

# Relationship between the Use of Mobile Telephone, Intimate Relationships and Interpersonal Conflict in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The responses of 121 Nigerian public servants in Abuja metropolis, the country's capital city, to a survey instrument were used to determine the extent to which mobile telephone use impacted the intimate relationship and interpersonal conflicts in Nigeria. The data showed that partners in intimate relationships experience a number of problems to which they adopt the full range of options for resolving conflicts including negotiation, mediation, and arbitration. Furthermore, mobile telephone use was said to relate directly to mistrust between parties in intimate relationships aside from being generally rated in a positive light. In addition, mobile telephone use was perceived to have impacted on aspects of human behavior including participation in social, cultural, and religious affairs as well as limiting social support to and from families of partners in a relationship. These findings were discussed in terms of dysfunctional patterns of adjustments to what can still be described as new technology and the transition from tradition to modernity in this part of the world. It was suggested among others; that people need to be educated about the distrust, disconnection, and other relational problems associated with mobile telephone use and the need to engage professionals to resolve problems of mistrust in intimate relationships and interpersonal conflicts.

## INTRODUCTION

Advances in technology have remarkably transformed the history of human development. From the days of the early man when life was lived in primitive forms involving the use of stones for hunting and gathering of fruits for sustenance to the Industrial Revolution that occurred in Britain in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that brought rapid development to the use of machinery, man has never looked back in invention. Today, life is fast and involves the use of sophisticated machinery for goods and services.

Information and communication seem to be most revolutionized going by the ways they are being processed, stored and transmitted by both human beings and machines.

In general, the use of technology has not only improved human condition but also shaped their behaviour in different directions. In organizational behavioral studies, there is ample evidence that technology enhances human performance (Wajeman, Bittman, Jones, Johnstone and Brown, 2007). Technology in this case involves the use of machineries as opposed to the direct use of human labour for the performance of given tasks, (Feldman, 1999). In this way, machines can work for many hours without tiring as a human being would.

One of the major advances in technology in recent times has occurred in the communication field. The early man depended on the transmission of message through human messengers who have to walk and run thousands of miles or kilometers to pass on messages. In Africa, animals such as dogs, camels and donkeys were even used to courier messages between farms or villages, whereas, we can now on pressing of a few keys communicate with people several thousands of kilometers away from us. This indeed is remarkable.

In Nigeria, only a few years ago, it was unthinkable that telephone will be accessible by the poor in the society. But since 2001, access to cell phone by Nigerians has increased dramatically. Going by the statistics released by the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), the country's teledensity stands at 97.45 per cent (186 million) as at January 2020 with a population of about 200 million people (Abidoye, 2020). In a way with over ten mobile phones providers in the country, with the majority being Mobile Telephone Networks (MTN), GLOBALCOM, AIRTEL and ETISALAT, we can say assert that the use of telephone in Nigeria has really come of age. It is the largest telecommunication market in Africa.

No doubt, this development has made life much easier for the people vis-à-vis reduction in the time to communicate with people in different parts of the country and globally, and anxiety associated with lack of access, reduction in number of accident involving people trying to move to places where they could not communicate with relatives, faster ways of transacting business resulting in higher profit, among others.

Whereas, we can estimate the several benefits of cell phone technology in Nigeria, the potential for the new technology to affect human behaviour or relations in negative ways have not been fully determined or explored. However, a newspapers cutting that made round in the Nigerian print media (PUNCH of 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 2007) indicated that a man was stabbed to death by his wife as a result of a call he received from his

mobile telephone set. According to the story, the woman believed that the voice on the other set was that of a female lover of her husband.

Indeed, there have been many similar incidences like this even that led to death of spouses or intimate friends in recent times. Incidence such as this raises the question as to the impact the recent upsurge in the use of mobile telephone may have on human intimate relationship. It is the effort to understand the relationship between the use of mobile telephone, intimate relationship and interpersonal conflicts, that this study was designed. More specifically, the study sought to explore the following issues;

- The length and problems encountered in intimate relationship
- The relationship between ownership of mobile telephone and problems in intimate relationship
- The impact of mobile telephone on various aspects of social behaviour
- The management of the problems associated with mobile telephone use.

