Hybrid Strategies:

Allocating Involvement in the Digital Age

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Abstract

An important trait of mobile phones is their capacity to superimpose multiple social interactions in time and space. Little research examines how individuals choose between face-to-face and digitally mediated interactions in specific social contexts. Drawing upon focus group interviews with a diverse sample of university students in the United States, we argue that, contrary to a perspective that is popular in theory and journalistic commentary, mobile phone users do not experience the digital and the face-to-face as distinct realms. In deciding where to direct their attention, users enmesh the distant and the present, making moves that are expressive and strategic in their own right that reveal the interest, intimacy and urgency that users place in multiple, coinciding social involvements.

Mobile phones are dramatically altering public behavior. With the advent of smartphone technology and mobile broadband, mobile devices offer immediate access to physically distant social contacts, as well as an effectively limitless stock of information and entertainment, thus changing the way users experience the world (Bertel 2013; Ling 2012). For face-to-face interaction, a particularly important capacity of the mobile phone is a relatively basic one: its ability to superimpose multiple interactions in a given setting. Mobile devices penetrate the invisible "membrane" (Goffman 1961) surrounding a face-to-face interaction, introducing invisible third or fourth parties into the mix (Humphreys 2005). As a result, social actors now routinely move through everyday contexts while juggling multiple real-time and asynchronous interactions with distant friends, relatives and associates. Simultaneously "here" and "there," they frequently occupy two or more "front stages" at the same time, as Ling (1997), following Goffman (1959), observes.

In describing the effect of mobile phones on face-to-face behavior, journalists and scholars have emphasized their capacity to produce a form of dramaturgical "removal" from social performance (Carr 2011; Gergen 2002; Knight 2013; Turkle 2012b; Turkle 2012a). From the perspective of companions and bystanders, a person immersed in mobile communication appears to be not fully "present" (Gergen 2002; Turkle 2012a). This model resonates with a perspective that Jurgenson (2011) has termed "digital dualism": the digital and the "real" are separate, mutually exclusive realms - when we enter into one, we depart from the other.

Only a handful of studies (e.g. Ames 2013; Humphreys 2005; Rettie 2005), have empirically examined how mobile users make sense of their behavior and reconcile mobile communication with the social norms that prevail in any given situation. Writing long before the advent of mobile communications technology, Goffman (1963: 54-92) described cases in which multiple activities make competing claims upon an actor's attention. There are rules to social multitasking, Goffman suggested: "a patterned distribution or allocation of the individual's involvement." But the social norms and

strategies that guide the "allocation of involvement" between mobile devices and face-to-face interaction settings remain largely opaque – untheorized at a time of increasing relevance. When actors prioritize face-to-face interaction, immerse themselves in digital media, or attempt to "multitask," they make moves that are likely to be expressive and strategic in their own right, but that have seldom been analyzed in detail. In this study, we investigate these moves, and explore their implications for interaction in the era of mobile communications.

Our empirical material consists of transcripts and video recordings of focus group discussions with adults in their teens and early twenties. The research project, undertaken in 2013 at a medium-sized public university, examined interactional norms among a population with a high level of smartphone adoption and use. The research team collected a wealth of data on research subjects' use of their phones for entertainment and consumption, manipulation of digital content, and social interaction and coordination. In the present study, we highlight one set of findings that emerged from the research – a set of social norms and strategies for handling multiple, simultaneous social interactions in the course of day-to-day behavioral routines.

Drawing upon their firsthand accounts of mobile communication, we find evidence that runs against the conceptualization of face-to-face and digitally mediated interaction as distinct, mutually exclusive activities. Rather than experiencing mobile communication as a temporary "removal" from face-to-face interaction, our research subjects possessed a varied repertoire for balancing, merging and separating face-to-face and mobile communication. Digitally mediated interaction may be *compartmentalized* or *integrated*, differentially prioritized according to interactional *hierarchies*, or incorporated into actors' *expressive manner* in face-to-face interaction.

For sociologists of interpersonal behavior, these moves have important implications. Rather than diluting or diminishing meaningful face-to-face contact, as others have argued, we suggest instead that mobile devices make the interactional

membrane *permeable*, introducing non-present actors into face-to-face interaction and producing a new set of hybrid strategies that enmesh the distant and the present in meaningful ways. This change opens up face-to-face interaction to interruption and distraction, but also offer new expressive opportunities to the actors involved.

Dramaturgical Removal

Interaction rituals require sustained investments of mental focus and expressive effort on the part of participants (Garfinkel 1994; Goffman 1983; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). In light of this, mobile devices have a readily apparent disruptive or dilutive potential for face-to-face interaction. Even an unanswered ringtone may be problematic, interrupting the natural flow of interaction and asserting a coercive request for attention, much like a doorbell (Plant 2001). According to Turkle (2012b), mobile devices exert a constant draw on individual users' attention, resulting in the loss of spontaneity and depth in interpersonal contact. Successful interaction requires "inhabiting" a role, being "in the moment," or being "present," spatial metaphors that describe full cognitive and affective investment in a situation. In contrast, mobile phone users are "present yet absent" (Turkle 2006), a formulation reminiscent of Gergen's (2002) "absent presence."

A variety of gestural or verbal messages serve to acknowledge this removal and make it less socially awkward. Before answering a mobile phone or a text, it is typical to apologize preemptively for a lapse in attention (Humphreys 2005; Ling 1997; Ling 2004). Several physical behaviors appear to serve a similar purpose, as mobile phone users move into spaces where conversation cannot be heard or angle their bodies away from the people with whom they are sharing space (Humphreys 2005; Plant 2001). Such behaviors physically segregate mobile communication from its face-to-face context, permitting each interactional sphere to retain its integrity.

