This study is an examination of the cause and effect relationship between the use of cell phones in small group settings and the formation of social capital which occurs between group members. Previous research into the effects of cell phone use has primarily focused on individual-level effects, such as texting while driving, which leaves a gap in our understanding of the technology’s effects on larger social processes. As the most widespread form of communications technology in the modern day, such an examination of cell phone use is of great interest to the social sciences. One such process that cell phones may affect is social capital, or the networks of assistance which exist in our lives, along with the associated norms of trust and reciprocity therein. Social capital has been shown to be an important aspect of our social lives and, as such, anything that influences it (either positively or negatively) is worth a thorough examination. A consideration of recent trends in both social capital and the development and use of cell phones suggests that there may be negative effects from cell phone use when it comes to the formation of social capital in the first place. Using social capital formation (calling upon others for aid and developing a sense of trust and reciprocity) as the main dependent variable, this study tests a number of hypotheses related to
differences in interactions between members of a group in the presence and absence of cell phone use.

Utilizing an experimental design, undergraduate participants from a Midwestern university are placed into either experimental groups (able to use cell phones) or control groups (not able to use cell phones), and asked to work through a small task during the testing period. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection were employed in order to understand the degree to which group members worked together and how they felt about their interactions. The analysis of data involves both a complete quantitative analysis, with t-tests, regressions, and path analyses used to test the hypotheses, as well as a consideration of qualitative observations in an attempt to triangulate the findings and reach a thorough understanding. The results from this study indicate that there is an overall negative impact of cell phones use on the formation of social capital, with differences in the types and degrees of interactions, and feelings of trust and reciprocity occurring in the presence and absence of cell phone use. However, the analysis reveals that this relationship is nuanced by both demographic considerations and the influence of interaction quality as perceived by group members. This study has implications for both theoretical understandings and future empirical endeavors, and offers insight as to the effects of cell phones on daily life and the ways in which technology impacts our social world.