Cellphones and Social Effects

Adena Ruckoldt

Bzz! Bzz! Bzz! First you hear it, then you see it light up. Don't know what I'm talking about yet? That's surprising, because you probably have one on your desk, in your pocket, or in your hand right now. In fact, as of August 2015, 92% of adults owned one of these things (Mendoza). I'm talking about a cellphone. While they are phenomenal little devices that we can use to communicate, surf the web, play games, or watch movies, they can also cause some serious issues. Eye strain, headaches, brain tumors, hearing loss, and low sperm counts are just a few of the risks of using cellphones (Bhatia). Although I agree with other writers in terms of cellphones causing negative health effects, it is important to expand on those ideas by examining the social aspects of this issue. Is our population becoming ruder? Are we becoming less satisfied with our lives? Are these changes because of our increased dependence on cellphones? Let's see what we can discover.

A few weeks ago, I attended Western Illinois University's rendition of *Tribes*. Before the actors even got on stage, an announcement was made about respecting the actors and not using cellphones. I didn't think that announcement was necessary, but even though it was said, people still did not turn off their cellphones. The first phone that rang continued to go off. Not only did the owner not turn off her phone to begin with, she also did not silence it right away. This was not just a vibrating phone, this was a full on song as a ringtone type of phone, and the lady made no attempt at stopping the disruption. Finally, it stopped ringing, and I was able to focus on the show again. Well, I was able to for about five minutes. The guy right next to me had a phone

start vibrating in his pocket. He silenced it right away, but then proceeded to take out his phone, look at the number that was calling. He studied it, I presume trying to decide if it was important or not. So, now, I've been disrupted by a ringing phone, a vibrating phone, and the brightness of an iPhone while I was trying to watch a play. Where has everyone's respect gone?

Theaters have been struggling with patrons using their cellphones for a few years now. In July 2015, Patti Lupone was performing in "Shows for Days" at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater. Enraged by the four cellphones that went off during the matinee show, she took it upon herself to take a texting audience member's phone during the evening show. According to her, people who "can't let go of the phone" should not buy a ticket or come to the theater. The phone "controls them. They can't turn it off and they can't stop looking at it." She continued, "They are truly inconsiderate, self-absorbed people who have no public manners whatsoever." Her job isn't to keep cellphone users in check; her career is to act (Piepenburg, Erik. "Hold").

According to Susan Frankel, the general manager of Circle in the Square Theater, patrons who use their phones in the theater fall into one of three categories. The first is those that do not go to the theater very often. They may be excited about the experience, or they may just not know or remember the proper etiquette. The second section of phone users are diehard fans. They are so excited to be so close to some of their role models and inspirations that they simply must tell someone! These people are not trying to be disrespectful, but they want to share the adoration for the performers with other people. The third camp of people are parents with kids at home. They are worried if they left the babysitter with enough details, if the kids are behaving, what the children are doing, and all of the other thoughts that come with parenting (Piepenburg, Erik. "Theaters"). This section probably makes the most logical sense because the parents are concerned with safety. However, this does not give them the right to disturb others. If they really

needed to know what was going on at home, they could sit in the back, and when necessary, step out of the theater for a minute. That way less people are disturbed with their interruptions. How can we fix these incidents if they're happening at all levels of theater?

A company called Yondr has one idea. As guests enter a theater, they are handed a "form-fitting, tamper-proof neoprene case," phones are put into the case, it is locked and each audience member holds it during the performance. If a call needs to be made, they must take the package into the lobby for a staff member to unlock. After the show, the cases are returned much like 3D glasses at a movie theater (Piepenburg, Erik. "Theaters"). The main problem I see with this method is that people are not patient. Nobody is going to want to wait in line for their case to be unlocked before they are allowed to go home. Although also not ideal, theaters could have phone lockers. In order for patrons to receive their tickets, they would need to place their phone in the locker. Once that was done, a ticket would be printed out for them. The lockers could even have charging cables in them, so everybody can give their phone a boost during the performance. The downside of this is how do the people that don't have phones get their tickets? Perhaps they have to go through a bag check and metal detector to be sure, or maybe we can trust people. However, with the amount of people that are addicted to their phones, I would be curious to see how many would lie just to keep their phone with them.

Another method for controlling cellphone use in theaters is to embrace it. Several theaters have classified certain seats as "tweet seats." Audience members in these seats are encouraged to use social media throughout the performance. This allows them to use their phones, and provides free publicity for the show (Piepenburg, Erik. "Theaters"). However, when I go to a theater, I don't want to see a bunch of people with lit up squares in front of their faces. I'm there to soak up the magic of the show. While I like the idea of "tweet seats," I feel like they would need to be

in the very back, or have some sort of dome over them so that I could still enjoy shows in the good old fashioned dark.