In light of the above, one possible way to conceive of mobile communication's effect on interaction is to emphasize the potential for *dramaturgical removal*. This perspective underscores the self-contained, labor-intensive nature of everyday social interaction, downplaying the potential for multi-tasking. As Rettie (2005) points out, dramaturgical removal implies a sharp, Cartesian distinction between the body and the mind. When we enter into a digitally mediated interaction via a mobile device, we mentally depart from our face-to-face interaction setting.

A complementary line of theory, focusing on the interactions that take place *through* digital media, suggests that when actors dramaturgically remove themselves from their physical setting to talk or text message, they engage in a form of interaction to which place itself is irrelevant. Katz and Aakhus (2002) suggest that mobile devices promise an idealized, "pure" form of communication in which spatial and temporal obstacles no longer apply, "like the talk of angels that occurs without the constraints of the body." By this logic, the mobile phone is a transcendent technology that uncouples communication from spatial and material context altogether, liberating interaction from the constraints of place. Wellman (2001) neatly summarizes this view:

> [P]eople's awareness and behavior are in private cyberspace even though their bodies are in public space… [Mobile] communication will be every*where*, but because it is independent of place, it will be situated no*where*. The importance of a communication site as a meaningful place will diminish.

Although differing in their analytical focus and their normative assessments of mobile communication, the arguments outlined above share the view that digital activity represents a temporary act of withdrawal from immediate social context – a binary switching away from the immediate social setting, to a form of interaction that is defined by its indifference to such settings. This model is represented in Figure 1.

Allocating Involvement

Dramaturgical removal, then, draws a fairly strong analytical distinction between face-to-face and digitally mediated interaction. A different perspective problematizes this distinction, highlighting the ways in which face-to-face and digital environments may be intertwined in users' experiences (Ames 2013, Fortunati 2005; Geser 2005; Humphreys 2005 Lasen 2003; Ling 2008; Palen, Salzman and Youngs 2000; Rettie 2009). As Gergen (2002) notes, the mobile phone is "virtually unique in its capacity to link otherwise absent worlds to the immediate circumstance," permitting users to "interweave" and "knit" the distant and the immediate in new ways. Similarly, Rettie (2005) observes that users inhabit a single, "complicated" reality, in which the virtual and the physical merge, each offering distinct opportunities. Ling and Donner (2013) refers to this as the "interlacement" of mediated and co-present activities: "we engage in mobile communication in the various folds of life when we are not otherwise engaged."

Even when a person is forced to choose between face-to-face and digitally mediated interaction, the very act of choosing places these analytically separate realms into dialogue with each other. Palen et. al. (2000) offer an elegant description of this process:

> When mobile phone users are on the phone, they are simultaneously in two spaces: the space they physically occupy, and the virtual space of the conversation - the conversational space. When a phone call comes in… the user decides, consciously or otherwise, what face takes precedence: the face that is consonant with one's physical environment, or that of the conversational space? The greater the conflict between the behavioral requirements of the two spaces, the more conscious, explicit, and difficult this decision might be.

At this point, performative decisions in one interaction will affect performance in the other, even if they choose not to answer the phone – a performance in its own right. How do users navigate such situations? And what are the consequences of their decisions? Goffman's (1963) work on "allocations of involvement" provides a theoretical starting point for how coinciding social activities are handled, describing norms for allocating attention between "dominant" and "subordinate" involvements. However, if Goffman provides a useful trailhead in this case, his writing leaves much contemporary terrain

uncharted. As a form of competing "involvement," mobile communication poses an entirely new set of social problems and opportunities, as we will explore.

RESEARCH METHODS

We draw upon qualitative data generated by a research project conducted at a medium-sized public university in the northeastern United States over a six-month period in summer and fall of 2013. In the first stage of the project, twelve trained researchers spent a month observing and recording mobile phone use in public places. Following these observations, a series of ten focus groups were designed and conducted. Moderators used a semi-structured script of questions and prompts to elicit accounts and interpretations of everyday mobile phone behavior. Vignettes were used to orient discussion on hypothetical examples, and participants were asked to share and discuss digital logs of their recent mobile communication. The focus groups lasted 90 minutes, and were video recorded and transcribed.

Given the project's substantive interests, focus groups were preferable to in-depth interviews or surveys as a research method. Focus groups can be particularly useful in identifying latent group norms [See Bloor 2001) for a discussion]. By introducing group dynamics into the research design, focus groups generate data that directly reflect the level of consensus or disagreement regarding various interpretations of normative behavior (Morgan 1996). More concretely, when research subjects sought to explain their behavior to their peers and the researchers on hand, they clarified the strategic, pragmatic, or ethical logics that legitimized a set of emerging norms for handling face-to-face and digitally mediated interaction.

An important disadvantage of the focus group as a research design is social desirability. We anticipated that participants' accounts of their behavior would be influenced by the same group dynamics that might prove advantageous in other respects. To mitigate this risk, participants were asked to record logs that were then consulted in

the group interviews. Research subjects recorded the specific social setting and any concurrent activities in which they were engaged while the last ten text messages or calls were taking place. They were also called upon to consult and discuss the specific content of text messages, status updates, tweets and posts. This permitted consideration of concrete, specific behavioral examples that were fresh in participants' memory, reducing the effect of social desirability and other sources of bias in self-reported behavior.

