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# UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES SHAPES INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Jadelin P. Felipe

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UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES

**UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES  
SHAPES INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE UNDERGRADUATE  
COLLEGE EXPERIENCE**

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Leadership Studies

School of Education

University of San Francisco

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP

by

Jadelin Pikake Felipe

July 1, 2016

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Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approved by all its members, this thesis has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

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Date

04/03/17

# UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES

## DEDICATION

To the Unplugged Students who see the beauty in face-to-face human connection.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would not be the scholar and educator I am today without the incredible support of my faculty mentors and personal support network. This thesis is as much mine as it is yours. Thank you Professor Danfeng Koon, Professor Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales, Ria Das Gupta, Andrea Lum, Jessica Ayres, Jon Summers, Virgilio Menor Felipe; and to the rest of my friends, colleagues, and students who were there every step of the way.

# UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of what motivated college students—the Unplugged Students—to intentionally use their cell phones less and how they understood the impact that unplugging had on their interpersonal relationships and college experience. Nine undergraduate college students from four private schools were interviewed in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. These students, considered non-users, provided a particularly useful perspective as these students made a conscious choice to counteract social norms and experienced both being plugged in and unplugged. Cell phones and the act of unplugging proved to make up a complex and more nuanced topic than expected. Emerged from the research were themes that brought to light the personal and external factors that motivated students to unplug, unveiling the opportunity for families, schools, and public figures to educate students. The study also includes the student perspective about the complexities of relationships in the digital age, the major role of social media, opposing views on the impact of unplugging on community spaces, and students' shared vision for the future.

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# UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES

## CHAPTER I

### THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Nearly two-thirds of Americans are now cell phone owners and this number has nearly doubled since 2011 (Smith, 2015). How people communicate with each other is changing at rapid speed. Long gone are the days of people writing letters to stay in touch with one another, connecting using their broadband phone lines at home, or using public pay phones. As of 2015, a quarter of the Americans who owned cell phones reported that they relied on their cell phones for accessing online information and connecting with others because they either no longer had home phone service or had less options available to connect online (Smith, 2015). Cell phones are a more convenient way for people these days to communicate and get access to online information, and college students know this best.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Young Americans and those who come from higher socio-economic backgrounds and relatively high education level backgrounds make up a significantly high percentage of those who own cell phones today (Smith, 2015). The Pew Research Center, a self-reported non-partisan American think tank on a variety of social issues and that conducts substantial large-scale research on technology statistics, reported in 2011 specifically on the topic of college students and technology. They found that nearly all college student respondents reported owning a cell phone, including 96 percent of undergraduate students (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). A more staggering statistic is the percentage of young cell phone users who are more likely to use their phone for preventing boredom and avoiding others. Ninety-three percent of 18-29 year old cell phone users used their phone to prevent boredom and nearly half used their phones to avoid

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interacting with the people around them (Smith, 2015). College students say they value face-to-face conversations, uninterrupted by cell phones, but the reality of telling friends to put their devices away is not easy nor the social norm amongst peers (Turkle, 2015). With the widespread ownership and use of these gadgets in neighborhoods and school campuses, attention must be paid to the implications cell phones have on behavior, relationships, and the spaces they occupy.

Colleges and universities make a unique place—a unique ecosystem—where young adults have the opportunity to meet multiple people from different places and backgrounds. According to Bliming (2010), the “environment and social role expectations combine to influence development” (p. 136). In college, students have the opportunity to meet and socialize with a wide range of people, learn what it means to live away from home and to live with others, and are challenged with choosing from multiple activities to participate in and the consequences associated with their choices (Bliming, 2010). College/university life introduces a whole set of its own new environmental factors that influence how students develop as young adults. Cell phones are now a part of the college and university environment and have the potential to impact how college students develop their interpersonal relationships and experience college.

### **Background and Need**

Majority of college students own and use cell phones and the percentages are growing each year (Brooks, Dahlstrom, Grajek, & Reeves, 2015; *Cell Phone and Smartphone Ownership Demographics*, 2014; Dahlstrom & Bichsel, 2014; Smith, 2013). The percentage of teenagers, ages 13 to 17, owning cell phones is growing at even faster speeds (Meredith, 2012) and is evidence to help forecast what college and universities can expect of their future students. Through phone calls, text messaging, and social media applications/“apps” and functions that are

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on cell phones, college students are able to more easily communicate and keep in contact with friends and family than students were able to in previous years (Palmer, Boniek, Turner, & Lovell, 2014). With the ease of accessibility and conveniences that cell phones offer, cell phone overuse and the social impact they have on changing face-to-face interactions is a growing concern and increasingly being researched. How people communicate with one another is becoming digitized. College students talk less to each other in-person (Turkle, 2015) and developing and maintaining human interpersonal relationships and empathy towards others are at stake. Most research and common dialogue in the digital age today focus on understanding technology or cell phone use, their benefits, how they can be leveraged, and their implications, but less on what can be learned from the absence of these devices (Baumer, Burrell, Ames, Brubaker, & Dourish (2015a), Lee & Katz, 2014, Plaut, 2015, Ribak & Rosenthal, 2015; Wyatt, 2003). Non-users, like the students in this study who unplug, have the unique perspective and ability to identify possibilities normally not seen or considered. Knowing why young people gravitate to their cell phones, the advantages, and consequences of using them will be important for the users themselves to learn from and also families and schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of what motivated college students to intentionally unplug from their cell phones and how they understood the impact that unplugging had on their interpersonal relationships and college experience. In this study, nine undergraduate college students from Liberty University, Menlo College, Stanford University, and University of San Francisco were interviewed in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. These students intentionally unplugged from their cell phones and used their phones less, and provided

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a unique perspective and understanding of cell phones. Cell phones and the impact they have on college students, their interpersonal relationships, and college experience proved to make up a complex and more nuanced topic than expected and learning from students directly provided clarity.

Little is known about the student perspective and the topic of cell phones. The aim of this research study was to learn from students who chose to intentionally “unplug” from their cellphones. Studying students who intentionally unplugged provided a particularly useful perspective as these students made a conscious choice to counteract social norms and experienced both being plugged in and unplugged. Interviewing and learning from these students brought to the forefront a perspective that had not been heard in the research and literature surrounding the topic of cell phones and college students. These students brought to the study a critical perspective and the ability to see what is often taken for granted, or the price that is paid, when students are on their phones. This research explored the personal and external factors that motivated students to unplug, the complexities of relationships in the digital age and the connection to cell phones, the major role of social media, opposing views on the impact of unplugging on community spaces, and students’ shared vision for the future.

### **Research Questions**

1. What motivated students to initially unplug and continue to unplug from their phone?
2. How did unplugging impact students’ interpersonal relationships?
3. How did unplugging impact students’ college experience?

### **Significance of the Study**

Technological advances are often greeted with open arms and with the assumption that they are the way today's students communicate. It is also thought that these devices will increase students' productivity and efficiency. The significance of this study is to inform higher education professionals to think critically about cell phones on college campuses and to learn a perspective not often shared from students themselves. By learning from students who identify with a concern with cell phone use, this research study strives to inform educators that not all students are quick nor want to connect using their cell phones at all times. These students see consequences of cell phone overuse and the benefits of actively unplugging. Another aim is to inspire other college students to think critically about how they use their phones. Education spaces such as colleges and universities have a role in setting an example for other industries and developing how people think and behave when using their everyday cell phone devices.

As some scholars have suggested, "Education is a moral and political practice and always presupposes an introduction to and preparation for particular forms of social life, a particular rendering of what community is, and what the future might hold" (Giroux, 2002, p. 441). Colleges and universities are spaces where students develop skills and understandings of the world around them. They take the lessons they learn in school with them after graduation, and into what Giroux refers to as their social life and the communities that they enter after they are a student. Learning what can be gained from intentionally unplugging from cell phone use is a dialogue not often talked about and is at the heart of this research study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has limitations that should be considered. The study included interviews with students who only enrolled at private, four-year colleges or universities. This was based on the ease of accessibility the researcher had to the schools and the response from students who shared interest in participating. The socio-economic demographic of students at these institutions and the likelihood they would own cell phones would be different from that of state public universities, two-year community colleges, or vocational schools who are known to enroll large numbers of student populations from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Future research should consider including different school types in order to learn if there are similarities or differences and based on institutional structures and student populations.

The size of the participant pool gives a limited view on the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors tied to this topic of cell phones, intentionally unplugging, and its impact on relationships and the college experience. Only nine students were interviewed. Future research may consider interviewing a larger number of students and/or consider surveying a bigger student population to capture more responses and a broader understanding of the issues researched.

As in all research, the perspective of the researcher informs the questions asked and the research design. Understanding more deeply how students positively use cell phones to connect with others would need to be explored and could be compared to those who intentionally unplug. This would help determine if there is a difference in self-reported levels of quality interpersonal relationships and positive accounts of their lived college experiences between those who use their cell phones heavily and less frequently.



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### Definition of Terms

The definition of terms used for this study follow:

***App:*** A short-cut word used to refer to applications on smartphones. Applications are computer program software installed on phones that allow its users to access specific content and functions (i.e. calculator, fitness tracker, social media Facebook website).

***Cell phone, mobile device or phone, and smartphone:*** The term cell phone will be the term used primarily in this study for consistency. This was the keyword most commonly used in the literature. The different names for the devices are usually used to describe the separate functions the device offers the user. For example, a cell phone usually refers to a basic functioning phone that has less sophisticated options such as a smartphone with mobile apps like a fitness tracker or social media site such as Facebook. Because functions were not a major factor in the study, the term cell phone was chosen for this text and replaces other terms originally used.

***Facebook:*** Social media site where “friends” can post status updates, photos, and videos, exchange messages, and receive notifications about activity on the app (i.e. someone approving of a photo or commented on a post).

***Fear of Missing Out (FoMO):*** FoMO is a term to refer to a social phenomenon where there is prevalent apprehension of being absent while others are having positive experiences and

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the constant desire of wanting to know what others are up to (Prybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013).

***Instagram:*** Social media site where photos and videos can be shared publicly or privately and posted on other social media sites. Text caption word count is less than Facebook.

***SnapChat:*** Social media site where image messaging and multimedia mobile applications that can be shared viewed by the receiver for a specific length of time. Additional functions allow users to create and share stories using their images and multimedia and they are also able to add graphic overlays on photos and videos depending on their location and available geofilter.

***Social media:*** Social media sites allow its users to communicate electronically to create online communities to network with each other and share information (Merriam-Webster, 2016).

***Twitter:*** Social media site that enables users to send and read short 140 character messages called “tweets”. The use of hashtags (#) enable users to “tag” content based on a phrase or subject and allows users to read a collective of tweets based on the hashtag.

***Unplug or Unplugged:*** A term the researcher uses to describe the intentional act of disconnecting and using the cell phone device less frequently. Amount of minutes or hours spent not using the phone or how unplugging looked like was not defined.

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## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of the literature review is to ground the new research study within a broader context on the topic of cell phones and college students. The literature here is from the fields of education, social psychology, communication, technology, and media and cultural studies, and validates the interdisciplinary nature of studying technology devices such as cell phones and students. First, data on the overall trend on cell phone ownership is reviewed. Followed by existing research on the impact cell phones have on interpersonal relationships, a feature important to higher education. Finally, the concept of Technology Non-users is introduced as an emerging area of research that provides a framework to understand the unplugged students who participated in this study. This helps further explain the implications cell phones have on higher education and the college experience.

#### **Cell Phone Ownership and Students**

Cell phones pervade our college campuses and the growing number of students who own these devices gives higher education reason to pay closer attention to the role these devices play. EDUCAUSE, a nonprofit association whose mission is dedicated to advancing higher education through understanding the use of information technology, has conducted worldwide research studies on college students and information technology since 2004. In their 2015 EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research Study of Students and Information Technology report, 50,274 students at 161 institutions across 43 North American states and 11 countries were surveyed. In the study, 92 percent of undergraduates reported they owned cell phones (Brooks, Dahlstrom, Grajek, & Reeves, 2015). This number of college students who own cell phones continues to

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increase and is reflected in data from the same research study done in previous years. The data collected in 2015 was an increase from 86 percent of undergraduates owning a cell phone in the previous year, and up from 76 percent in 2013 (Dahlstrom & Bichsel, 2014).

The data reported from EDUCAUSE is consistent with information gathered from the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan American think tank that conducts polling, research, and analysis on social issues, public opinion, and demographic trends in the United States and the world. In 2013, 79 percent of traditional aged college students (ages 18-24) reported owning a cell phone (Smith, 2013) and this increased to 98 percent (ages 18-29) in 2014 (*Cell Phone and Smartphone Ownership Demographics*, 2014). If there is curiosity over what cell phone ownership among college students may look like in the future, paying attention to cell phone ownership numbers among youth is telling. According to an article focused on teens and cell phones (Meredith, 2012), 58 percent of teens ages 13 to 17 reported owning a cell phone and this was a 60 percent increase from the prior year. Nielsen (2012), a media research company, dubbed those born after 1990 and who have lived their adolescent years after the 2000s “Generation C” in large part because of their constant connectivity to all digital things. Students who are entering college and university doors simply do not know life without cell phones and other technology devices.

### **Cell Phones and Interpersonal Relationships**

Research on cell phones and their impact on interpersonal relationships helps uncover the social impact these devices have on college students. Research has found that college students use their cell phones to keep in communication with friends and family by phone calls, text messaging, and social media websites or applications such as Facebook (Lundquist, Lefebvre, &

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Garramone, 2014; Palmer, Boniek, Turner, & Lovell, 2014). Social media sites allow its users to communicate electronically to create online communities to network with each other and share information (Merriam-Webster, 2016). While cell phones serve as a tool for students to keep in touch with family and friends, there is increasingly a concern over the negative impact that these devices may have on the interpersonal relationships of traditional college aged students (Hall, Baym, & Miltner; 2014; Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Lundquist, Lefebvre, & Garramone, 2014; Palmer, Boniek, Turner, & Lovell, 2014; Turkle, 2015).

In an article titled *Smartphones: Fulfilling the Need for Immediacy in Everyday Life, but at What Cost?* (2014), the authors Lundquist, Lefebvre, & Garramone found that undergraduate college students listed a top negative effect of cell phones was that communication face-to-face was no longer the same. An example of this was the miscommunication of meaning that occurred over text messaging on a phone. Sherry Turkle (2015), a leading researcher in human-technology interaction, confirms that today's college students talk less to each other face-to-face due to their preoccupation with their cell phones. This change in behavior due to cell phones has drawn the concern of researchers and more literature expands on how cell phones reportedly effect how interpersonal relationships are developed.

In a study that explored how the presence of mobile communication technology influenced face-to-face conversation quality (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012), two experiments were conducted; one where researchers observed how the presence and the absence of a cell phone affected face-to-face relationship quality and the second observed the same conditions as the first experiment plus with the added variable of making the participants have a casual conversation and a meaningful conversation ,and then comparing the differences. The study

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concluded that the dyads with participants who had more meaningful conversation with one another and where there was a cell phone present in the room suffered the most negative effects on closeness, connection, and conversation quality compared to the dyads who discussed casual conversation topics with no phone in the room. This aligned with the results of a longitudinal study that took place years prior (Konrath, O'Brien & Hsing, 2009).

Researchers at the University of Michigan conducted a 30 year long study (Konrath, O'Brien & Hsing, 2009) where they studied levels of empathy among American college students and compared results from different series of personality scales that assessed multi-dimensions of empathy. The study found the level of empathy towards others that college students had declined significantly over time by 40 percent. The majority of the decline occurred after the year 2000 when there were significant changes in media and technology, and increased cell phone usage and social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter (Konrath, O'Brien & Hsing, 2009). In another study reported in the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Journal (Lloyd, Dean, & Cooper, 2009), cell phones were one technology device that negatively impacted college students' psychosocial development regarding peer relationships. Although students were able to connect using the online social media site, Facebook, the researchers discussed that the virtual opportunity to communicate with others may have not been conducive to developing relationships as fully or deeply as they would have face-to-face.

