


The Constitutive Practices of Public Smartphone Use

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Received: 7 September 2020; Accepted: 8 October 2020; Published: 10 October 2020



Abstract: The smartphone has become the most ubiquitous piece of personal technology, giving it significant social importance and sociological relevance. In this article, we explore how the smartphone interacts with and impacts social interaction in the setting of the urban café. Through analyzing 52 spontaneous in-depth interviews related to social interaction in cafés, we identify three categories of smartphone use in social settings: *interaction suspension*, *deliberately shielding interaction*, and *accessing shareables*. These categories comprise the *constitutive smartphone practices* that define the social order of public smartphone use within an interactionist sociological framework.

Keywords: ethnomethodology; interaction suspension; smartphone; social interaction; Goffman

1. Introduction

The role of the smartphone in today's Western society is significant, yet it is still unmanageable, difficult to follow, and coloured by myths and stories. It stretches from the complex financial arrangements with different sharing platforms [1] to our most intimate, individual relationships [2]. Currently, in 2020, the smartphone is integrated in almost every ongoing social activity, as phone use becomes a co-activity that moves in parallel with other activities [3]. Such co-activity may include finding the best café on TripAdvisor, paying for bus tickets, or communicating with other actors both distantly and within the same physical space, thus establishing a number of discreet "communication layers" [4]. Licoppe [5] claims that shifting between different smartphone communication layers and face-to-face interactions are seamlessly woven together in everyday life in a "connected presence".

The smartphone offers an individual freedom from the constraints of time and place. It also leads to renegotiation of place from an understanding of place as stable and fixed (*stabilitas loci*) to a reconceptualisation of place as formed in and through mobility (*mobilitas loci*) [6]. Such freedom and reconceptualisation contribute to major changes in the co-ordination of social life [7–9]—as illustrated by the usual initiation of mobile calls—through a mutual exchange of information about the location of communicators. This provides guidance for legitimate and "safe" conversation themes [10], linked to awareness of place-based possibilities and limitations [11]. The awareness of place exemplifies how new technological opportunities—such as the smartphone—are domesticated through people's adaption and use [12,13].

On the basis of interests both on uses of personal technologies and social life in public space, we focus in this article on public smart phone practices, more specifically in cafés. While this focus is fairly narrow, it enables us to explore details of micro interactions that are changed—and that impact—global trends of urban social life. Habermas [14] analysed how the cafés allowed spaces for open and uncensored political debate in Europe in the 18th century. Now, in the 21st century, new forms of public spheres arise with online access everywhere, and cafes used as laptop-open

offices [15]. The physical space of the café is also a venue for cultivating social relationships. The café gives the social researcher access to public city life [16], to study social interaction both between friends, acquaintances, and strangers, hence to explore both macro- and microworlds [17].

As sociologists, we are interested in exploring how technologies and humans interact. The phone is a reciprocal technology, and (through interaction) we have developed a common sense of interaction practices where we expect that other people are available [18]. In face-to-face conversations, people will need to manage between the different co-present and mediated involvement obligations [19]. Through an ethnographic study of online and offline life, Lane [20] shows how studying layers of smartphone data in a synchronous manner can capture the extent and richness of social relationships among youths. While Lane's study explores the meanings of the connectivity, Roberts and David [2] studied smartphone use in romantic relationships and found that people felt "phubbed" (over-looked) by their partners' smartphone use. The concept of phubbing is commonly used to describe the interference of smartphones in social settings, based on a contraction of the words "phone" and "snubbing." However, because the observer does not have full access to the subjects' feelings and reactions, phubbing can be difficult to discover through observation. What we *can* observe is how the smartphones impact on social interaction, and through interviews we can get more information about how people feel about other people's use of the smartphone in social meetings.