Our sample consisted of university students between the ages of 18 and 26 years old. Although convenience was a consideration in our sampling, the demographic profile of university students provided several analytical benefits worth considering. Our research objectives did not include generalizing across the digital divide; instead, we were interested in studying a population for whom mobile telephony had been extensively "domesticated" (Silverstone and Haddon 1996), or integrated into everyday social routines and rituals. In a context of demographically uneven smartphone adoption, a young, urban sample was thus advantageous. While our findings may be limited in generalizability to older users or users in low-density suburban or rural settings, this was considered a worthwhile tradeoff in light of the richness of the data provided by a sample with extensive experience using mobile phones and/or witnessing their use by others.

The setting for this research was the campus and immediate environs of a medium sized public university in New York City. Participants were recruited through fliers distributed across campus and classified advertisements posted on the websites of two student-run newspapers with broad circulation among the student body. The resulting sample was diverse with regard to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Females accounted for approximately three out of four focus group participants. This was not deemed problematic, in and of itself, for external validity, given the demographics of mobile phone use (Smith 2010). However, it is conceivable that the uneven gender distribution may have led male participants to suppress divergence from group norms or disagreement concerning interpretations of behavior, leading to discussions that were

more reflective of female mobile phone use or attitudes regarding such. [See Ling et. al. (2013) for a recent study of gender-based differences in mobile phone behavior.] No sampling bias was inferred from the gender distribution, which roughly reflected the distribution of the student body. The characteristics of the focus group sample are summarized in Table 1.

The focus groups generated approximately 460 pages of transcribed dialogue. All twelve researchers coded this textual data, comparing notes through memos and regular meetings and altering the focus group script in successive iterations to hone in on areas of interest when saturation was reached. Coding techniques were adapted from grounded theory and Glaser and Strauss's (1967) "constant comparison" method of data collection and analysis, which permits topics to be developed inductively from the data. With this in mind, the findings do not reflect any attempt at deductive hypothesis testing, but rather a set of themes that emerged gradually during the focus group sessions and the subsequent analysis, becoming clearer over time.

Allocating Involvement

Early in our data collection, it became clear that the view of mobile communication as temporary removal from face-to-face interaction did not accurately capture participants' understanding of their own mobile phone practices. Although participants occasionally mentioned abstract desires to "be present" or "live in the moment" or, conversely, to hedonistically immerse themselves in the pleasures of digital media, their descriptions of day-to-day mobile communication centered around a less lofty objective – achieving an acceptable moment-by-moment compatibility, or equilibrium, between face-to-face and digitally mediated activities:

> *Claire: If it's an engaging conversation, you should probably give it your full focus. But if it's a passive one, like you're walking to your next class or just walking along the street looking around, I guess it depends on the type of conversation you're having. Like if they're talking about*

something important, you should probably listen. Like if you're just like,
"How's the weather?" then it's alright to engage in other activities.

These comments parallel Goffman's (1963: 43-83) description of the norms governing behavior when multiple interactions make claims to an individual's attention. Attention figures here as a scarce resource that is allocated and reallocated between activities that vary in their intensiveness. Although attention signifies a degree of mental focus, it is not synonymous with cognitive effort: from the perspective of Goffman's sociology (and this paper), attention is more accurately understood as an *expressive* investment in a given activity, which is signaled through verbal cues, bodily posture, and most of all, sustained eye contact. These dramaturgical signals may be paid, either in full or partially, to various simultaneous involvements, which are, in turn, defined by the amount of attention they are thought to require. For example, "side involvements" (e.g. texting) may be permissible when the "main involvement" (conversation) is not taxing enough to require, in Claire's words, "full focus."

The side involvements that appear in Goffman's work, however, tend to be passive, solitary pursuits such as doodling, smoking, chewing gum, or talking to oneself (Goffman 1963:75-90). These activities have digital corollaries, such as using one's phone to read online content, watch movies or play video games – activities that were popular with our research subjects. But in the case of calling, text messaging, emailing, or using one-to-many social media, when the "side involvement" is, itself, a social interaction, there is an important qualitative difference for which Goffman does not prepare us. Two interactions, by vying for the attention of a social actor, have effectively become *mutually contingent*: even the basic possibility of either interaction may only be judged relative to the requirements of the other, an interdependence imposed by the finite expressive resources of the individuals involved.

Due to the technological capacities of smartphones, this condition existed at virtually *all times*, as text messaging, email and other asynchronous media created the expectation that mediated interaction might occur at any given moment. Rather than

automatically shifting the bulk of their attention from one interaction to another, our research subjects described a complex range of possibilities for allocating involvement. Some interactions were understood to monopolize a relatively large stock of an individual's attention [Goffman (1963: 54) refers to these as "dominant involvements"], while in other cases, attention could be safely shared between digitally mediated and face-to-face activity. This model, as described by our research participants, is presented in Figure 2.

We now turn our attention to the strategies guiding our research subjects' attempts to achieve equilibrium in any given situation. We first describe strategies for handling *competing* interactions that respectively stand to dominate attention i.e., those toward the top of the diagram in Figure 2. We then turn to strategies for managing potentially *compatible* interactions i.e. those toward the bottom of the diagram in Figure 2.

Handling Competition: Commensuration

When a ringtone or a buzzing text message alert interrupts an ongoing face-to-face interaction, the owner of a mobile device is forced to choose between two social involvements that each stands to monopolize her attention, at least temporarily. As Humphreys (2005) observes, where the ringing home phone for much of the twentieth century imposed an anonymous and coercive request for attention, caller identification, a universal feature of mobile phones, personalizes each claim, encouraging what Ames (2013) refers to as a "techno-social pecking order."

