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The Effect of a Mobile Phone Ban on Perceived Academic and Social Life: A Qualitative Analysis

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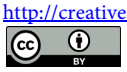

Abstract

Schools worldwide are reconsidering student smartphone access, yet evidence on social and academic consequences remains mixed. This study examines student perceptions at a private high school that implemented a zero-access phone ban during the 2024-2025 school year. Two anonymous surveys were fielded at policy launch (October 2024) and three months later (January 2025), yielding a combined N = 494. Of these, 209 responses from Round 2 formed the final analytic sample. Primary outcomes were perceived changes in in-person interaction frequency and quality, perceived connectedness, perceived classroom focus, perceived productivity during school, and self-reported academic performance. Most respondents perceived social benefits, including more frequent face-to-face conversations, while a minority reported diminished connectedness. Half perceived higher productivity during school, yet most perceived no change in academic performance. Over half reported increased phone use during homework, which may offset in-school gains. Findings underscore heterogeneity in responses and suggest that bans, without complementary supports, can improve opportunities for in-person interaction for many students but may disadvantage students who rely on digital scaffolds for social engagement.

Keywords

Behavioral and Social Sciences, Sociology and Social Psychology, Phone Ban, School, Adolescent

1. Introduction

Smartphones have become inseparable from high school students' daily lives, with 95 percent of U.S. teenagers owning one and many reporting near-constant online

activity (Faverio et al., 2025). This ubiquity has fueled debate about their effects on learning, social development, and mental health, prompting restrictions in about one in four countries, including the United States, Australia, France, Spain, Canada, and Sweden (Antoninis et al., 2023). In the U.S., school phone bans date back decades, initially driven by safety concerns regarding drug transactions linked to pagers and early cellphones (Panchal & Zitter, 2024). By 2009, 91 percent of public schools in the U.S. imposed some form of restriction (Panchal & Zitter, 2024). This figure fell to 66 percent by 2015 before climbing to 76 percent in 2021 as attention shifted toward the impact of mobile phones on academic distraction and mental health (Panchal & Zitter, 2024). Since Florida enacted state-level restrictions in 2023, adoption has accelerated at the state level; as of August 2025, a majority of U.S. states have laws that ban or regulate student cellphone use in schools (Amy et al., 2025).

This study examines students in a private high school in Charlotte, North Carolina, where, in fall 2024, the school instituted a zero-access policy that required phones to remain off and stored from arrival to dismissal, with violations subject to disciplinary consequences; instruction-time caddies were discontinued, and access during lunch, activity, and free periods was removed. This policy implementation pushed students to rely entirely on school-issued iPads and personal laptops for all digital academic tasks and communication. The study finds that the policy reshaped students' social and academic experiences in complex ways, with both perceived benefits and challenges.

The effects of such a policy cannot be understood without considering the generational context. Earlier generations of students developed their formative social skills without constant access to smartphones. For them, removing a phone later in adolescence might have been inconvenient, but it would not have disrupted the foundations of how they related to others. In contrast, today's high school students have grown up with smartphones from early childhood. Their habits of communication, ways of building friendships, and strategies for managing emotions have been shaped around having a phone within reach at all times. For this group, a phone is not just a tool for communication but a central medium for social life, emotional support, and access to networks. Therefore, because these effects are intertwined with students' lived experiences, capturing their perceptions is essential for identifying social and emotional shifts that quantitative data alone cannot fully reveal.

This study tests whether contemporary students' reliance on smartphones shapes the perceived academic and social effects of a school-wide phone ban. It analyzes 494 student responses gathered through two rounds of anonymous surveys: one at the start of the ban and one three months later. This study seeks to determine how students perceive the removal of their phones in regard to social connection or academic focus. The study investigates how students perceive the ban's effects on their academic and social lives. By directly centering student perspectives, this research fills a gap by contributing to the understudied body of

work that foregrounds student perception (Bar et al., 2025). It also offers timely insights for educators and policymakers seeking to understand the real-world impacts of phone bans and to develop more informed, balanced, and responsive technology policies.

