

RUNNING HEAD: TECHNOLOGY IN SHAPING INTERACTIONS

The Role of Technology in Shaping College Student Interactions: A Qualitative Study of

Canadian Students

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## **Introduction**

Autumn weather becomes December winds. Students shuttle indoors, growing cozy in the campus pub while coffees and beers decorate tables. Although the social space is coloured with different faces, most of them share one thing: they're facing a device. This technology is everywhere, which is not unique, but it also seems to have a big effect on how people interact here, which seems to have unique results.

It is common to read headlines like CBC's "Social media affecting teens' concepts of friendship, intimacy" published in 2014. That article discusses Patricia Greenfield's research stating that college students receive social support through online networks instead of face-to-face connections. "The result is a decline in intimate friendships". This echoes warnings parents repeated for years: technology is ruining how youth interact. The sentiment is everywhere, yet Canadian research is rare. This paper addresses that, looks at studies about interaction and technology, and provides evidence based on 10 hours of observations to explain how technology influences social interaction among Canadian students in a way that actually benefits social life.

## **Previous Research**

In an article titled *The iPhone Effect*, the authors found that people reported feeling more connected without their phone. Survey responses indicated that participants without a cell phone nearby felt "higher levels of empathetic concern for their conversation partners". The study stresses this paper's goal, exploring how technology affects interaction.

The second article looks at 10 other studies, combining them to explain how looking at a phone screen shapes social interactions. The author developed his explanation with Japanese culture in mind, which is more reason for this paper to study Canadian students. For Nakamura, a

smartphone user can nonverbally communicate that they are able to talk with others at any other time, that others might need to contact them, or that they are busy. This “contextual multiplicity” is because a smartphone user has many options at their literal fingertips. In a busy space like the school pub, this affects individuals and groups.

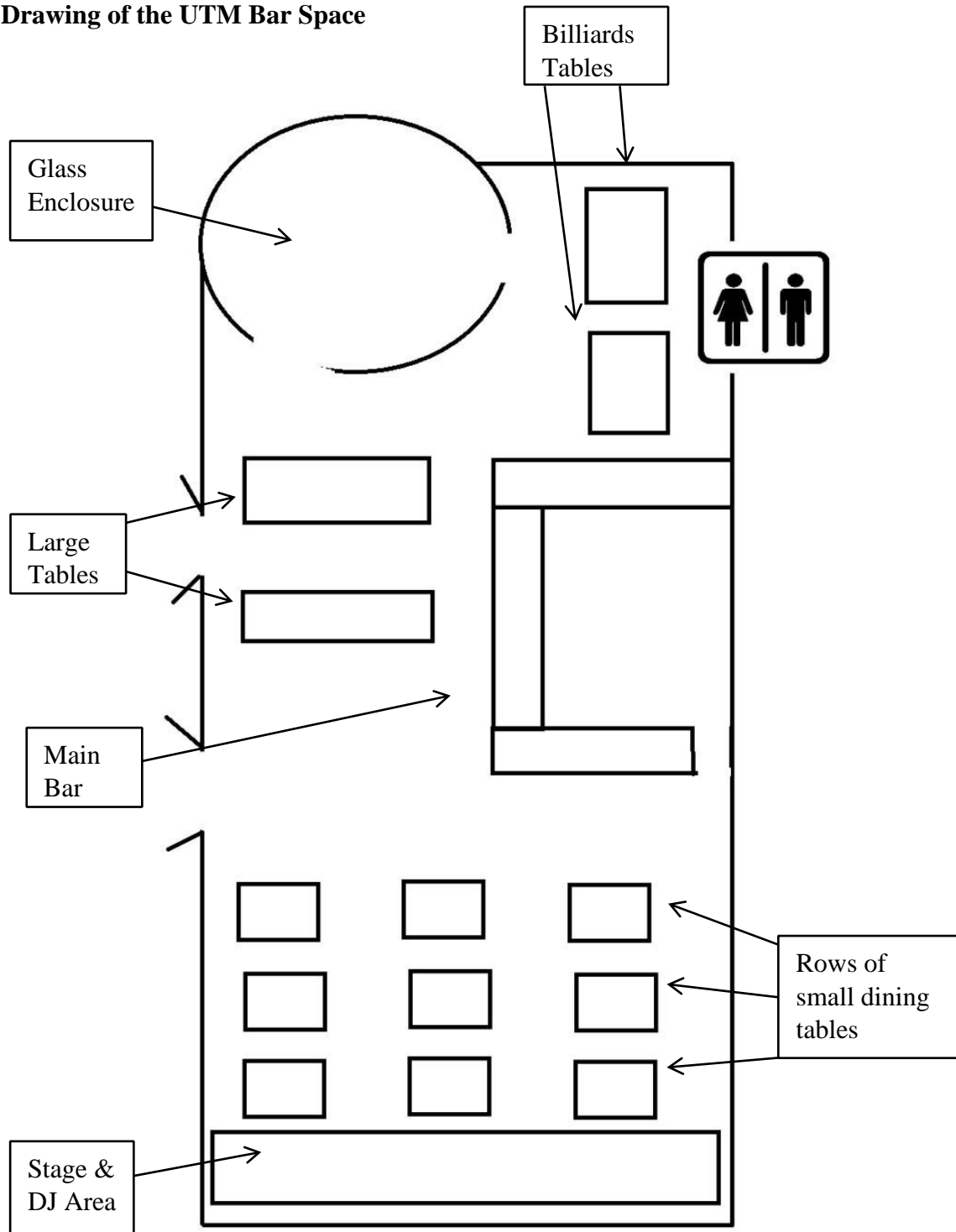
The last study is called *Cellphones in Public*. Humphreys observed 500 people in places like trains and cafes. One frequent observation throughout the study was the act of communicating with people one is physically with while taking a call. A participant explained that he rolls his eyes when he is taking a call from someone when he does not want to; he also avoids eye contact to make it seem less like he is blowing off or ignoring the person. Another participant admitted to listening into phone conversations even though it is frowned upon. Her work shows that cellphone use has social rules and it gives insight into our social expectations.