Some callers or texters are prioritized over most face-to-face situations. Our research subjects acknowledged having close relatives or friends whose calls or texts *always* took precedence. Others described intimate friendships and relationships that were only feasible because communication partners, though physically distant, were willing to prioritize staying in touch throughout the day, a finding that resonates with Ling and Ytrri's (2002) research on the mobile phone behavior of young adults. In such

cases, according to our research subjects, taking a call or responding to a text is quasi-automatic – resisted only in the most demanding or formal of face-to-face settings.

In other cases, however, mobile communication involves a process of *commensuration* in which a distant friend or associate's claim to involvement is implicitly or explicitly weighed against that of the specific situation. The interest, the urgency, or the emotional significance of an ongoing conversation with a friend, for example, is implicitly measured against a competing claim for attention. The following transcript segment illustrates this process at work:

> *Daniel: I've been in situations where I'm with friends and someone texted and I text them back and I'm not listening to a word that anybody else is saying, because it's not really appealing at the moment – the conversation. The texting is more interesting at the moment. Then, there have been other times when all my friends were telling jokes and then somebody's texting me and I'm just like, quickly texting them back and I put the phone away.*

In the first scenario, Daniel finds texting more interesting than face-to-face interaction; in the second, face-to-face contact wins out. These interactions are evaluated on a fairly straightforward metric – "interest" or "appeal." Other participants described more nuanced comparisons in which a wide range of situational and biographical factors can come into play:

> *Saraya: [Y]ou're out with somebody and you haven't seen them for a while and you just want to talk. And you have this random guy just sending messages to whoever you're seeing and just basically interrupting the whole thing. Which is very, very annoying and happens way too often.*

In this case, intimacy, rather than interest, becomes the basis for the valuation of an ongoing conversation. The length of time since Saraya and her friend have seen each other – a contextual factor imbuing the interaction with particular meaning – is weighed against the claims of a less intimate relation – a "random guy."

To be clear, similar calculations are required whenever one is forced to choose between several social involvements. However, by eroding the spatial and temporal barriers that separate and insulate interactions, mobile devices make these moments both

common and public, forcing users to make overt, rather than discrete, assessments of the interest, intimacy, urgency and formality of ongoing interaction.

Handling Competition: Interactional Hierarchies

In the commensuration of competing interactions, the ostensible threat posed to face-to-face interaction by a ringtone or a text message alert appears in a new light. Where previous analysts (e.g. Turkle 2012a) have identified mental and emotional detachment as the deleterious potential that mobile telephony holds for face-to-face communication, the concept that we propose, *commensuration*, introduces power into the mix, rendering invisible hierarchies visible:

> *Xiao: I find it really annoying when we're doing karaoke, and my friend was using her phone to text someone and we were like wondering who she was texting and why she couldn't just interact with us rather than the person she was speaking to.*

> *Melycris: My boyfriend will check his phone sometimes…he'll be texting, or like, go on [a popular news website]. He's like a smart guy, I guess, so that's why he does those things. And it makes me feel less important because you're honing skills or something…when we could just be talking regularly, having a normal conversation.*

The ambiguity mentioned in the first quote ("who she was texting") is crucial. It is often unclear with whom a person is communicating via mobile phone; Xiao's reaction evinces a desire to establish and define an implicit hierarchy when one is being slighted. In fact, a person may not be interacting with anyone at all, but may be instead be passively consuming digital content – for example, reading a newspaper article or a blog post, acts of digital consumption that are comparable to picking up a magazine while in the company of friends. But it is the capacity of mobile phones to accommodate interaction with an absent person that gives this behavior its edge, transforming attentiveness into a social currency that is competitive and zero-sum in its allocation. Moreover, it is not only in the capacity for the subordination of face-to-face interaction to digitally mediated engagement that such hierarchies are rendered visible. Users expressed the same anger

and humiliation when repeatedly unable to reach a friend or relative by voice call or text message.

> *Chris: When people who are always on their phones…where they don't text you back until an hour later or they don't call you back or they don't respond at all… It's like, I know you're on your phone all the time, so it's mostly that social ability to be like, "I'm going to ignore you or I'm not going to ignore you." It's easier to do that, and it's more visible when it's done.*

This example underscores an important point that is often overlooked when the empirical or normative emphasis is on face-to-face interpersonal behavior. Actors seeking to communicate via a mobile device are forced to compete for attention as well, vying in a reciprocal manner with the social contexts in which their communication partners are physically embedded. In a technosocial era in which repeated digitally mediated interaction may serve as a conduit for friendship or intimacy, and people "are always on their phones," even the timing of a text message becomes crucial: given the commensurative logic at work in mobile communication, a delayed reply, regardless of its content, conveys an unspoken message that the present is more valuable than the absent.

To lessen the insult implicated in suspending one type of interaction to engage in another, research subjects described externalizing their evaluative judgments. For example, in order to excuse a lapse in attention, they might confer a level of intimacy "it's my sister" or urgency, "my husband can't find his keys" upon the incoming communication. These kinds of comments do more than simply announce an upcoming gap in the interaction – they resolve the disconcerting ambiguity mentioned above in a way that balances the scales of interactional hierarchy, communicating that the person one is with is not *generally* unimportant. Indeed, the emotions expressed in response to the scenarios above, when such tactics have failed – jealousy, intellectual inadequacy – are not the frustration of a person whose communication partner is failing at his or her task (Garfinkel 1964); they are *relational* sentiments rooted in implicit social

comparisons that are made explicit when one's physical presence or text messages are ignored in favor of competing interactional commitments.