While some researchers are slower to identify cell phones as the problem that prohibits people from connecting with one another, the same researchers that believe this do believe that through the use of these objects a sense of immediacy is developed (Lundquist, Lefebvre, &

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Garramone, 2014). Immediacy mentality is when an individual not only feels the need to attend to their phone in short time intervals but feels compelled otherwise to “constantly and mundanely” check to see if there might be a message on their phone, although aware there likely is not. From the sense of immediacy and need for instant gratification, the space to build intimacy, or healthy closeness, is quickly eroded with the advent of the cell phone. Habuchi (2005) describes what Lundquist, Lefebvre, & Garramone alluded to and described the “tele-cocooning” effect where people withdraw from face-to-face interactions with others.

A fairly new phenomenon that justifies the decrease in empathy in others and relationship quality is what is referred to as the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) (Prybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013; Turkle, 2015). Prybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell (2013) define FoMO as the prevalent apprehension of being absent while others are having positive experiences and the constant desire of wanting to know what others are up to. In Turkle’s (2015) new book titled *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, a student describes the false and pseudo-like feeling she has when she is with her friends. Although her and her friends are physically together, their real focus is on their phones and not wanting to miss out on information. The student Kati said, “We’re focused on what our phones are saying about what our other options are. It’s not much of a conversation” (Turtle, 2015, p. 146). Turtle (2015) wrote what she believed was at stake:

It all adds up to a flight from conversation—at least from conversation that is open-ended and spontaneous, conversation in which we play with ideas, in which we allow ourselves to be fully present and vulnerable. Yet these are the conversations where empathy and

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intimacy flourish and social action gains strength. These are the conversations in which creative collaborations of education and business thrive (p. 4).

While cell phones create the opportunity for students to connect with others near and far using its different phone functions, there is an overwhelming amount of concern among researchers about the social effects the device has on the development of interpersonal relationships, particularly those of undergraduate college students.

### **Technology Non-Use**

The aforementioned literature and the majority of what is written about cell phones and college students focus on the use of the device and its impact on areas such as multi-tasking (Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009), classroom learning (Elder, 2013), emotions, and interpersonal relationships (Hall, Baym, & Miltner, 2014; Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Lundquist, Lefebvre, & Garramone, 2014; Palmer, Boniek, Turner, & Lovell, 2014; Turkle, 2015). There is less empirical research that explores the non-use of the devices among college students. A recent article titled *Disconnect: A case study of short-term voluntary mobile phone non-use* (Lee & Katz, 2014) attempted to fill the gap in the literature and explored non-use. The article described how participants who were primarily in their mid-20s attended an “unplugged weekend” without their mobile communication devices and found again the value in in-person interactions and activities while giving undivided attention to one another. Non-use as a framework highlights the complicated nature of technology and cell phones and creates an opportunity to rethink relationships and technology in a broader context.

Viewing subjects and things through the non-user perspective one can see subtle implications that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. While non-use can be understood on a



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deeper level if it were to take into account those who voluntarily choose not to use a technology versus those who are prohibited or do not have the access due to the socio-economics of a person's place (Wyatt, 2003) the focus here on non-use is on those who voluntarily choose to opt out or use technology less. When use of technology is viewed as the norm, non-use in contrast is perceived as a deficient and in need of being fixed (Wyatt, 2003).

Researchers in the academic fields of communication, technology, and media and cultural studies are attempting to reframe the understanding of non-use and non-users (Baumer, Burrell, Ames, Brubaker, & Dourish, 2015a & 2015b; Ribak & Rosenthal, 2015; Plaut, 2015; Wyatt, 2003). According to Baumer, Burrell, Ames, Brubaker, & Dourish (2015a), "While non-use is often understood as the absence of a phenomenon or practice, something else likely exists in place of use, and it is *that* [emphasis included] something we should be studying" (p.54). Voluntary non-users consciously think about their actions and go through their own internal process of decision making to decide why they choose to use their phone less or not at all (Ribak & Rosenthal, 2015). Consciously thinking about their technology use, non-users more easily see new and different possibilities not easily picked up by those of users who practice social norms such as using technology or cell phones. By viewing non-use and non-users as important, a newfound value is put on a group of people that are usually not taken into consideration.

To understand this more concretely, in her seminal research article titled *Non-users also matter: The construction of users and non-users of the Internet*, Sally Wyatt (2003) uses the car industry as one example. Cars are usually seen as the physical objects that they are, made with wheels and steel, and primarily defined by the function they serve to transport people and

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things. What is less considered, however, is the lessening of car-free spaces and its impact on non-drivers (Wyatt, 2003). Taking into consideration the implication of lessening car-free space for those who do not drive is another angle of interpreting the use and value of cars. Wyatt writes, that analyzing users is important, however, by focusing on this group of people runs the risk of “accepting a worldview in which adoption of new technology is the norm” (p. 77-78). She recommended non-users be included in design processes and posed the question “would mobile phones make irritating noises if non-users had been involved in their design?” (p. 78) Non-use gets away from categorical understanding of technological engagement and opens up the possibility to a more fluid in-nature understanding where subtle nuances may arise (Baumer, Burrell, Ames, Brubaker, & Dourish, 2015a & 2015b). Through studying the absence of use or participation, important and less thought of information can still be gained.

By understanding non-use, the space that is absent of the technology can reveal the complex nature of technology itself. Take for instance the transition from the music boombox to earbuds. While the invention of music player earbuds enable users to listen to their music privately without bothering other people, earbuds have given its users power over what they no longer are able to hear (Plaut, 2015). Choosing to play music privately can be seen as an individual and considerate decision to those around the user, however, the decision creates a separation between the private, individual space and the shared public space. Preferred music may then be heard by its users but the absence of shared music changes the dynamic of the shared space. Plaut (2015) calls these communication technologies of avoidance and a form of non-use. On one hand choosing to use earbuds is the choice to not use the music boombox. However, the choice to use earbuds can communicate avoidance towards others even

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inadvertently. In this case, non-use of a music boom created a use of the earbuds which illustrates the complex nature of choosing to use and not use technology. Like author Wyatt used the car industry to help better understand the concept of non-use and to raise question on how the creation of cars impact non-drivers, Plaut raises the question of how the public space and the people that occupy them are affected when people are listening to their music privately through their earbuds. By taking these two examples into consideration, one can begin to think how the decision to use and not use technology such as cell phones can impact public spaces.

In Ribak & Rosenthal's study (2015) the authors interview cell phone resisters and highlight how their actions often associated with unplugging is a part of what they call media ambivalence or mixed feelings towards technology. Some resisters chose not to use their phone to resist the social mainstream of using phones that is a part of contemporary culture, others were cautious of their ring tone songs as the type of music played would leave others an impression to judge what a person might be like based on their music taste, and others viewed cell phones as an unnecessary luxury item but at the same time were open to owning one if it helped them with networking and job search. In order to understand the implications technology, specifically cell phones, may have on people, non-users are an important group of people that unveil the complex nature and impact technology can have and the opportunity non-users have to see otherwise.

### **Summary**

With the fast paced growth in the number of youth and college students who own cell phones, higher education is in a unique position to learn what the impact these devices can have on students' relationships and college experience. Cell phones enable students to communicate

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with friends and family, however, there is concern about the social implications cell phones can have on emotional development and the ability to connect with others. Through the understanding of non-use the social norms surrounding cell phone use can be challenged and can uncover unexplored possibilities. This study aims to see the cell phone topic through the lens of non-users, or the unplugged students, and what higher education could look like with phones less used.

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## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study was to understand the ways undergraduate students intentionally unplugged from their cellphones, what motivated them to unplug, and the impact it had on their interpersonal relationships and college experience. The findings of this research can inform colleges and universities in the digital age. Colleges and universities can learn about an emerging student population, what their concerns and needs are in order to serve them appropriately through programs, services, and infrastructure changes. This research, more importantly, is aimed at broadening how college and university faculty, staff, and administrators think about technological devices such as cell phones and to consider the benefits that may develop in unplugged spaces.

#### **Research Methods and Approach**

The researcher chose nine undergraduate students to participate in the study to represent the perspectives of college students who attended four-year private institutions. The participants were students who were enrolled at the following private colleges and universities: Liberty University, Menlo College, Stanford University, and University of San Francisco. Two students were selected from each of the four schools and one additional student was interviewed from Stanford University. The additional Stanford student was included in the study because of her unique involvement with the development of a mobile phone application that directly addressed the topic of preoccupation and unplugging from cell phones.

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Interviews were conducted with each of the nine students and the objective of the interviews were to gain a deeper understanding of how college students thought about their cell phone usage and what impact they saw on their interpersonal relationships and college experience. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper meaning and more personalized accounts from participants themselves in order to answer the research questions.

Semi-structured interviewing is a specific technique of interviewing and is the most common method researchers use when choosing to interview (Galletta, 2013). Like with other interviewing techniques, questions asked are predetermined allowing interviewers to identify main topics or sub-areas within their research study to focus on and guide the actual interview. What characterizes semi-structured interviewing is the flexible nature of how interviews are conducted where interviewers are free to ask open-ended question, ask for clarification whenever needed, and be able to further explore topics that may arise from the interview conversations (Galletta, 2013). The benefit of using this type of interview method is creating the space and opportunity to learn information that grows out of natural conversation and to understand the perspective of those being interviewed.

The reason for choosing interview methods instead of focus groups or surveys for this study was intentional and was rooted in the core topic of the research study: people and technology. The likelihood college students would openly disclose that they felt addicted to their cellphones or share that they felt ignored and hurt because their friend spent too much on their phone is likely lower in a group setting such as a focus group due to the possibility that others may judge them. Despite the capability that survey methods would have had to capture more

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responses, using the sole method of interviewing was intentional. By conducting one-on-one interviews, the interviewer was able to capture answers with more depth, play an active role in identifying any confusion participants expressed through their answers or body language, and was able to ask for the participants' clarification, reflection, and further thoughts.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

To recruit participants, the researcher engaged in a variety of outreach efforts. The researcher contacted Liberty University's Center for Digital Wellness and her network of colleagues and students at Menlo College, Stanford University, and University of San Francisco. Liberty University claims to have the first university sponsored student resource center focused on educating students on how to develop healthy practices when it comes to technology, primarily mobile phone devices (Menard, 2015). The other universities were chosen because the researcher had professional contacts that assisted in obtaining access. Given the nature of this study focused on an ever-changing field in technology and social behavior, the study was advertised in departments where the researcher felt students would have developed an awareness and interest about technology and its social impact. Departments included: organizational behavior, sociology, psychology, communications, and science, technology and society.

Students interested in participating in the study were instructed to contact the researcher directly through email and to narrow down the list of students selected to participate in the study students were asked the screening question: "What have you done to intentionally unplug from your cell phone?" Students who answered the question in more detail using examples and descriptions were those that were selected.

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## Population Sample/Participants

The selected participants for this study were nine undergraduate students who attended Liberty University, Menlo College, Stanford University, and University of San Francisco. In order to select a diverse group of participants, age, class standing (i.e. freshman), and gender were also taken into consideration. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of these students. A brief written profile introducing each student participant can be found in Appendix A.

Pseudonym Name	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	School Attended	Class	Academic Major	Self-Reported Household Parent Income	Homestate
Benji	24	Male	White	Liberty University	JR	Criminal Justice	\$25,000-49,000	WI
Coto	22	Female	Asian	Stanford University	SR	Science, Technology, and Society	\$100,000-149,000	CA
Jodi	20	Female	White	Liberty University	SO	Transmedia Writing	\$50,000-74,999	TN
Lara	19	Female	Unknown	Menlo College	SO	Business	\$75,000-99,999	CA
Lewis	22	Male	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	University of San Francisco	SR	Psychology	\$25,000-49,000	CA
Madison	18	Female	White	Menlo College	FR	Marketing	\$150,000-199,999	OH
Paolo	21	Male	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	Stanford University	SO	International Relations	\$100,000-149,000	CA
Shirly	19	Female	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	University of San Francisco	SO	Critical Diversity Studies and Sociology	\$25,000-49,000	CA
Wei	20	Male	Asian	Stanford University	SO	History	Either \$150,000-199,999 or \$200,000+	MI

Table 1. Participant Profile Information



### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Protecting the rights and identity of participants involved in the research study was a primary goal. In compliance with the University of San Francisco's (USF) Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), an application with a proposal to conduct research was submitted. A copy of the approval letter from the USF IRBPHS is held in the School of Education Dean's Office and a sample of the letter appears in APPENDIX B of this document. With IRBPHS approval, the researcher was granted permission to conduct research including participants at Liberty University, Menlo College, Stanford University, and the University of San Francisco.

All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the research study and were aware of their rights as research participants, including their right to withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any questions that might make them feel uncomfortable. The interview participants understood the nature of the research study, its purpose, length of time, potential risks, benefits, and the significance their contribution could have on further understanding the impact of cell phone technology on college students. Before interviews began, participants received a copy of their signed *Consent to Participate in a Research Study*. A copy of this consent form appears in APPENDIX D. One part of this consent agreement explained to the participant that pseudonyms would be used to protect any personal identifying information. In addition, participants were also asked to complete an additional *Consent to Audio or Video Recording and Transcription* form agreeing to have the interview recorded for data analysis purposes. Concluding each of the interviews, participants were asked to complete an optional demographic survey. This *Cell Phone and College Students Additional Interview Questionnaire* is included in APPENDIX G.

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In addition to the USF forms, Liberty University required the researcher to submit a copy of the approved IRB from USF to seek additional institutional permission to conduct research involving their students and before proceeding to recruit participants. Forms related to this additional approval process are included in APPENDIX C.

### **Data Collection**

Once approval from the appropriate Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) offices were granted allowing the researcher to proceed with research, the researcher initiated the steps to recruit participants previously mentioned in the section titled Recruitment of Participants. All communications prior to the interview between the participant and the researcher were done via email correspondence.

Students who met the minimum eligibility criteria and answered the screening question most thoroughly were formally invited to serve as interviewees in the study, and all students offered an invitation to participate in the study accepted. Because students initiated contact to the researcher to participate in the study, in response to the recruitment outreach and research study advertisement, students did not require further explanation of the purpose of the research study. However, before interviews took place, any clarifying questions asked by the students were answered to ensure participants were fully aware of what they agreed to in order to participate.

Once the logistical details of the research study were explained, interview times were scheduled between the researcher and the participant based on their shared availability to meet. During the interview meeting, prior to the start of the actual interview, the researcher introduced herself and gave a general description of what led her to be interested in the research topic. She asked general introductory questions to the interviewee to get to know him/her better and to

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create a welcoming and trustful environment for the interview to take place. The researcher explained the role of the participant was to share their own honest answers and thoughts and that the researcher was there to learn from them. Before the interview started, the researcher asked the participant to complete the two consent forms agreeing to participate in the study and be audio recorded. The audio recording devices were turned on and the interview commenced.

After the interview, participants were asked to complete a short demographic survey. Some of the information requested in the survey included age, gender, ethnic background, class standing, and household parent income range. A copy of the survey is located in APPENDIX G.

### **Interviews**

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth information and the personal accounts and perspectives of the students who were selected. In-person interviews took place on campus at Menlo College and Stanford University and virtual video interviews were conducted with Liberty University and University of San Francisco students due to the geographical distance between the researcher and the students. In-person interviews with Menlo students were held in a library classroom and interviews with Stanford students were conducted in the researcher's work office. Virtual interviews with Liberty and University of San Francisco students were conducted using the online video conferencing software called Zoom (<https://zoom.us>) in the researcher's work office or home.

The locations of these interview sites were selected based primarily on mutual accessibility for the researcher and interviewee and in places that would ensure less noise distractions or interruptions. All research participants were interviewed once and the opportunity to be interviewed a second time was an option available and agreed upon in the case there was a

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need for follow-up or to gather more information. No second interviews were scheduled since all questions were covered in the initial interviews. Follow-up emails were sent to students if there was a need for clarification on their answers or profile and demographic information.

Students were interviewed for approximately 90 minutes each and were audio recorded for transcription and data analysis purposes. Students were asked a series of questions about cell phone use, interpersonal relationships and their college experience, and what they wished for the future related to cell phone usage. Examples of questions asked included how their interpersonal and school experiences were when they used their cell phones more heavily and after they started to intentionally unplug from their phones. They were also asked to define what the act of unplugging from their phones meant and what they envisioned the ideal use of cell phones would be and what the college experience would look like. To see a list of the questions asked, the list of interview questions is available in the APPENDIX F.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected through the interviews were used to answer the following central research questions of the study:

1. What motivated students to initially unplug and continue to unplug from their phone?
2. How did unplugging impact students interpersonal relationships?
3. How did unplugging impact students college experience?

