Should we Re-think our Relationship with Modern Technology?
Impact of Mobile Phones and Tablets on Relationships
Lidia Gruszka

Working with clients in social work and counselling programs for nearly two decades, confirmed over and over that modern technology (mobile phones and tablets) made an impact on better and easier access to communicate with each other. Modern technology aims to save our time; it allows us to contact anyone in the world. It helps to improve time management, and it makes our daily tasks much easier. There is also an endless supply of applications that provide various types of entertainment. In our society, modern technology has proven to be useful to "kill time" while commuting or when waiting for an appointment; however, it has also been more frequently recognized for its noticeable impact towards growing obsessive behaviour with it. It looks like the time we are supposed to save; we use for checking people's news, statuses, likes and comments and usually playing not very educational games. The games may encourage exercising abilities to climb higher and higher without any noticeable gains. These days, life without mobile phones and tablets seems impossible to imagine.

While humankind generally praises modern technology, it is cursed by some partners and family members of those people whose obsessive use of mobile phones or tablets caused problems in their close relationships. The feeling of having to compete with an electronic device to get someone's attention and his/her time is hard to imagine, but when communication and commitment slowly disappear from any relationship, arguments follow, and its breakdown is just around a corner. One person's fascination with modern technology may be a nightmare for their partner or a good friend.
During my contacts with clients, I have heard spouses, parents, grandparents, and friends complaining about deteriorating relationships with their loved ones. Loss of communication, lack of time for and with each other, and an obsessive approach towards the modern technology were the most common concerns and in some cases contributors to relationship breakdowns.

Healthy relationships require time. Both quality time and its quantity shape happy relationships. Depending on a kind of relationship, healthy boundaries, respect, patience, love and positive attitude are also on the list of its 'core ingredients'.
Sensible use of modern technology will continue to make our life easier and convenient. It would prevent disappointments, arguments with significant people in our lives and developments of unhealthy behaviour that is usually too difficult to be recognized by a person who gets over excited with their new phone or tablet. To be able to balance our life and our relationships is a skill and a sign of maturity.

The decision to explore the topic of "Impact of mobile phones and tablets on relationships" was made as the use or even overuse of modern technology was usually pointed out by individuals and couples as a growing problem in communication with their spouses and significant others in their lives.

Members of our society enter into/build relationships and communication is one of the core ingredients. Usually when a relationship is formed, it starts with a friendship, people gradually spend more and more time with each other, talking about anything. Relationships will not function without communication. Some of us are good communicators and some struggle in this area. We use verbal, body and sign languages to communicate with others and we have access to information and guides on how to communicate effectively. Communication requires attention, confidence and

time. Time factor is so important these days that priorities are made in relation to who we are going to talk to, who we are going to stay in touch and who we feel comfortable with.

Effective Communication Skills

Communication requires skills and they can be learned. Different situations require different styles of communication. Personal communication will be different to professional style but all styles are effective when clear, respectful and tactful language is used and when posture and behaviour makes others feel safe.
Some of the useful communication skills are attending behaviour and active listening.
'*Good attending behaviour'* that is demonstrated by showing respect to a person that one is interested in what he/she has to say. The effect of attending is an encouragement to the person to go on talking about his/her ideas or feelings freely without actually using words that you are listening to the person. Attending behaviour includes eye contact, posture, gesture, facial expressions and verbal behaviour.   It requires a presence of at least two individuals in the same place (including communication via video connection like Face Time, Skype and similar).
The active listener needs to concentrate, focus, understand, and respond, and to remember the context and content of conversation. "*Active listening involves listening with all senses. As well as giving full attention to the speaker, it is important that the 'active listener' is also 'seen' to be listening"* (University of Wisconsin, Counselling Centre Fact Sheet, 2012).