Handling Competition: Compartmentalization and Integration

Because commensuration threatens to cause harm, devaluing interaction and humiliating individual participants, actors devise practices that insulate interaction rituals against competing claims. Focus group participants often described attempts to limit the use of mobile phones to specific places and times, compartmentalizing and segregating modes of interaction. In six of the ten focus groups, one or more participants mentioned a game-like ritual that served to exclude digital distractions from shared meals and mark such occasions as sacred:

> *Victoria: I know personally with my group of friends, we'll go out to dinner or someplace, we put all our phones in the middle kind of like yes, we're expecting someone to call. If you happen to pick up your phone, you pay the bill [laughter]. Kind of like there's a consequence to using my phone because you're here in the present, so enjoy it.*

Although this particular practice serves to mark an ordinary face-to-face occasion as sacred and protect it from the profane contamination of digitally mediated interaction, participants also frequently mentioned compartmentalization strategies centering upon traditionally sacred occasions, such as holiday celebrations or family dinners. As Goffman (1963) observes, ceremonies and formal occasions involve an implicit demand that actors treat the interaction as the dominant involvement and thus provide a context in which even low intensity side involvements are not tolerated.

> *Emmanuel: I see my family probably once a year like on break, and I am absolutely used to the fact that we are going to sit around after dinner, all of us, and everyone will be on their phone. And then we talk a little bit while everyone's texting or surfing.*
>
> *Moderator: You said after dinner… what about during dinner?*
>
> *Emmanuel: No. No, that's because we sit down and have dinner but that feels different. That feels separate from that. But after dinner, everyone will sit around together and everyone will have a phone.*

Although, in this particular context, mobile communication is regarded as profane, while face-to-face interaction is viewed as sacred, a reciprocal categorization was also described by research subjects who maintained intimate friendships or romantic relationships via mobile phone, and who came to rely emotionally and psychologically upon regular, digitally mediated interaction ritual. Susan, a young woman whose husband was serving in the military, described a need to "protect the phone time" from the temporal and spatial demands of her day-to-day social routine:

> *Susan: When I get home, whatever I'm doing, eight o'clock, that's our time. It's the best time of my day. So the rest of whatever I've got going on with my friends and my family here has to be put on hold for that, and they all know that, so nobody gets offended. If I'm out, I find a quiet place where's it's going to be quiet for the next half hour. If I'm at home, I shut the door and lock out my roommate.*

In this case, compartmentalization works the other way, protecting a sacred phone call. The assignment of a designated time for the call serves multiple purposes: it allows a daily coordination with a loved one on the other side of the world, but it also insures that friends and family "don't get offended" when their calls for attention are subordinated to a mediated involvement.

An alternative to compartmentalization is integration. Where compartmentalizing interactions protects them against the competing claims of coincidental interactions occurring via different media, integrating face-to-face and digitally mediated interactions places an equivalent value on two or more overlapping interactions and *merges* them, reducing competition for attention. The use of mobile phones as vehicles for digital content (e.g. photos, music, videos) that becomes the focus of mutual entrainment in face-to-face interaction has been previously noted (e.g. Ling 2008: 98-99). In similar fashion, users may let a copresent person in on an ongoing mediated interaction, reading a humorous text or recounting the inaudible replies of a caller in order to redefine the boundaries of an interaction to include *both* physically present and distant actors. The interchangeability of compartmentalization and integration for the purposes of etiquette was underlined by participants who described using a combination of one and the other:

> *Denise: When I'm with my friends, usually I don't have my phone on vibrate or anything. So it's like I talk to them face-to-face, and if I have anything to show them, I'll show it to them on the phone.*

Turning off a mobile phone when with friends and making it the focus of attention may seem like diametrically opposed approaches to mobile communications, but they are interchangeable; both types of interactions maintain the integrity of the face-to-face interaction by minimizing the competition between phone and friends for attention.

A reciprocal form of sharing also appears to be common, as our research subjects described sending texts to close friends and relatives throughout the day chronicling their face-to-face interactions, a practice referred to elsewhere as "hyper-coordination" (Ling and Yttri 2002). By sharing these experiences with distant associates, users again decrease the competition between immediate social settings and digitally mediated interaction, integrating the two worlds in a way that keeps distant associates apprised of their daily activities, experiences and emotions. Given the potential damage involved in making the relative value placed on an interaction explicit, compartmentalization and integration can be seen as semi-institutionalized practices that protect face-to-face and digitally mediated interactions by avoiding competition between them.

Managing Compatibility: Deflection and Downplay

All of the strategies described thus far involve cases where face-to-face and digitally mediated activities compete to momentarily monopolize attention. In other cases, however, focus group participants described situations in which mobile phones did *not* compete with face-to-face interaction at all, but were actively deployed as expressive tools or props. These cases suggest that the relationship between face-to-face and digitally mediated interaction is not necessarily competitive: given that many interactions call for moments of tactful indirectness or inattention, the relationship between mediated and unmediated interaction may be symbiotic in nature.