After the interviews were conducted, all audio recordings were sent electronically to the company Rev (<https://www.rev.com/transcription>), a reputable online transcription service to transcribe the content of the interviews. The purpose of using this transcription service was to ensure accuracy in what was said and to use the transcripts to refer to for the data analysis phase

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of the study. Once all audio recordings were transcribed they were all read through to find common themes and patterns that answered the central research questions. Pattern codes were created to help the researcher identify smaller groups of themes in the data and to help explain common patterns or infer meaning (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The transcripts were read through and coded twice to capture more pattern codes to help the researcher better analyze the interview transcripts. When there was an excessive amount of codes difficult to manage, broader codes were created to explain and overarching pattern or theme. The process of coding allowed the researcher to visualize and more easily depict reoccurring and significant major themes that emerged from the interviews. The researcher also wrote memos in the side margins and open spaces of the transcripts notating questions or a need for further clarification, interesting quotes to be used during writing, odd or interesting findings. To see a copy of the codes that were created see APPENDIX H. In APPENDIX I there is a single transcript page with an example of pattern codes and memos.

### **Background of the Researcher**

The researcher is an Asian Pacific Islander (API) female in her early-30s and has spent her entire professional career in the education field. Her educational background includes a Bachelor of Arts in Ethnic Studies from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Jadelin has worked with K-12 students and adult learners, and for the last 10 years she has worked in higher education student services providing support to students outside the classroom. She has worked in both public/state and private college and university settings in different capacities including admissions, enrollment management, new student orientation and programming, student

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employment, graduate and professional school test administration, international student services, academic advising, undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral scholar support services.

The researcher considers herself a social scientist and one who has always been observant and curious about patterns of behavior among groups of people, always questioning reasons why there are similarities and differences between how people behave and what motivates them to behave in certain ways. Throughout her experiences working on different college and university campuses, and with the increase and evolving changes in technology inventions, she has witnessed a rapid growth in the use and preoccupation with technology gadgets, specifically cell phones. While there is a significant wave of initiatives and dialogue on how to increase and maximize the use of technology, she is less quick to take this stance and chooses to intentionally critique technology and explore the less chartered territory. The researcher believes there are lessons that can be learned when common behavior is analyzed. Witness to multiple incidents where cell phones seriously distracted student's attention, communication, and engagement, she has committed and focused her academic research interest on further understanding the dynamic between college students and their cell phones. She is interested in seeing how this research can inform students themselves, how university faculty and staff can provide support, and if there are any implications on interpersonal relationships and the college experience as a whole.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

In this chapter, findings of the qualitative research conducted through semi-structured interviews with nine undergraduate students are presented. The aim for these interviews were to gain firsthand responses from students who had concern about the overuse of cell phones, adopted their own practices to intentionally unplug from their phone, and to gain an understanding of how they saw cell phones and the act of unplugging impact their in-person interpersonal relationships and college experience. The following section presents a summary of what factors helped motivate students to unplug, their views on the impact of unplugging had on their interpersonal relationships, a developing power shift between students and cell phones, students' college experience, ongoing motivation factors to unplug, and their shared vision and concerns for the future. Students proved navigating and understanding cell phone use and college life was no easy undertaking and confirmed the complex nature of the topic.

#### **Motivation to Unplug**

There was a range of personal motivations for initially unplugging but almost all students in this study shared that they had been preoccupied with social media websites and were impacted to unplug by external influences like school, parents, and even celebrity music artists, suggesting that college students use of cell phones can be impacted by a variety of influencers and those they respect around them.

#### **Personal Motivations**

All nine students referenced a preoccupation with social media websites and mobile applications/"apps" as the main reason why they decided to unplug and intentionally use their

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phones less. Social media apps are applications within a mobile phone where text, video, and photos can be shared online in different formats with social networks that include friends, family, classmates, and the general public who are added to the group. The top social media apps that students referenced (popularity in this order) were: Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter.

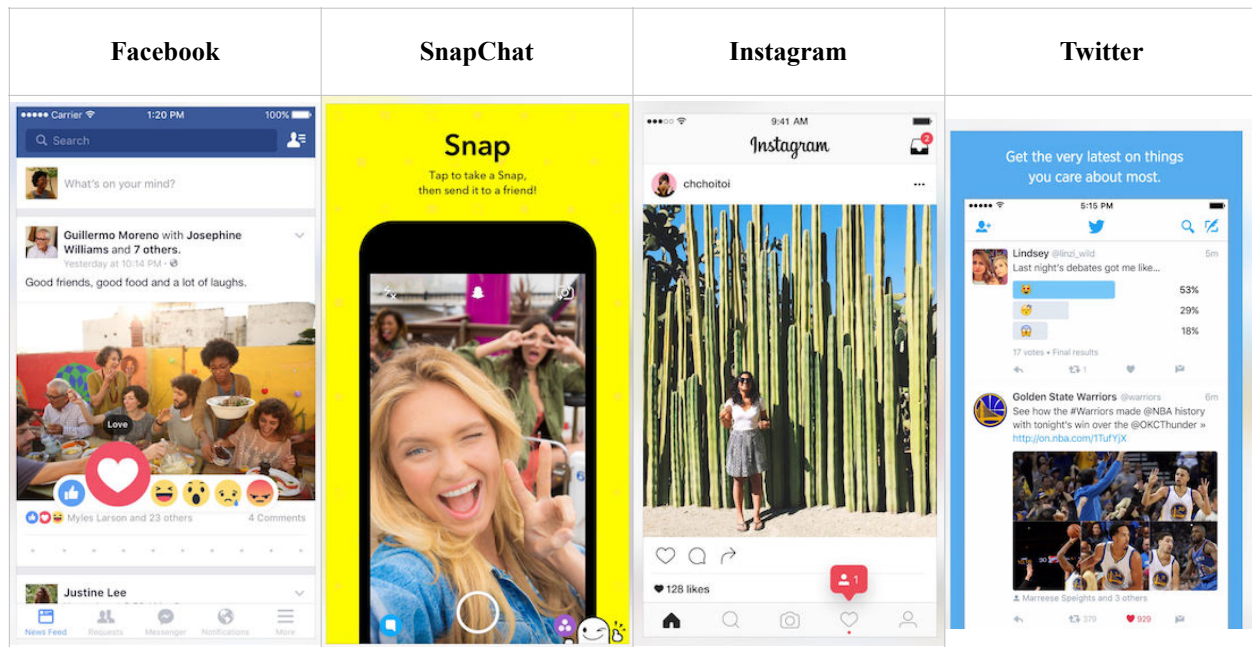


Figure 1. Generic screenshot images of social media applications Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter taken from the Apple, Inc. application App Store, for visual representation.

College freshman, Madison, said she would catch herself automatically looking at social media without any real intention or thought and that going onto social media apps served as a past time activity. “I would just be kind of checking things without really caring. I just did it almost not even consciously, it was just horrible, [it was] just a kind of [thing to] fill time” (p. 6). According to Jodi, a college sophomore, “Having to be in ‘the in-crowd’ so to say with social media. It was exhausting honestly trying to keep up with everything” (p. 6). Madison agreed and reiterated the same feeling and said that when she was out with friends, “I always have this stress. I need to



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like post a photo and put it on Instagram and like capture the moment” (p. 6). While social norms and expectations put on people about what and when content should be shared on social media is a topic that would need more exploration it was clear that students expressed a tension within themselves. Students expressed directly and indirectly their built-up annoyance and frustration when they spoke about how often they realized they or their peers were using social media apps. On one hand the pull towards social media and the time spent on the sites were time consuming and sometimes viewed as unproductive but on the other hand so much of their social interactions took place on the social media apps. What these students made clear was that the draw to use social media was a strong one and was a main reason why they decided to unplug.

Other students shared multiple examples of when they noticed how much time they and their friends were spending on social media and that their personal motivation to unplug was that they did not want to become dependent and consumed with their phone. Improving personal health and reclaiming back a sense of control of one’s surroundings were other personal motivational factors to unplug. Benji, a junior, said what motivated him to unplug was how he saw conversations and group settings change. According to him, “The dynamic just changed for the worse” (p. 6). He noticed that people were not simply using their phone for their basic functions such as texting and email but were spending majority of their time, sometimes hours, on social media. “People were not just texting but would be on Facebook for three hours a day” (Benji, p. 6). Excessive time spent on social media apps was a major concern students shared and attention was being drawn inward toward their phones and social media sites instead of attention on the present physical moments that they were in.

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Lara and Wei, a college sophomore and junior, said an additional reason that motivated them to unplug was the impact being on their phone was having on their health. Lara noticed her posture was crooked and worsening from looking down at her phone (p. 7) and both she and Wei lacked sleep because they were on their phones so much. Lara said she was “noticing how it’s [phones were] taking a toll on my health. I wasn’t sleeping as much, how my posture wasn’t as good and how I still need to consciously make an effort to correct it” (p. 7). The response from Lewis, a college senior, captured the different reasons why all of the students decided to unplug. “I just didn’t really feel in tune to my surroundings” (Lewis, p. 4). As Lewis described he felt out of touch with his surroundings, the main personal motivation and reason why students chose to unplug was to reclaim back what they felt was wasted time on social media.

### **External Motivations**

There were external motivations that inspired students to unplug and this included schools, parents and family, and even celebrity music artists. Two students were introduced to the idea of unplugging from their cell phones through externally enforced strict rules. Paolo, a college sophomore, student joined the military after high school where cell phones were confiscated and phone use privileges had to be earned. Lewis attended a private boarding high school where they had mandatory study hall and phones were not allowed to be in the same room. At the boarding school, computers and cell phones had to be left outside of their dorm room or study area and a teacher would inspect and make sure everyone were abiding by the rules. At the time both Paolo and Lewis felt this authoritative enforcement of rules were overbearing leaving them feeling at unease and with some anxiety. Cell phones were a major part of the interactions in high school with their peers. In retrospect, and now more mature as college

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students, Paolo and Lewis were both very thankful that they had these interventions that enabled them to experience time without their phones; an experience they felt they may have not easily got otherwise on their own.

Six out of the nine students mentioned or alluded to their family having some influence on their decision to use their phones less. Most shared how their parents would complain how much they or their siblings were on their phone which made them aware that cell phone overuse was something they needed to work on. Before Paolo was eighteen years old his parents would have him put his phone on the counter before he went to sleep. He admitted though he would sneak out of his room at night to use his phone. Although parent interventions and their cell phone rules did not have a major influence on why students decided to use their phones less family did have some level of influence. Shirley, a sophomore, said:

...A lot had to do with what my family had to say because they're extremely important to me. What they say, I take it to heart a lot because if it's affecting them. I wouldn't want to do so in a negative way...They felt like I was lacking that kind of bonding with them and respect for them...I took it as constructive criticism. It's making me a better person. I feel disconnected with them so I kind of need to tone it down (p. 13).

Outside authoritative military interventions, school rules, and families that introduced the idea of cell phone overuse for some students, when it was time for students to adopt their own practices to intentionally unplug from their phones each of the students had their own motivation. One student read an essay on addictiveness and cell phones and attended the community gathering event called Burning Man that emphasized people to connect with nature and be absent from technology (Wei, p. 12). Shirley heard a popular song called "Just a Picture"

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by Kehlani and Kyle that left a strong message that she should be less preoccupied with what she shared and posted online and the importance of living in the moment (p. 4). She also attended music concerts where the performers challenged the audience to not use their phones and to enjoy the music and experience (p. 16). Lara, a sophomore, went to a holiday reunion party and was excited to be reunited with her friends from high school who were away at other colleges but was taken a back when she got there. She said, “I couldn’t understand why they didn’t want to talk to me and why people weren’t jumping up and hugging one another...it really hurt me” (p. 8). It was in that moment when she realized she did not want to do the same thing to others.

By talking with these students it was evident that these students represented a new wave of college students who were beginning to think critically about cell phone overuse. External motivations had a strong influence on students when it came time to decide to unplug from their phones and be more engaged in the present moment. This speaks to the opportunity that public figures (i.e. music artists, authors), parents, teachers, and schools can play a part in helping students to think critically about their cell phone use.

### **Impact of Unplugging on Interpersonal Relationships**

Cell phones and the act of unplugging proved to complicate how students understood and experienced their interpersonal relationships with others, suggesting that these devices have the power to change how students interact with one another and impact how relationships are developed and maintained.

### **Relationships Are A Two-Way Street**

Multiple factors contributed to how students perceived, valued, and experienced their in-person interpersonal relationships. Although minor, how often a person used their phone in the

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presence of others did influence how the relationship was perceived and for some it had a significant impact on how they felt valued in the relationship. According to Lewis, there were more factors than just cell phones and unplugging to consider when thinking about interpersonal relationships but unplugging did play a role:

The person who you have this relationship with, they perceive that relationship through their own eyes. You could be doing all these efforts to try to unplug and better that relationship. At the end of the day, they're just going to perceive that through their same lens and they might not even be aware of what unplugging might do to this relationship.

A relationship is a two-way street and you can only unplug yourself (p. 17).

Five out of the nine students (Coto, Lewis, Madison, Shirley, Wei), including Lewis, agreed that it was difficult to determine whether their interpersonal relationships improved as a result of intentionally unplugging from their phones because there were multiple factors at play. Factors at play that were mentioned included the quality of the relationship before one person unplugged and used their phone less, the personalities of the people in the relationship, and different communication styles and preferences. There was no blanket agreement on how students perceived cell phones and how they saw it impact their interpersonal relationships. All of the students, however, did see an improvement in their ability to notice details of how others looked, their quirks, how they and others communicated, including the other people's verbal and non-verbal cues.

Paolo shared an example of when he made an effort to connect with another student in person in his on-campus residence hall and the other student was surprised at how observant he was, without his phone:

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...last year in my freshman dorm these people had always been surprised when I asked them ‘What's wrong?’ and if they need anything to come talk to me. Then a day later or that night they [would] say, ‘I need to talk to you’ and ‘How did you know something is wrong?’ [I would tell them] ‘I just watch you, you don't look like yourself...’ [and they would ask] ‘so you're always watching me? [I'd say]...‘no I am not looking at my phone so I notice people. I notice how you normally act whenever I'm around you’...and [the other person would say]...‘you're the first person to notice this today’ (p. 41).

Although there was no clear identifiable cause and effect factors indicating that unplugging directly correlated to the quality improvement of a relationship what Paolo's experienced illuminated was the potential power that unplugging could have on making students more observant and aware students of others and how they feel, one important factor in relationships.

### **Entry-Way Into Students' Social World**

Cell phones were not only objects that distracted students from their in-person interactions and social world but served more as an entry-way into the students' social world through social media applications. Students experienced a lot of feelings of angst about their online identities from pressures that derived from social media and unplugging provided relief from a preoccupation with how they were perceived by others.

Wei, a college junior, explained how deeply intertwined cell phone use and social media apps were with one another and that this would add complexity to how college students and cell phones were understood:

...You can't separate the gadget of the cellphone away from these apps...People are checking their cellphone but ‘why are they checking their cellphones?’ Because [these

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are] things that help people communicate with other people, notifications, that are designed to attract people's attention (p. 17).

Without hesitation, Wei said that he felt the root problem with the obsession and overuse with cell phones were not an obsession with the devices as objects but rather the social media applications that were on the phones. After conducting all nine interviews, Wei's strong instinct was accurate. This claim was supported by all of the student participants who were interviewed who reported that social media overuse was a main reason that motivated them to unplug. Cell phones were not being referred to for its utility functions such as for calling, email, calendar, or transportation and navigation by all of the students. Instead, students were using social media apps on their phones to connect with the "outside world" (Lewis, p. 5) which explained the phone was being used as a communication tool and served as an entry-way into their virtual social network world.

Paolo emphasized Wei's point and said, "[When I]...had a social media presence...people knew I existed all of a sudden" (p.18). Social media presence equated with students' existence and in some ways how they were valued by others and by themselves. All of the other student participants who were interviewed conceded. With this view and value put on cell phones and the accompanied social media apps, the idea of interpersonal relationships took on another meaning. Phones may have been interrupting or a distraction to in-person interactions with friends and family, however, students were using their phones and social media apps to communicate, make plans, to socialize and have a presence among their social network in person and virtually.