Literature Review

The rapid rise of smartphones in schools has triggered an international debate over their influence on student learning, relationships, and well-being. Concerns about distraction, shorter attention spans, and reduced face-to-face interaction have led many schools to implement mobile phone bans, from classroom-level restrictions to nationwide prohibitions (Siyami et al., 2023; Thornton et al., 2014). Prior studies show a mix of results, with some finding small academic gains and others finding no change, often alongside social tradeoffs (Beland & Murphy, 2016; Guldvik & Kvinnsland, 2018; Kessel et al., 2020; Lepp et al., 2014). The differences seem to depend on factors like how strictly the rules are enforced and how much technology is already built into the school day. Some studies highlight measurable academic gains, particularly for students who are most vulnerable to distraction (Beland & Murphy, 2016; Guldvik & Kvinnsland, 2018; Kessel et al., 2020; Lepp et al., 2014). In contrast, others find minimal or no change in academic outcomes and point to complex social and emotional tradeoffs (Beland & Murphy, 2016; Guldvik & Kvinnsland, 2018; Kessel et al., 2020; Lepp et al., 2014). Taken together, this body of work shows both the promise and the limits of phone bans, while also revealing important gaps in understanding how students themselves experience them.

Academic performance is the most frequently measured outcome in this literature. Large-scale analyses in England found that banning phones in schools improved standardized test scores, with the strongest effects among lower-achieving students (Beland & Murphy, 2016). Other studies have shown that higher phone use correlates with lower GPA among U.S. college students and that even the visible presence of a phone can reduce cognitive performance (Lepp et al., 2014; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013). These results have informed the common argument that removing phones from classrooms improves focus and learning. However, many of these studies define academic success only through test scores or GPA, overlooking dimensions such as motivation, stress, quality of peer interaction, and class participation, which are more difficult to quantify (Böttger & Zierer, 2024; Melattinkara, 2021). Few examine whether the academic improvements they report come at a social or emotional cost, such as reduced autonomy or heightened frustration, and even fewer consider how students adapt to restrictions by shifting attention to other devices like laptops or tablets (Selwyn & Aagaard, 2021).

The social and emotional dimensions of phone bans have received less attention; however, existing evidence suggests both benefits and drawbacks. Research from Czech classrooms found that phone bans during instruction improved class-

room cohesion and reduced conflict, and studies linking higher screen time to increased depression and anxiety suggest that limiting phone access could support mental health (Cakirpaloglu et al., 2020; Twenge & Campbell, 2018). However, other work highlights unintended consequences such as stress, loss of autonomy, and reduced access to helpful digital tools (Campbell et al., 2024; What Students Are Saying About School Cellphone Bans, 2023). Many of these studies focus exclusively on structured class time, leaving open the question of how bans affect unstructured settings like lunch or passing periods, where phones play a different social role.

The academic benefits reported in some contexts are not consistent across all education systems. In Norway, researchers found no significant academic gains from phone bans, though bullying decreased among boys (Guldvik & Kvinnsland, 2018). They noted that Norway's highly digitized schools, where students already have structured technology use, may experience less impact when personal phones are removed (Kure et al., 2025). Replication work in Sweden similarly found no benefits and rejected even small effects (Kessel et al., 2020). In Australia, longitudinal research reported no significant differences in problematic phone use, engagement, or belonging between ban and non-ban schools, with only minor changes in bullying rates (King et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the effects of phone bans depend on context, enforcement, and available alternatives for communication and learning.

Although research has examined the effects of phone bans, it has often neglected the voices of students, even though they can offer meaningful perspectives on how such policies shape their educational and social experiences (Gao et al., 2017; Wall et al., 2005). The limited studies that focus on students, specifically their perspectives on phone use guidelines, report that they generally support restrictions during class but want access during breaks, and they raise concerns about fairness and autonomy, such as feeling punished for responsible phone use, wanting age-appropriate flexibility, and having a say in how rules are applied (Gath et al., 2024; Ott et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2022). One of the few large-scale studies centered on students, conducted by South-Australian researchers, analyzed nearly 70,000 words of open-ended responses (Bar et al., 2025). Students acknowledged benefits such as improved social interaction and classroom engagement, but many also reported feeling less trusted, losing access to helpful tools, and struggling emotionally without their phones. Some advocated for policies that teach responsible phone use rather than banning devices entirely. Bar et al.'s findings illustrate why including student input is essential for creating policies that are both effective and balanced. Without it, schools risk overlooking the everyday realities that determine whether a ban succeeds or fails.

