent. Although, many parents reported using some sort of hierarchical scheme to manage the sense of urgency felt when communication was initiated, there was not a uniform hierarchy that was present fully. Thus, each individual parent expressed feeling different levels of urgency under different circumstances and it seems the only way to truly elevate the sense of urgency is to engage in the initiated communication by checking the text or email notification or answering the ringing phone even when in the presence of children and spouses.

Therefore, it seems that in order to alleviate the sense of urgency felt by parents more attention is being directed to attending to rings, dings, and alerts notifying the user of incoming information, as one parent put it, “if it rings or chirps or anything, it like breaks my whole Zen moment.” Parents reported directing their attention in the form of checking behaviors, “I am checking email or a voicemail or something or just checking my own status update.” Some parents even reported checking their smartphone, even when they have not been prompted to do so from a notification, “I might like once an hour, once every two hours just press the light on my phone to see if I got any messages.” This constant checking behavior is reinforced repeatedly and continually draws one’s attention away from the physical here-and-now and into the digital world of smartphones, “I found that I’m checking it more because I carry it,” causing some parents to become concerned with this behavior and attempts to mitigate or stop it were reported.

## **Boundaries**

Rules and boundaries around technology use were reported by many parents as being created and upheld to lessen the negative relational effects of smartphone use. Speaking about their child’s smartphone use, one parent said, “I realized that she’s wanting to do it at home when we are supposed to have family time, so that’s when it kinda became more problematic and I put in more boundaries.” Another parent reported, “family time is where it’s kinda invasive ... having the set parameters in place helps.”

**Fighting for connection.** This study found that older parent parents reported creating and using technology-specific rules and boundaries more frequently and more deliberately to protect significant times such as meal times, before bed, and “family time” in general:

We’ve got a strict policy at home that when we’re having dinner or during the dinner hour no phones are at the table and in fact they are away from the table, so you can’t even see things pop up. So, everything goes on the pie plate, all phones are on the pie plate...also, when we are watching movies together as a family nobody can have their smartphone.

Although the rules and boundaries specific to technology use differed from parent to parent, all boundaries and rules were reported as intended to help stay connected to the present and deepen the relationships with people physically present. Turning off notifications, using do-not-disturb functions, physically containing or distancing oneself from the smartphone, were all reported methods for creating boundaries around smartphone use, in an attempt to take back time and attention that is slowly being siphoned away by smartphones. "I've got nighttime parameters...at eight o'clock at night it's gone, phones aren't allowed in bedrooms ... and my phone is turned off at nine pm." Another parent stated, "I have to physically remove myself ... I turn off all notifications on my phone ... and I use an old school planner, calendar, to kind of remind me of my appointments." To further protect mealtimes, one parent reported "we implemented a no technology rule during meals, and so, that's helped a lot," "we just don't do technology during meals." These efforts to regain or protect time and space for children and family are seen as vital coping mechanisms for surviving in a digital age. Speaking of the results of setting and keeping boundaries around technology use one parent stated that after implementing the rule "no technology during meals, me and my son have had some really great conversations that I realized I was missing out on." Some parents reported taking technology-specific boundaries a step further: "we implemented like the no technology rule when we're together," in an effort to negate any possible cost to familial relationships.

Despite the creation and enforcement of rules and boundaries regarding smartphone use, most parents could, relatively quickly and with ease, find examples and times in their lives where smartphones were intrusive in their personal lives. "I was trained to respond right away because of work ... I've learned boundaries ... now I don't respond right away ... just because I have a phone and I seen the message does not mean I am going to respond right away." Another parent stated, "I feel like my solitude sometimes is infringed on by my phone," while another parent said, "at night ... I have to put it on do-not-disturb because I find that I get actually irritated ... sometimes I've just had to put it away or put it on do-not-disturb or silent just to avoid that." Speaking about her smartphone intruding on her relationship with her husband one parent stated, "The level of intimacy has decreased, I'm going to say yes ... unless we both make an effort to put down our phones ... its habit to pick up our phone, not habit to sit and talk to each other."