Whether cognizant or not, students were heavily preoccupied with how they were perceived by others on social media. This had a negative impact and complicated how

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relationships were viewed and were developed. Some students looked to social media for affirmation and how they valued themselves was closely tied to the feedback they received. Jodi shared how caught up she was one time with how others perceived her:

One of those struggles is reminding myself that I don't have to have other peoples 'likes' on Facebook and Instagram and stuff like that for me to know that I am beautiful, I am good enough, I am creative. Because of my [desired career] field [in Transmedia], I want to know that I'm creative and that I'm good at what I do (p. 11).

This made clear that students were not solely going on their phones and social media just to pass time as freshman Madison had mentioned. For some students, how they viewed themselves was closely connected to how those in their social media network affirmed who they were and what they did. Going online to connect with their social world through their social media applications was how they received feedback, which challenged the good intentions students had to unplug.

Wei reiterated the same notion that Jodi had and explained how tied his online identity was to social media:

...I post a picture and then I look at the 'likes' and [will] be obsessed with how many people have liked the picture. I changed my profile picture a couple of weeks ago and...I kept on checking Facebook, it's just so satisfying to have people like my photo. It's really bad for you (p. 12).

The students shared these comments nonchalantly as if the behavior of affirming oneself with the feedback received from social media was a social norm for them and their peers. Students looked at their social media applications regularly and began to expect receiving some level of affirmation from others, as if it was like a source of currency exchange between one another. If



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they did not receive confirmation from others as they had hoped and expected students felt disappointed. Going on social media was like second nature to students but at the same time there was a sense of disbelief that the students displayed, a feeling that they did not like knowing a part of them cared so much about what others thought of them. As much as the students wanted to resist their default behavior to check social media, it was clear whether they embraced or resisted using social media or their phones, how they perceived themselves and their social life was very much tied to their online social media apps. Shirley began to not use her phone as much, was less active on social media and noticed “I guess everybody thinks I have no life” (p. 11). Finding validation was heavily connected to their social media presence and how they were perceived by others.

Students were not blind to noticing the hazards of looking so intently at their phones and being preoccupied with social media to get messages of self-affirmation. Coto, a senior, said, “social media is a very interesting thing...because you can paint this image of what you’re not” (p. 20). Without seeing firsthand the students’ social media profiles, what they said and shared online, and not knowing the students personally, it could not be determined if the student participants were portraying themselves online differently than who they really were. According to Coto though, the opportunity to reinvent yourself or portray yourself different than who you really were was there.

### **Power Shift Between Students and Their Cell Phone Devices**

Not explicitly shared by the students responses but an important finding that emerged from some of the student comments was what seemed to be a developing power shift that was occurring between people—the students—and their cell phones. Students expressed more than a

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simple annoyance when other people in a group setting were on their phone. They wished others would be courteous and let them know they would be off their phone shortly or at least acknowledge how the phone was disrupting the current conversation. Throughout the interviews, no matter their age or year in school, students displayed confidence in their voice. Confident about their frustration over others being on their phone too much or confident about their decision to intentionally use their phone less. Students were also confident and quick to say that they felt community spaces on their campuses did exist online and on social media and others expressed their strong desire to recreate more spaces where students would interact face-to-face. Oddly, the two most vocal students who were interviewed indirectly alluded to this underlying power shift.

Paolo and Wei openly admitted their inability to intervene and speak up about something that was obviously a concern to them. Paolo said, "...I am never going to ask that straight up [to ask someone to not use their phone when we are together] because I don't think it's my place to do...that" (p. 41). The shift in confidence in their voice about their opinion or inability to take action was an interesting change to hear and see in their behavior. Wei explained more closely to this inexplicit developing power shift:

I'll be talking to someone and then they'll take out their phone. I don't know if they're trying to do that on purpose just to disrespect me, like a power play or something or whether it's just like they can't help it. But I'm in no position right now to command that respect (p. 4).

It was odd to hear Wei say this because he was the most opinionated out of the student participants.

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There was a sense of surrender that could not be explained that students were allowing the presence of the cell phone take the lead. Benji also described the power shift:

I don't want to bother them, they are doing their own thing [and] It's almost like [they are] trying to put up a barrier like saying, 'Oh this is more important than you are, even though you're right there' (p.12).

There was a sense of defeat that Paolo, Wei, and Benji felt given the inability to speak up when someone was on their phone in their presence and when it bothered them. Social norms and what people think is appropriate behavior when with others on their cell phone and electronic devices may be slowly evolving. It was clear that there was a change in how students talked about their interaction with their phones. It is possible that cell phone use and its impact on social interactions on college campuses are behaviors too new that ways to discuss the topic have not been developed or been put into practice.

Although the act of unplugging did not solely affect how students developed and maintained quality in-person interpersonal relationships, unplugging did improve students' ability to be more observant of their own actions of others and has the potential to influence relationships. The way students spoke about their cell phones primarily as a way to connect with their friends and virtual social network revealed the greater significance cell phones as objects play in students' lives. Receiving affirmation from others through online social networks opens new avenues where students can get feedback from others on how they are doing or are perceived. Over reliance and basing one's self-worth and identity on how others give affirmation, whether virtual or in-person, however, has the potential to be damaging if one is too dependent on it. Discussion with students over the impact of unplugging on interpersonal relationships and

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shift in power dynamic between students and cell phones proved that cell phones are not static objects and have relevance to how students interact with others such as friends, schoolmates, and residence hall dorm mates.

### **Impact of Unplugging on the College Experience**

Students expressed real frustration about the overuse of cell phones and witnessed the ways it detrimentally impacted their college experiences but found it difficult to unplug because of the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). Students had opposing beliefs on how they felt cell phones and unplugging had and the potential impact it may have on the community spaces of colleges. The mixed student responses suggest that this study is a part of only the early stage attempt to better understand the impact cell phones and intentionally unplugging have on the college experience as a whole.

### **Use of Cell Phones Created a Sense of Pseudo Community**

A major reason why students decided to unplug from their cell phones was because they began finding themselves more often in face-to-face situations that felt like a pseudo, or artificial interaction and sense of community. All of the students interviewed shared examples of when they spent time with others where people were physically present but that there was a feeling that the others were not emotionally or mentally present and invested in the conversation or interaction.

Lara, described her thoughts on how she felt cell phones had an impact on relationships and the college experience:

Your phone has this kind of way of making you feel close to people and the same time taking you away from them and so I think that is a huge [impact on the college]

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community. Then people lose a sense of what a real community is supposed to be like (p. 19).

Lara's quote spoke to the tension students felt when finding the motivation to unplug from their phones because the pull towards being present on social media was strong. Her cry to reclaim what she calls "a real community" justifies that college students continue to attend brick-and-mortar traditional campus schools for more than to just virtually connect. Other students also felt a strong feeling of pseudo, or artificial, sense of community when with others.

Lewis described in detail a familiar situation that all of the students shared that they experienced:

...someone [is] really excited [to tell] a story or [share] some information in hopes that the others will engage or have something thoughtful to say or even just listen. Many times, you don't even want...feedback, you just want to be heard. [But] too many times, I've seen someone nodding their head with a cell phone in their hand. It just makes me wonder how engaged can you really be. [What's] so important that you have to be looking at your phone that you can't take five minutes to listen to your peer? (p. 3).

There seemed to be a loss in purpose and significance to interact in-person due the simple presence of a cell phone, even if the phone was not being used. What Lewis experienced in that moment that he shared was a feeling of lost respect, value, and camaraderie and support from the other person, all important factors in creating a sense of belonging and community within the collegial college environment.

Other words and characteristics were used to describe how the sense of pseudo community was felt and experienced. Madison described that when she felt a sense of pseudo

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community, or artificial interactions with others, it felt as if people were in “separate worlds” (p. 5) and where Ben felt conversations were rushed (p. 7) and mental attention was elsewhere. The draw towards the phone trumped the physical in-person interactions and conversations. Jodi shared what she thought the real underlying message being communicated when there was a sense of pseudo community, even if unintentional, was:

[the phone has] become a crutch almost where we can't function without it, and when things get awkward then people automatically just [signal], 'Oh I'm going to go to my phone because I don't have to deal with the situation' ...as time goes on, it's a lot of negative impact [to] relationships... (p. 4).

Students felt disrespected by others who were on their phone and did not pay attention.

According to Lara, “[People's preoccupation with their cell phones] ...caused a lot of...nights out with friends to end prematurely because people had nothing to say...you aren't contributing [to] the conversation when you're on your phone” (p. 5). One can imagine what communal spaces on college campuses may look like in the future given the impact the preoccupation with cell phones can have on students interacting with one another.

Shirly forewarned what the future of relationships and college campuses may look like if students continue to use their phones as often as they do now:

...We turn to look at our phones, scroll through our phones...we kind of use it as an excuse...to avoid those awkward instances, but in doing that, you really just automatically deny any kind of relationship that has potential...You could be connecting with the person next to you, but instead you're on your phone. That's an automatic loss (p. 7).

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For these students, their face-to-face interactions within their college experience had turned into a sense of pseudo, or artificial, community. They felt that while their schoolmates and friends may have been physically present in a given moment, their attention and a part of their loyalty was elsewhere, even if not ill-intended. The absentmindedness students observed of others in face-to-face interactions seemed to be an extension of the other person's thoughts tied to social media. The face-to-face college experiences began to feel artificial because students felt people were going through the motions of talking but were not actually present in the moment, engaged, and contributing positively to the conversation or interaction.

While some research argues that online and virtual communication and interactions are valuable and a must in today's digital times (Stoller, 2015) the students in this study help argue that there is value in creating opportunity to connect with others live in-person. They have seen cell phone use change the dynamic in social interactions that have created the sense of pseudo, or artificial, community that they felt. Unplugging from their phones is the way the students in this study actively participated to counteract this.

### **A Challenge to Unplugging was the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)**

Students found it difficult to unplug because of the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), a widely known social phenomenon among young adults and is now increasingly being researched (Prybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013; Turkle, 2015). Prybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell (2013) define FoMO as the prevalent apprehension of being absent while others are having positive experiences and the constant desire of wanting to know what others are up to. All of the students in the study expressed that FoMO was a feeling that they personally felt. Wei said, "...People say it (FoMO) because it's a real thing" (p. 19). It was important for

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students to know what was happening on-campus and played a factor in how students experienced college.

Students feared that they would miss the latest information, an upcoming event, or what their friends were up to because a lot of their college experience was communicated through social media. Shirly shared how she personally experienced FoMO:

You don't...want to miss that text or something, or a call saying [let's all meet up]...you also don't want to be left out...when you are the only one that isn't posting something on Snapchat...you kind of do feel left out (p. 11 and 15).

All of the students had adopted practices to intentionally unplug from their phones and as they described their experiences with the fear of missing out, in almost the same breath or sentence they expressed their aversion and feeling of absurdity towards the phenomenon of FoMO.

Quickly students would share their frustration and positive revelation that they had. Jodi said, “[It’s] frustrating dealing with people and their inability to see me past their phone screen” and “if you’d look up you’d see that I’m still here no matter what” (p. 11). With the 24/7 accessibility and nature of online websites and social media have it was understandable the difficulty students had to unplug from their phones. Students felt exhausted keeping up with the activity occurring online, the desire to want to be up-to-date with the latest information among friends, or what cool party they should go to. With so much stimuli being sparked elsewhere online it was no wonder why students felt a sense of pseudo, or artificial, community face-to-face.

### **Opposing Views on the Impact of Unplugging on Community Spaces**

Students had opposing views on how the community spaces in college were being affected and changed due to cell phones and the act of unplugging from their phones. Cell phone



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use impacted not only the social interactions between students but the sense of community at large. With the advent of social media apps and websites some students located and defined community differently. Coto, Paolo, and Wei acknowledged how intertwined social media sites such as Facebook were a part of college and university life and Paolo and Jodi expressed their concern for what their community spaces currently and may look like in the future.

Coto, Paolo, and Wei explained that a lot of college life is communicated to students using social media. Wei said:

So much of college life is just on the Facebook feed, you'll be surprised. If it wasn't on the Facebook feed...I wouldn't know what was going on [and] maybe that would make me happier but I'd also meet less people" (p. 27).

While happiness and satisfaction levels confirmed or challenged by social media presence could be explored, for the focus of this study, the significance of Wei's quote was that there was a feeling of uncertainty over where a sense of community existed on his campus, online on Facebook or offline and in person. There was a sense that Wei felt he needed to choose one or the other and a need to resolve the dilemma of how college community space was defined and understood. Wei highlighted the benefits of college students using social media and connecting with others online. He said, "I think [cell phones] actually increases community because now I know what the people are doing, what events are going on, what groups there are, what kind of people there are" (p. 26). Like Wei, other students also acknowledged that increasingly university information was heavily being shared on social media and gave reason to why they looked to on the websites to stay informed. In contrast, other students felt that the sense of community on their campus was diminishing due to the frequent use of cell phones and technology.

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Paolo agreed that a lot of university life was communicated on social media but also saw how the preoccupation with cell phones changed communal spaces on campus. He described what he saw on his campus firsthand and shared his thoughts on the college community space.

I would say yes [cell phones impact the community space] because they're empty...My common areas in my dorm are pretty much empty unless you'll see that one individual playing the piano every so often and usually when somebody comes and listens, if they don't feel comfortable they walk away, and if they're okay they will keep playing otherwise you will sometimes see a study group come once in a while but there is not one space you know that you can always go to and find individuals" (p. 40).

Paolo also shared a recent conversation he had with a fellow schoolmate who also wondered where other students were on campus. The student had shared with him that he returned from study abroad at an international school and experienced campus life where students sunbathed in common areas and held large study groups. Paolo's schoolmate shared with him that he hardly saw groups of students spending time together outside in the open spaces such as the engineering quad and amphitheater style grass area that had recently been built with wooden benches, picnic tables, and lawn chairs suggesting they were intended to make up a gathering space for people. Spending time with others, socializing, and playing games in person was what they valued. Without surveying or interviewing more students it is difficult to conclude that the empty common spaces on campus that Paolo spoke about were directly related to the increase in cell phone use among students, however, the desire for more group activities and socializing in communal spaces was a viewpoint to think more about. The desire for more activity in common

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spaces on-campus raises the question how technological devices such as cell phones influence how and where students spend their time.

Jodi shared what she frightened to see in the future if there was continued growth of overuse with cell phones and other electronic devices:

...[the] more we pull away from the actual physical reality and the more we go to our phones...we'll become more and more antisocial to a point of 'Oh I'm going to go to dinner by myself because I have my phone.' 'Why should I go to dinner with somebody else when I have everybody that I need right here at my fingertips?' (p. 19).

Paolo and Jodi's beliefs that unplugging is the solution to rebuilding relationships and a sense of college community is a perspective to consider and their account for what they see on campus as "empty" or "antisocial" spaces brings to light a unique viewpoint on campus life. How students defined community spaces and envisioned what being social looked like varied; proving the definition of community space may be reinventing itself just as technology is evolving.

Since unplugging and using her phone less, Shirley came to the realization that she didn't need to be on her phone to feel a sense of community and preferred her offline community. She said, "I don't need to be on my phone when I'm with them, their company is enough" (p. 16).

Shirley was beginning to see the value in her face-to-face interactions with others that she had not seen or put much thought into before. Some students wanted opportunities to get information, interact, and socialize with their peers and college environment online on Facebook and others wanted more opportunities to talk and socialize with their peers offline in-person. The mixed student responses made it clear that there were multiple perspectives when it came to

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understanding how students used their phones, how they would like to see them used, and suggested that there is still more to learn from students.

### **Ongoing Motivations to Unplug**

Added to the personal and external factors that initially motivated students to unplug from their phones, the ongoing motivational factors that helped students to continue to unplug spoke to the larger takeaways and benefits that the act of unplugging offer students and colleges. Eight out of the nine students interviewed said that a main reason that motivated them to continue to unplug and use their phones less was because they saw improvement in their in-person social skills and how they interacted with their friends and others (Benji, Jodi, Lara, Lewis, Madison, Paolo, Shirly, and Wei). Benji said what motivated him to continue to unplug from his phone was that he began to meet more new people and make new friends he otherwise was not sure he would have made. He said:

I met a girl at a party who I wouldn't necessarily have talked to if I was on my phone. I ended up finding out that we are like almost the same person. We were both home schooled all the way up. We both worked at camps for inner city kids. We both like the guitar. We're both Christians, etc., etc. All this stuff that I wouldn't have figured out if I was on my phone (p. 13).