It is within this gap that the present study is situated. By focusing on how students perceive the academic and social consequences of a schoolwide phone ban, this research aims to connect the measurable outcomes emphasized in prior work with the lived realities that numbers alone cannot fully capture.

2. Methods

This study used two surveys to explore high school students' experiences and opinions about a recently introduced mobile phone ban. The first survey (Round 1) was distributed in October 2024 on the Monday following the policy's midweek implementation. The second survey (Round 2) was fielded three months later in January 2025. The surveys focused on how the ban might affect daily social interactions, emotional well-being, and academic habits for Round 1 and how the ban did affect perceived daily social interactions, emotional well-being, and academic habits for Round 2. Furthermore, Round 2 included open-ended questions that allowed students to describe their experiences in their own words, offering nuance beyond what multiple-choice questions could capture.

The final survey sample included 209 respondents. Of these, 29.7 percent (n = 62) were in 9th grade, 32.1 percent (n = 67) in 10th grade, 25.8 percent (n = 54) in 11th grade, and 12.4 percent (n = 26) in 12th grade. Gender identity was reported as 43.1 percent (n = 90) women and 44.5 percent (n = 93) men, with the remaining 12.4 percent (n = 26) choosing not to disclose or selecting another identity. These percentages and counts are based on the survey with 209 respondents (Round 2). This distinction explains the difference between the combined N of 494 reported in the abstract and the percentages presented here, which are calculated only from the Round 2 analytic sample.

The final survey was shaped in three stages. First, the short initial survey provided early feedback and highlighted key areas of interest, such as academic focus and peer interaction. Second, informal conversations with students during lunch, sports, and free periods helped identify recurring themes and concerns. Finally, feedback from a small group of peers helped refine the wording and structure of the second survey to ensure questions were clear and relevant.

The final survey included 23 questions in seven categories: 1) demographic information, 2) phone use before and after the ban, 3) academic focus and productivity, 4) social interactions, 5) emotional well-being, 6) changes in behavior, and 7) reasons for no changes. Most questions were multiple choice; the last two categories were open-ended. Analysis centered mainly on categories (3) and (4), though open-ended responses from all sections informed the findings.

For consistency, key terms were defined as follows: "Productivity" referred to a student's self-perception of getting more academic work done or feeling more efficient during school hours. "Meaningful conversation" referred to face-to-face conversations that students described as emotionally fulfilling or supportive. "Connectedness" referred to a general sense of belonging and closeness with peers. These definitions guided both survey design and subsequent coding.

The surveys were distributed online through school email, grade-level Google Classrooms, and word of mouth. Participation was voluntary. Both rounds combined, the study collected 494 total responses. Round 1 captured approximately 48 percent (n = 285/600) and Round 2 captured approximately 35 percent (n = 209/600). While this approach encouraged wide participation, students with strong

opinions may have been more likely to respond. The combined N of 494 reflects the total number of survey responses across both rounds rather than unique participants. Because the surveys were voluntary and anonymous, some students may have participated in both rounds, while others may have responded only once. Attrition between rounds was natural, as Round 2 captured a smaller subset of students who remained engaged with the study. For all analyses, the Round 2 sample of 209 was treated as the final analytic group.

Google Forms was used to design and distribute the surveys, and Google Sheets was used for organizing and sorting responses, identifying patterns, and calculating averages for numerical questions. Built-in charts in Google Forms helped visualize trends and informed the coding of open-ended responses.

Both surveys were open for one week. No identifying information was collected, and students were told their answers would remain anonymous and confidential. While the study was independent of school administration, some students may have seen the survey as a way to influence or protest the policy, which could have shaped the tone of their responses.