To be able to study such phenomena in more detail, we concentrated on the accessible public space of the café with the following question: *"How does the smartphone interact with and impact social interaction in urban cafés?"* We apply an ethnomethodological point of departure to acknowledge social integration of smartphone use, i.e., that everyday routine use of the smartphone establishes what is "normal," "accepted," or even "artful" [21] phone practices. With basis in detailed observation studies, and with inspiration from Anne Rawls [22], we identify three "constitutive practices" of public smart phone use: (i) suspension, (ii) deliberate protection of the interaction, and (iii) access to sharables. These are practices that define the acceptable "social role" of the smart phone. We chose the café as a space that is public, a part of everyday life, and accessible for discreet, covert, legitimate and ethically acceptable studies. We use the term "public" to conceive of the café as a space in which the dominant culture is reproduced by the people being in the place at any time, and who do not necessarily know each other [23]. Using the term "public" also suggests equal access, although such access usually demands the small investment of a coffee or similar. While café guests take different roles depending of the purpose of the café visit, we limited our observation to what seemed as purely social encounters between established acquaintances.

The empirical basis for this article includes 108 observed situations as a background and 52 spontaneous in-depth interviews [24] that focus on reflections on the social use of smartphones at the café. This design fostered an investigation of both smartphone practices and accounts of such practices, thus making it possible to develop a nuanced analysis of social interaction and related experiences/reflections. We follow Durkheim's [25] understanding of the social order as a shared set of continuously evolving social norms [26], by which human action is never entirely random. To understand human action, we need to think about how agents interpret their own situation and what kind of interpretation processes they are part of within their cultures and communities [27]. By drawing on observation and spontaneous in-depth interviews, we seek to address the "picayune and petty" issues related to social interaction that otherwise go unnoticed [28] (p. 247).

The further introduction to this study describes technologies, physical spaces, communities, and social interaction. It is followed by a methods section and a five-part analysis section. In the final discussion, we identify interaction suspension, deliberately shielding interaction, and accessing shareables as three categories of constitutive smartphone practices. This typological concept is the main contribution of the article.

2. The Ambivalence of Mediated Communication

The development of the smartphone and the fourth and fifth generations of mobile telecommunication networks (4G and 5G) have made it possible to be online almost everywhere, 24 h a day. Mediated communication has provided opportunities for new forms of communities across time and space, in a “persistent-pervasive community” [15]. Persistent contexts make contact possible throughout life when one might earlier have lost contact due to mobility constraints such as moving from one place to another. Time and place separation is no longer reasons for losing contact. Pervasive awareness makes it possible for people to be constantly updated with information about the everyday lives of others in their networks. Mundane information such as occasional photos and updates on day-to-day activities may seem trivial, but it facilitates people staying connected. This persistent–pervasive connection may be understood as communication layers, by which indefinite and potentially discreet layers of collaborative presentations of selves are constantly produced [4]. Whereas Turkle [29] and Putnam [30] claim that social capital is reduced because of our use of the Internet and personal media technologies, others claim that these technological developments open up new modes of interaction between people and their use of communication technologies [8,9,31].

Personal technologies, like the smartphone, need to be treated as parts of our everyday interaction [32]. Approaching Goffman’s terminology [33], one of the two individuals in an interaction unit becomes single when the other individual’s mobile phone rings [34]. The one who receives the call turns his or her focus of interaction away from the accompanying person, towards the person on the phone. Humphreys [34] used observation to determine how individuals employ different strategies to adjust to interruptions in ongoing face-to-face interactions. One strategy that Humphreys points to is the possibility for the single to eavesdrop on part of the phone conversation, thus becoming part of the phone interaction. The possibility of eavesdropping on conversations is still available today, but with the change from regular mobile phones to smartphones, talking on the phone has to a large extent been replaced by reading, writing, and browsing by silently touching the screen. This makes it hard to know what and whom the other person is occupied with on the screen.

The smartphone is a form of communication technology with impact on social occasions, in our case on conversations between café guests. Benediktsson et al. [35] (p. 346) use Goffman’s term “allocation of involvement” [36], (pp. 43–63) to analyse how individuals use different strategies to maintain face-to-face interaction while simultaneously maintaining their digitally mediated social ties. The intimacy of the relation and the informal power of social interaction are crucial for where the individuals choose to focus their attention. The shift of focused interaction between face-to-face and various communication layers may be interactionally problematic because they are interleaved into each other, hence representing unfocused communication layers [37]. Simmel [38] use the terms dyad and triad to illustrate how much more complex the social interaction becomes when one more person attends. The smartphone can be understood as another participant in the interaction when it calls for attention [32]. Goffman describes interleaving in connection with frames that individual participants are part of:

The actor cannot easily insert himself back into appropriate involvement, back into control of the frame. And his precipitous departure from effective participation can disrupt the proper involvement of other participation . . . Whatever can cause an individual to break frame has produced in him the behaviour which can cause others to also [39] (p. 350).