Not being on his phone allowed Benji to notice someone in a room at a party and start a conversation that he otherwise thought he may have not easily seen as an opportunity if on his phone. Lewis identified as an introvert and said unplugging helped him with his social growth. He said, "Unplugging made me realize that I have more social skills than I previously thought. I guess that's what's really been motivating me to unplug or keep working on those skills" (p. 10).

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Three other students (Coto, Lara, and Wei) mentioned they noticed they created and were maintaining healthier habits that they wanted to hold on to. An increase in feelings of happiness, decrease in back pain, improved sleep, and being less addicted to using their phone were other examples shared. Jodi's parents told her that they saw an improvement in her academic grades, mannerisms, and thought she was less selfish and more thoughtful of others than when she was on her phone more (p. 12). Ability to pick up on other's emotions in-person when off her phone was the way she and some of the other students improved in this way.

Students shared what motivated them to continue to unplug was a part of a bigger picture. It involved how they viewed cell phones and the way they saw unplugging had an impact on students and the college experience, and more broadly how people connect on a human level. Since they adopted the practice of intentionally unplugging, Jodi and Lara liked seeing their change in behavior and how it started to rub off on others around them. Beyond the positive changes that the students felt themselves, the feeling that they might be a part of a larger initiative creating positive change was even more motivation to continue to unplug. Lara dubbed the change that she began to see as "a pay it forward effect" (p. 14) and Jodi saw the open opportunity for her to be a part of a bigger generational change. Jodi said that what motivated her to continue to unplug was that she did not want to be like everybody else around her. She said:

I'm not a robot. I'm a human being...For me...leading a change...of not being obsessed with technology, if I can be part of the initial wave of [helping others see], "Hey, this isn't right, so let's change," if I can be a part of that or if I'm just standing up for what I think is right, that's a big motivation for me personally (p. 12).

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Paolo, a college sophomore who aspired to one day be the United States President, said that after his experience in the military he realized that there was “no single world [but] rather there were eight billion different interpretations of it [and] so what I was really fighting for [in the military] was the right for so many different interpretations to co-exist” (p. 29). With this frame of mind, face-to-face story telling was an important to him as a way for him to get to know other people, where they were from, how they grew up, and what things were of important to them and why. Paolo said, “...story telling [is] so important to me...the ability...not just the story telling [and] being able to talk...[the ability for someone to] tell your history is very powerful” and “...to understand people I think you need to talk to them in person” (p. 29). The act of unplugging was not only a way for students to be able to be more observant of their surroundings, create opportunities to have face-to-face conversations, and build a sense of community on their school campuses. The act of unplugging was a way the students were trying to preserve what they believed to be—at the root of the cell phone issue—human connection and understanding of one another.

### **A Shared Vision For The Future**

Despite the mixed views students had on how they thought cell phones had an impact on the community spaces of their schools, they all shared a vision for the future. All of the students unanimously agreed when asked the question “How would you like to see cell phones used?” The students shared that they would like to see people in the future be more self-aware about how they use their phone. Madison, a freshman, said what she envisions for the future is where people would be “...more in tune with the world around [them]” (p. 20). Students agreed that

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after people become aware of their actual phone usage that it is important for people to decrease and moderately use their phones and to use them for their more basic and essential uses.

Six out of the nine students (Jodi, Lara, Lewis, Madison, Shirley, Wei) explicitly said they hoped to see people use their phones to actually call and talk to people instead of a reliance on non-oral communication forms such as text messaging and email. With phone calls, they felt there would be less miscommunication because emotion and intonation could be more easily picked up by hearing someone's voice. Basic and essential phone functions students mentioned that they would like to see people use their phones for, instead of for entertainment, included: professional and knowledge building (Benji, Lara, Lewis, Paolo) and safety precautions (Benji and Shirley). Phone use for professional and knowledge building would give people the opportunity to have productive conversations, useful skills, and new information could be learned and would expand on one's existing knowledge. How students thought phones could beneficially be used for safety was the phone function that allowed users to record a video or take a photo of a traffic accident or domestic relationship dispute and be used for evidence. Paolo and Coto agreed they would like cell phones to eventually be used like an accessory (p. 42 and p. 18) where people would be less dependent or hypersensitive when without it. Paolo said he would like to see cell phones be used as "...supplementary to life but not your life itself" (p. 42). Students hoped that in the future people would use their phones with greater intention, as author Turkle (2015) would agree.

Beyond using cell phones more deliberately and in moderation for their more basic functions, students sought for a future where phones would be used in more meaningful ways. Cell phones would have more significance if they were used to share a new sight or discovery

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someone had and captured with their camera phone (Benji, p. 20) or for community service. For example, the United Nations Children's Emergency Funding (UNICEF), a children's rights & emergency relief organization, led a campaign called the UNICEF Tap Project that incentivized people who used their phone less (Jodi, p. 21). Coto shared that during a health awareness week her friend posted on Facebook sharing that had suffered from an eating disorder (p. 20). This contrasted the manicured images the students talked about that they or their peers posted online which played in to how they perceived themselves. Coto's friend who shared her eating disorder was showing vulnerability and in a way was sending a message to others that life is more complex and that it is okay to share less-than-perfect moments with others. When asked how he would like to see cell phones used, Lewis said he'd like to see people use them "to derive meaningful information" (p. 18). Students sought a future where phones would be used with more thought and meaning.

There were additional deeper layers of the shared vision for the future that the students talked about. In addition to their wishes for a time where people use their phones in more meaningful ways, they used word such as: friendlier, brighter, more awake, and awakening to describe how they envisioned what the future would look like. These descriptive words were telling and spoke to how they saw or felt their current surroundings with people using their phones. The students sought a change to the energy dynamic among their peers and others when phones are present.

From the interviews, an interesting finding emerged. Three students (Benji, Coto, and Wei) shared what they believed to be the next big problem after cell phones—wearable technology. Wearable technology that they mentioned were the AppleWatch and Google Glass



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glasses. These wearable technology inventions give less option to put it away and is more likely to be worn on the person and has the potential to be used more frequently than phones.

Technology advancements are growing at lightening speed and students are already thinking ahead and onto what lies ahead.

The student participants were cognizant and had developed their own stances on cellphones and unplugging. They were observant of their surroundings, critical of phone overuse and new technology adaptations of the device, and hopeful for the future. They depicted a shared vision for the future that colleges and universities could play a part in, help plan for, and create.

### **Summary of Results**

Conducting interviews with students who expressed concern about the overuse of cell phones, and who adopted their own practices to intentionally unplug, was a new approach to understanding technology and students. Amidst a majority of college students who are quick to use their cell phones and social media, the participants of this study represented a new and emerging student group of non-users who expressed their critical understanding of cell phones, relationships, and the college experience.

From the interviews the study found that both personal and external motivations helped students unplug and there was an identified opportunity for families, schools, and public figures to intervene. While some may argue that proper cell phone use is not a subject to be taught at the college level the students in this study valued and acted upon the advice received from others they respected. Social media overuse was a major reason students wanted to unplug and revealed the intertwined relationship students had with mobile applications such as Facebook and show how college social life expands the physical limitations of college and university campuses. In

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general, students did not see unplugging significantly change or improve their interpersonal relationships as there were various factors within a relationship that needed to be accounted for but shared unplugging helped them become more observant of others. This showed the potential the act of unplugging has on helping improve relationship quality. Students did not see cell phones as simple physical objects but rather as a tool to reach and engage with their friends and family using social media and where they looked to receive affirmation. This exposed the importance of cell phones to students and how interconnected college students' social lives are lived virtually.

Students expressed real frustration about the overuse of cell phones and witnessed the ways it detrimentally impacted their college experiences but found it difficult to unplug because interactions felt artificial and there was a strong feeling of the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). If there were beliefs that cell phones were insignificant to the education space, what the students shared made apparent that the cell phones do change the dynamic between people. Students had opposing beliefs on how they felt cell phones and unplugging impacted the community spaces of colleges suggesting a one-size-fits-all approach to integrating technology to college/university life has to be reconsidered.

Students were motivated and inspired to continue to unplug because they witnessed improvements in both their personal wellbeing and relationships and caught glimpse of a different way their social and college life could be like. With the absence of being plugged in so frequently the students in this study were able to see a different kind of existence with cell phones present, share their concerns, and illustrated a vision for the future that colleges and universities can plan for. The interviews with these unplugged students highlight students who

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think critically about cell phone use on college campuses. In the following final chapter, discussion, limitations, recommendations, and conclusions from these findings will be shared.

## Chapter V

### DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The root of this research study was to further understand the social implications cell phones have on interpersonal relationships and the college experience. To gain a more focused perspective, a unique group of students/non-users, college students who intentionally unplugged from their phone were interviewed. After interviewing nine undergraduate students who attended four different private colleges and universities, in one-on-one semi-structured interviews, what emerged was a nuanced and complicated understanding of cell phones and college students. Students were less preoccupied with their phones as objects but instead were deeply connected to social media apps such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. This research study found that cell phones are not passive objects and in fact do impact an individual's behavior, the way they interact with others, the social spaces in the college environment, and the broader higher education context. This study adds to the new developing research about cell phone ownership among college students, its impact on interpersonal relationships, the concept of technology non-use and role of non-users, and broadly responds to general discussion about the overuse of cell phones among young people and its social and more broad implications. In this chapter is a discussion about the major findings from this study, limitations of the study, recommendations, and concluding final thoughts.

#### **Discussion**

Six major themes emerged from the student interviews and the following is a discussion that expands on each of them.

### **Motivation to Unplug**

There were a range of personal motivations that influenced students to initially unplug and almost all of them were impacted by external influences such as school, parents, and public figures such as celebrity music artists.

The main personal motivation that influenced students to unplug was the overwhelming feeling students felt about the amount of time, attention, and energy social media demanded of them. Previous research and the researcher's own experience working with college students confirmed that college students spend a significant amount of time on their phones to access and interact on social media sites (Lundquist, Lefebvre, & Garramone, 2014; Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Palmer, Boniek, Turner, & Lovell, 2014; Stoller, 2015; Turkle, 2015). Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter are very much a part of the daily life and language used on college and university campuses. The popularity and use of these social media apps are often heard about and encouraged but rarely are the less glamorous and negative effects brought to light. There was a clear sense of tension that students felt. The social norm created among students' peer groups were to co-exist and be active on social media but they felt taxed with the amount of time and energy spent on social media.

Easy access to social network via social media sites and apps allow students to get a question answered or get needed support in a timely manner, however, the instant accessibility to one's social network has created feelings of hypersensitivity. Students feel there is always a need to be present and active on social media. As students' lives get busy with more academic, extracurricular, and adult responsibilities, and as they progress through college, the more commitments and places will demand their time and attention. Social media is there in the mix

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ving for students' attention and, as shared by all nine students, students are beginning to put more value and time spent in other places away of social media.

Since social media was the main personal motivation for all nine students in the study to unplug it would be interesting to find out if majority of college undergraduate students would agree and if there is an emerging shift away from social media, and how that might affect college campus life and students' social behavior individually and with others. What is concerning is how the student Madison said she often would go onto social media without any real thought or intention (p. 6). In this case, a student lost self-control of their focus and time, two important components of navigating college life successfully. As Bliming (2010) wrote, the college environment is one where the "environment and social role expectations combine to influence development" (p. 136). Students will need to learn to develop the skill to moderate their own cell phone use. Creating opportunities for students to find ways to balance their social media use and added responsibilities, along with how to manage the emotions such as the stress that students expressed comes with using social media, may become a learning objectives colleges and universities will need to take on to teach students.

Often it is thought that college students are at a less impressionable age as young adults. Jodi, Lara, Madison, Shirly, and Paolo mentioned their parents or family relatives encouraged and influenced them to unplug from their cell phones. Shirly also mentioned song lyrics and music performer at a concert she attended inspired her to be more present in the moment. Students will need to come to their own conclusion and reasoning to create new habits such as using their phones less. However, with the level of influence external sources—schools, parents, and even celebrity music artists—had on students to help motivate them to unplug, these entities

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and individuals should be recognized and considered as influencers and additional support to students. While parents, some college and university level staff, faculty, and administrators, and even public figures like music artists may think that teaching college students to develop healthy phone habits is not their responsibility, the openness and impressionability that students had from these outside sources suggests these external sources have a level of influence to teach the importance of and practice of unplugging.

### **Impact of Unplugging on Interpersonal Relationships**

Students did not see the act of unplugging to significantly change or improve their interpersonal relationships and believed there were more factors within a relationship that needed to be taken into account. Students saw an improvement in their own ability to be more observant of others which suggests the act of unplugging has the potential to impact how relationships are developed and maintained.

Students felt that there were too many variables in a relationship to determine if unplugging had a direct impact on their interpersonal relationships but saw the positive impact unplugging had on themselves. Students shared that since unplugging they were able to see more detail in other people's personality and actions and their physical surroundings such as their school campus that they did not previously notice. Being able to pick up on the human nuances in another person, including the verbal and non-verbal cues, are important when developing a relationship (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012). This in itself is one step in the right direction that supports the idea that there are tangible benefits to using a cell phone less. The reasons why students chose to unplug align with what authors Lundquist, Lefebvre, & Garramone (2014) found when undergraduate students listed a top negative effect of

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cell phones was that communication face-to-face was no longer the same. Being self-aware of their own behavior was a first step to creating behavioral change. Often when people change their behavior those around them take notice. As more students become aware and put into practice new and healthy behavior like unplugging, the potential to create broader awareness and positive change among other students to see the upside of unplugging becomes more possible.

Students were less preoccupied with cell phones as objects for their basic phone functions like emailing and phone calls and instead cell phones served more as the entry-way into students' social world with the use of social media applications. This broadens the way cell phones and its users are perceived and shows an aspect of how cell phones can be used for social engagement. One can view social media spaces as a space that has increased the number of opportunities for students to interact with others, and also an alternative space for students who may have difficulty approaching and interacting with others in-person. Social media in that sense has expanded the physical social spaces where students would convene on their college campuses. Learning that the phone was a main way for students to reach their friends and family and to stay connected, the researcher developed more empathy and understanding for college students.

While cell phones were viewed as a way to stay connected with friends and family, students experienced a lot of feelings of angst about their online identities from pressures that derived from social media, the act of unplugging provided relief from a preoccupation with how students were perceived by others. A concerning comment the student Paolo mentioned was that he felt it was not until he had a social media presence that other people knew he existed. Other students looked to social media to affirm their talents and how they physically looked. Social media monopolized and shaped how students understood the way they were seen and valued by



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others. The danger in this is the over dependence students will continue to have on social media to confirm their presence and self-worth and devalue other forms of support.

Technology is changing the way students communicate with each other and the social norms of what is viewed as acceptable or not varies depending on the person. In today's digital age, it will be important to not overvalue one communication method such as face-to-face over another like virtual communication. More importantly, students will need to learn how to negotiate with one another what communication format is preferred by each individual and suitable for a group. Students should not be faced with the dilemma of choosing to communicate face-to-face (unplugged) or virtually (plugged in). This may mean that the expectations people hold over what are appropriate communication methods and social norms may need to be reconsidered and being flexible and open is a good starting point. It will be important for students to not be too dependent on their gadgets in order to open up more possibilities and opportunities to connect with others in person, face-to-face.

### **Power Shift Between Students and Their Cell Phone Devices**

An interesting finding was the developing power shift between students and their cell phone devices. Throughout the interviews students exuded confidence in their voices when sharing their opinions and concerns over cell phone overuse and their decision to intentionally unplug. They were less confident when it came to navigating situations when with another person who was on their phone. Some of the students did not feel they had the authority to intervene because people on their cell phones in social settings have become normalized and expected. The uncomfortable feelings that they expressed like not wanting to bother the other person because they felt there was a "barrier" up (Benji, p. 12) and almost like a "power

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play” (Wei, p. 4) was in the mix left students in the situation feeling like they were an interruption to the other person and less valued and important. Not feeling like it was socially acceptable to say something is telling of the social power that has been transferred to cell phone objects and its users.