Open-ended responses were coded thematically by two independent student researchers using an inductive approach. Responses were first reviewed separately, then grouped into categories such as improved social connection, worsened social connection, increased productivity, worsened productivity, or no effect. Coding disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Coding was completed in Google Sheets and Google Docs, and intercoder reliability was checked informally by comparing initial categorizations, which showed strong agreement.

Participation followed basic ethical guidelines. Students were told the purpose of the study, assured of anonymity, and encouraged to answer honestly. Approval to distribute the surveys was obtained from school administrators, though the research was in no way in collaboration with the school. Some responses contained sensitive personal details about emotional or social challenges.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Key Findings

The survey found that a majority of students perceived positive changes in their social lives following the mobile phone ban. Many reported increased face-to-face interactions, more meaningful conversations, and a greater sense of connection with their peers during the school day. However, a notable minority of students perceived a decline in social cohesion. These students reported difficulties staying connected with friends and challenges adjusting to the increased expectation for in-person conversation without the phone as a social tool. Direct comparisons between rounds were limited because the survey questions were not identical. However, one approximate comparison suggests a shift from expectation to perceived outcome: in Round 1, 35.8% of students anticipated that the phone ban would help them complete tasks faster or stay focused, whereas in Round 2, 48.3%

reported feeling more productive during the school day. While these items are not perfectly aligned, the increase suggests that perceived productivity may have exceeded initial expectations.

In terms of academic perceptions, nearly half of the students reported feeling more productive during the school day. Still, the survey left "productivity" undefined and did not ask how it manifested, whether through completing assignments faster, finishing more work, improving focus, or even in non-academic activities. Despite this, a majority of students perceived no significant change in their academic performance, with some students noting slight improvements and others reporting slight declines. The study did not observe objective academic outcomes, so academic impact should be interpreted cautiously.

Regarding classroom focus, the vast majority of students reported no change in their ability to concentrate. This suggests that the removal of phones during school hours did not lead to increased distraction or anxiety during class time for most students. More than half of students reported increased phone use during homework, suggesting a shift in distraction to less supervised settings. This shift in mobile phone use raises concerns about the potential effects of this offset phone use.

Socially, while the policy appears to have reduced barriers to in-person interaction for many students, a smaller subset experienced greatly diminished social connections. This reflects the varied roles phones play in students' social lives, not only as communication devices but also as emotional supports and as means of maintaining relationships across social groups.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students' perceptions of the phone ban's effects are complex and mixed. The policy is generally associated with perceived social benefits for most students, but also with negative social consequences for some. Academic effects, as perceived by students, are more limited and varied. These perceptions underscore the importance of considering students' lived experiences when evaluating the impacts of such policies.

3.2. Academic Life

Students' perceptions of the phone ban's impact on their academic performance, productivity, and study habits present a complex and at times contradictory picture. When asked to compare their academic performance before and after the ban, 21.5% of respondents perceived some degree of improvement, while 18.7% reported a decline. The majority, nearly 60%, noticed no change. This suggests that, for most students, removing phones during the school day has not substantially influenced their perceived academic outcomes. The composition of the sample may help explain this result, as 72% of respondents reported earning grades in the A range prior to the ban. For students already performing near the top, there may be limited room for noticeable academic improvement. Additionally, because the survey measured overall performance rather than specific elements such as time spent on homework, quality of assignments, or engagement in class, subtle changes may have gone undetected.

Perceptions of productivity during school hours revealed a somewhat different pattern. Nearly half of students (48.3%) felt more productive without their phones, 19.6% perceived a decline in productivity, and the remaining third noticed no change. The mixed results suggest that the policy's effects depend heavily on individual habits and needs. Because "productivity" was self-defined by respondents, these reports may capture both academic and non-academic activities, which limits comparability to grades. While subjective, these self-reported insights still provide valuable information about how students experience the behavioral shifts brought on by the ban. One student explained, "I actually finish more of my classwork because I don't get distracted." Another noted the opposite effect, writing, "I find it harder to focus now because I am more stressed without being able to check my phone." These contrasting perspectives illustrate how subjective productivity gains or losses varied across individuals.