This is essentially an exploratory study as from available literatures on the issue; it seems there has not been established study on the subject matter in Nigeria about 19 years after, particularly as it relates to the use of telephone technology, intimate relationships and interpersonal conflicts. Accordingly, we have not proposed any specific hypothesis to be tested in this study; rather the objectives outlined above were used as the basis for generally exploring the problems associated with mobile telephone use, with reference to intimate relationship and inter personal conflict in Nigeria.

## Method

### Participants

Abuja was selected for the survey because as the city of federal government, it is a conglomeration of all ethnic groups in the country. Therefore, understanding what and how mobile technology affects their intimate human relations will help in mitigating negative effects of mobile technology such as interpersonal conflicts. A total of 121 persons responded to a questionnaire to elicit issues related to the impact of mobile telephone use in intimate relationship and interpersonal conflicts in Nigeria. They consisted of 76 (63%) males and 45 or 37% females, drawn from the population of Federal Civil servants in Abuja metropolis, Nigeria's capital. Though there was no other rationale for sampling the civil service other than to be the first sampling population to be tested. Care was taken in selecting the sample in order to obtain the reliability of the survey data. The respondents were aged between 20 and 53 years

with a mean of 34.8 years. In addition, 77 or 66% said they were married while 40 or 34% said they were single. A clear majority, 69 or 73% said they had higher degrees, while 16 or 16.8% said they had only HND, 1.1% said they had OND and 9 or 9% stated that they had school leaving certificate.

### **Instruments**

The instrument used in this research was a 40-item questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers and was exploratory in nature. Some of the items measured the length respondents had been in intimate relationship, method used in resolving problems in the relationship, ownership of GSM line, changes in behaviour as a result of owning a GSM line, management of mistrust due to the GSM use, while a separate section was devoted to the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Some of the items required open-ended while others required close – ended responses.

### **Administration of the Questionnaires**

The questionnaire was administered in the offices of Federal Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) within Abuja Metropolis. In administering the questionnaire, the researchers approached officers in each of the selected MDAs and briefed them about the purpose of the research. They were then given copies of the questionnaires, which they administered to their colleagues. Usually the questionnaires were collected a day after they were given to the collaborating officers in the selected MDAs. In a few cases, the questionnaire took longer than a day to collect after they were given to the respondents. Interestingly, all the administered copies were returned filled.

### **Coding and Analysis of the Questionnaire**

Because many of the items of the questionnaire were open-ended, we developed a coding scheme based on a content analysis of those items, which yielded response categories. On the basis of these categories we assigned numbers that enable us to normally code all the questionnaires including the close-ended questions.

In this way, the analysis of the data involved working out frequencies as well as percentages associated with given response categories, as many of the items were nominal in nature. The other items, such as length of relationship and age of participant, which were interval data, required providing the range and means associated with the distribution.

## Findings

The findings of this study are organized along specific themes that approximate the key objectives of the research. These include length and problems in intimate relationship, Relationship between ownership of mobile telephone and problems in intimate relationships, Impact of mobile telephone on intimate relationship and management of the problems associated with mobile phone technology. In this section of the paper the findings of the study are presented.

### 1. Length and Problems in Intimate Relationship

We were interested first in establishing if the respondents were in any intimate relationship and problems they had encountered being in such a relationship. The findings showed that the respondents indicated they were all involved in an intimate relationship. The length of relationship according to the respondents ranged from one to 27 years, with a mean of seven years. Furthermore, 64 or 53% of the respondents indicated that they have had misunderstanding in the relationship while 57 or 47% stated that they have not had any problems in the relationship. These problems according to the respondents included infidelity of about 33 or 52%, partner not providing finance for family upkeep constituted eight or 13%, influence of third party was 10 or 16%, other responses which were not specified constituted 18 or 20% of the total number of respondents. In terms of the resolution of these problems, as can be seen in table one, the most frequently used method of resolving the problems is for the partners sitting down and ironing things out by themselves as 60 or 63% stated they usually "seat and talk" things over, while the most infrequently used method of resolving problems in relationship were interventions by elders and clergy as can be seen in table one.