Time Together

"*I was the most important person in my husband's life. I was the person that he would spend all of his time with, and I assume I was the person that he wanted to spend all of his time with. Now, I have to share my time in our marriage. I am sad to say, my husband spends too much time on the internet.*"(Fertel 2014, July 11)
Dr Brent Conrad has developed a website dedicated to Video Games Addiction. His website provided support, articles, statistics and other information related to the gaming addiction. In one of his articles he has written a question "Is it worth getting upset about?" Some may point out that it is not drug, alcohol or gambling addiction, and a partner plays games or scrolls through Facebook pages, *he is at home, with you, "not out at a bar somewhere"*. The answer most likely will be that the partner is at home but detached, isolated and removed from relatives who need to compete for his/her attention with digital tools, modern technology or simply mobile phone or a tablet.
There is also another aspect of time spent together that applies mostly to younger generation. These days social life with a mobile phone is a widely acceptable norm. We can be together at home, at a restaurant, shopping, visiting friends or even at a church and the eyes are focused on a screen of a digital device. There are young couples visiting relatives and texting to each other while being someone's guests in the same room. There are possibly more shocking and ridiculous social scenarios we are aware of. It is important to notice how the definition of meaningful time together is understood differently by younger generations and then us individuals. What is a reasonable and unreasonable time spent on a phone outside an individual's work commitment and travel to and from work place? Healthy relationships require time, as it shapes happy relationships. Meaningful time together would be spent on activities that may need the focus to be on each other, including some communication, eye contact, fun and joy of being together and achieving something together. Getting attention, constructive conversation, relevant updates are also parts of meaningful time together.

Internet Gaming Disorder

According to American Psychiatric Association (APA) which is the authority responsible for publishing "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Edition (DSM-5), *"Internet Gaming Disorder" is identified as "a condition warranting more clinical research and experience before it might be considered for inclusion in the main book as a formal disorder" (APA 2013).* Internet Gaming Disorder is described as a new phenomenon, it acknowledges that the internet is now an essential part of many peoples' lives but it was also reported by clinicians that their clients develop an unhealthy preoccupation with the internet, particularly with online games. *"The 'gamers' play compulsively, to the exclusion of other interests, and their persistent and recurrent online activity results in clinically significant impairment or distress. People with this condition endanger their academic or job functioning because of the amount of time they spend playing. They experience symptoms of withdrawal when kept from gaming."(APA, 2013)* People with this condition will also risk relationship breakdowns due to social isolation and no time available to participate and contribute towards "Time Together".

Studies presented to APA suggest that *"when these individuals are engrossed in Internet games, certain pathways in their brains are triggered in the same direct and intense way that a drug addict's brain is affected by a particular substance. The gaming prompts a neurological response that influences feelings of pleasure and reward, and as result, in the extreme, is manifested as addictive behaviour". (APA, 2013)*

Relationship Indicators Surveys 2008, 2011 and 2015 by Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia has conducted several surveys since 1998 exploring issues for Australian relationships today. According to the 2008 survey, work pressure/work study demands, followed by financial insecurities and bringing up children were the three highest responses as the main factors contributing to relationship problems. These were compared to 1998 survey were financial difficulties were number one problem followed by work pressure and having/bringing up children (*Relationships Australia 2008 p.30).*

In the 2008 survey "Issues and concerns that Australians have in their relationships today", 1200 telephone interviews were conducted asking participants questions about challenges in relationships, reasons why people get married, causes of relationship breakdown. Possibly for the first time, the impact of technology on relationships, was raised as a problem. *"The majority felt that this technology has had a positive impact". "Just 9% felt that technology has had more of a negative impact on their important relationships. The main reason given was that technology is <u>less personal</u>. With regards to how communications technology has had a positive impact, the main response was that it enables people to <u>keep in touch</u> with friends and family. Only two in ten respondents felt that these kinds of technology had not had any impact on their important relationships." (Relationships Australia 2008 p.21)*

The 2011 Relationships Indicators Survey focused on connection with significant others, partnering and marriage, finances and their impact on partner relationships, social networking and relationships, loneliness, accessing help and other issues. 1204 interviews were conducted.

In just three years *"an interesting correlation between use of social networking technology and loneliness became apparent, with those frequently feeling lonely more likely to use social networking, and in particular Facebook, than those who do not experience feelings of loneliness" (Relationships Australia 2011 p.6)*

In 2011, the main factors identified that contribute to relationship problems and breakdowns were financial stress, communication difficulties, different expectations / values and luck of trust. In

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regards to the use of social networking to communicate 27% of respondents stated that it had a positive impact on their relationship and 16% stated that it had a negative impact and 57% stated that it had no impact.

According to the 2011 survey, social networking's positive impact was described as helpful to keep in touch with people in general and where distance is a problem. It also helps respondents to be in touch with friends from school or from years ago. The negative reasons were stated as "*there is less face to face contact/people forget how to communicate in person, people spend too much time on computers at the expense of being together, and that communication can be dishonest over social networking media as it is not the real world.*"*(Relationships Australia 2011 p.17)*

The 2011 survey findings indicate that the most preferred methods of communication were in the following order: email, SMS, Facebook, Twitter and online dating sites. In regards to loneliness, the respondents who indicated that they feel lonely *"would likely to use Facebook to communicate with friends, family and potential partners"* (*Relationships Australia 2011 p.21*).