To reduce the intrusion on personal and family time while still getting vital information during times deemed as emergencies, this study found that parents individually created and used a hierarchical guide system to determine when a communication needed to be attended to. Commenting on this hierarchy, one parent stated, "a text is kind of like, or an email...it's like, you can get back to me whenever, that's kind of the hierarchy I give." They went on to say, "if someone calls like three times, it's like, alright, they need to get ahold of me ... like, when my mom calls me and I'll go, oh I'll call her back and then she calls three more times, it's like she's telling me I really need you to answer." Although the use of some sort of hierarchy was reported by many parents to help screen incoming interruptions from their smartphone during valued time with children and family, there was not a unified or agreed upon standard by which these boundary systems were created or used.

One of the many ways parents reported creating and using boundaries to protect or reclaim time with kids was based off of the mode of the communication sent. Parents reported using this mode of the communication sent to determine the level of importance the information contained within, held, "for me it would probably be a phone call cause if it wasn't serious, they would probably just send me a text," one parent stated. Another went on to say, "emergency people should call not text me about an emergency." Other parents reported using methods such as having prior knowledge as to who is calling and why, "if I know one of my family members is, you know sick, or in the hospital, or gonna have a baby, or, you know someone needs help, then I'm more apt to check my phone, and respond promptly," or simply

just who it is that is trying to communicate with them, “it just kinda depends on who it is,” “if one of my kids is calling me ... I know if they’re calling me something is up.” Through the creation and use of personal boundaries such as a hierarchy to screen incoming information as well as rules to protect times in which families can deepen and strengthen their relationships with one another, parents of this study were found to be addressing issues of raising a family in this modern smartphone age.

### **Cognitive Dissonance**

Finally, a theme of cognitive dissonance was found in both parents who reported having technology-specific boundaries and those who did not. The dichotomous nature of smartphone use, carrying both benefits and costs presents a unique challenge, as many parents who acknowledged smartphone use carries a heavy relational cost, also reported engaging in smartphone use to relax and deliberately disconnect from stressors around them, “I get home and I want to relax, it’s been a long day and I want to check in with my friends ... I relax by getting on my phone.” While addressing the task of mentally evaluating and managing the pros and cons of smartphone use, one parent stated, “It’s a balance ... I need to be conscious of it I think.” The task of mentally balancing the costs and benefits of smartphone use, although reported as challenging by parents who were cognizant of them, was not shared by all parents, as some parents seemed to view costs of smartphone use as only applying to others, “I am old and I didn’t grow up with cell phones so I don’t think it’s ever totally disengaged me,” Regardless of their level of personal insight into the issue of their own smartphone use, parents seemed to experience cognitive dissonance in various forms. This disconnect manifested itself most often in two ways, parents either reported a narrative in which they struggled to manage the effect smartphone use was having in their personal and family life, then when later asked directly if it was a problem reported it not being an issue for them, or, parents identified a group of people who they felt experienced a problem managing smartphone technology, but claimed to not be a part of said group in any way. Thus, it was found the cognitive dissonance that was used most frequently could be summed up in either of these two themes of “them not me” or “justifying the addiction.”

**Justifying the addiction.** Parents who engaged in cognitive dissonance in this way seemed to have some level of insight and knowledge of the personal and relational costs associated with their smartphone use, but when confronted about these costs directly, reported to not be affected by said costs. The marker for this type of cognitive dissonance was a level of incongruence between parents’ statements within the interview. One example of incongruent statements came when asked about times the parent’s parenting abilities may have been compromised as a result of their smartphone use, the parent responded, “I’m sure there have probably been one or two occurrences but none that I can actually recall where they have been significant,” indicating that this missed time is not important. Later, when speaking about the potential for these times of parental disengagement causing a child to feel neglected or abandoned, the parent stated, “I think it does, I think when your face is more looking at a phone than seeing them and kind of enjoying the things that they are enjoying and seeing what they’re seeing, it does take away from those moments together, and those memories.” These two statements seem to oppose each other; on the one hand, the parent justifies their smartphone use by asserting that time missed in the present moment and spent on a smartphone is not significant, but on the other hand, when thinking about the effect this time may have on children present, they state that they feel it takes away from moments together and memories that could be significant.