**Table 1:** Frequency and Percentage distribution of method of resolving problems in intimate relationship

| S/n | Mode Of Resolution            | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----|-------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1   | Sat down and talk things over | 60        | 63         |
| 2   | Family intervention           | 4         | 4.2        |
| 3   | Friends                       | 6         | 6.3        |
| 4   | Did nothing                   | 9         | 9          |
| 5   | Elders intervention           | 1         | 1          |
| 6   | Clergy intervention           | 1         | 1          |
| 7   | Others                        | 14        | 15         |

In terms of the current status of the relationship, the majority of the respondents 70 or 60% stated they enjoyed a very cordial relationship with their partners while 23 or 20% said the relationship was merely cordial, 15 or 13% said they had some lingering grudges/problems in the relationship, six or 5% said the relationship was not cordial at all. Quite clearly, this data indicates that the sample was made up of people with divergent experiences on the cycle of conflict and normalcy. Accordingly, we have pursued further analysis in relation to recent trend in mobile telephone use and its impacts on intimate relationship.

### **Relationship between ownership of mobile telephone and problems in Intimate relationship**

In terms of ownership of GSM, a large number of 119 or 94% stated that they owned GSM lines while only seven or 6% said they did not own a GSM line. We also went further to know if their partner owned GSM as well. A majority 121 or 98% said that their partners owned GSM line. The ownership of the GSM lines, according to the respondents, brought about changes in their partner's behaviours, which constituted 51 or 43% while 68 or 57% said that there were no changes in behaviour.

The respondents further stated the nature of the change in their partner's behaviour, a number of 22 or 40% said that the nature of change in behaviour brought suspicion to the relationship, 23 or 43% said that the change in behaviour was cordial, 6 or 11% said that the nature of change in the relationship was not cordial and only three or 6% could not specify.

We sought to know if respondent have more trust in their partners as a result of the use of mobile telephone. Twenty-five or 24% said that they have absolute trust, 22 or 21% confirmed that GSM use leads to more trust, 32 or 31% said constantly it leads to trust, 16 or 16% said that GSM use did not lead to more trust and eight or 8% said that it doesn't lead to more trust at all. The respondents further stated that the significant experience they had with partners was as a result of the GSM use; about 67 or 58% said that they had significant experience. While 48 or 42% indicated there was no significant experience.

In terms of the nature of experience they had with their partners, the table below shows the rating of the experience.

**Table 2:** Frequency and percentage distribution of nature of experience associated with GSM use and intimate relationships

| S/n | Nature of experience      | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----|---------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1   | Mistrust                  | 26        | 40         |
| 2   | Happy its smooth and easy | 24        | 38         |
| 3   | No significant experience | 7         | 11         |
| 4   | No response               | 7         | 11         |

We further explored the extent to which partners in relationship have trust in their spouse as a result of ownership of GSM, 57 or 50% indicated they have trust in their spouse, while 56 or 49.5% stated that they did not have any trust on spouse as a result of ownership of GSM.

We also tried to find out if partners had trust about callers identity About 107 or 80% stated that their partners lied about callers identity while 14 or 12% said that their spouses did not lie about caller's identity. In addition, the respondents indicated how they felt when they were lied to. One hundred and or 92% said they felt that their partners lied to them as a result of GSM use while 10 or 81% said that they do not feel their partners could lie to them as a result of GSM use. Interestingly, the use of social media, for example, the Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, among others, particularly since 2012 has added to the mistrust among people in intimate relationships.