The relationship between in-school phone restrictions and out-of-school academic habits appears more problematic. Over half of students (53.1%) reported increased phone use during homework time since the ban's implementation, indicating a possible compensatory effect. Rather than fostering improved self-regulation, the policy may have displaced phone use to after-school periods, which could affect homework duration and sleep; future work should measure these directly. This compensatory pattern is consistent with recent evidence showing that adolescents made daily adjustments to allocate more time to digital devices and conversations with friends after school (Monika & Dube, 2025). Device use increased particularly on weekends and holidays and was associated with stress, tiredness, and reduced face-to-face interaction (Monika & Dube, 2025). These findings reinforce the concern that students in this study may not have reduced overall usage, but instead shifted their in-school phone time to out-of-school hours. These patterns could undermine some of the intended benefits of the policy. Sleep quality in particular has well-documented effects on memory consolidation, learning, and executive function, meaning that such after-school shifts in behavior may indirectly harm academic outcomes (Curcio et al., 2006). The findings challenge the assumption that limiting access in one context automatically encourages healthier habits in another.

Taken together, these results indicate that the perceived academic impact of the phone ban is limited, with improvements more likely tied to subjective feelings of productivity than to measurable academic gains. The compensatory behaviors reported after school further complicate the picture, suggesting that the policy's influence on academic life cannot be fully understood without considering both in-school and out-of-school contexts. Future interventions may be more effective if paired with programs that promote digital literacy, time management, and intentional device use across environments, rather than focusing solely on restriction during the school day.

3.3. Social Life

Students' responses to the phone ban's social impact reveal both promising trends

and persistent gaps. When asked about changes in their frequency of in-person conversations during unstructured school time, 46.5% reported an increase, 43.5% saw no change, and around 10% experienced a decline. Based on students' responses in one-to-one conversations and open-ended survey questions, the removal of phones as a source of distraction appears to have made it easier for some students to engage in spontaneous conversation. In contrast, others reported no change because their social habits were already established or because they found alternative ways to spend their time. Among the minority who reported a decline in social connection, the ban may have disrupted established patterns of initiating or maintaining contact, particularly for students who relied on digital communication to coordinate meetups or stay informed during free periods. For example, one student shared, "Without phones, I've talked to people I never used to talk to at lunch." By contrast, another explained, "I feel more left out because I relied on group chats to know what was going on." These voices highlight both the opportunities and challenges created by the shift to a phone-free environment.

Students were also asked about the quality of their interactions. For the survey, "meaningful" was defined as conversations that felt emotionally fulfilling or supportive. About 33.5 percent said their face-to-face conversations had become more meaningful since the policy change, while 7.1 percent felt they had become less meaningful. The remaining 56 percent reported no change. These results suggest that even if in-person conversations become more frequent for some students, an increase in quantity does not necessarily lead to greater emotional depth or connection. Furthermore, for certain students, the loss of digital tools such as shared media and messaging may have reduced the perceived quality of their interactions.

Feelings of social connectedness showed a similar mixed pattern. In total, 40.6% of students reported feeling more connected to their peers after the ban, compared to 15.8% who felt less connected and 43.5% who noticed no change. The 40.6% who reported increased connectedness may have benefited from more present and uninterrupted interactions during breaks or lunch, along with the shared experience of an environment less dominated by digital distractions. By contrast, the 15.8% who felt less connected may have lost forms of intimacy tied to continuous digital communication. Messaging platforms, shared online content, and mobile games often serve as social anchors for many Gen Z students, creating a constant flow of references and collaborative activities that are not easily replaced by face-to-face conversation alone. The ban's removal of these touchpoints may have left some students without familiar ways to engage, particularly during the early stages of adjustment.

The results across all three measures (frequency of in-person conversation, interaction quality, and connectedness) point to a central tension. The phone ban appears to have opened space for more direct human interaction, but it has not ensured that all students are equally prepared to take advantage of that space. Students who already possessed the confidence, skills, or existing networks to social-

ize in person may have been best positioned to benefit. Those who were more reliant on digital cues and coordination tools may have experienced the shift as a loss, rather than an opportunity.