In a monthly survey conducted by Relationships Australia "February 2015 - The internet and relationships", 1830 respondents took part in it.

The survey findings have confirmed that the internet makes a huge impact on people's lives and that individuals and families use digital tools for daily tasks like communication, education, work and entertainment. The survey confirms again the benefits of modern technology but it also provides the following findings:

"*Unfortunately, recent studies also suggest that the internet can have negative effects on family relationships. High internet use may lead to conflict between parents and adolescents over teenagers' lack of social skills and it can mean that people neglect their family relationships. Frequent use of online pornography or engaging in online affairs may jeopardise partner relationships. Even though relationship infidelity is not new, online relationships can develop more quickly due to lowered inhibitions, the lack of physical cues and the ease of exchanging information (Morris, 2002). Use of social media can generate positive feelings of connection, but alternatively increase feelings of loneliness, and the emptiness of illusory and false or shallow connections. The internet can also make it easy for a person to stalk or bully someone else, or make personally damaging comments that can be read instantly by a wide audience (Morris 2002, Mitchell et al. 2005).*"

The Relationships Australia 2015 survey provides a list of commonly cited relationship issues related to the negative impacts of the internet, mobile phones and tablets. It suggests that relationships suffer due to use of internet pornography, cybersex, online dating and gambling sites. The respondents indicated that partners use secret SIM cards, email addresses and profiles to maintain infidelities. The respondents have also indicated hacking into ex-partners social media accounts, they have also reported online stalking, controlling and monitoring partner's emails and messages.

To continue with the subject of this paper, a short survey was developed and conducted amongst local community who lives and or work in the City of Casey.

"Impact of mobile phones and tablets on relationships – Casey sample"
Short Survey Result Analysis

The initial aim was to receive 100 responses, a total of 70 were received and 12 people declined to participate in the survey indicating lack of interest in the topic. More females responded than males and more males than females declined to complete the survey. Before the survey was given to complete, all respondents were given the following simple definition of a relationship: *"Relationship*

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is a state of being connected or related with another person" and then asked if they were currently in a relationship with a boyfriend/girlfriend or husband/wife or a partner.

Participant demographics
The demographic profile includes respondents living and/or working within the City of Casey. Respondents include clients and staff of Casey North Community Information & Support Service, church community (Hampton Park Baptist Church) and school community (staff, students and parents from Victorian School of Languages, Dandenong campus).

Participants were asked 16 questions about their and their partner's use of mobile phones and /or tablet. Most answers were to be circled.

Question 1
Do you live or work in the City of Casey?
Sixty nine out of 70 respondents live in the City of Casey and twenty six out of 70 work in the City of Casey.

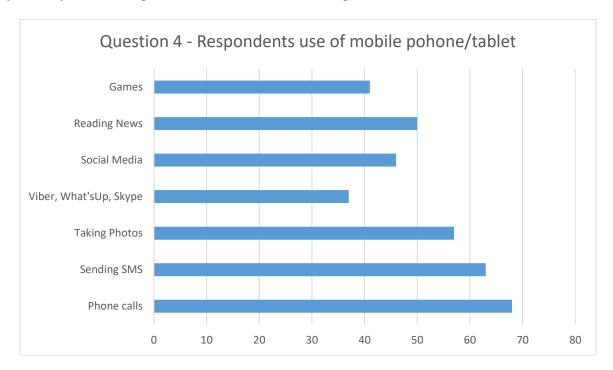**Question 2**
Are you female or male?

46 respondents were females and 24 were males.

Question 3
How old are you?

