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ID 1589 | E-CAMPUS SPACE REVISITING THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE CAMPUS URBAN LIFE

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ABSTRACT: How has Wi-Fi and smartphones changed the excitement of the Campus urban space? To what extent has it de-engaged students from themselves and their surrounding? How has the culture of smart phones affected the on-campus communication style in public spaces among the younger generation? The study is a continuation of the dialogue generated by Keith Hampton, Lee Humphreys and others on the impact of mobile phones in public spaces. However, it chooses to focus on ME Gulf City Campus Life. Campus life has traditionally been one of the most memorable and engaging experiences of student life. The common age-group, shared major of study, interest and common agenda has branded

the university life to become so memorable in the development and growth of a student, perhaps so much more than any other urban space in the city. Ever since the introduction of virtual space, that aspect seems to have changed. This study aims to investigate the effects of smart phones on how people interact, connect and perceive campus urban spaces. It investigates some aspects of the culture of smart phones on the design of urban spaces. These aspects of how people connect and perceive urban spaces, their cognitive abilities, communication skills, behaviour and face to face interactions are just few effects of smart phones in shaping the identity of people and places. The study finally investigates whether the design of the space affects how people use their phones or are there other factors that play a role in that. For this research, the students of the American University of Sharjah (AUS) are surveyed for the case study. The findings include insights about what motivates people to use their phones in public spaces and how physical elements of a space such as the provision of various seating options, soft-scape, good views, etc. would affect the likelihood of using smart phones.

KEYWORDS: mobile phones, social isolation, campus space, observation

1 INTRODUCTION

For a decade or more, the use of smart phones has been one of the popular acts throughout different societies attracting people of all age groups. The use of smart phones in public space social life became an undeniable phenomenon since about 2012 (Reisinger, 2013). Smart phones miraculously got people close to each other, they can now call, text, Skype and check Facebook posts from all over the world. Smart phones have changed from a simple communication tool, to a technological extension to our body (Lanier, 2010). Everywhere in the city, social life in public spaces is changing. Interaction and engagement seem no longer related to the confines of physical space and design. On campus too life is changing. We cannot leave a place without our phones. Walking around campus, students no longer talk to each other anymore while walking to classes. Even when sitting together on the same table, a short phrase when something pops-up, then each one goes back to their own digital world. Smart phones replaced face to face interactions. The use of mobile phones has turned public urban spaces into private ones where each person is in their own world with someone who is not in their same location. People move around with their own private bubbles, their own private public space. Therefore, as urban planning scholars, the question is posed: how does this behaviour affects how people perceive campus urban spaces? How do students interact with their campus environment within the dominance of non-physical engagement? Is there a new task for the campus planner/designer? The scope of this study is bound by the behaviour of users of the American University of Sharjah (UAE).

The time a person spends on smart phones is a lot more than what we spend on other life activities. Recent studies show that the average time an individual spends on a cell phone was about 4 hours every day (Emarketer, 2017, Flurry Analytics, 2017). Smart phones therefore affected the way people communicate and behave in outdoor as well as indoor public spaces. Many studies about the effects of smart phones -and their predecessors the mobile phones and PDAs -on social interaction and face-to-face communication in public spaces have been conducted. Lee Humphreys (2005) for example, performed a year-long observational study on how people's interaction changes in public spaces and how mobile phones became an anchor for societal relations. The behavior of people was examined when they were alone or with someone and how they used their phones as "defense mechanisms" to escape from "social vulnerabilities" (Humphreys, 2005). Keith Hampton's et al. (2010) looked at how social life took place in "wireless urban spaces". They observed seven public parks in four different cities in the US. The findings indicated three things: that people are attracted to public spaces that offer internet connection that they would not otherwise visit; that the location of seating that people choose depends on their usage of smart phones; and that users can be less aware of what is happening in their surroundings and are less likely to be engaged in in-person conversations. Ira Hyman (2014) compared the acceptance of cell phone usage among social groups. She found that young generation found texting and using smart phones among social groups to be more acceptable than older generations. Ling (2002) goes on to suggest that smart phones restrict the social interaction and nonverbal communication especially among the younger generation. While Irfan, Aqeel and others (2014) find the opposite -that owning a cell phone actually increases social capital and sense of belonging among university students.

Therefore, the issue of whether or not smart phones positively or negatively affect the campus life experience is still largely undetermined. This study uses different methodologies and in a different context and cultural setting.