In another example of this type of cognitive dissonance, the parent, speaking about a time they felt guilty about using their phone in the presence of their child said:

There's probably one time that I can actually remember that I was on my phone that ok, what she didn't know is that I was trying to download a soundtrack for her but she didn't perceive it that way, and that's fair, so she's like mommy are you on your phone? You're not listening to me, 'cause she wanted my attention and usually I'm pretty good about it but it stuck out to me that she said that. Like, oh I hadn't noticed that she picked up on that even though it was a different scenario but I wasn't giving her my attention.

Shortly after recounting that experience, the parent tried to quell their feelings of guilt when they stated, "In that moment, yeah, later on I was like well it's for you and she kinda cheered up but I did feel guilty." This parent's description illustrates how even within a personal experience of the negative effects of smartphone usage, they engage in cognitive dissonance that justifies their smartphone use and the associated relational cost.

Another example of this type of cognitive dissonance being used, was made evident when a parent was asked when, if ever, their smartphone intruded on their life. One parent stated, "It never really intrudes on my family life," but also recalled a time during a family meal when, speaking about their daughter stated, "She would be eating and her head would be down like that, so we had to kibosh that at the dinner table." Once again, although this parent could easily recall a moment a smartphone intruded on their family life when asked directly about it, denied it being an issue.

When asked when it is appropriate to interrupt a face-to-face conversation for an incoming communication via smartphone, many parents reported that only situations deemed as emergencies would that be appropriate. A parent shared, "unless it is an emergency or a sick kid it doesn't really, I'm not really involved or invested in it," but when recalling day-to-day times of smartphone use reported that issues involving work or school, "I have to really discipline myself to pull away because there is always stuff to do in school and there is always stuff that you could be doing with work, so I really have to focus ... especially at home with my kids." In this example, the parent reports that unless it is an emergency the smartphone can wait, but when recalling experiences from their life they admit that when it comes to work or school they must actively try very hard to disengage from smartphone use and pay attention to what is happening in their home and with their family. Time and time again, all participating parents reported justifying their smartphone use in the presence of their child or even contradicting previous statements made about this behavior at least once.

Smartphones were reported by parents to negatively affect many subsystems of the family including parent-child relationships as well as couple relationships. One parent recalled times at night before bed when, "a couple times per week ... I'll be in bed just watching our phones instead of talking to each other." When asked if there were other times in their lives smartphones robbed them of intimacy or solitude the parent reported "no," however, later reported "when friends are having issues and they feel like they just have access to you 24/7 ... sometimes it feels burdensome." Indicating that there are multiple contexts and instances in which smartphones are carrying relational costs to their children and spouses, but when asked directly, the parent engages in cognitive dissonance and reports there is no cost. Possibly one of the most blatant uses of cognitive dissonance was exhibited when a parent stated, "I think you're always paying attention to your children even when you're not paying any attention to your children."

**Them not me.** This form of cognitive dissonance seemed to indicate little or no level of insight on behalf of the parent pertaining to personal or relational costs smartphone use was having in their lives. This sub-theme of cognitive dissonance was frequently evidenced by parents identifying costs of smartphone use applying to groups of other people but not themselves, thus, marked by a “them not me” attitude. Some examples of parents engaging in this form of cognitive dissonance include when parents reported seeing other parents disengage from the present and into their smartphones while at the park with their children. One parent when speaking about this kind of experience stated, “I knew someone who was at the park and they looked up and their kid was gone. I mean she had just gone over the hill thank God but, when you realize you haven’t paid attention that full time she was pretty freaked out by that.” When asked if they had ever disengaged at the park or in a similar way, the parent simply stated “no, I put my phone down for that.” Another parent, while addressing the costs of smartphone use, stated, “it’s a different generation or a different time, cause when I was ... when my kids were younger we didn’t have those smartphones like they do now.” This parent seemed to discount the possibility of being subject to the same parent-child relationship costs, just because they did not raise a small child in the age of smartphones, despite having and using a smartphone now with children in the home.