People draw on a frame as mental equipment when trying to understand a situation and establish what is expected of them within it. The characterisation of the situation involves different interactional norms and role requirements [40] (p. 194). One requirement is providing a civil explanation for making the interaction less focused or increasingly interrupted by suddenly interleaving another communication layer onto it.

New modes of togetherness are realised in different shared spaces: for instance, when people are co-located in a public space with their laptops [24] or when they are online while at home and

participating in virtual shared spaces outside of the home [41], a situation which has become normalised in recent times of pandemically-induced home office work. In this vast array of physical and virtual spaces, people experience different types of communities that change depending on the context (frame), common interests and collective support [4], potentially incidental interaction pretexts [42], or legitimating different roles that can be played out [17]. Hence, from a sociological point of view, uses of technologies are socially constructed [43] and shaped [44] by ways in which they are made relevant within social interaction.

3. Methods

The idea for this article has evolved during 12 years of café studies across many cities in Norway, UK, USA and Australia. In these studies, we have found that café customers within each city form their practices in relation to a wide range of purposes of café visits, and with no obvious differences between countries. We have observed one obvious cultural difference though, related to the acceptance of public breastfeeding, which we find regularly in Norway as opposed to the other countries. In previous studies, we have noted the way technologies like smartphones, tablets, and laptops become part of the social life of cafes. Smartphones represent an essentially ubiquitous technology of today, producing a lay observation (or myth) that everyone is just staring at their screens rather than communicating with those with whom they are gathered.

Empirical material was generated in cafes in the city centre of Trondheim, a Norwegian university town with about 187,000 inhabitants. The empirical approach included covert observation of café guests socialising, and spontaneous in-depth interviews, i.e., short, open-ended interviews conducted on the spot [24]. The data were generated between 11:00 and 20:00 on weekdays and weekends during November and December 2015. Trondheim this time of year is a dark and chilly experience, and the cafes offers a warm and cozy meeting place outside the private home. Across the 13 different cafes we found groups of students reading for exams and preparing papers, adults pausing from work or working with their laptops, friends meeting over a coffee, and fresh mothers bringing their babies in strollers to be social during maternity leave. We would not be able to make any detailed demographic profile, but the participants we selected would mainly be in the range of 20–40 years of age.

Participants for the covert observations of 108 different social situations were selected on the basis of a simple inclusion criterion: they needed to be in groups of at least two people with at least one of them having a smartphone visible during their time at the café. Groups could vary in size over time by people joining or leaving while being observed. During our fieldwork, we also started taking notes regarding people sitting alone or arriving alone at the café with a smartphone visible, because it became apparent that many single visitors turned out to be waiting for someone as long as they did not start working on a laptop.

We interviewed 101 individuals through 52 spontaneous in-depth interviews. These are short *focused interviews* [45] conducted on the spot after a brief introduction [46]. We approached people who were either part of groups of at least two people, or who had been sitting together with someone who had left. We asked the following questions: (1) Do you use your smartphone in the café with others? (2) What do you used it for? (3) Why do you use it? (4) Do you have your smartphone on silent/vibration/sound mode? (5) Why do you use this mode in the café? (6) Do you check stuff on Internet when being at cafés with friends? (7) What do you feel about other in your company using the smartphone at cafés? To reduce the participants' feeling of intrusion, we would not interview the same participants as we had been observing. The interview style would be relaxed and informal, suitable for the café as an informal place.

As the café guests in many cases were on the way to leave when we approached them, some of the interviews needed to be rather brief. Nevertheless, with interviews lasting between 3.5 and 34 min, with an average of 10 min, our experience is that café customers in general were generous enough with their time for the spontaneous focused interview method to generate relevant information. The combination of observation and interviews provided empirical material on both practices and

personal accounts of public smartphone use, hence providing “thick descriptions,” covering both “what,” “how” and “why” questions [47].