Enabling cell phones and technology to take on the social power and influence over how students behave is a concern. It is then when students lose self-control over their sense of agency and their belief in their ability to say something that bothers them. While some may argue that cell phones and social media are a medium that gives students the opportunity to express their voice and share opinions, the sense of defeat that the students shared shows in a way cell phones silence the opportunity for people connect in person. Having honest conversations with others, even if uncomfortable and involving confronting opposing ideas and values, is an integral part of the social growth and knowledge building that takes place during college. Benji shared his fear for the future and said, “I believe in the future people will stop trying to think for themselves because the internet [through their phones] can think for them” (p. 19). Unplugging was one way for these students to counteract the popularized activity of going on their phone but the skill of knowing how to discuss the uncomfortable feelings surrounding cell phone use had not been developed yet. This is where colleges and universities can take part in teaching students how to start these kinds of conversations with one another.

### **Impact of Unplugging on the College Experience**

The influx of heavy cell phone and social media use did not only have an impact on students individually and on their relationships it also had an impact on how they experienced college. Students expressed real frustration over the overuse of cell phones and witnessed the

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ways it detrimentally impacted their college experiences but found it difficult to unplug because of the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). In addition, students had opposing beliefs on how they felt cell phones and unplugging had on the community spaces of colleges.

Students often felt a sense of pseudo, or artificial, community when with others and attributed it to others being preoccupied using their cell phones. The sense of pseudo community creates a great concern because feelings of respect, value, and camaraderie and support are lost between people, all important factors in creating a sense of belonging and community within the collegial environment. Not only can this impact an individual person who is left feeling disrespected and undervalued but it has the serious potential to impact a group setting such as the college experience. The sense of pseudo community has the potential of reducing people's desire to interact with others, invest time and energy to get to know others, and for collaborative and supportive communities, networks, and friendships to be developed. These are some of the many reasons students choose to attend college.

Students found it difficult to unplug because of the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). They feared that they would miss the latest information, an upcoming event, or what their friends were up to. As Prybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell (2013) and Turkle (2015) found in their research, the fear of missing out is very much a real feeling of apprehension that students feel. FoMO gives more value to virtual communication and interactions over those face-to-face and with the 24/7 accessibility and nature that online websites and social media applications have the desire to know what is going on and the fear of missing out is never ending. The irony of students who are so fearful of missing out on information that is shared online is that they ignore and potentially miss out on what may be occurring right in front of them. So much of college life

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is experienced not only in virtual spaces but also live in person—on the lawn on campus, at the cafeteria dining table, at the football game, or the music concert.

Students had opposing beliefs on how they felt cell phones and the act of unplugging would potentially impact the community spaces on colleges campuses. Some students felt that cell phones are a part of today's college experience and the two are inseparable. Other students thought that there is a need to create opportunities and spaces for students to spend time with others without the distraction of technology and devices like cell phones. These two opposing views are valid and both should be honored because they reflect the diverse needs of students.

Paolo and Jodi referred to the community places on their campuses as being “empty” or “antisocial” and gives reason for others to be observant of patterns on where students spend their time on campus, what draws them to those spaces, and what may be causing them to spend their time elsewhere. If students in masses are retreating from traditionally reserved common spaces on campus then more will need to be explored on the reasons why. The activities that students participate in private or with friends in their dorm room may be equally or even more engaging as a conversation face-to-face that were to take place in a residence hall but this will need to be further explored. Future work will need to take place to assess the different activities that students participate in, in what formats these activities are in, and whether or not alternatives may need to be created to meet the needs of different students. The students who participated in this study represent a group of students who would like more opportunities to interact offline and in person.

### **Ongoing Motivation Factors to Unplug**

Students shared a variety of motivation factors that helped motivate them to continue to unplug, which included personal gains and greater social fulfillment. One student found himself making more new friends since unplugging, and others were happier, their academic grades and attitude towards others improved, and so did their physical symptoms such as back and neck pain and sleep. This proves that heavy cell phone use can impact students in a number of different ways and how far stretching the simple act of unplugging can go to help make improvements. In addition to the more tangible and easy-to-see benefits of continuing to unplug, several students chose to continue to unplug because they saw this act as a way to contribute to something much greater—not just on their campus but as a part of a larger societal issue involving people and technology.

Jodi saw herself as being a part of an initial wave of students creating change among her college-aged generation and Paolo was motivated to continue to unplug because he valued face-to-face conversations and the power of storytelling as a way to get to know other people. It seems as if the social repercussions of using technology is only catching the attention of college students, the group of students in this study being some of those students. This may be a sign of the benefits of being unplugged, or a non-user, a group of people whom Wyatt (2003) encouraged academics and practitioners to pay more attention to. What is hopeful is that students are seeing that there are alternatives to what currently exists. One objective of this study was to show that some students value face-to-face conversations alongside virtual communication, a rare sight in a digital busy time. However, more importantly, what was hoped was that this study would unveil a new part less explored of the conversations around technology and college

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students. As Baumer, Burrell, Ames, Brubaker, & Dourish (2015a) said, “While non-use is often understood as the absence of a phenomenon or practice, something else likely exists in place of use, and it is *that* [emphasis included] something we should be studying” (p. 54). By hearing students’ aspirations to serve as social influencers for their peers and future students, this study has moved the needle one step forward opening up the dialogue that college and university administrators, faculty, staff, and students themselves may have in the near future. The ability for the unplugged students to see alternative ways and new aspects around technology and college students that were less explored is likely what Baumer, Burrell, Ames, Brubaker, & Dourish (2015a) meant when they referred to the “something else” that likely exists.

### **Shared Vision for the Future**

Students communicated their shared vision and concerns for the future. They envisioned a future where people would be more intentional with their phone usage and would use their phones for their basic functions or for more meaningful purposes and initiatives that would bring greater good in their community. The students also shared their concern about what they thought the impact wearable technology will have on people and their connections with others.

The shared vision that students have for the future, and ultimately what they long for, is for people to become more self aware of their actions and surroundings. At its core what they seek is positive human connection; things that require no digital plug-in or upgrade. What they want is simple and does not require much resources nor major university financial investment. A lot of focus on college and university campuses have been to find ways to leverage the latest technology and what these students are calling out for is for there to be more opportunity to connect with each other without the time and attention that their cell phones often demand of

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them. In order for this to occur what needs to happen is for students and colleges to first be open to consider an alternate kind of existence that could lived; technologically competent, not overly dependent on their devices, and the openness to using other modes of communication and connection.

Students shared their vision of the future and their concern for new technology such as wearables like the Apple Watch or Google Glass glasses. These types of new technology are worn by a person and are almost an extension of one's body. It will be interesting to see how conversation between two people will look differently when there is a more advanced version of the cell phone. It is possible that future technology like the Apple Watch and Google Glass will be less obtrusive as it is when a person picks up a cell phone in front of someone. Technology developers should consider including non-users in the design process (Wyatt, 2003) in the future in order to speak to the needs and concerns of its users. How a person self-manages the constant activity these devices will stimulate and call on for their attention, along with their ability to stay focused and engaged in a face-to-face conversation, will likely be more complicated and challenging. If this is the future of technology, and its possible implications, than it is even more important now for students to become more cognizant of their phone use and the need to balance the constant connectivity that these devices require.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

There were several limitations to this study that should be considered and open up opportunity for future research. The small number of participants and use of only interviews for data collection were limitations. This study is a part of a larger body of research in its infancy that critiques heavy cell phone use and its relation to college students. Due to this, there was not

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an obvious group or place where students who intentionally unplugged could be found. The researcher chose to only do interviews because she did not think students would feel comfortable talking in a group setting about the unpopular topic of using their phones less. However, adding surveys and physical observations as additional data collection methods would allow the researcher to hear responses from more students and gain a more comprehensive understanding of how students think about cell phones. By physically observing students one could see how students actually interact with their phones and would allow the researcher to more clearly define what it means to be preoccupied with a cell phone, what it looks like, and be able to identify other possible contributing factors that are more difficult to identify from interviews and self-reported survey information.

There were an uneven number of participants, student demographics, school type, and undefined term of “unplugging”. Addressing these limitations could allow the researcher to identify clearer patterns and differences in the data. There was an uneven number of students across their age and year in school and there was a greater representation of students who were twenty years and older and beyond their freshman year in college.

All participants shared that it was in middle school, high school, or their first year in college when they used their phones more often and when it was a greater problem and distraction. Not having friends and being in new surroundings explains why students in their initial year in school would use their phone more often to communicate with existing friends and family. Only two freshmen reached out to participate in the study and only one committed and followed through. This may be evidence that the younger groups of students are heavily using



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their phones and have not yet developed an awareness of their phone usage, need or desire to use their phone less for certain benefits in return.

With more participants who were twenty years and older and beyond their freshman year, it was noticeable that these students were more mature and had developed their critical thinking and communication skills to be able to self-evaluate their phone usage in relation to their relationships and college experience. By interviewing younger students, it is anticipated that these students would be using their phones more often, more information could be gathered to further understand the causes for increased phone usage and gain more reasons why it is difficult to unplug from their phones. With this information future researchers could compare and contrast between the different age and school years. Plus, further exploration can be done to get a deeper understanding of what the major contributing factors are to the cell phone and college issue. Variables that could be explored in more detail are: age, year in school, stage in personal development phase, level of maturity, increase in student responsibilities and expectations, current and popular technology and apps being used.

Due to the researcher's professional and school network at private colleges and universities, all participants attended four-year private institutions. In general, private schools enroll more students who come from higher income and socio-economic backgrounds. With more financial resources that would allow students to own a cell phone it is likely these students viewed cell phones as dispensable and as an accessory. The reoccurrence that students referred to their cell phones for entertainment value suggested they did not rely on the single device as the only means of communication or accessing the internet for essential purposes such as finding transportation home or healthcare. By adding student participants who attend other school types

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such as vocational/trade schools, community colleges, and state/public colleges or universities, where there are students who come from less privileged backgrounds, a more complex understanding of why students use their phones could be gathered. Gaining an understanding of how students might rely on their cell phones for access to information that their livelihood depends on would add to how people think about college students and the preoccupation with their devices.

The term unplug/ged was loosely defined and was a limitation in this study. In this study, to be unplugged from one's cell phone meant you consciously made the decision to use your cell phone less, with no specific parameters such as minutes or hours the cell phone was used or not used or for what functions of the phone was used. Due to the popular trends of using cell phones as part of daily life there is less discussion being had counteracting this narrative and behavior. This is the reason why a more broad definition of what it meant to unplug was used. By loosely defining what it meant to unplug allowed the researcher to recruit more students to participate. Clearly defining the parameters of what it means to unplug would allow for the creation of a control-group and to more clearly identify shared commonalities or distinct differences between students and their phone usage.

Students were the only population included in this study. Students endorsed university sponsored programs and initiatives as a way to address the prevailing issue of students and the overuse of cell phones and it would have been helpful to include interviews with university staff, faculty, and administrators to broaden the perceptions of cell phones and how they see these devices impact interpersonal relationships and the college experience. Small or large gaps between the views and expectations between university personnel and students could have been

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identified. By including the higher level decision makers at the university to be a part of this study, future research may be able to identify interventions and solutions necessary to address the issue of increased cell phone and electronic device use. This can help surface which university stakeholders would be needed to create institutional/campus-wide initiatives to be established.

It was clear that the main reason students decided to unplug from their phones was because they thought they were spending too much time on social media apps. A limitation of the researcher was that she did not have an extensive knowledge of the intricacies of how mobile apps such as Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter were used to understand what the major draw students had to use them. By knowing the functions and benefits to these apps in more detail the researcher would have been able to see the value students saw in social media and better empathize with the struggle students experienced when they tried to detach.

Limiting the study to only college students, where age range, personal development, and life experiences are not too far widespread made it difficult to see major patterns, unique, and stand alone responses more clearly. Doing a longitudinal study including pre-kindergarten, graduate students, middle-aged adults, and seniors would enable a researcher to see what factors contribute to heavy cell phone use, ease in unplugging from devices, and a clearer understanding of its impact on relationships, school, and lived experiences.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations for practice are suggested to students, college and university administrators, faculty, and staff, and information technology (IT) mobile software developers to consider.

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### For Students

**Creating Dialogue.** It is recommended that students speak up in situations where they find cell phones interrupting face-to-face conversations and when they are displeased. Students shared their desire and difficulty to speak up to tell their friends and peers that they wished they would use their cell phones less because they felt it hindered their conversation and ability to connect with others face-to-face. Students are encouraged to start a discussion respectfully where they constructively share with the other person what bothers them when they are on their phone too much and what they seek out of the interaction uninterrupted from cell phones.

College and university life is a time where students mature and develop their understanding and stance on their own values and self-growth and improvement cannot occur if problems are not addressed. The more that students suppress their feelings of annoyance and frustration the more they allow it to build up within themselves increasing the chances of anger and resentment towards other. Enabling behavior that they do not favor creates an undesirable environment to be in and sends the false message that preoccupation with cell phones is not an issue. Students are encouraged to share the reasons they prefer the other person to unplug from their cell phones and why they value conversation and their company with less distractions. Students should share what benefits they've found from unplugging if they have begun to do this and what motivates them to continue.

Students are encouraged to practice speaking up and create spaces for dialogue with others. As family members, school staff, and public figures such as music celebrities whom students respected influenced and motivated them to engage in face-to-face interactions without their phones, students themselves can help teach their peers. Students can begin to create a

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culture where talking about cell phone and technology use can be constructive and welcomed. Having these types of conversations is not the norm yet and only when discussion around counteracting the preoccupation with cell phones begins will more awareness and social acceptance for unplugging be created.

### **For Colleges and Universities**

**Recognizing Their Role.** Colleges and universities play an important role in educating students and young people about cell phones and its social impact on relationships and the school experience. College and university administrators, faculty, and staff can take an active role in small and big ways by creating new training and programs, adjusting their strategic communication plans, and making campus infrastructure changes. In tandem with the students who participated in this study, those who intentionally unplugged from their cell phones, college and universities need to first acknowledge that personal technology devices such as cell phones have the potential of impacting individuals, relationships and groups of people, and the dynamic of college life. Firsthand accounts were shared by students themselves in this study and provide valuable information from the student perspective. By first acknowledging cell phones are a topic worth paying more attention to, university administrators, faculty, and staff can recognize that it is within their purview to see how they can contribute solutions to this emerging issue.

First, universities will need to take an active part in creating an openness for dialogue that it is okay to use cell phones and electronic devices less. Different campus constituents are encouraged to create workshops and resources that teach students the benefits of unplugging. Whether initially couched in the health/wellness department on campus or another office, several of the students in this study suggested that universities take a multi-department approach at

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bringing awareness on the topic of cell phone overuse, the consequences, and the benefits of unplugging.

**Liberty University As An Example.** Liberty University in Virginia is an example of a pioneer in educating students on healthy technology use, including cell phones. As a part of the university's academic and advising support services, Liberty launched the nation's first Center for Digital Wellness with the purpose to "raise awareness about the dangers of digital overuse and saturation" (Menard, 2015). The center has organized innovative events including a Digital Detox retreat, where students spend a weekend at a camp with no Wi-Fi access. The center also provides students with a variety of resources such as a digital wellness quiz and a digital wellness challenge that encourages students in concrete ways how can change their daily behaviors using technology. In addition, a student-led Reclaim Conversation campaign on that campus encouraged students to go out and talk about the importance of face-to-face conversations for happy lives and healthy relationships.

Even in its early stages, students at Liberty have already seen changes in their own behavior, how they see others and their relationships with their friends and communities. The center's webpage highlights student testimonies on how involvement in the center's programs has helped enrich their relationships and their ability to self-reflect and be engaged. As one student notes, "My digital life is different now because I have increased my intentionality of making friendships a priority over spending time online. So I have to be more efficient with time to have space for meeting a friend for coffee or spending time in a conversation. It is worth it. I need rich relationships" (Liz, n.d.) One might argue that it's too late to try to teach healthy digital boundaries at the college level and that it should instead be addressed in elementary and

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secondary school, while it is encouraged, this Liberty University student proves that initiatives spearheaded at the university level are well received and effective.

**Training and Programming.** Campus departments can create a student employee handbook for their office to make a change to the office environment. The student employee handbook can be used to teach skills of professionalism and have students practice putting away their cellphones during work shifts to be more attentive to their work and those whom they are serving. A part of the new student orientation program can be dedicated to raising awareness of the issue. The media and production company called SoulPancake, a top recognizable creative agency creating uplifting and inspiring content, conducted an experiment called “Take a Seat, Make a Friend” (2013) which was documented on the video sharing website YouTube and is a creative way colleges and students might consider replicating. In the “Take a Seat” experiment, random strangers in a city who come across one another at a street corner are invited to sit in a play pen with colored plastic balls that have questions and prompts written on them to spark conversation with one another. In the end, two people of different ages and backgrounds who did not previously know each other find ways to connect with each other on common grounds, show empathy and care towards the other person; initial signs of face-to-face human connection and friendship building.