In discussing their mobile phone use, participants repeatedly made reference to interaction settings that produced forms of psychological or social discomfort, such as embarrassment or awkwardness. In these situations, mobile phones provide a valuable buffer between a user and her environment or, in Goffman's (1963) terms, an "involvement shield" giving an impression of obliviousness to one's surroundings and discouraging unsolicited contact. Unsurprisingly, given the dense, urban research setting, users frequently mentioned turning to their phones while on mass transit:

> Erika: The subway's a really good example because I'm very much aware of my surroundings and they're not necessarily perfect, so that's why I retreat to my phone. I'm like, oh, I don't want to look at this person…let's say someone gets on the subway and they're belligerent or they're like clearly mentally not all there. To distract myself from being uncomfortable or having a face of being uncomfortable, I would rather just look at something else… I won't listen to music because I want to hear what's happening, but I just want to see something else. There is a sense of awareness, but it's just I don't want to be fully engrossed in it.

Mobile phones offer a way to simultaneously downplay sensory exposure to the surroundings and manage an expressive performance. Dramaturgical removal, in such cases, is both intentional and contextually motivated, serving the psychological and expressive needs of the interactional setting. When facing particularly uncomfortable interactions, a discreet text message may even be used to engineer an escape:

> Lucy: Basically, if like if I find myself in a really awkward situation where a guy's coming up to me and being really rude about something or going on and on, I would just like quickly text my friend like, "Can you call me please right now?

In these cases, the capacity of a mobile phone to dilute or interrupt an ongoing interaction becomes a substantial benefit to its user. As interactional sociology has long acknowledged, not all face-to-face interactions are deep and meaningful – indeed, not all interactions are desirable at all – and many performances call for deflection or indirectness rather than a head-on approach.

In dramaturgical terms, mobile devices offer a "prop" for such performances. Studies of other forms of portable media have referred to this tactic as "environmental control," (Katz, Lever and Chen 2008) or "filtering" (Bull 2007), and Goffman (1963)

describes a range of non-digital objects that may serve as effective involvement shields, including books and newspapers. However, unlike a book or a portable music player, mobile phones *create* and *continue* other interactions when acting in this capacity, resulting in digital interactions that, far from independent of place, are undertaken as a direct result of social context. The tedium or discomfort caused by one interaction becomes the reason for another interaction to occur, as users seek a digital distraction that will complement their face-to-face setting.

Managing Compatibility: Expressive Manner

In a similar vein, participants often discussed the use of mobile phones to signal interest or disinterest in an ongoing interaction. Conspicuously consulting letters or other printed correspondence, looking at one's watch, or consigning someone to an indeterminate period in a waiting room are all ways of suggesting that one has more pressing matters to which to attend. The mobile device, however, offers a particularly useful prop for making this impression, alluding to an invisible, "virtual" audience outside of the immediate physical setting that presumably requires an actor's attention:

> David: It's like passive aggressive sometimes. If I'm going out with somebody, and they're constantly texting. It's like, oh yeah, I have other things better to do.

Where glancing at one's phone while involved in an interaction with one or two other people may offer grounds for offense, in public places where the audience is larger and less personal, the behavior has become a recognizable "manner" (Goffman 1959) among young urban dwellers, suggesting confidence and an indifference to one's surroundings:

> Daryl: When you're walking [through campus] and there's just a bunch of eyes on you and you just like, [mimics looking at phone] I'm important. Got someplace to go. I'm checking the time…It just feels like a long walk and just people are checking you out. You know, I might look up and see who's around but it just happens kind of naturally. Check your phone.

By consciously signaling the value that one places on an interaction (mediated or otherwise), users exert power through an expressive manner that relies upon the mobile phone's ability to interweave multiple social settings. As Goffman (1963:61) notes, absorption in a subordinate involvement shows that one is "in command." However, while intentional displays of boredom or distraction have long been part of the expressive repertoire of actors in face-to-face interaction, shifting attention to a mobile phone differs importantly from these traditional power plays, delivering a message that relies upon the relational logic of commensuration and hierarchy described above: it signals that other, distant actors are more important than proximate ones, a process that binds together the distant and the proximate through the logic of interactional commensuration. By turning off the ringer on a phone, research subjects signaled attentiveness and intimacy; by returning texts quickly, they signaled not just politeness or solicitude, but affection and loyalty. The simple allocation of attention between communicative media is a surprisingly salient, sophisticated and flexible signifier, granting or limiting access as a communication partner and thus revealing the value placed on an ongoing interaction.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As discussed at the start of this paper, academic theorists and commentators in the popular press have emphasized the potential for mobile communication to remove an actor from face-to-face interaction. Others have focused on the rituals and relationships that take place through digital media, suggesting that digitally mediated interactions may transcend physical setting altogether.

While our findings do not negate the possibility of dramaturgical removal or "placeless" social interaction, they point in another direction. For the young people we studied, digitally mediated and face-to-face social reality were enmeshed or "intertwined" (Gergen 2002) within the strategic framework of routine social behavior. Our research subjects used a variety of hybrid strategies to connect, commensurate, merge, and

compartmentalize these modes of activity in order to reduce the conflict between them. Rather than moving between face-to-face and mediated social realms, they inhabit one "complicated" (Rettie 2005) or "augmented" (Jurgenson 2011) reality, where interactional moves made within one medium are understood to communicate meaning and substantively alter performance in the other. This model is schematized in Figure 3.