We did not record the age, names, or other demographic data in the observation or during the spontaneous in-depth interviews. Due to ethical considerations, we confirmed that interview participants were over 18 years of age and that no personal information would be recorded. Informed consent was collected during the invitation to be interviewed and with the positive response. Covert observation is ethically accepted in public space—since anyone may observe anyone else, as long as reporting is strongly anonymised. Interviews, however, may disturb the existing social order of the café as well as reducing the discreteness of the observers, and were therefore undertaken at the end of observation sessions, just before us leaving each café. The study was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD).

The analysis of data from observation and interviews followed a stepwise-deductive inductive strategy [24], by which empirical material was first coded with empirically close codes, by the use of HyperRESEARCH software, and then thematically grouped. This approach is closely related to Grounded Theory [48] with the aim to identify and develop concepts emerging from the empirical analysis to be able to establish a wider understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny. The analysis resulted in five themes, which we have termed modes of smartphone practices; (1) phone–face transitions, (2) screening for urgency, (3) ignoring and being ignored, (4) contagious smartphone use, and (5) screen sharing. In the following analysis section, we will review these types of use briefly and provide some examples.

4. Five Modes of Smartphone Practices

We may view the relationship between the social café guests and their smartphones as organic, i.e., as evolving during social interaction over time. What we describe as a social order of the smartphone becomes evident in the negotiation (sometimes with friction) between café guests’ face-to-face conversations and their face-to-smartphone encounters. The conversation and the café setting play together to form the social entity of the café visit, with a beginning (entering), a middle, and an end (leaving). In the middle part, the conversation comes to life and is sectioned into topics with natural breaks between them.

4.1. Phone–Face Transitions

The processes of both entering and leaving the café were played out in quite similar manners at our different fieldwork locations. Guests’ smartphones were often present and visible. When arriving at the café, the guests would often use their phones as they entered or when they found a table. This was especially apparent when one person in a party arrived before the other(s); the waiting guest would often use their smartphone and put it away when the person they were awaiting arrived. The most common location for this “away” would be on the table with the screen facing up or down.

Two local women in their twenties have just bought coffee and muffins. When I sit down, they start “snapping”¹ the coffee and muffins. They spend a little time on this task. When the snaps have been transmitted [distributed to Snapchat contacts] both say “ok, that’s it” and put their phones on the table with the screens facing up. (Observation MS11)

These women’s café visit seemed well established and routinely synchronised: buy coffee or food, allocate some time to take a picture of the food, publish or send the picture to someone, put the smartphone on the table with the screen facing up, and then engage in focused social interaction with each other.

¹ Snapchat is an application that allows people to easily share photos and videos.

Towards the end of the café visit, the smartphone returned to its former presence. At this point, the phone could be used to check the time, check the bus timetable, or to plan the next appointment with each other by the use of their calendars. Some café guests got into a rhythm the last few minutes before leaving: Social interaction face-to-face, then face-to-smartphone, and then again face-to-face—whereas others did not. Independently of this rhythm they used their smartphones when leaving the café. The smartphone is used in a manner to *tactfully signal* [33] (p. 55) the end of the café visit. According to our observations and what many participants told us during interviews, this appears to be an established routine.

During the café visit, some guests were left alone while their company was ordering something at the counter or needed to use the restroom. As they became unaccompanied, the phone again became present. Several participants told us that they would use their smartphone to surf the web to be entertained while waiting for someone. People sitting alone doing nothing but looking around was observed on very few occasions. When waiting for someone, the smartphone offers a way to avoid the signalling of loneliness or boredom. Humphreys [34] refers to Goffman [33] when observing that singles occupy themselves with looking at a menu, playing with the coffee cup or eating—or, in this case, using the smartphone.

If there are two people and one of them goes to the restroom, then the other often suddenly [checks the phone] and it is almost as if one has become addicted, that it feels awkward just sitting there without doing anything. (Olivia)

Olivia pointed out that the feeling of just existing and not doing anything specific made her uncomfortable. It was strange not to use the smartphone when being (left) alone in a public place. The phone is not only an involvement shield [36], it is also an important prop for constructing the front stage presentation of someone who is not lonely, but rather occupied with something important. When the “single” again becomes “with,” the phone is again put away, as in the beginning of the café visit. Phone–face transitions thus happen during entering and leaving, as well as in breaks from one’s company.