These findings suggest that the policy alone is not a comprehensive solution for fostering stronger social bonds. While it may catalyze increased face-to-face interaction, its benefits are uneven and may be amplified through targeted supports. Structured social opportunities, peer mentorship, and communication skills activities could help students who do not naturally benefit from a phone-free environment.

3.4. Limitations and Recommendations

3.4.1. Academic Outcomes

Several limitations affect the academic findings in this study. All results come from self-reported answers at a single private high school, which means they reflect students' own perceptions rather than objective measures. As a student at the same school and a member of the same generation as the participants, the researcher shared many of their digital habits and daily experiences. This perspective helped ground the study in lived reality, but it may also have introduced bias. To partially mitigate this, the study relied on anonymous self-reported responses from a broad cross-section of the student body. Response rates were 48% in Round 1 and 35% in Round 2, so the views captured may differ from those who chose not to participate (a potential selection bias). Some answers may have been inaccurate or incomplete due to students being asked to recall past experiences (recall bias). In addition, a few responses suggested the student hoped the results would either reverse or reinforce the ban, which could have influenced how they framed their answers.

This study captures only short-term effects, roughly three months after the ban's introduction. Therefore, it cannot assess whether reported gains in productivity or academic focus will persist, improve, or fade over time. Almost 60% of students reported no change in their grades. Future research should incorporate standardized test scores and more detailed academic measures, such as time spent on assignments, work quality, and class participation, to clarify what productivity gains mean in practice.

An additional concern is that over half of the students reported increased phone use during homework hours. This suggests that the ban may have simply shifted the previous in-school phone use to out-of-school settings, potentially undermining its intended effects. Future studies could examine the relationships between objective outcomes, such as course grades, assignment completion times, and standardized test scores, and how these outcomes are linked to students' survey responses about the amount of time they spend on their phones outside of school.

3.4.2. Social Outcomes

Social effects also show important limitations. Nearly half of the students reported more face-to-face interaction during school breaks, and about a third felt those

interactions became more meaningful. These findings suggest the policy may have lowered some barriers to connection. However, benefits were not universal. Around 10% of students experienced declines in social connection, often because they lost access to digital tools they used to initiate or maintain relationships.

This variation indicates the policy's impact depends greatly on individual factors such as communication styles, personality traits, and existing social networks. For example, introverted students or those relying heavily on digital communication may find it harder to adjust to fewer phone-based interactions. Future research could explore pre-registered subgroup analyses by grade level, gender, baseline GPA, and self-described introversion, which might clarify some of the heterogeneity in the results and inform targeted supports. Classroom observations and interviews might reveal how school culture and teacher practices influence whether the ban promotes inclusion or contributes to social isolation.

While many students reported feeling more connected to peers, the quality and durability of these connections remain unclear. Longitudinal studies are necessary to determine if early increases in in-person interaction lead to deeper, lasting relationships or if benefits plateau. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as focus groups or personal reflections, could uncover subtler emotional and interpersonal effects and identify the supports needed to extend the policy's benefits to all students.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how the deep emotional and social reliance that today's teenagers place on smartphones influences their perceptions of the academic and social effects of a school mobile phone ban. For most students, the absence of phones during the school day was neither socially nor academically harmful. Many reported improved in-person interactions, greater feelings of connectedness with peers, and modest gains in perceived productivity. These findings do not support the expectation of widespread social disruption from a phone ban during school hours. Instead, perceived effects were mixed: while many students noted social benefits, a minority experienced losses in perceived connectedness.

However, the experiences of the minority who reported diminished perceived connection and difficulty adjusting suggest that phones remain an essential social tool for some students. This may be due to limited prior experience with face-to-face interaction without phones, highlighting a potential need for structured opportunities to practice in-person communication or longer adjustment periods.

If schools choose to pursue phone bans, complementary programs that teach intentional device use and provide structured opportunities for in-person connection could increase benefits and reduce harms.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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