We have looked to Goffman's (1963) theory of "involvements" to provide analytical leverage on these strategies. But for sociologists, the more important question may be what these findings contribute to Goffman. As noted at the start of the paper, mobile communication transcends the invisible social "membrane" (Goffman 1961) that surrounds face-to-face interaction. Dramaturgical removal is one possible result of this capacity. Our findings suggested another: that interactions with distant associates now substantively *enter into* face-to-face interaction and affect what happens there. A final example from our data illustrates this distinction:

> *Interviewer: So just to be clear, you're talking to three friends, and you're texting one of them about what the other one is saying?*
>
> *Talisa: Yeah, say it's like four friends talking. Yeah, exactly.*
>
> *Interviewer: If you're texting about the third or fourth person, what are you saying?*
>
> *Talisa: Okay, we're talking about school or something like, "Oh, my God. This subject is so hard," then I'll text and be like, "Well, why is this person still talking about school though?"*
>
> *Interviewer: What if the person you're texting is* also *texting the third person about what you're texting them?*
>
> *[Participants laughing]*
>
> *Talisa: It usually happens like that. Yeah, it usually happens [laughter]. But we're all best friends.*

An outside observer of this situation would see four young women chatting about school while frequently checking their phones and thumbing quick text messages. Through the lens of dramaturgical removal, a social analyst might see an overall diminishment or dilution of the symbolic content of interaction. By texting while talking,

Talisa and her friends appear to be mentally elsewhere, abrogating the intersubjective work that maintains an interaction ritual and imbues it with meaning. In actuality, at least two interactions are occurring at once: the front stage of one performance is the backstage of the other. Digitally mediated interaction *adds* meaning to this situation.

In similar fashion, our analysis pointed to the ways in which digitally mediated involvements enter into and modify the meaning of face-to-face situations. The membrane surrounding interaction is not destroyed by this process, but is instead made more *permeable*, allowing involvements with present and absent communication partners to flow through and interpenetrate one another. Social contexts now bleed into one another by virtue of technologies that are indifferent to the spatial, temporal and social barriers that have traditionally insulated and protected interaction (Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Lane Forthcoming). As our analysis indicates, physically distant friends, relatives, associates who remain beyond the horizon of the situation, as conventionally defined, exert a direct influence on face-to-face performance, influencing the subjective significance of behavior and, by extension, the objective meaning of a situation.

The hybrid strategies that comprise the main contribution of this paper – commensuration, deflection, compartmentalization, integration, etc. – are integral to understanding such situations. A teenager compulsively glancing at his phone might be socially uncomfortable with his surroundings or anxiously waiting to be asked on a second date. A worker furtively texting during a meeting might be complaining to a colleague or arranging childcare for a sick child at home. Audience members who appear immersed in their smartphones may either be bored with the proceedings or excitedly "live-Tweeting" the event to friends or colleagues, in an example of the integration strategy described above. In such cases, the distinction between these varying interpretations is not theoretical but empirical, and bears importantly on the meaning of the social interaction in question for the actors involved.

To the extent that mobile phones permit social interactions to overlap in time and space, they may be seen as contributing to the overall richness of social contexts and situations. The superimposition of third and fourth interactions adds to the substantive complexity of interpersonal behavior, introducing new expressive opportunities, imperatives, and strategic considerations into a situation, rather than depleting it of meaning. But understanding the implications of digitally mediated interaction for everyday interaction will require following participants online, into their smartphones or onto their tablets. The actors and interactions that we find there, and, most importantly, their subjective relationship to the face-to-face situation at hand, are increasingly necessary to understand.

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Table 1. Focus Group Participant Characteristics (*n =65*)[1]

Race / Ethnicity:[2]		
Asian	17	26.6%
Black	8	12.5%
Hispanic	13	20.3%
White	21	32.8%
Other	5	7.8%
Gender:		
Male	18	27.7%
Female	47	72.3%
Parents with College Degree:		
Neither	23	35.4%
One	20	30.8%
Both	22	33.8%
Daily Time Spent *Talking* on Mobile:		
0-15 minutes	43	66.2%
15-30 minutes	11	16.9%
30-60 minutes	8	12.3%
More than an hour	3	4.6%
Daily Time Spent *Texting* on Mobile:		
0-15 minutes	15	23.1%
15-30 minutes	8	12.3%
30-60 minutes	15	23.1%
More than an hour	27	41.5%