4.2. Screening for Urgency

During the middle part of the café visit the focus of our subjects was mainly on the conversation. Few people seemed to use the phone during this phase, but when there was a shift in conversation topic a natural break was sometimes created where phone use was considered legitimate. One of our subjects described this smartphone lull as giving rise to a kind of unspoken consensus that use of the smartphone during the lull would not imply an uncivil disruption of the ongoing face-to-face interaction. One of our informants, Karla, admitted that even if she paid full attention to the conversation, she would check her phone. However, to “check the phone” could mean two different things in this context: (1) to glimpse at the phone briefly to see who had sent a particular message, without reading or answering it, or (2) to take the time to read and potentially answer the message. Participants considered the first as legitimate during conversation but the second was not, unless the person communicated that checking the phone was important. People would screen for urgency in order to civilly manage the shift between face-to-face and mediated communication.

Most of our interview participants kept their smartphone in silent mode throughout the visit. Having the sound turned on, even just for incoming calls, was not considered appropriate insofar as it would interfere with the conversation and disrupt the overall atmosphere of the café. When having the smartphone on the table with the screen facing up, users would be able to discreetly notice the light/flash, signifying calls and notifications, while seemingly not being occupied by the phone.

On the question of whether it was acceptable to answer a message or notification immediately, the participants pointed out that it depended on the status of the person in the face-to-face interaction relative to the person in the mediated conversation. The frame was relevant to determining importance and consequently to establish whether interruption of the face-to-face conversation was justified.

Work- and family-related issues were considered more urgent for several of our subjects and would often easily justify interruption of face-to-face conversation. However, there were individual differences. For instance, parents with small children mentioned that a main reason for keeping the smartphone on the table, even sometimes with the sound turned on, was to be immediately accessible for communication from the kindergarten or daycare. Several of our participants pointed out that work-related calls or messages were considered both important and legitimate to answer. This could partially be explained by the fact that most interviews were conducted during regular work hours.

One of our participants mentioned being offended by other people's frequent use of smartphones when they were together and that their use influenced her own attitude towards smartphones, keeping her own phone use to a minimum. At the same time, she found it acceptable to answer work-related phone calls. Issues that were not considered urgent, she thought, could wait if one was in the midst of a face-to-face conversation. Several of our participants confirmed the existence of a hierarchy of disruption justifications based on which application was used in addition to who sent the call or message. Differentiating between various phone applications ("apps") was a well-established practice: a traditional (voice) call was considered more urgent than a Snapchat message by many participants. That young people hardly use the phone for traditional calls increases the perceived importance of receiving a phone call. One participant, Daniel, pointed out that it is not common to talk on the smartphone and that different types of text communication (SMS and various chat apps) have taken over. When the phone actually does ring, it is therefore considered urgent, consequently legitimising the interruption of on-going activities to answer straight away. The frequency of voice call interruptions in the conversation is also relevant, as Eva put it:

It is OK if the phone rings and you hear a beep and [the other person] takes out the phone, checks it, and perhaps says "sorry, I just have to answer this." Then you understand that it may be a bit important. But if this is what happens all the time, THEN it becomes annoying. (Eva)

Our interview subjects confirmed that it was easy to be excused for answering a phone call, especially if followed by an apology. As suggested, this is because actual voice calls, and the person making the call, are given a higher "urgency" status.

4.3. Ignoring

In the literature, phubbing is commonly used to describe the interference of smartphones in social settings. The word "phubbing" is a contraction of the words "phone" and "snubbing." Phubbing can be difficult to discover through observation because the observer does not have full access to the subjects' feelings and reactions. One representative example of phubbing from our field observations involved one subject showing visible signs of exasperation: "She is so occupied with the phone that the man (who accompanies her) looks out into the air. It looks like he has given up looking at her to get her attention." (field observation). The man in this situation attempted to achieve eye contact with the woman throughout the conversation, but she ignored his attempts and kept focusing on her smartphone. In the interviews, we asked the participants whether they had been annoyed by others' use of the smartphone. The answer was "both yes and no," but phubbing was generally perceived as uncivil. One subject put it this way: "It is very uncomfortable, since I feel left out—that the person doesn't really want to interact with me" (Daniella). Another participant, Mary, expressed it like this:

