Mobile phones (especially smartphones) have changed how people experience space and time in everyday interaction (e.g., Ling and Campbell, 2010). The intricacies of this change across diverse (and under-studied) cultural groups and contexts merit investigation. This paper presents findings of a comparative case-study project that examines patterns and perceived effects of smartphone usage on college students’ academic and social lives in three countries: Oman, Ukraine, and the United States. Approximately 100 first-year college students in each country completed a Likert-style questionnaire; this paper focuses on student responses to questions about uses of and beliefs about mobile phones in educational and personal settings. Our analysis extends a new conceptualization of mobile phones as cultural tools with affordances and limitations (see Al Zidjaly and Gordon, 2012) to reveal how mobile phone use in the three groups delineates different types of space and organizes time, both in public (educational) and private (interpersonal/social) contexts. For instance, in Oman, a traditional Islamic Arab society, mobile phones afford professors and students a new educational relationship space: Omani professors often have a mobile phone number dedicated for professor-student communication (this custom does not exist in the U.S. or Ukraine). Further, mobile phones create “private” spaces of communication between students and their friends and family members in both the U.S. and Ukraine; in Oman, mobile phones provide a space to strengthen relationships amongst students and their friends, but this affordance is not exploited with family members. Our analysis reveals (and explains) cultural differences while also showing how a cultural tools perspective lends insights into the structuring of public and private relationship space and time for members of different cultures. The paper advances theorizing regarding smartphone-mediated communication while also offering practical applications for (multi-cultural) educational and social contexts.

Keywords: Mobile Phones, Public, Private.