2 LOCATION OF THE STUDY

For this study, participants are selected from one university, American University of Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The United Arab Emirates is an Arab country located in the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula. The UAE is made up of seven emirates, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Ras Al Khaimah, Umm Al Quwain, and Fujairah. It is known to be one of the top countries hosting a wide diversity of cultures and nationalities which makes it an interesting field for social and studies. The city of Sharjah is the third largest emirate in the UAE. The American University of Sharjah was founded in in 1997 and is now a prominent all-inclusive coeducational university in the Gulf region. .

AUS is a huge 150 hectares campus with its academic core spreading across 18 hectares (550x360m). Academic buildings are symmetrically aligned along both sides of a north-south axis with the Main Building and Library (4) at its vista. The main gathering places are mostly indoors. The Student Center (2) has lounges, a food court, and Break Point restaurant. The Libaray building and its annex has the reading hall (4), the Sheraa Enterpeneurship Center and its infamous Belnds and Brew Cafe (3). Wifi servise covers the whole campus spaces both indoor and outdoor (figure 1).



Figure 1-American University of Sharjah Campus

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study was conducted on three stages; online survey, recorded video observations and face-to-face interviews. In the first stage ; 35 students currently enrolled in AUS in different majors took the online survey. In this survey, campus spaces where student gather, use their smart phones and interact were identified. Students were asked 10 questions about their smart phone habits, technology dependency, reactions to their surroundings, their life before and after they own a smart phone and finally to rank the public spaces in the university where they use their phones the most to where they use it the least.3

Based on the survey findings, the second stage used unstructured observation technique (Gillham 2008) at those key locations around AUS during lunch breaks and campus peak hours. The main focus was on how students behave with each other and with their surroundings. The other motive was to understand the role of the space design on students' decisions to use or pay no attention to their smart phones and explore what other factors can play a role in that.

The third stage used in depth interviews with 16 students to find out about the motives of their behaviour and actions.



Figure 2 - Interview Analysis

The research took place during finals weeks. This caused the sample of our interviews to be smaller than what was intended. Not only this, but this might have also impacted the answers of the interviewees regarding their behaviour in the two spaces especially in the library cafe because all what they were thinking about is their studies. In addition, the findings might be limited to college students who are within a specific age group and not in public spaces in general. Therefore, the reasearch is considered more exploratory in nature.

After the data collection, the analysis started with identifying trends and behaviour patterns. First, the scripts of the interviews were written, coded by their reparation and categorized into groups with different labels. From there they were prioritized according to their relevance to the study. The final step was to expand the understanding and explore the relationship between every answer and the other (figure 2).

4 FINDINGS

For the survey, results showed where students used their smart phones most and where they used them the least. Food Courts and Lounges ranked top in usage whereas Blends and Brews Cafe at the Sheraa Enterpreneurship Center has the least usage (figure 3).

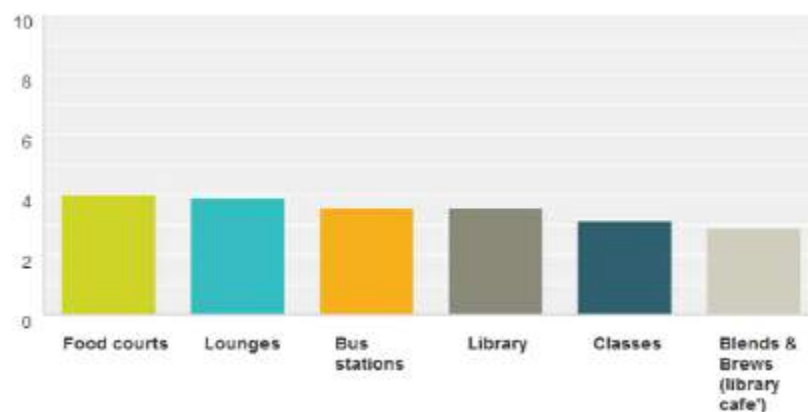


Figure 3– Smart Phone Usage Ranking on Campus

During the observation, it was noted how students would react differently when they were alone or when they were in a group. When eating alone, they would be on their phones the whole time, while when they were with friends they would finish eating and check their phones immediately. Studying with friends or enjoying a coffee seem to drive students to abandon their smart phones for a long time.

Finally student interviewed results show that almost all the students agreed that food courts are the spaces on campus where students use their phones the most and that the library café is where they used it the least. When asked about their relationship with their phones, some people used the words “intimate”, “cannot live without it” and even “it’s like my wife” to describe this relationship. (see Appendix B for sample survey).