1. All variables self-reported prior to participating in a focus group.
2. All participants who identified as Hispanic were only counted in the Hispanic category.
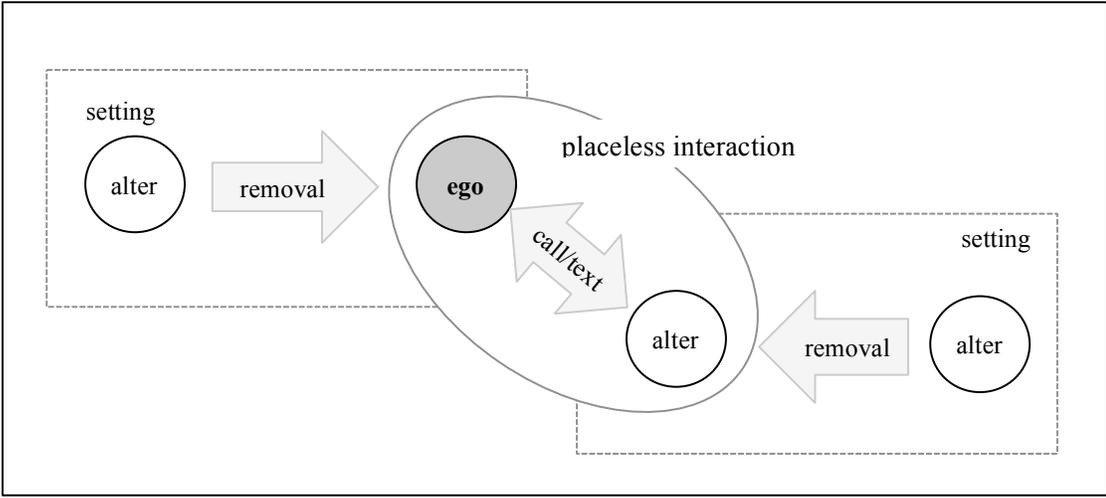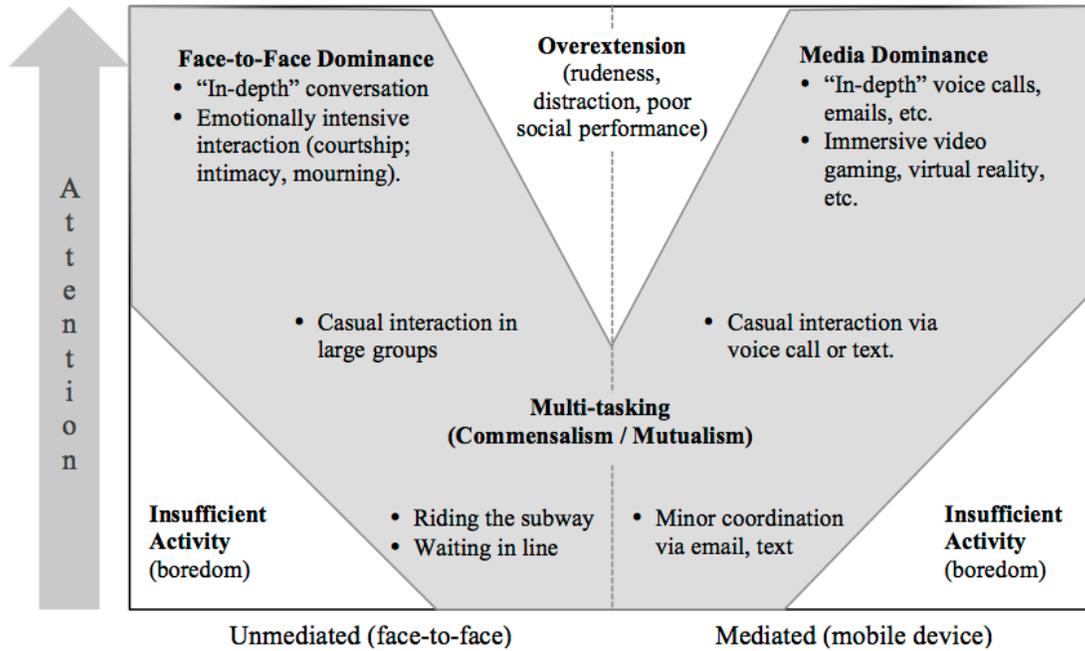
Figure 1. Dramaturgical Removal

Figure 2. Allocations of Involvement*

Attention (vertical axis)

Face-to-Face Dominance
- "In-depth" conversation
- Emotionally intensive interaction (courtship; intimacy, mourning).

Overextension
(rudeness, distraction, poor social performance)

Media Dominance
- "In-depth" voice calls, emails, etc.
- Immersive video gaming, virtual reality, etc.

- Casual interaction in large groups

- Casual interaction via voice call or text.

Multi-tasking
(Commensalism / Mutualism)

Insufficient Activity (boredom)

- Riding the subway
- Waiting in line

- Minor coordination via email, text

Insufficient Activity (boredom)

Unmediated (face-to-face)   Mediated (mobile device)

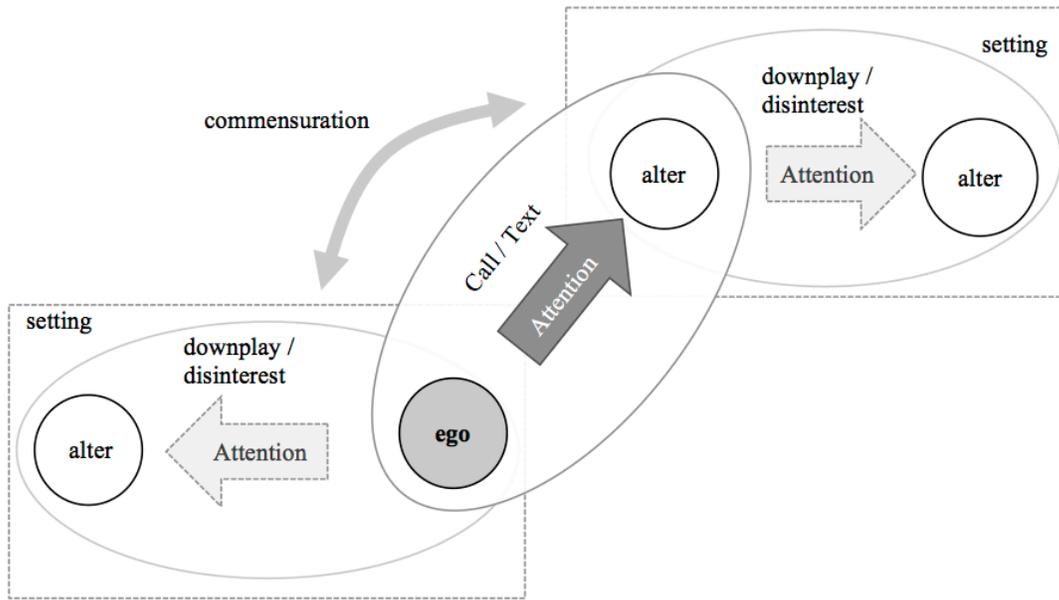* Shaded area represents areas of equilibrium, where individual's attention is neither overtaxed nor insufficiently engaged.

29

Figure 3. Hybrid Strategies