It is not just in the theater where people struggle with phone etiquette. Another complaint that some have is people talking on cellphones in public places like the grocery store or a waiting room. They feel that people are loud and inconsiderate because they are not focused on the situation around them, but on the conversation with the person they are on the phone with. For some reason, people tend to overshare when they're in public on the phone. Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D from *Psychology Today* uses the example of standing in line at the grocery store. If neither of you were on the phone, you both may smile and talk about the weather. But, neither of you would spill secrets about family or financial problems. However, if she was on the phone, you just might accidentally overhear some of these things. People think that being on the phone isolates them somehow. The more private a conversation should be, the more removed they feel from their immediate surroundings (Whitbourne). This can make bystanders feel awkward and uncomfortable. They know they shouldn't be eavesdropping, but at the same time, if someone is standing right next to you, and talking loudly on the phone, it can be hard not to overhear. Michigan State sociologists Jonathan Forma and Stan Kaplowitz conducted a study that found cellphone users actually speak 1.6 times louder while on the phone than they do in person (Whitbourne). Knowing this, we can attribute volume to be a main reason that people who use cell phones in public are considered rude. There is kind of an expectation in society that we all respect each other's bubbles, and that includes sound as well. But, as it turns out, there is another reason why people consider cellphone conversations to be more distracting than overhearing a conversation between two people. According to Cornell University psychologist Lauren Emberson and colleagues, when you overhear two people talking, it is easy to hear what

everyone is saying, but when someone is on the phone, you only hear one side of the conversation. Your brain has to do extra work to try and fill in the gaps in the conversation (Whitbourne). So, even though you aren't trying to eavesdrop, your brain is decoding the conversation anyway, putting more of a mental strain on you.

The easiest way to fix this issue with cellphones would be to set up designated places for people to talk on their phones, much like there are designated smoking sections. Sure, it isn't convenient to have to stand somewhere else, but chances are that phone conversation can wait anyway. Another option is to begin having technology etiquette classes starting in middle school and going through high school. As kids learn how to use their cellphones appropriately in public, they will hopefully teach their parents some rules, too. Local libraries, park districts, and workplaces could offer seminars on this topic as well. The best thing to do would be to educate the public on what is expected of them and their cellphone use. The best option would be to have the major technology companies such as Google and Apple create a type of standards on when it is most appropriate to use a cellphone and also, how it should be used in those situations. Based on their expectations, educational classes could easily be developed to help the population understand proper etiquette when it comes to technology.

The third issue with an increased cellphone dependency is the injury rate. In 2005, the number of pedestrians injured while using their phones and received hospital treatment was 256. By 2010, that number was six times as large. Clearly, this issue is still increasing as more and more people become heavily reliant on their phones (Halsey). This is a danger to the user because they can easily walk out into traffic, fall into a fountain, or run into a sign or pole. Do you think I'm kidding? Google "woman falls into fountain while texting," and see for yourself. This lady was literally so engrossed in her cellphone, that she tripped into a fountain, continued

to look at her phone for a second, and then got out of the fountain with her phone still in her hand (Chappell). But, it is also a danger to the people around them. What if they run into one of them? What happens when a person who is texting and driving fails to notice a person texting and walking and runs them over? How can we prevent this problem from getting worse?

Well, we all know that there are texting and driving laws. There are also hands free driving laws that require cellphone users to use a Bluetooth speaker or some other method to talk on the phone while driving, so that they are not holding their phone to their ear. Both of these offenses are punishable by law. So, why is distracted walking not a part of that list as well? It would be easy to have police officers walking around busy cities and streets writing tickets to people that are texting and walking. The fine does not need to be large, but eventually people will get the idea that maybe paying attention to their surroundings while walking is a good idea.

Based on what we have learned, I think it is safe to say that our society is becoming overly dependent on cellphones. They are great to use while arguing over facts with friends and a quick Google search will determine the winner. They are a fabulous tool to use for keeping track of dates, times, and events. They are wonderful for quick conversations or questions. But, they are not great when they go off in theaters and interrupt performances. They are not fabulous when they are distracting and irritating other people. And, they are definitely not wonderful when people are getting sent to the hospital because of being used while walking. As technology continues to rapidly change, people's perceptions of how and when to use certain gadgets will change also. It is our job to try and educate the public on how to best go about making these decisions. Some day we may think that it is a necessity to have access to our phones while in a theater, but as of now, most people would think otherwise. We need to lead by example and show the population that it actually is possible to walk around a mall without texting, watch a

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