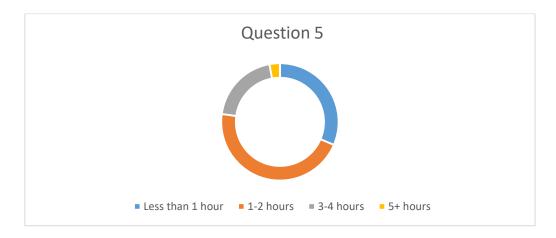*Lidia Gruszka, Social Worker, Casey North Community Information & Support Service Inc.*

The highest group of respondents was 55-64 years old (21), followed by 45-54 years old (15), followed by 65 and older (11), 25-34 years old and 35-44 years old groups were equal (10 each)) and the smallest group was 24 years old and younger (3)

Question 4
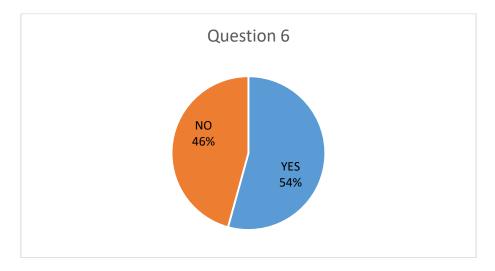Do you use your mobile phone or tablet for the following activities?

Two respondents selected that they do not use their mobile phone/tablets to make phone calls. It is possible that they were answering this question based on their use of tablet only or land line telephone use only for making phone calls.

Question 5
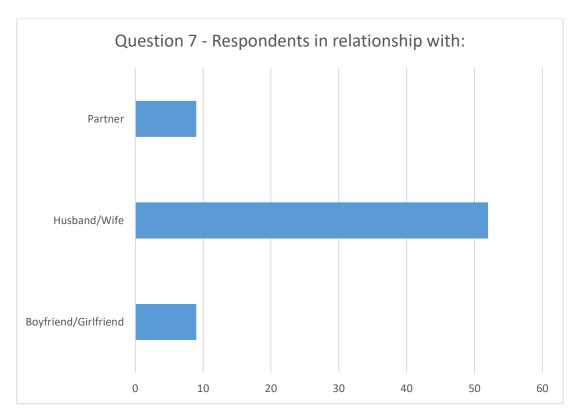How many hours do you spend on your phone/tablet daily?

One respondent, who stated that she spends more than 5 hours on her phone, has advised that she has disability and that the modern technology allows her "to be connected with the world".
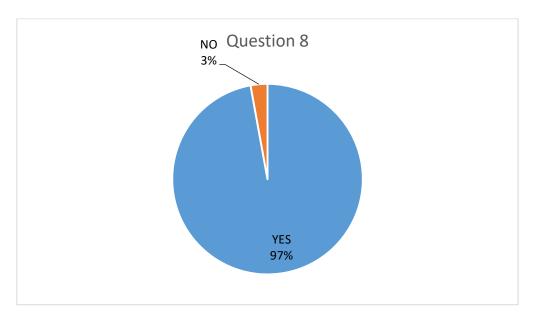
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Question 6
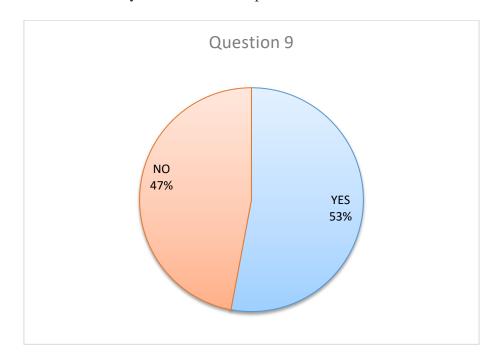Do you switch off/put away your mobile phone/tablet at night?

Question 7
Are you in a relationship with boyfriend/girlfriend or husband/wife or a partner?
In the following questions, the person who the respondent is in relationship will be referred as **"person Q7"** meaning the person I have asked about in the question number 7.
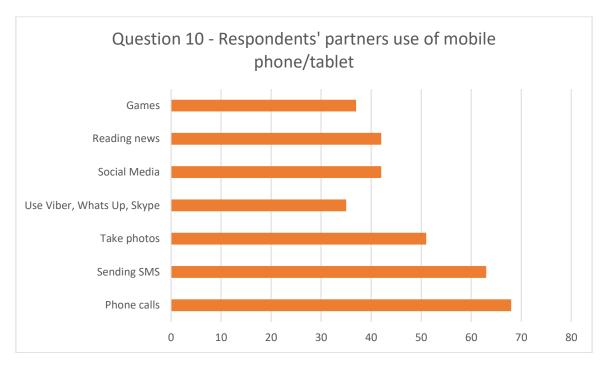
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Question 8
Does **the person Q7** have a mobile phone or tablet?
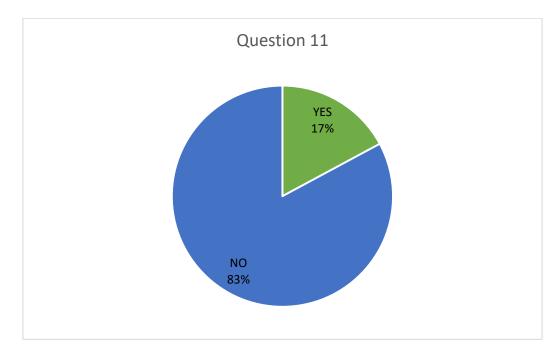
Question 8