This is a way colleges and universities could get students talking with one another, and see how much more they learn about their peers without their phones. By doing such an activity, students can experience firsthand the potential upside to unplugging their phones and can set the tone and expectations, telling students to rethink how they show up and participate in campus activities throughout the school year. In these ways, students can start their college experience on

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a positive foot while truly engaging with their fellow classmates, as well as faculty and staff members.

**Strategic Communication Plans.** Universities are recommended to balance their communication strategic plans with both digital and less technology dependent forms of relaying information. Some of the students interviewed shared that they felt college life was synonymous with social media. “So much of college life is on the Facebook feed” (Wei, p. 28). This comes at a time where colleges and universities are strategically putting into action ways to meet students where they are at by communicating with students using social media platforms (Stoller, 2015). Sending information to students through multiple streams of online methods, primarily social media apps like Facebook and Twitter, does allow offices to reach students more easily and provide them with updates on new events, important dates and changes to policies and procedures. However, there is more to what students were saying when so much of their university information was communicated using Facebook. There was a sense that they had no other option otherwise they would miss out on important information.

Universities should consider informing students using nondigital forms such as the printed school newspaper, fliers, verbal announcements at events, use of campus TV screen monitors, and in-person tabling. If social media apps and online communities continue to be viewed as places for students to congregate and meet others, and where they exchange ideas, build school spirit and a sense of community, universities will need to consider clearing out what is communicated virtually to students and take on a more diversified communication strategy and implementation. If majority of university sponsored information is being relayed virtually to students the likelihood that they are inundated with information increases. There will need to be



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some negotiation of what is shared virtually and easily accessible through students' mobile devices if universities want students to be able to decipher very important information from less information, and more importantly stay engaged.

**Campus Infrastructure Changes.** Creation and implementing physical building infrastructure changes is another initiative college and universities can consider taking on. The student Wei suggested adding small scale additions to existing buildings on campus and a creative solution that would take more financial resources but is worth considering. Wei said:

[what my university should do is] “build nooks and crannies within buildings that are specifically digital free, just spaces, focus zones. Have things like that across campuses where you can’t access Wi-Fi, you can’t do work in there. It’s a cool space where you can just sit, meditate or do whatever, maybe talk with whoever else is in there as well.....  
[also] Just have nap pods scattered across campus at specific places where students can just take naps” (p. 20).

Liberty University student, Jodi, also mentioned that at their campus' new Center for Digital Wellness spaces called Conversation Corners have been created to encourage people to start meaningful conversations. Conversation Corners is a physical room space where it is quiet where students can talk to somebody and study, and physically unplug from technology distractions such as their cell phones. Stanford University has a fairly new building and quiet contemplation space on-campus named the Windhover and is a collaboration between the Office for Religious Life and Office of the Vice Provost for Student Affairs (“Stanford Windhover, n.d.). These intentional Wi-Fi-free zones and napping pods are physical and tangible solutions to the preoccupation with cell phone issue.

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If colleges and universities continue to be looked to in order to help educate and prepare students to be good citizens and positive contributors to society then taking part in the cell phone discussion falls within their scope of responsibilities and are encouraged to consider implementing any of the small or large scale initiatives mentioned.

### **Information Technology (IT) Industry and Mobile Software Developers**

At the speed technology is evolving and the quickness young people, including college students, are taking up learning how to use these devices, the technology industry (IT) itself may need to be the actors in helping create solutions. The IT industry can help students use their phones in moderation, more productively, and in healthy ways. Jodi mentioned a couple of innovative ideas that are a step in this right direction. For example, the UNICEF Tap Project (<https://tap.unicefusa.org/>) which is a campaign that the community serving organization created to challenge people to put down their phone and take part in social good. For the time users spent off and not active on their phones the organization would make monetary donations to help raise money for clean water for underserved communities. Another creative solution to address the cell phone addiction issue that Jodi mentioned was the new mobile application called Pocket Points (<https://pocketpoints.com/>). Students are incentivized to unplug and use their phone less. For the time a phone is locked students while in class or on campus they are able to gain points that can be redeemed for student discounts, coupons, or gifts at local or online businesses. Although this would still require students to use technology and their devices that they are trying to use less, these innovative developments are a shift in the way companies are engaging with their customers and in their way advocating for students to think about and interact differently with their phones and technology.

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Coto, a student a part of this research study, already has gotten involved in thinking about creative solutions to intervene on this issue. Coto designed a prototype of a mobile app called *Unplug*; named perfect, timely, and directly in line with the focus of this research study. The idea behind the app was that it would help people control how often they used social media app or general phone apps. The app she was designing would give the user the option to block apps for a set period of time or the user would be able to set allowances of a certain amount of time to be able to check their apps.

By taking up these recommendations, students themselves, colleges and universities, the technology industry and mobile software developers can add to the momentum, drawing attention to the benefits of unplugging, face-to-face interactions, amidst the constant clicks, taps, and pings of cell phones.

### **Conclusion**

Cell phone overuse has further implications that are far reaching beyond the parameters of this study. In addition, a lot can be learned from the unplugged students and their vision for the future. Initially, the onset of this research study sought to find if there was a connection between students' cell phone use, corporate culture, and the role of students as consumers; and whether or not they impacted relationships and the college experience. A question of curiosity was whether or not cell phones, objects tied to corporate company interests, were disrupting or had the potential to sway the "noncommodified public space" of higher education where important issues pertaining to its community are discussed and debated (Herman and McChesney, as cited in Giroux, 2002, p. 428). Quickly, however, through conversations with the students in this study it was very clear that the study would take a different turn and focus.

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Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that institutions of higher education have become increasingly more commercialized (Giroux, 2002; Lindros & Zolkos, 2006; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009; Naidoo & Jaimieson, 2007; Olsen & Peters, 2007), and that cell phone use has played a role in this process. For example, many campus bookstores have transformed into authorized Apple, Inc. stores where they sell products such as the Apple Watch, wearable technology that students expressed their concern about for the future.

Cell phones have become like second nature to students and are very much a part of how they operate and navigate through their college and daily life. For these reasons, it is understandable why not much thought was given to consider the implications of cell phones with regards to hyper-commercialization and commodification in higher education. The students in this study shared their thoughts and feelings about how extensive cell phone use impacted their ability to be present in the moment with others, their health, and wellbeing. Students did not think of themselves as corporate consumers of their cell phones and instead were primarily drawn to their phones to simply communicate with others, mainly using social media.

The overuse with cell phones and other technological gadgets have the potential of challenging the mission and values of most universities that encourage in-person human connection, team and community building, and empathy and respect for others, and increased civic understanding and engagement. As Paolo said, embodying the mission that many universities seek to impart on their students, the biggest lesson that unplugging taught him was “being forced to understand the world in which I live in and I think the phone gives you this false impression that the world in which you live in is through that phone” (p. 15-16). Through the use of their phones and social media, and sometimes by viewing news on their mobile apps, students

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in some way felt they were involved in the democratic process—communicating with others, sharing their ideas, and contributing to dialogue taking place in their school, local, and larger communities—simply by being active on their phones. By hiding behind a cell phone screen students have the option to easily ignore and disengage in the hard face-to-face conversations and work that is necessary for building a sense of community with others. The unpredictable nature of face-to-face communication brings with it more nuances one has to navigate. The students in this study who intentionally unplugged were in their way trying to create spaces to have these conversations with others and be engaged citizens, or active participants in their college communities. They were directly, though perhaps unknowingly, challenging the system of social media apps and companies who benefit from them being unconnected to one another in in-person community but hyper connected virtually. In this way, unplugging was the way these students were trying to de-commodify the higher education space and their attempt to reclaim their interpersonal relationships and college experience.

The unplugged students who were a part of this study are a group of students who are thinking critically about cell phone use on college campuses. Jodi had hoped to be a part of an initial wave of college students helping others see the benefits of unplugging and in the end she is. These unplugged students are taking initiative on college campuses showing how campuses are implicated by the habit of cell phone use. By not addressing the notion that cell phone overuse impacts students interpersonal relationships and how they experience college, higher education institutions are complicit in the overuse of cell phones.

When asked “How would college life look different if everyone subscribed to your vision of cell phone use?”, the students shared that they envisioned a time where cell phones would be

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used in healthy ways. More people would be looking up, away from their phone screens, and you would be able to pick up a person's tone of voice and body language. People would have improved posture and phones would be mainly used to keep in touch with the people who were not there with them. Cell phones would be put away and not seen out at meal time or during class, and there would be more students out in common spaces on campus like the school cafeteria and at campus athletic games.

Jodi envisioned that students "would not have voices because we'd be talking so much to everybody" (p. 21). Students would text less and not be afraid to call each other. They would not market a false reality and sense of self online on social media and there would be more people out of their comfort zones. Students would respect other people's time and would equally feel fulfilled to learn something from one other.

There was concern about what the future will be like, especially for the younger generations who have grown up with technology and are more dependent on it. The unplugged students saw the act of unplugging as a conscious way of interacting with others and getting involved in things that matter most. To them, cell phones do change the college community and the way it is developed and formed. To Benji, unplugging truly meant: "to unplug from your phone...[you] plug yourself into the world" (p. 9).

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APPENDIXES

## APPENDIX A

### STUDENT PARTICIPANT PROFILES

#### **Introducing Benji**

Benji is a twenty-four year old white male and is from Wisconsin. He is a junior and a recent transfer student at Liberty University. He is majoring in criminal justice and would like to join the Marines and become a prosecuting attorney after he graduates. Benji recently started unplugging from his phone just three weeks prior to when he was interviewed for this study. What initially motivated him to unplug was an extra-credit challenge his evangelism teacher gave to his class to try to not use their phone while on campus. The class was a required class all Liberty students had to take and the class was focused on learning from the bible and learning how to share the teachings and show you care through service. By unplugging from their cellphones Benji's teacher thought it would enable students to have more conversations with others about the bible and Christianity. After the class challenge was over he decided to try and continue to practice and incorporate unplugging in his daily life, which he was beginning to find a positive practice. Benji also heard a presentation on-campus about Liberty's new Center for Digital Wellness where he learned about the impact overuse of cell phones could have a negative impact on people. He was intrigued by the topic about the impact cell phone use can have on people.

The primary functions he used his phone for were texting, Google search, and Facebook messenger because his parents live in another country. His best method of unplugging from his phone was to put his phone on silent mode and the method that did not work for him was putting his phone on vibrate. Benji said that when a person unplugs "you focus on the people in front of you and the world around you" (p. 11) and to him when people unplug they become more aware of others and see their connection to a greater context.

#### **Introducing Coto**

Coto is a twenty-two year old Asian female from Southern California. She is a senior at Stanford University majoring in Science, Technology, and Society (STS). She is interested in human centered design and applications in technology and would like to work in the design industry. Coincidentally, when she heard about this research study she was working on designing a prototype of a mobile phone application/app called "Unplug" for a class called "Media that Matters". The idea behind the app was that it would help people control how often they used social media app or general phone apps. What initially motivated her to unplug was because of the anxiety she felt not being able to control how often she would check her phone. During her junior year, many of her friends studied abroad, she found herself constantly checking social media, and feeling left out seeing what her friends were up to without her. She did not unplug often and only unplugged depending on the situation and if she needed to focus on something such as a project.

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The primary functions she used her cell phone for were texting, email, and social media (the top being Facebook, SnapChat, and Instagram). What she did to intentionally unplug was ask her friend or her sister to change her password for her, deleting apps off her phone, turning the phone off or leaving it at home when she goes out. The unplug method that did not work for her was being mindful and having her own will power to not use her phone apps.

### **Introducing Jodi**

Jodi is a twenty year old white female from Tennessee. She is a sophomore at Liberty University and is majoring in Transmedia Writing where she learns how to create a story and tells the story in multiple formats like the popular Marvel comics do. She is an honor's student and attended home school her entire life prior to attending Liberty. Because she was home schooled she was not surrounded by other people all of the time and found herself curious and wanting to know what other people were doing. She felt lonely and using her phone and social media was her way of connecting with people and feel like she had more friends. It allowed her to fill the void of not having constant interaction with peers. When she used her phone often in high school it was because she was either bored, trying to avoid serious feelings, and block out reality. She said using her phone was "numbing" (p. 5).

Jodi works at Liberty's Center for Digital Wellness where she is responsible for marketing the Center, researching different ideas that the center can pursue, and adding programming that is geared towards raising awareness around digital wellness. She is a Christ follower and since she has unplugged she is less obsessed with her phone. Being unplugged has allowed her to be able to sit and have quiet time which has given her spiritual renewal that helps her to keep going and get through challenges. What initially motivated her to unplug was when she noticed how often the people she would spend time with were on their phones, they would be busy posting on social media instead of saying what they had to say out loud in person. She did not want to be like them and be dependent on her phone.

The primary functions she used her cell phone for were Hootsuite, a website where you can create a single post of information and have it linked and posted to other social media sites that she uses for work, the calendar and homework planner for school, her bank app, texting, and the music player called Spotify. What she did to intentionally unplug was she would put her phone on vibrate mode, face the phone screen down, put it out of arm's reach, and when she really feels bad about how often she would go on social media she would delete the app off of her phone so that she did not have the "temptation to just mindlessly just play on my phone" (p. 8). When absolutely necessary, she would even ask a friend to take her phone and put it behind them so that she will not reach it and be able to pay attention. According to her, doing this is like having extra accountability when trying to self-manage her cell phone use. The unplug method that did not work for her were setting time limits and verbal accountability where another person would tell her not to use her phone.

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### **Introducing Lara**

Lara is a nineteen year old female, with unknown ethnicity, from Southern California. She is a sophomore who recently transferred to Menlo College and is majoring in Business. What drew her to participate in the study was that she felt she had a different view on unplugging than what she thought most people her age would have. She got her first phone when she was in high school compared to others her age first who got their first cell phone in elementary school. Lara considers herself from a “generation that’s in the middle” (p. 2) who experienced a time with less technology and recalled when there was dial-up internet. She did not have a cell phone her entire life but was young enough to be heavily influenced by them. Her mother is a yoga instructor and is the person who made her aware of the physical drawbacks that heavy cell phone use does on the body such as back and neck pain and problems with sleep. Her mother’s influence seemed to have a significant impact on her as she often referred back to the physical implications of heavy cell phone use and it being a major motivation for her to use her phone less. What motivated Lara to unplug was when she felt hurt when she was at a holiday reunion party with friends and no one seemed excited to see each other after not having seen each other for some time. She did not want to do the same thing to other people.

The primary functions Lara used her phone for were text messaging or phone calls in order to keep in touch with her significant other and family and Google search to find answers to questions that she might have. What she did to intentionally unplug was that she would turn off her phone because it would take time to turn back on and she would sometimes leave her phone behind when she went out. An interesting method she used to unplug is to have the video on her computer be on where she and her boyfriend could see each other while they were doing their homework, not necessarily talk, and not have to fidget with their phone and be distracted. When out with friends her and her friends would put their phones in the middle and the first person who picked up their phone had to pay the bill. Since students do not have a big budget to be able to pay the bill not using their phone was quite motivating. The unplug method that did not work for her was her attempt to power down her phone an hour before sleep so that it would enable her to go to sleep more easily but she found it difficult because her need to be able to be contacted by her family and friends. An interesting thought that Lara shared was:

I think that helps to just leave your phone in a place where you can’t get to it because when you can’t get to it then you have to face that vulnerability and then as you’re facing it you become more comfortable with it. I genuinely believe that people are not that far off in transitioning back to having conversations. It’s just nobody wants to take that step and live the phone someplace else. It can’t be just a one person thing (p. 10).

Lara was optimistic that students and people could teach themselves to use their phones less.

### **Introducing Lewis**

Lewis is a twenty-two year old male of hispanic, latino or spanish origin and from Southern California. He is a senior at University of San Francisco majoring in psychology and

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intends to go to medical school after he graduates. He said the reason why he was interested in participating in the study was because he had recently noticed that he would “fall for the cell phone a lot of the times” (p. 2) and use his phone without any real thought and was becoming dependent on it. Lewis’s high school boarding school prohibited students from using their phones during study time and were required to keep their phones outside the room. This gave Lewis no choice but to unplug. Later on on his own, he noticed he was spending too much time on social media and was being unproductive. He realized that if he had limited amount of time to do things that he rather spend his time doing something productive such as gaining new knowledge rather than spending his time on social media.