5 ANALYSIS

Upon review of the findings, it became apparent that certain factors contribute more than others to an attachment to smart phones. The following are some of these observations:

5.1 LONELINESS AND THE SURROUNDING ENVIRONMENT

Students seem more inclined to use smart phones when they are alone. Their frequency of use can be up to 10 times in an hour. Whereas when with friends, they tend to check them for a maximum of 5 times. This seems to indicate that the usage of a cell phone decreases when a person is accompanied by someone however, when alone and not concentrating in something such as studies, students tend to spend more time on their phones. This is compounded by another factor, the attractiveness of the surrounding environment. Students felt distracted and less connected to their surroundings when they use their phones. All participants stated that if they were not busy with their phones they will most probably enjoy the space and recognize its beauty and their surrounding environment generally.

The relatively low smart phone engagement rates at both the Sheraa Blends and Brews (Library café) compared to those in Break Point and lounges seem to further substantiate this fact. Sheraa – ‘Sail’ in Arabic (Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center) was launched in January 2016 to provide a launch pad for aspiring young entrepreneurs in the UAE. It is headquartered in AUS library and was designed to create an innovative, relaxing and comfortable environment that would aid in the flow of ideas. It has a refreshing mood with unconventional indoor stepped seating, swings, lighting fixtures that really seem to attract students to look around and engage. On the other hand Break Point is a classical restaurant with tables and chairs arranged in a conventional template manner. This goes to indicate that the physical elements and assigned activities of the space do have an effect on how people behave and interact. When asked about what would they do in this space we found out that people actually had clear ideas of things to do in the library café more than they could think of in break point. It supports the assumption that people were more engaged and paid attention to the space and thought well about enhancing their experience within the space than the restaurant area.

5.2 LIFE WITHOUT A CONNECTION

When asked what they would prefer to do in the space if they have no internet connection, students at Break point mentioned they would stare at the walls, have a meal then immediately leave after they finish or start a conversation with people sharing the space. While those at the library café students went for a wider variety of activities such as, listen to music, read, eat, grab a coffee or just approach others and start a casual conversation.



Figure 5 – Various views at the Blends and Brews Sheraa Center vs that of Break Point (lower right)

Noticeably, students would actually find something to do without having internet connection to kill their desire to interact with friends and with their surroundings. Also the common factor between the two spaces from the answers is starting a conversation with the person they are accompanied with. Therefore, an important question was asked, “How long would you stay in this space without checking your phone?”



Figure 6- Feeling without internet connection

For Break point students they said as long as it takes to finish eating, others stated they can't tolerate to spend more than 5 minutes. While this was an interview question, this is one of the behaviors documented while taking the observation videos.

While students answered positively that they would find different activities to do when there is no internet connection, this was contradicted by the survey responses. The question in the survey was to use a word to describe your feeling without an internet connection. Mostly used words were bored, normal, disconnected, lost and uncomfortable (figure 6). However, back to the previous point, people were can expressed their willingness to invest their time in other life activities. That means, the belief that we cannot live without our mobile phones is taking our minds off the things we can actually do and enjoy.

5.3 ENJOY THE VIEW

After observing and analysing the behaviour of people in these two spaces, the space design and physical character was investigated to study their effects on the behaviour of people. Physical elements in this

study include seating arrangements and options, lighting, landscaping as well as outdoor views. The analysis started by asking people in the survey about their first reaction when they stand in front of a very beautiful view. The answers revealed the participants' willingness to enjoy the view without their smart phones (48%) but almost the same percentage of people responded they will use their smart phones to capture the view (49%). Very few thought asking someone to share the moment would make them enjoy and appreciate the view (see figure 7). This might prove smart phones to be one of the factors that steal priceless moments and limit the joy of exploring life and adventures.

