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ARE SMARTPHONES REALLY BAD FOR RELATIONSHIPS?

PROFESSOR RESEARCHES IMPACT OF PHONES ON IN-PERSON CONVERSATIONS.

by [Jim Hanchett](#) | October 26, 2020*Above: David Roaché**Read time: about 1 min*

Smartphones have been accused of ruining relationships – just by their mere presence during a conversation. New research by a [communication](#) professor casts doubt on this conclusion.

Dr. David Roaché studied how couples interact when they discuss a conflict in person while holding or carrying smartphones. It's a useful area of inquiry because more than 80% of Americans own a smartphone. Claims that phones are fundamentally transforming relationships are common. About half of adults in committed, cohabiting, or married relationships report that their partner is distracted by their smartphone during conversations.

Roaché and his co-researchers used college students in heterosexual dating relationships for their study. Couples in one group discussed conflict issues in their relationship without their phones. Other groups of couples either held their phones or kept them in plain view while they hashed out disagreements.

The findings suggest that smartphone presence doesn't meaningfully diminish conversational quality. That is, couples' ratings of conversation quality did not differ when a smartphone was present or not. Instead, how couples communicated during the conflict played a much bigger role than whether a smartphone was present.

"It's common for people to blame communication problems on new communication technologies like smartphones," Roaché said. "However, our work suggests that, at least with interpersonal conflict, problems are more likely due to poor conflict management. People can use their mobile phones in destructive ways, but it's not

the device's fault."

An article summarizing the research, "The Presence of a Mobile Phone Does Not (Necessarily) Change the Fundamental Processes of Face-to-Face Relational Conflict," was published in the journal *Human Communication & Technology*. In addition to Roaché, the researchers include John Caughlin from the University of Illinois, Ningxin Wang from National University of Singapore and Kimberly Pusateri from Northwestern University.