NO 3%

YES 97%

Question 9
Does **the person Q7** switch off/put away her/his mobile phone/tablet at night?
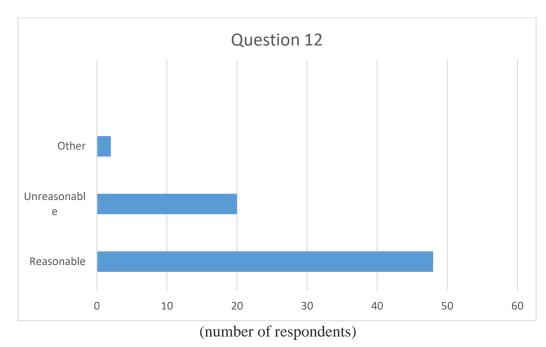Two respondents stated that they share one mobile phone/tablet.

Question 9

NO 47%

YES 53%

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Question 10

In your opinion, does **the person Q7** use her/his mobile phone/tablet for the following activities?
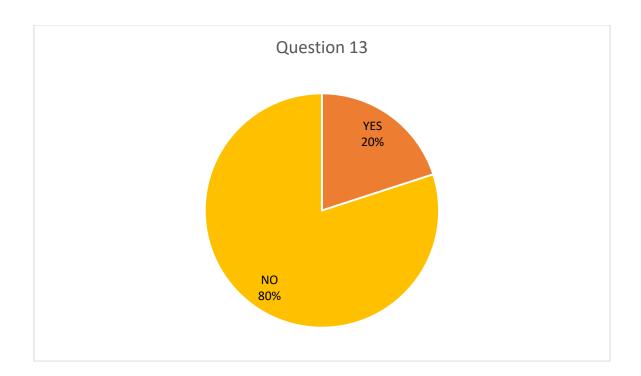

Question 11

Have you been told by **the person Q7** that the amount of time YOU spend on your mobile phone/tablet is annoying her/him, concerns her/him?
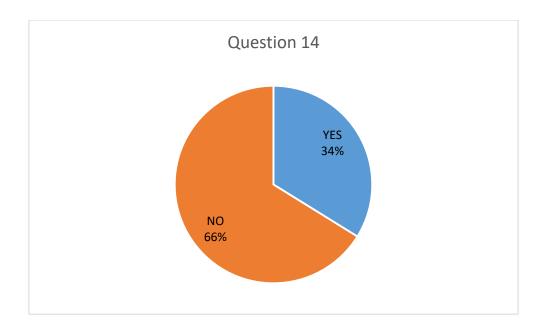
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Question 12
How many hours do you think, does **the person Q7** spend on their mobile phone/tablet per day?

(number of respondents)

Question 13
Do you believe the time YOU spend on the mobile phone/tablet is affecting your relationship?

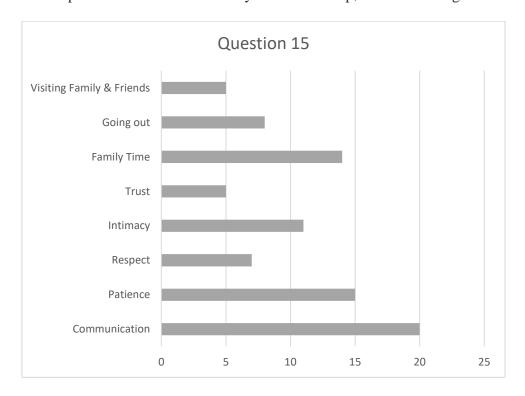*Lidia Gruszka, Social Worker, Casey North Community Information & Support Service Inc.*
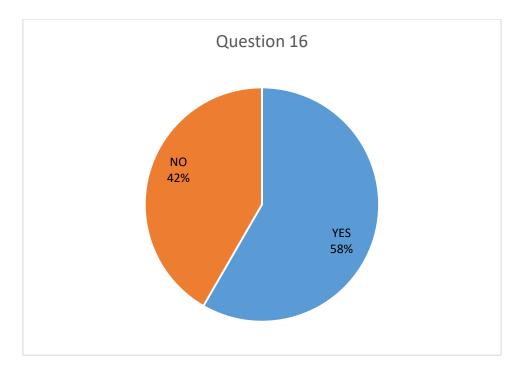
Question 14

Do you believe that HER/HIS time spend on the mobile phone/tablet is affecting your relationship?