If you're on the phone a lot you will, for instance, signal that you are bored, that you don't really enjoy the company of the people around you. And that, of course, signals that you are not in a good situation. You'd rather be on the phone. (Mary)

A third participant said "I feel like I am not sufficiently exciting to be their conversation partner" (Julia). Phubbing was not only perceived as uncivil; subjects who had experienced being phubbed themselves interpreted it as a way of being socially downgraded. To avoid the feeling of being phubbed,

an apology would justify the phone use as being important or urgent, and, in this manner, maintain the social order of the situation.

Individuals who phub others seem to do so for various reasons, most commonly because they interpret the situation differently. For example, they may worry about embarrassing silences and pick up the phone to repair the awkwardness while pretending to be occupied with something important. One participant expressed this as a common occurrence: “I actually do that quite often. When it’s completely silent, I’ll just pick up the phone and pretend to be doing something” (Ben). Others phub to more demonstratively show that they do not enjoy the conversation, in a manner akin to eye rolling. Being phubbed in a two-party relationship (dyad) can be experienced more unpleasant and uncomfortable than in a three-party relationship (triad), because there is a greater closeness in the interaction in a dyad than a triad [37]. The fact that some of our participants sometimes phubbed others intentionally, for example, in situations where the conversation bored them, made the experience of being exposed to phubbing themselves more unpleasant and uncomfortable.

The strong propensity towards frequent smartphone use, in combination with an established etiquette of abstaining from smartphone use at the table, led some of our participants to go the restroom to use their smartphone. Breaking the conversation by going to the restroom is legitimate on the basis of an expected bodily need but is also used strategically to check the phone without sacrificing politeness at the table. The use of the smartphone in the restroom and using the restroom strategically to have some “phone time,” illustrates the conflict between compulsive phone use and maintaining socially appropriate phone practices.

When the interaction frame is not clearly defined as a social encounter at the café, people may misinterpret each other and the situation, in particular with regard to the role of the smartphone. To achieve synchronisation, those who are phubbed might pick up their own smartphones; smartphone use is contagious.

4.4. Phone Use Contagion

When one person checks the phone, face-to-face interaction is disrupted, quite often unintentionally. A face-to-face encounter is then transformed into what we have identified as face-to-smartphone interaction. During our observations, we noticed a pattern of contagious use of smartphones. When subjects started fiddling with their phones, we often found that others at the table would quickly start doing the same. This can be seen as a reaction to phubbing, an observation that was confirmed through the interviews. When asked whether the participants had told their friends to stop phubbing them, several subjects stated that they had wanted to, but did not. A few had actually told their friends to stop, but in a rather humorous way, for instance by photographing their friends using their smartphones and sending the image to them instead of verbally suggesting to put the phone away. By picking up the smartphone and using it, in this case to send a picture, the individual’s response to being phubbed is to use the smartphone. In this sense, we can understand smartphone use as contagious, as in this observation:

Two men (1 and 2) sit on the big couch in the middle of the café. A woman (3) sits in a chair on the other side of the table. It looks like they’ve been sitting there for a while and that they’ve got plenty of time. 14 min into the observation man-1 starts tapping his phone. Man-2 takes out his phone and starts tapping it, leans over to look at Man-1’s screen for a moment. Now Woman-3 also takes out her phone. (Observation MS60)

When one individual in a dyad is “left alone” by the other person’s smartphone use by the table, this person will very often get occupied with his or her own smartphone. This is a way of accepting being phubbed, and at the same time re-establishing a certain symmetry of the social order. Anna would use her smartphone as long as her friends were initially using their smartphones. Her reflection depends on a type of awareness of the other person(s) and to what extent the smartphone interferes with the face-to-face interaction and the relation between café companions. Paula put it like this:

It varies a bit with your company. If I am in the company of someone who is more active on the phone, then I'll use the phone more actively myself. So, it depends a bit on how your company uses the phone. (Paula)

Another participant explained that when she was together with her mother, she did not use the smartphone because her mother would then ask her what she was doing and why. In this way, the mother would tell her daughter indirectly not to use the smartphone when they were together. This is an example of the social interaction between café companions continuously defining or negotiating the norms for use of the smartphone. At the same time, participants mentioned that while experiencing being phubbed it was easier to pick up one's own phone than to tell the other person(s) to put away theirs. In this way, participants would involuntarily maintain a smartphone-infused social order.