The primary functions Lewis used his phone for were public transportation, news, and music. He began to not go on Facebook and Instagram less than he did before but continued to check Twitter to follow and learn more about celebrities or artists and for the news. What he did to intentionally unplug from his phone was to not bring his phone with him or have it readily available. He tried to impose strict rules for himself and be more observant of his actions and the unplug method that did not work was putting his phone on airplane mode which would deactivate the cellular connectivity for mobile apps to work.

### **Introducing Madison**

Madison is an eighteen year old white female from Ohio. She is a freshman at Menlo College majoring in marketing and is a student athlete. What drew Madison to participate in the study was that she noticed she was using her phone more often than she thought she should be. She wanted to learn if she was intentionally or unintentionally unplugging from her phone already, learn more about the subject on cell phones and college students, and have the opportunity to talk through her thoughts. She said she wanted to see if she could self-manage her cell phone use on her own. There was hesitation in her voice over whether she believed she was capable of self-monitoring her cell phone use. Madison had only started unplugging recently during the semester that this study took place. What motivated Madison to unplug was seeing other people not on their phone and she thought she should do the same. “[If] they are not missing out I don’t think I’m not going to be missing out on anything” (p. 9). Others had an influence on her and it was then that she thought she would give unplugging a try.

The primary phone functions that she used were social media (mentioned in this order: Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and SnapChat), the camera, and music. What she did to intentionally unplug was to leave her phone behind in her dorm room or if she had her phone she would turn it off. The unplug methods that did not work so well for her were deleting apps off of her phone, surprisingly never more than for a couple of hours. Putting her phone on silent mode or turning off the notification function were methods that did not work. It was hard of Madison to separate herself from the phone and she found herself often looking at her phone just in case a message came through. Interestingly, Madison was the only freshman student who participated in the study and only one of two who had inquired. Why less freshman were not interested in participating in the study may reflect where first-year students are at in developing awareness about their cell phone use.

### **Introducing Paolo**

Paolo is a twenty-one year old male of hispanic, latino, or spanish origin from Northern California. He served in the Army after high school before going to college. He is a sophomore at Stanford University majoring in International Relations with a focus on Security and Comparative Government and his dream job is to be the President of the United States. What interested him in this study was that he was fascinated with the concept of how technology has impacted people. While growing up, his family did not have cable TV or video games and therefore he naturally went outdoors to play. Now, he prefers to be outside. He considers himself a very social person and likes talking to people and learning about them. Paolo's introduction to unplugging was not by choice and when he joined the military there were strict rules that prohibited him from having a cell phone and phone privileges had to be earned. After the military, what motivated him to continue to use his phone less was by seeing his parents less dependent on their phones and that they were fine. He then thought he would try and use his phone less. His parents also instilled the idea that it was important he know how to speak up for himself, articulate his ideas, and be socially aware, and believed by using the phone less would help him be able to do this.

The primary phone functions he used were email, calls and texts, and news. What he did to intentionally unplug was to set timers for himself. When the timer would go off he would allow himself to use his phone for a certain amount of time before he would go back to do the task he was working on, a self-imposed regimen he created for himself that was similar to Coto's prototype mobile phone app "Unplug". Setting time durations of when he allowed himself to use his phone was how he self-managed his phone usage but also was his way he would reward himself and take a break. The unplug method that did not work for him was putting his phone in his pocket, even if it on silence, because he would still reach for his phone.

### **Introducing Shirly**

Shirly is a nineteen year old female of hispanic, latino, or spanish origin from Southern California. She is a sophomore at University of San Francisco double-majoring in critical diversity studies and sociology. Participating in the study was timely for her as she had recently heard a song called "Just a Picture" by Kehlani and Kyle left a strong impression on her. The song encouraged people to disconnect from technology and live in the moment. After hearing the song she noticed how often her friends were on their phones when she spent time with them and it left her feeling annoyed. She did not want to be hypocritical and began to make an effort to use her phone for its basic functions. Her family also helped motivate her to unplug and were the ones who pointed out how much she was on her phone. She had a lot of respect for her family and took their feedback as constructive criticism. She started to intentionally unplug hoping she would set a good example for her siblings and cousins.

The primary phone functions she used were Instagram, texting, and Facebook. What she did to intentionally unplug was remove her earphones and put them away in her backpack. This way she would have no choice to hear and see what happened around her. She would normally



## UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES

listen to music a lot and admitted that she kind of would “isolate myself from the rest of the world around me” (p. 14). Other methods she used to unplug were to not look at her phone or put it in her back pocket. Like the student Lara, Shirly and her friends also played the restaurant phone game where you put your phone in the middle of the table as a way to be less distracted and be more attentive. Shirly said that most friends would be open to doing the restaurant phone game and that everyone respected the core principle behind it. She said that her and her friends were aware that they were always on their phone and the phone game served as a reminder to them that they were there for each other. Unplug methods that did not work were deleting apps that she used. She would assign different levels of value for the social media apps that she had. Snapchat was the least valued, after Instagram and Facebook which she used for educational purposes to learn about specific topics she was interested in such as feminism. The unplug method that did not work was justifying time limits to allow herself to be on her phone. Coto’s mobile app “Unplug” would have been a perfect solution for Shirly.

### **Introducing Wei**

Wei is a twenty year old asian male from Michigan. He is a junior at Stanford University and a history major. What drew him to participate in the study was that he thought that different technologies such as cell phones were becoming addictive and a problem that many people don’t think is a problem but is a bigger problem than people realize. He was heavily influenced and inspired by Paul Graham, an English computer scientist, venture capitalist, and essayist. He read an essay Graham wrote about addictiveness and the importance of blocking long periods of time to think and concentrate and be able to come up with something original and new. This influenced Wei’s view on being attention-conscious and is what helped motivate him to unplug. He also believed he was growing a cell phone addiction and creating healthy habits such as healthy cell phone use motivated him to unplug and monitor how often he used his phone.

The primary functions Wei used his phone for were text messaging, Facebook messenger, and the general Facebook app which is where he would get his news from. What he did to intentionally unplug from his phone was to place his phone face down, put it in a drawer, turn the phone off, delete apps, and turn off notifications. Inspired by Graham who supposedly did not have a smartphone, an interesting method that Wei also tried to unplug was by having two different cell phones. One flip-phone was supposed to be used only for when he was studying when he did not want outside contact with others and for people to contact him only for emergencies. For everything else, he would use his smartphone. Having the two phones failed. He said, “the experiment frankly failed, [and] that just shows the power of the cell phone. It’s so dominant in our lives that even if you intentionally go out to try to subvert it, it’s almost unfeasible” (p. 11). His friends eventually got confused over what phone they were supposed to reach him at and managing two phones became not practical.

# UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES

## APPENDIX B

### APPROVAL FROM THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD OF PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS - UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO (COVERS ALL SCHOOLS)



#### IRBPHS - Approval Notification

To: Jadelin Felipe  
From: Terence Patterson, IRB Chair  
Subject: Protocol #610  
Date: 02/19/2016

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your research (IRB Protocol #610) with the project title College students, intentional "unplugging", interpersonal relationships, and neoliberal college context. has been approved by the IRB Chair under the rules for expedited review on 02/19/2016.

Any modifications, adverse reactions or complications must be reported using a modification application to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS via email at [IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu). Please include the Protocol number assigned to your application in your correspondence.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Terence Patterson, EdD, ABPP

Professor & Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

University of San Francisco

[irbphs@usfca.edu](mailto:irbphs@usfca.edu)

<https://www.axiommentor.com/pages/home.cfm>

APPENDIX C

APPROVAL FROM THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD OF THE PROTECTION OF  
HUMAN SUBJECTS - ADDITIONAL FOR LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Dear Jadelin,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases are attached to your approval email.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**The Graduate School**



*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE INFORMED CONSENT FORM



**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Jadelin P. Felipe, a graduate student in the Department of Education at the University of San Francisco. The faculty supervisor for this study is Danfeng Koon, a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco.

**WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:**

The purpose of this research study is to determine how college students, who intentionally “unplug” from their cell phones, understand their proactive actions and the ways in which these actions influence the way they develop and maintain quality in-person interpersonal relationships, within a college corporate culture (neoliberal) context.

**WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:**

Your participation in this study will involve one or two 30-90 minute one-on-one interview sessions. You will be asked a series of questions related to your intentional action of “unplugging” from your cell phone and its impact on your interpersonal relationships and college experience.

**DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:**

The study will take place 1) at your school or work place, 2) at a mutually convenient place for both interviewee and researcher, and/or 3) by telephone call or video conference call (i.e. Skype, FaceTime), depending on your availability.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:**

The research procedures described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: brief or limited emotional distress, frustration, and/or anxiety

## UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES

surrounding the topic of how cell phone use has impacted your interpersonal relationships and college experience. However, serious risks are not anticipated to occur that should prevent you to want to participate. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

### **BENEFITS:**

The possible benefits to you of participating in this study are:

- Have the opportunity to share your personal experiences and be able to reflect on how cell phones impact your interpersonal relationships and college experience;
- Gain confidence and empowerment over cell phone use, find motivation to think about your cell phone use, and establish healthy boundaries with your cell phone; and
- Gain the opportunity to ask and/or learn about successful “unplugging” techniques and programs to consider to do yourself and to teach others as well (i.e. peers, friends, family, colleagues).

### **PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, unless given permission from participants to use their personal identifying information (i.e. name), I will use pseudonyms to protect the names of the students I interview. Photos and audio recordings will be downloaded onto my computer which has a security password for safety. Photos and audio recordings will be kept indefinitely to reference in the case I continue this research in doctoral studies.

Additional Information:

### **VIDEO AND AUDIORECORDINGS:**

With your permission, your interview will be audio-recorded. This is needed for the researcher to be able play back and reference the interview, transcribe, and decipher what was said in order to help formulate writing for the thesis paper. Once interviews are complete, audio recordings will be downloaded to my computer which is protected by a password for safety. Audio recordings will be kept indefinitely in order to refer to for future research.

### **COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:**

You will receive a \$25 gift card for your full participation in this study.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:**

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

**OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:**

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Professor Danfeng Koon at [dkoon@usfca.edu](mailto:dkoon@usfca.edu). If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at [IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu).

**I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.**

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*PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE*

*DATE*

APPENDIX E

SAMPLE CONSENT TO AUDIO OR VIDEO RECORDING AND TRANSCRIPTION FORM

**CONSENT TO AUDIO OR VIDEO RECORDING AND TRANSCRIPTION**

I understand that this study involves the audio and/or video recording of my interview with the researcher, Jadelin P. Felipe. I am aware that the audio or video recordings will be transcribed into written form and that only Ms. Felipe will listen (view) to the recordings. Additionally, I recognize that it is the responsibility of both the researcher and I to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions.

By signing this form, I am allowing Ms. Felipe to audio or video record me as part of this research. I am also aware that Ms. Felipe will store, in a secure place, the original audio or video recordings and transcripts for indefinitely in the case she needs to access them for future research. Recordings and transcripts will be destroyed at your request.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES

## APPENDIX F

### SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### **INTRO**

Before getting started, do you have any questions?

#### **PREVIOUS CELL PHONE USE**

You've shared you are proactive and intentionally "unplugging" from your cell phone.

What was it like when you were using your cell phone more often?

How would you describe your in-person relationships and college experience before unplugging?

#### **CURRENT CELL PHONE USE AND UNPLUGGING**

What do you use your cell phone primarily for? Name functions and/or specific uses or apps.

Do you think college students use their cell phones frequently?

What is the impact you've seen cell phone use on others?

Again, you've shared you are proactive and intentionally "unplugging" from your cell phone.

What does "unplugging" mean to you?

What led you to this?

What methods do you take to intentionally limit the amount of time you use your cell phone?

What has worked?

What hasn't worked?

What has been challenging about "unplugging"?

What motivates you to continue?

Have your interpersonal relationships and college experience changed since "unplugging"?

If so, how? If not, why not?

Have you noticed any changes since "unplugging"?



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### **STUDENT AS CONSUMER**

[Explain LinkedIn purchase of Lynda.com]. There is literature out there that says college students have become “student consumers” and that there is a lot of student data that companies can potentially use and leverage. What do you think about this?

### **INTENTIONAL UNPLUGGING PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES**

[Explain Stanford Windhover/Liberty University Center for Digital Wellness/University of San Francisco “unplug” pledge campaign]. What do you think about these places and programs?

What recommendations do you have for students who have difficulty detaching from their cell phones?

In what ways can college/university student services help?

### **FUTURE CELL PHONE USE**

How would you like to see cell phones be used?

This will be the last question of the interview. How would college life look different if everyone subscribed to your vision of cell phone use?

### **CLOSING**

Do you have any questions you would like to ask?

# UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES

## APPENDIX G

### COLLEGE STUDENTS ADDITIONAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender (Choose One):  
☐ Female      ☐ Male      Other \_\_\_\_\_
3. Hometown:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
City/State
4. What is your race or ethnicity?  
☐ Asian  
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native  
☐ Black or African Am.  
☐ Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin  
☐ Middle Eastern or North African  
☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander  
☐ White  
☐ Multiracial or biracial  
☐ Some other race, ethnicity, or origin \_\_\_\_\_
5. Class Standing (Choose One):  
Freshman      Sophomore      Junior      Senior
6. Household Parent Income Range Combined:  
☐ \$0-24,999  
☐ \$25,000-49,999  
☐ \$50,000-74,999  
☐ \$75,000-99,999  
☐ \$100,000-149,000  
☐ \$150,000-199,999  
☐ \$200,000 or more

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For Researcher Use Only: Participant #: \_\_\_\_\_

# UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES

## APPENDIX H

### LIST OF PATTERN CODES USED FOR TRANSCRIPT ANALYSIS

Pattern Code	Brief description	Pattern Code	Brief description	FALSE REALT	False reality	PROBLEM	Cell phone posed a problem
ADDICT/HABIT	Addicting or habit	MULTITASK	Multi-tasking related	FAM	Family	PROFILE	Student profile information
ADJECT	Adjectives describing unplugging	NEG	Negative uses of cell phones	FB	Facebook social media	PROG	University programming ideas
BIG QUES	Bigger questions posted by student or researcher	NEOLIB	Neoliberalism or corporate culture	FOMO	Fear of Missing Out	REBUT	Rebuttal or challenge to a question
COL/UNIV	College and university experience	NEWS	News function on phone	FRESH	Freshman year in college	REC	Recommendations for colleges and universities
CONV	Conversations in general	NO CHNG	No changes occurred	FRIEND	Friend	SCH YR/AGE	School year or age
DEFINED	Unplugging defined	ODD	Stand alone comment, data - interesting	FUTURE	Thoughts on future	SNAPCH	Snapchat social media
DELETE	Act of dealing app to unplug	OTHER	Other people	GROUP SET	Phone use in group setting	SOC MED	Social media
DUR	Duration of unplugging	PH FUNCTION	Phone fuction	H.S.	High school time frame	SOPH	Sophomore year in college
EMOT	Emotions felt	POSITIVE	Positive uses of cell phones	HEALTH	Health related	SR	Senior year in college
ESSENTIAL	Cell phone needed for its uses	POST UNPLUG	After unplugging	IDEAL	Ideal use of cell phones	STUD INT	Student's personal interests
F2F	Face to face interactions/ conversations	PREPLUG	Before unplugging				

INSTA	Instagram social media	TIME WAST	Time wasted/issue/ concern
INT PERS	Interpersonal relationships	TWIT	Twitter social media
JR	Junior year in college	TXT	Text messaging
LIKES	Affirmation on Facebook or other social media	UNIQ	Unique information
MEN	Men	USE	Uses of cell phones
METHODS	Methods of unplugging	VARIAB	Variables need to be taken into account
MIDDLE	Middle school	WHEN	When student began to unplug
MOTIV	Motivation to unplug	WOMEN	Women

# UNDERSTANDING HOW INTENTIONALLY UNPLUGGING FROM CELL PHONES

## APPENDIX I

### SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT PAGE OF PATTERN CODING AND MEMOING