This type of cognitive dissonance may be even more heinous than parents who justify their smartphone use because the lack of insight this requires makes it difficult for these parents to change their behavior using boundaries or any other sort of behavior altering intervention. One such parent lacking personal insight, speaking of society in general, stated:

I think a lot of people’s lives are consumed by the online electronic world...I feel like we’ve let it consume our society, and a lot of our society depends on technology and depends on being connected and plugged in, to an extent that some people feel like that’s how they connect best with others is over the phone.

In this statement, it appears that the parent views the costs of smartphone and technology use and the changing norms that are associated with it, but only minimally includes themselves in the group for which this an issue. Finally, one parent concluded, “For me the costs don’t necessarily outweigh the benefits ‘cause I try to manage and mitigate it.” Although it may be possible this parent’s efforts to mitigate the negative effects of smartphone use on their family may be working, the way in which they make this statement leaves no chance for error in estimation and seems to be used to excuse the parent from a group who may be affected by smartphone use in an adverse way. Engaging in this form of cognitive dissonance is dangerous as it has the potential to excuse behavior by not even acknowledging its existence within the life of the individual parent. This mental error could potentially lead from psychological projection on other larger groups of parents, inward to spouses and co-parents, ultimately leading to further disruption of the parental subsystem.

Finally, it is important to note that engagement in either of these forms of cognitive dissonance has severe potential to disrupt familial relationships. Whether justifying their smartphone use in the presence of their child or outright denying it ever happens, pervasive patterns of this type of behavior engaged in by parents could prove detrimental to the parent-child relationship. With many parents today using smartphones it is vital that awareness of these potential parenting pitfalls be made know to the lay parent.

## Discussion

While examining the impact parental smartphone use may be having on parent-child relationships, it is important to note the findings of parental disengagement from parents of the

present study. Hertlein (2012), in her CFT framework, outlines aspects of affordability and accessibility that can influence technology promoting closeness or distance within relationships. Findings of the current study align well with the constructs of accessibility and affordability in the CFT framework, providing a clear understanding of how those constructs play out in the lives of the parents of this study. Additionally, by virtue of having a smartphone on one's person at all times, the technology affords the user the opportunity to engage with elements and social circles not physically present. Thus, the accessibility and affordability of smartphone technology promote the user to disengage from the present. Recognizing that children are often the ones who are most affected by their parents taking leave in the digital world of their smartphones for extended periods of time, begs the question what implications this new parental behavior might be having on the emotional attachment that is forming as the child grows.

Although this study did not initially take into account or address Attachment Theory, findings of the present study seem to suggest that parental smartphone use may have critical implications on the formation of children's attachment styles. As made evident in Quiroga and Hamilton-Giachritsis (2016) study on childhood attachment style formation, many factors go into the formation of attachment bonds and ultimately attachment styles.

Considering the intergenerational aspects of Attachment Theory, it is important to note the accounts of concern as well as observations made by parents of the present study that have intergenerational implications (Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2008). These accounts and concern were often related to learned behaviors of children regarding smartphone use and the way in which they relate and interact with peers and adults. The concern expressed by parent participants of the present study indicate an intergenerational aspect to implications that may involve attachment in the way that children and others are currently relating and may relate to others in the future as technology use becomes more saturated in populations around the world. These relational effects have the potential to last years, affecting many generations and possibly contributing to clinically significant problems (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016).