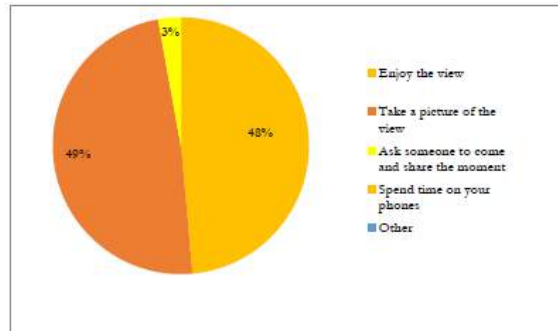


Figure 7 - Response to a beautiful view

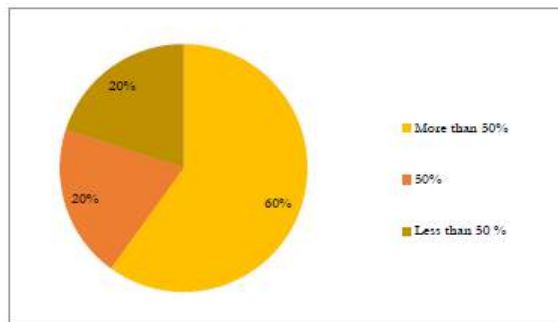


Figure 8 - Willingness to spend time on phone

Not only this, but when asked during the interview about elements to add or remove to distract people from using their phones, most of the respondents answered that an outdoor view or wider windows to the outside would actually reduce the amount of time people spend on their phones. However, these answers were contradicted by a question that the students answered in the survey. The question was: how much of your time would you spend using your phone if you are in front of a beautiful view?

The responses show that while people claim that a beautiful view would distract them from using their phones and that they would just enjoy the beautiful view they are watching, they would spend more than 50% of the time on their phones.

Students in both places stated that their phones are the only source of entertainment especially if they are alone. Therefore they suggested some elements to make the spaces more lively and entertaining to take their eyes off their phones. Adding a source of entertainment such as TVs or activities was common in both places. Students thought of break point as merely a place to eat, they were not really keen about making it look better or change anything about it to distract them other than the three elements mentioned above. As for the library students were more open to suggestions and additions to the space as they can spend more time their studying or with their friends. They wanted to add elements of nature to the space and relaxing music in order to make them feel comfortable. A really good suggestion was choosing what types of tables are available to use in this space by making them higher for example to encourage studying rather than feeling like sitting in a lounge. This takes us to another important question that we asked during the interview. The question was "Why did you choose this particular place to sit while you have a variety of seating options?" Break point as apace does not really offer a variety of seating options; you either sit on the couch (figure 9) or on chairs, on a gigantic table for four (figure 10) or more or on a small table for two. Students' preferences were not varied according to specific factor, as mentioned earlier they just see it as a space that they will just eat their meal in and leave. Students chose the places they

want to sit in based on their needs at that moment. For example, needing a socket for the laptop, joining a friend or alone so a table for two is enough. Others were more concerned about their comfort and therefore they chose to sit in a more quiet place or on the couches.



Figure 9 - Table for four people Figure 10 – Couches

For the Library Café interviewees mentioned that the seating selection depends on their planned activity. For example, students on the swings said it is fun to study there, some chose to set on the stepped floor to have the open view to the entire space, while others preferred to enjoy the view of the landscape so they set close to the large windows. Some student thought the excluded seating options are more private and cosy to study a way from other distractions.

On the other hand, the library café offered different seating options that are suitable for people who use the space for different purposes. These options make the space more attractive for students and more enjoyable for them when studying. Seating can be used by students who are just there to socialize, eat or drink (figure 11). They are also used by students who prefer to have tables in front of them while studying especially if the course requires solving (figure 12). The other seating options are different and more fun while studying such as the swings (figure 13) or the wooden steps shown in the pictures below (figure 14). However one disadvantage mentioned by students as to why they do not use the wooden steps is that it hurts the back. Moreover, seating options are also encouraging for groups to sit and study or do anything else together. As noticed in the observation, people sitting on seating designed for groups are less likely to use their phones than those sitting in seating designed for individuals or perceived to be used for people sitting alone or with one other person (figure 16).