4.5. Screen Sharing

After the first five field visits, we had to revise our observation form to include sharing screens, a behaviour we had not expected to see to such a large extent. Several of the interview subjects pointed out that if they did use the smartphone in a social setting it was often to view postings or images together or to take pictures of each other or of the group. The phone was in this way applied socially:

I use it mostly to show them photos of where I have been and what I did last weekend or something. I also check Facebook sometimes, but not so frequently. (Nelly)

Nelly was using the smartphone to supplement the conversation with pictures, a practice that was common among our participants. Several observations also demonstrated how taking pictures of each other and searching the Internet for facts related to an on-going discussion gave the smartphone a supplementary role within the social activity. Ann and Nicolas put it like this:

Interviewer: So, when it adds something to the conversation, it's OK?

Nicolas: Yes.

Ann: Yes. I'll agree to that. If we're talking about the population of Iraq, it is important to be able to check with Google.

Nicolas: Yes. Ha-ha. Very good example.

The two participants reported using the smartphone to google facts when discussing a topic. "You never argue about facts anymore," several of our participants mentioned in the interviews. We also observed subjects sharing their smartphone screens with each other, i.e., an inclusive use of the smartphone that did not require an apology the way the previously described disruptive uses did.

5. Discussion: Constitutive Smartphone Practices

In the analysis of our empirical material, we identified five empirical different categories of smartphone use in cafés: (1) phone–face transitions, (2) screening for urgency, (3) ignoring, (4) phone use contagion, and (5) screen sharing. At the start of this study, we asked the question about how the smartphone would interact with and impact social interaction in urban café. As we base our analysis on structured observation, focused ethnography by taking field-notes, and spontaneous in-depth interviews, we were able not only to document and analyse the various nuances of public smartphone practices, but also how these are distributed among café guests and how smartphone users reflect on their own and others' habits. In a continued and more theoretical discussion, we will suggest three concepts of constitutive smartphone practices through which the smartphone is integrated in the interaction order: (1) interaction suspension, (2) deliberately shielding interaction, and (3) accessing shareables. With these concepts of smartphone practices, we draw attention to more generic aspects, by which the smartphone and similar personal communication technologies are essential parts of the interaction when they call for attention. These technologies also afford certain

social actions and add quality (for instance by providing images, information, facts) to social encounters. While the five empirical categories of smartphone practices draw attention to observed patterns and individual accounts, the three conceptual smartphone practices constitute social interaction by which the smartphone becomes part of the action. By such a conceptual development, we aim to contribute to a sociology of smartphone use, in a more generic and constructive sense, adding to established interactionist sociology.

The smartphone affords a number of different layers of communicative transparency [4], and the ability to act out multiple roles at the same time through different platforms such as e-mail, text messaging (SMS), social media apps, photographing/recording facilities, and traditional phone features. Social interaction face to face may be suspended when individuals screen notifications on their smartphone to assess urgency—a potentially important e-mail from the boss, a call from kindergarten about a child being ill, a “snap” (text/image on Snapchat) from a boyfriend—or an impulse to check social media in fear of missing out [49]. The concept of interaction suspension is based on the phubbing phenomenon [2] and suggests changes in current public social interaction. The smartphone can be understood as a conflicting involvement obligation with the potential to disrupt co-present engrossing interaction [19]. We can also have in mind, as Walsh and Clark [19] note, that engrossing talks require extensive energy, especially over extended time, and individuals may also be grateful for some breaks. When subjects during a conversation withdraw from an ongoing face-to-face encounter because they are engaged in another (online) communication layer, they may fail to embrace the expected social role [50], (p. 37) in the café setting. The individuals’ own interpretations of the frame of interaction may, in this case, occasionally lead to error or frame disputes, as suggested by Goffman [39]. It is how the smartphone is a part of the conversation, and how it is arranged, that impacts how the frame is interrupted [51].