Themes of change in social norms as well as boundaries within the current study can be further examined and understood using the CFT framework (Hertlein, 2012). These thematic findings seem to practically illustrate the theoretical CFT framework. Allowing clinicians and family researchers to understand how the changes in social norms because of the proliferation of smartphone technology may be causing some parents to create and maintain technology specific boundaries to protect their familial relationships while simultaneously allowing the family to benefit from the use of smartphone technology. As hypothesized by the CFT, findings from this study seem to indicate that when technology-specific boundaries are used in the family system negative changes in social norms that have taken place seem to have less of an effect on the parent-child relationship (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). Future research could examine the processes a family system engages in when creating boundaries around technology use as well as other relational boundaries as findings of the present study seem to indicate this importance of the use of boundaries as they apply across relational constellations to include the parent-child relationship (Fletcher & Blair, 2014; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). Further, looking at technology-specific boundaries, McDaniel and Coyne (2016) assert that interference from technology affects conflict over technology use; thus influencing relationship and personal well-being could be expanded from couple relationships and applied to parent-child relationships as well.

Understanding the likelihood of smartphone-using parents to engage in cognitive dissonance while still harboring concern for their kids and society in the future will aid clinicians treating parents, children, and families. Further, a clinician using the CFT framework can challenge the cognitive distortions used by parents to help bring to parents' awareness the cognitive dissonance they engage in when justifying their smartphone use in the presence of

their children (Gilbert, 1998; Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). With more and more clinicians seeing technology related concerns brought up in therapy, this cognitive dissonance found in the present study could be an area of clinical exploration and treatment (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013; Hertlein & Webster, 2008) as the parent-child relationship is required to adapt to include the presence of the parents smartphone. By challenging cognitive distortions and utilizing boundary creation and maintenance clinicians may aid parent-clients in making changes to the role smartphone technology has in the presenting family system (Carroll, Olson, & Buckmiller, 2007; Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). These changes in a family system could have lasting implications for future technology use, family structure and functioning, as well as significant attachment implications.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Given the exploratory nature of this study there are inherent limitations to the results of the study and implications those findings hold. Limitations of the present study primarily include limitations of the sample of parents. The sample of this study appear to be very homogenous in nature, consisting of mostly young, educated, females. Another limitation of the study is the level of comfort parents reported when using smartphone technology. Of the twelve parents of the study, eleven reported being at least very comfortable using smartphone technology with only one parent reporting being not comfortable using a smartphone. Greater diversity in the parent sample could have dramatically altered thematic results. In addition, the purpose of the study was about parent perceptions rather than the actual impact of their technology usage. Future research could better describe this phenomenon.

Given the results of the current study as well as the limitations of those findings, more research is necessary to develop a greater understanding of the effect parental smartphone use is having on child and other familial relationships. There is a great need for family science researchers to take a closer look at the effects smartphone technology is having on many family constellations including parent-child relationships and couple relationships among others. Given that such little research currently exists in this area, combined with the findings of the current study, there is a need for future research to take a quantitative examination of these findings possibly through the development of a survey to gain a broader understanding that could be derived from a larger sample size.

### **Conclusion**

The intention of this study was to examine parents' awareness of the potential relational costs their smartphone use may be having on their children. This was accomplished by ascertaining parents' perceptions of the effect their smartphone use has on their children in a qualitative research design. Findings of this study provide clinicians, family researchers, and the lay reader a detailed description of how parents perceive their smartphone use affects their family. The results were congruent with theorized concepts found in the Couple and Family Technology Framework. Through understanding the psychological effects of smartphone use, current efforts of parents to mitigate negative effects of its use, and the role family therapy models can take to address problems associated with technology use within families, family therapists and researchers are benefited with expanded knowledge and understanding of individual parents' experiences. Results of the current study indicate a vital need for additional research, therapeutic intervention, and psychoeducation on a societal level in order to adequately course correct the trajectory of parenting as it is now being done in the age of smartphones. Researchers, clinicians, and well-informed parents have the significant responsibility of adapting to the digital age we have created and now live in. An integral part

of this social adaptation and change that is required to take place in order to adapt to our new digital world, is recognizing and manipulating the space and time our smartphones are taking within our parent-child and parent-family relationships. Further, the results of this study add to the collective knowledge on families and technology use and may impact the way future research and clinical treatment is conducted in a positive way.

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