### **The impact of mobile telephone on various aspect of social behavior**

Overall, the respondents indicated that ownership of mobile telephone line did not impact negatively on their intimate relationship. As it can be seen in the table 3, the mean ratings of the impact of GSM on intimate relationship showed that participants were "satisfied" with the effect of GSM lines on all domains covered. (note that the respondent rated the level of the effect of GSM line on 12 domains which were scored ranging from 1 – very satisfied, 2 – satisfied, 3 – not satisfied, 4 – not satisfied at all)

**Table3:** Summary of means of the rating on the impact of mobile telephone use on intimate relationship

| S/n. | Domain  | Means |
|------|---|-------|
| 1    | Overall rating of level of satisfaction with the impact of mobile telephone | 1.7   |
| 2    | Mobile telephone and impact on intimate relationship                        | 1.8   |
| 3    | Mobile telephone and finance on intimate relationship                       | 2.2   |
| 4    | Mobile telephone and participation on social activities                     | 1.7   |
| 5    | Mobile telephone and participation on cultural affairs                      | 1.9.  |
| 6    | Mobile telephone and support to relations                                   | 1.8   |
| 7    | Mobile telephone and support to your extended family                        | 1.7   |
| 8    | Mobile telephone and support from your extended family.                     | 2.0   |
| 9    | Mobile telephone and support from your partners extended family             | 2.0   |
| 10   | Mobile telephone and support to your partners extended family               | 2.0   |
| 11   | Mobile telephone and access to medical facilities                           | 2.0   |
| 12   | Mobile telephone and moral orientation of people.                           | 2.0   |

### Management of misunderstanding associated with the use of mobile telephone

We were also interested in finding out the adjustment that partners made in order to cope with the misunderstandings associated with the ownership of GSM line and intimate relationship. As reported earlier, problems of mistrust of partner when calling or receiving calls, chatting on social media, checking on records of SMSs, contact, etc. are major issues. In this regard, respondents indicated how they managed such problem of mistrust. In this regard, 45 or 55% stated that they often showed their callers identity to their partners, while 26 or 32% stated that they were honest enough with their partners and did not have to worry about making or receiving calls from the opposite sex in their presence, six or 7% stated that they do not answer their calls or make calls in the presence of their partners while only four or 4.5% stated that they allowed their partner to answer calls on their behalf. A few confessed that they sometimes put their calls in silent mode (without ringing out) especially when they were at home.



**Table 4:** Frequency and Percentage distribution of what people do when receiving calls from the opposite sex in the presence of their partners.

| S/n | What people do when receiving calls from opposite sex in the presence of their partner                               | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----|--|-----------|------------|
| 1   | Show or reveal caller's Identity to my partner   | 45        | 55         |
| 2   | Have been honest with my partner and do not worry about making or receiving call with opposite sex in their presence | 26        | 32         |
| 3   | No response  | 1         | 1          |
| 4   | Do not receive or make calls with the opposite sex in the presence of my partner                                     | 6         | 7          |
| 5   | Allow my partner to answer my calls  | 5         | 4          |

As seen in table 4, the most frequently used method of managing problem of mistrust in intimate relationship in terms of mobile telephone use was to allow or reveal the caller's identity while the least frequently used was to allow the partner to answer calls on one's behalf.

Clearly, there were some indications that partners experienced problems of mistrust with their partners as a result of mobile telephone use. Accordingly, only 27 or 23% agreed that they were willing to share mobile telephone lines with their partner, while over 92 or 77% unwilling to share GSM line with their partners. With regards to the reason why they would share GSM line with partners, a majority of the respondents 16 or 55% said it would bring about trust in their relationship.

**Table 5:** Frequency and percentage distribution of the reasons why people would like to share Mobile telephone line with their partners

| S/N | Reason why people would like to share Mobile telephone line with partner | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----|--|-----------|------------|
| 1   | Bring about trust  | 16        | 55         |
| 2   | Share the cost with partners   | 8         | 27         |
| 3   | Openness/sincerity   | 2         | 7          |
| 4   | No response  | 1         | 3          |
| 5   | Others   | 2         | 7          |

For those respondents who are unwilling to share mobile telephone lines with their partners, 76 or 88% said it was not convenient as they are not always together with their partners, while nine or 10% said that it would prevent conflict; one or 1% stated that people need some form of privacy in some aspects of their life, while four or 4% gave undisclosed reasons.

On whether respondents could answer calls on behalf of their partners, 73 or 72% say yes, while 29 or 28% said no.