Individuals who are exposed to interaction suspension may respond by using the smartphone as a deliberate interaction shield (cf. [36]), i.e., an intentional use of the smartphone to create the impression of being occupied and not interested in engaging in face-to-face communication. We have observed interaction shields also being applied to avoid uncomfortable situations, for instance when waiting for someone to arrive at the café, as shown in the observation in part 4.1, or when people gathered discuss a theme without everyone’s interest, as Sam explained in part 4.3. While Goffman introduced “involvement shields” [36] (p. 38) using examples from individuals in gatherings, the smartphone affords a wide array of constantly available activities: participating in social media, surfing the web, playing games, checking e-mails/messages, chatting, reading newspapers, ordering movie tickets, paying bills, etc. In addition to the features exhibited in Goffman’s examples, the smartphone also makes available imitated notifications, especially when the silent mode is on: nobody needs to know whether subjects actually received a notification. Benediktsson et al. [35] (p. 345) refer to this as managing compatibility, between electronically mediated and face-to-face interaction, where the latter is not always welcome.

The two processes of suspending and shielding interaction constitute “recognizable social orders” [22] (p. 6) of social integration of ubiquitous smartphone use. Our study demonstrates how the smartphone affords various social strategies for individual use in social settings, but also that care is very often taken to maintain civility in smartphone use, for instance by explicitly excusing interaction suspension and keeping such suspensions brief (“just need to respond to this”). Whether such situations are perceived as civil or uncivil depends on the individual’s ability to include the others in his/her smartphone use by accounting for the need to use it, often by mentioning who is calling. This leads to the third category, accessing shareables, concerning how the smartphone allows joint focused attention to the screen. By sharing pictures of family, friends and vacation memories, looking up information and facts, or placing appointments in the digital calendar, people are collectively focused by shared screens. This particular use of the phone demonstrates the smartphone’s potential integration also in face-to-face communication—towards enhancement rather than fragmentation.

This article offers a deeper and more detailed understanding of the social role of smartphone use. By suggesting the term “constitutive smartphone practices” we apply the ethnomethodological twist of Ann Rawls [22], to acknowledge the social integration of the smartphone, by which uses of various smartphone features afford changes of what is regarded normal social interaction, i.e., (re)constituting public social interaction. Studying a technologically advanced society—such as Norway, where 95% of the population had access to a smartphone in 2020 [52]—provides an analysis and “sociological vision” of social interaction in the age of total diffusion of technologically mediated communication.

Whereas Goffman’s work has been seminal with regard to the impact of interactionist sociology, studies from the 1950s and 1960s are necessarily missing concepts relevant for the nuanced understanding of a communicatively layered society [53]. Our particular study of how people in a digitally connected society use their smartphones in public points towards sociological interactionist analyses that extend what was established more than 50 years ago. Accordingly, sociological interest should be directed towards not only the empirical phenomena of ubiquitous personal communication technologies, but also towards the theoretical development of an interactionist sociology relevant for the 21st century, in which agency is distributed and negotiated among both human and nonhuman actors [54]. With this motivation we have emphasized the study of face-to-face conversations—and the smartphone’s place in such conversations—in order to be able to scrutinise what is otherwise commonly reproduced as superficial myths about everyone “being glued to their screens” in a society without face-to-face conversation.

This article is necessarily only a minor contribution to strengthening the future relevance of interactionist sociology in a modern technological world. Nevertheless, it may establish some grounds for empirical and conceptual pathways towards a better understanding of the social role of communication technologies [32]. Relevant uses and revisions of concepts such as interaction order (Goffman), artfully accomplished everyday practices (Garfinkel), or constitutive recognizable social orders (Rawls) all need to take into account how technologies (especially the smartphone) become thoroughly integrated and taken for granted in social interaction. From a sociological point of view we should be analytically positioned, neither blindly celebrating nor bluntly demonizing the societal impact of such use of new personal technologies.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, analysis, writing, review and editing: I.M.H., M.S. and A.T.; data collection: M.S. and I.M.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: To all the social café guest’s with smartphone: This article would not be possible without you contributing with your reflections. Thank you. We will also thank the editors and reviewers of Societies for constructive comments to a previous version of the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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