## **Methods**

Observation data was collected while seated at different tables around four areas (small tables, large tables, glass enclosure, and pool tables). Most data was collected at the small tables. One fifth was also collected at one of the large tables. I observed 42 students at the University of Toronto Mississauga Pub, The Blind Duck, in groups ranging from two to six. The sample included 18 males and 24 females.

Data was analyzed after notes and observations were thematically assessed then organized. One of the main concerns was that I began the study knowing about articles and books that say technology ruins social interactions and read nothing stating that it helps. Fairness was a primary concern, but the risk for bias in the analysis might remain.

**Drawing of the UTM Bar Space**



**Findings**

My findings indicate that technology can have a positive effect on social interactions. The main way technology improved social interaction was as a study tool. I saw many groups cooperatively working in front of a laptop in a way that a textbook cannot allow. More research is needed to confirm this, but these findings hint that technologies determine the tasks that groups engage in. This is shown by the way technology use is much less frequent during activities like billiards. The findings of this study also coincide with previous research pointing to technology being something individuals compete with: attention to devices draws attention away from group members or activities.

As a study tool, there were several instances that the role of cell phones as study aids was observed. A group studying in the glass enclosure discussed math problems while pouring over a worksheet one of the male students had. While working on the equations they took photos of the worksheet with their cellphones to have the document as reference and they also looked up formulas. This observation aligns with another where a pair of females worked in front of a laptop at the small tables. While working, they were also texting a third party who appeared to be involved in the session and gave them answers. At a group of four at the large tables, each member had a laptop out and was sending documents back and forth, exchanging answers while sharing screens and engaging in activities that traditional study media cannot permit. It is in these kinds of observations that it appears technology determines the way the interaction takes place: if the task was to study and no such technology was available, what are the chances that these students would study together rather than alone?

**Conclusion**

While technology is decried as an obstacle for intimacy, this study found it being used to bring people closer, whether to laugh at a friend's photo, get help with homework, or organize group study. Technology drew peoples' attention away from friends, but also enabled students to work and together. On one hand, social interactions are not as engaging, but on the other hand the use of technology for study creates a setting where both can be done more socially. The influence of technology on interactions is not as negative as some claim. Nakamura's contextual multiplicity appears to not only give people the options of doing multiple things at any given time, but it actually permitted them to do them.

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