Question 15

If the use of mobile phones/tablets has affected your relationship, what has changed?

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Question 16
If the use of mobile phones/tablets has affected your relationship, have you talked to **the person Q7** about it?

Question 16

NO
42%

YES
58%

24 responses were received.

The aim of the short survey within the Casey community was to get information how the use of modern technology contributes to relationship issues at the local level and to raise community awareness about the growing problems of internet addiction via mobile phones/tablets.

"Mobile phones/tablets have replaced a watch, an alarm clock, a calendar, a camera and a calculator, do not let the mobile phone/tablet to replace important people in your life" (quote from Facebook).

Sensible use of modern technology will continue to make our life easier and convenient, it would prevent disappointments, arguments with important people in our lives and developments of unhealthy behaviour that is usually too difficult to be recognized by a person who gets preoccupied with their digital tool. Introduction or simply regular maintenance of healthy boundaries, respect, patience, love and positive attitude are essential to be able to balance our life and our relationships. All of that is a skill and a sign of maturity.

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30 June 2017

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Appendix 1.
SHORT SURVEY "IMPACT OF MOBILE PHONES/TABLETS ON RELATIONSHIPS – CASEY SAMPLE"

PLEASE CIRCLE ALL YOUR ANSWERS

1. Do you live or work in the City of Casey area? LIVE WORK
   (Please circle ALL that apply to you)

2. I am: FEMALE MALE

3. Your age: 25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65+

4. Do you use your mobile phone/tablet for the following activities (please circle ALL that apply to you):

   - Phone calls (general)
   - Emergency phone calls ONLY
   - Sending messages (SMS, MMS, other)
   - Taking photos and storing them
   - Using applications that allow me to keep in touch with people overseas (Viber, WhatsApp, Skype, other)
   - Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, others)
   - Reading news, books, checking weather
   - Playing games

5. How many hours do you spend on your phone daily?

   - Less than 1 hour
   - 1-2 hours
   - 3-4 hours
   - 5+ hours

6. Do you switch off/put away YOUR mobile phone/tablet at night? YES NO

7. The simple definition of relationship is:
   "the state of being connected or related with another person" –
   Are you in relationship with: (please circle)
   - boyfriend/girlfriend
   - husband/wife
   - partner

   In the following questions, this person will be referred to as person Q7

8. Does **person (Q7)** have a mobile phone/tablet? YES NO

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9. Does **person (Q7)** switch off/put away her/his mobile phone/tablet at night?

    <div align="right">YES   NO</div>

10. In your opinion, does **person (Q7)** use her/his mobile phone/tablet for the following activities: (please circle ALL that may apply)

11.

- Phone calls (general)
- Emergency phone calls ONLY
- Sending messages (SMS, MMS, other)
- Taking photos and storing them
- Using applications that allow them to keep in touch with people (including overseas like Viber, WhatsApp, Skype, other)
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, others)
- Reading news, books, checking weather
- Playing games

12. Have you been told by **person (Q7)** that the amount of time YOU spend on YOUR mobile phone/tablet is annoying her/him or concerns her/him?

    <div align="center">YES   NO</div>

13. In your opinion, how many hours does **person (Q7)** spend on her/his mobile phone/tablet (**please select only one option**):

    a) Reasonable amount of time   b) Unreasonable amount of time
    (_____ hours per day)   (_____ hours per day)

14. Do you believe that YOUR time spent on the mobile phone/tablet is affecting your relationship?

    <div align="center">YES   NO</div>

15. Do you believe that THEIR time spent on the mobile phone/tablet is affecting your relationship?

    <div align="center">YES   NO</div>

16. If the use of mobile phones/tablets HAS AFFECTED your relationship, what has changed? (Please circle all that apply)

- Communication between us
- Patience
- Respect
- Intimacy
- Trust
- Your family time
- Going out together (entertainment)
- Visiting family and friends

17. If the use of mobile phones/tablets has affected your relationship, have you talked to her/him about it?

    <div align="center">YES   NO</div>

<div align="center">

Thank you very much for participating in this survey.
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