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Executive Summary

The Role of Smartphones and Technology in Sexual and Romantic Lives

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Overview

Technology has revolutionised our lives. From free texts to dating and hook-up apps, technology, and specifically smartphones, are transforming the dynamics of our sexuality in contemporary culture. This research, funded by Durex, examined the impact of technology and smartphones on romance, intimacy and sex for people in long-term relationships. Using in-depth, qualitative interviews with 30 people from a diverse range of backgrounds across England, this research shows that while smartphones are central to contemporary romantic relationships, they are also a cause of stress and tension. These tensions can be subtle and complex, but have the potential to negatively impact on relationships if they are not dealt with. While participants had strategies to deal with some of these issues, there was also dissatisfaction with the use of smartphones in their lives.

Key Findings

Technology and smartphones are ***central to the organization of romantic relationships*** for most participants, and are valued for the benefits they bring to everyday life:

- They are vital in establishing romantic relationships and an integral component of communication in the early stages of dating
- Smartphones are praised for enabling brief communication of love and affection during the day when couples are apart
- They are used to organize leisure time, including social activities and dinners out
- Smartphones are used to enhance sex lives, with two thirds of participants sending flirtatious messages, and 12 of the 30 sending sexual pictures to each other.

"We met and had sex obviously, but we kept in touch by text and emails and that kind of built the foundation of our relationship."

"I don't know what older people used to speak about, they didn't know what was going on in other peoples' lives. There is only so much you can talk to about with somebody you see everyday – these sites give us talking points."

The pervasive use of technology in relationships also ***comes at a cost***. For some participants, it served to **question the fidelity of partners**, and fatally undermine trust:

- Smartphones had been used as a way of facilitating cheating by partners of three participants
- Four participants spoke of tracking their partners' activities through monitoring their use of social networking sites, apps and their texts

"When the first iphone was purchased by him I used to call it the third person in our marriage and I hated her with a passion, she used to sit between us, and I really disliked her… it has become a third arm for a lot of people"

"It's just an open door. There are so many ways you can get away with things. It's been said before - the delete button is so easy to use. You can hide anything."

The great majority of participants valued technology in their lives, yet they still expressed **frustration at the tensions it caused** in their relationships:

- Participants expressed frustration when partners spent time on smartphone apps when together, often lying in bed messaging other people while ignoring each other
- Participants felt that smartphones encroached onto sexual activity, with 12 of the 30 having delayed sex because of technology use
- Some participants reported hurrying sexual activity in order to respond to messages on smartphone
- 10 participants had answered their phone during sex
- Participants expressed worry about privacy related to sexual texts and pictures

"*Sometimes I'll be on Facebook and he'll be on a sporting app while we are both in bed; we realize that we are literally sitting in bed together, but living in different worlds."*

"I may want sex and he might not be aware of that, because he's distracted on his phone"

"He is always on Clash of Clans. He is obsessed with that and often plays it on his phone and ipad. And he'll do that in the pub when we're with friends, which drives me insane."

Summary

In summary, technology has had a tremendous impact on the way relationships are started, consolidated and lived in the 21st century. Couples today use technology, particularly smartphones, to keep in touch – not just to organise the logistics of daily life like cooking and cleaning, but also for the emotional work of caring and comforting. Participants spoke of the importance of texts and phone calls - short communications to check the day was going ok or reminding their partners they were loved. It is also a central part of leisure time, arranging trips and dinners out or spicing up sex lives through flirtatious messages or erotic pictures and videos. Yet for all the benefits, there are still tensions that are fostered by technology, and smartphones in particular. While people develop strategies to deal with these issues, there is a role for technological innovations to help ameliorate these problems.

A Note on Methodology

In-depth interviews were undertaken in February 2015 with 30 people from across England. Participants were aged 18-55, and were required to have been in a relationship for at least one year. All participants were heterosexual, and there were a diverse make up in terms of class, ethnicity, age and educational background. Ethical approval was gained from Durham University, and the full report can be found at *Durham Research Online*.