With regards to the reason why they said yes that they would answer call on behalf of the partners, 45 or 64% said that it would bring about openness and trust in the relationship, while 18 or 26% stated that their partners could answer their calls, and only 10% did not respond to the question.

For those who said no were of the view that they could not allow their spouses to answer their calls. Over 22 or 54% stated that they deserve privacy and respect, while 15 or 3% stated that to an extent it would avoid problems or rift between relationships; one or 2% said that there be no suspicion, and only three or 7% could not respond.

## Discussion

Findings of this study have showed that mobile telephone uses are related to problems in intimate relationships as well as interpersonal conflicts. These findings are related to a number of issues that have to do with stability of families and the society at large. First of all, the health or peace of the family is the health or peace of the nation. Nigerians are technologically savvy people. The country could be said to have one of the highest usages of mobile telephone in Africa. Intimate relationships are being shaped since the introduction of mobile telephone.

Secondly, the aspect of the findings, which showed that partners in intimate relationships experience a wide range of problems, is not entirely unexpected. As part of the dynamics of human social nature, intimate relationships inevitably experience occasional ups and downs. As it is often said, conflict is inevitable in human life, (Burton, 1996; Nnoli, 2003). This is most applicable in intimate relationship that involves an intricate interchange of emotions. The advent and use of mobile telephones has added to the emotional concerns of intimate relationship and interpersonal conflicts. The findings in this respect suggest the need for partners in such relationship to continue to explore ways of understanding their partners.

Thirdly, the findings that showed that mobile telephone is related to interpersonal conflict are significant in a number of ways. First, it demonstrates the difficulties that often accompany the introduction of new technology, be it telephone, TV, internet or other technological gadgets. In this case, it is noted that mobile telephone was introduced about two decades ago in a country where a considerable number of people are increasingly having access to telephones, internet and social media. The introduction of mobile

telephone has imposed tremendous challenges on the adjustment capacity of a large chunk of the people. Second, Nigeria is a country that one can be described as being caught up in a transition from traditional modes of existence to modernity. Nothing in our views typifies modernity in our present context than mobile telephone. Accordingly, that people seem to have problems in intimate relationship because of the use of mobile telephone is to be expected. After all, people are still awakened to appreciate the full impact or the significance of mobile telephone in the emerging Nigerian society.

Fourthly, the study has revealed that mobile telephone has significant impact on aspects of human behaviour including social, cultural and religious domains. This impact essentially involves the reduction of engagement of people in this area of human functioning. The idea simply is that mobile telephone with the associated cost of maintaining them has had negative impact on people. In other words, whereas, people are happy with mobile telephone, they acknowledged that the new technology was expensive to maintain and might indeed reduce expenditure in other areas of their life.

Just how people should deal with this yet fully understood problem is one issue that should bother policymakers and practitioners in this area. It may well be that part of the problem between couples is the reduction of attention that they pay to these other areas of functioning which are important in sustaining relationships. For instance, that many couples are unable to extend assistance to other members of extended families may create problem in largely traditional African society where social support to extended family members is the norm.

Clearly, this study has shown that mobile telephone and their use in Nigeria have positive impact on the life of the people. Nevertheless, they are also associated with the problems that we see in intimate relationships especially in interpersonal conflicts. Mistrust appears to be the basis of the problems. A number of tragic cases that led to deaths, injuries, divorce and separation have occurred as a result of conflict over use of mobile telephones in Nigeria. However, the previous discussion has shown that investment that people make to maintain mobile telephone may increase the pressure on partners and inevitably heightens mistrust in such relationships.

## **Recommendation**

The recommendations offered here are aimed at reducing the negative impact of mobile telephone use on intimate relationship especially as to improve interpersonal relationship.

First of all, it is important for partners in intimate relationship to explore ways to better understand themselves in order to ease the tensions that may accompany the use of new technologies such as mobile telephone.

Secondly, use of mobile telephone is a sensitive issue, and therefore, professional expertise as in the use of mediation and counseling should be resorted to by partners as some of the issues in conflict are so complex that they may not on their own be able to deal with.

Lastly, there is need for further study in this area to determine the other aspects of psychosocial functioning that are related to the introduction of mobile telephone.

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