Figure 11- Seating for socializing



Figure 12 - Seating for studying

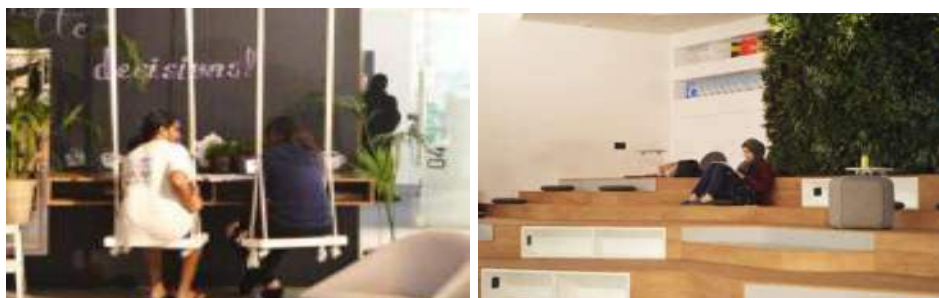


Figure 13 - Swings as seating Figure 14 - Wooden steps as seating



Figure 15 - Seating for two people Figure 16 - Seating for one person

6 LIFE BEFORE SMART PHONES

With all this being said, the authors wanted to know what people think about their lives now and before having mobile phones and we found out that peoples answers can be categorized in to three main categories (refer to table below). Some people felt that their lives were better before mobile phones in terms of their relationships and communication with people as well as enjoying the outdoors. Others did not feel there is a difference between that time and now in their lives and the third category of people thought that mobile phones were actually an advantage to their lives. They think that mobile phones enhanced and strengthened communication and relationships with family and friends. However, the majority of the surveyed students were more affected negatively by mobile phones.

NEGATIVE	NEUTRAL	POSITIVE
<p>Wasting more time (1)</p> <p>Life was meaningful, relationships were stronger, there was a dedicated time for hobbies and socializing physically</p> <p>Everything is different (2)</p> <p>Became harder to reach people unless you use a cell phone (1)</p> <p>I used to stay outdoors and not rely on it (2)</p> <p>I don't even remember how I was living (2)</p> <p>I used to communicate face to face (3)</p> <p>My relationships weakened (2)</p>	<p>Not different (9)</p>	<p>More and better relationships (3)</p> <p>Intimate communication (1)</p> <p>More connected (3)</p> <p>Had my phone since 7 or 8, so regarding my relationships with my family and friends I can state it increased and became better as I had more time with them through social media.</p>

Table 1 – People's view of their lives before and after mobile phones

7 CONCLUSION

To sum up, enjoying campus life has changed from a dependency on pure physical space design into a hybrid of factors that include both cyber and urban space. Design elements of a space still do matter and have an effect on how people use and behave in a particular space. What people remember about a space is affected by how long they spend on their phones but it is our duty to design spaces that leave a mark within each person no matter how long their use the smart phone in the space. The loss of connection is not because of one person but it is because all of those in a group. If you are with a group of friends who are busy doing something else or start using their phones, you are more likely to start using it to as a source of distraction or entertainment until you are given the attention once more from those sitting

with you. Student's face to face conversations are fading due to the presence of texting and when they talk to each other, they are often distracted by their phones. Moreover, we can conclude that people are aware of their actions and behaviour in public spaces and they know that they can live without their phones. However, people choose to live in it as they might convince themselves that it is the only source of entertainment. As future urban planners, our duty is not to force people to abandon their phones because clearly as they said in the interviews and as captured in the field observations this will not happen. So we should do our best to distract them as much as we can in order to strengthen the bonds they have with each other and with their surroundings.

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APPENDIX A

PAGE 1

Q1: What is the first thing you will do when you see a very beautiful view?

Take a picture of the view

Q2: If you are in-front of a very beautiful view how much time will you spend on your phone?

40

Q3: When you need to locate a place which one of the following do you use? (please select all that apply)

Ask someone

Your phone

Q4: When you use your phone for navigation,how likely are you going to use it to go to the same place again?

Very likely (will use my phone again)

Q5: What word would you use to describe yourself when you don't have an internet connection on your cell phone?

Uncomfortable

Q6: How is it different between now and the time before you own your cell phone?(e.g. relationships with your friends, practicing your hobbies, etc.)

I used to communicate face to face more

Q7: Imagine if you do not have a cell phone, how would you spend your time?

I would go out more

Q8: Please rank in which part of AUS campus do you use your phone the most? (1 Most - 6 least)

Food courts	2
Library	5
Bus stations	3
Lounges	1
Blends & Brews (library cafe)	6
Classes	4

Q9: What is your gender?

Female

Q10: How old are you?

21 - 25

APPENDIX B

Interviewee 01 (Break Point):

Q1:

Answer: I think they use it everywhere, to take photos of their pictures and upload it on instagram but I do not think the space has an effect on how much people check their phones

Q2:

Answer: Alone- long time

With people- Rarely

Q3:

Answer: Does not get caught up when using the phone

Q4:

Answer: intimate

Q5:

Answer: half an hour

Q6:

Answer: stare at the walls.

Q7:

Answer: fun activities, presentations but it is difficult to make people stop using their phones

Q8:

Answer: because there is a socket here and I need to use my laptop