

Students' Cell Phone Addiction and Their Opinions

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Abstract

Cell phone plays an essential role in communications throughout the world. The technological revolution that many Americans have experienced has drastically changed the way humans interact and communicate with one another. The author conducted field observations to examine Elon students' behavior while walking around campus, along with an online survey. Findings suggest that students seem to be addicted to their cell phones, with 64 percent of students observed on campus interacting with their device one way or another. Nevertheless, a survey of students found that they believe that the need of self-gratification achieved through excessive cell phone use has negative psychological effects on them. Overall, this research would impart insight into the addictive world of technology, and the impacts cell phones have on students' behavior.

I. Introduction

In recent years, the use of cell phones has played a vital role in communication across the globe; citizens of the United States, like people in other countries, are consumed in the technological revolution. It is hard for members of Generation Y, who were born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s, to imagine a time when instant and constant communication was not a main focus for them socially. A generation ago, people left their homes without any form of electronic device; made plans in person; wrote personal, hand-written letters; and knocked on neighbors' doors to see if they were home. These things, of course, still happen. But today "more than 90 percent of American adults have a cell phone of some kind, and for people under the age of 44, that number is closer to 97 percent."¹ For those with phones, particularly smart phones that allow individuals to instantly connect to anyone via the World Wide Web, personal, face-to-face connections seem to be disappearing at a rapid pace. In reaction, the McMillan family, of Ontario, Canada, conducted a social experiment where they "instituted a ban on all technology invented after 1986."² This year-long experiment was not designed to punish the children, but rather to show them a simpler way of life, before the world was instantly connected. Brean quotes McMillan, as saying, "The basis of the project is to feel what it was like

1. Doug Mataconis, "91 percent Of American Adults Own A Cell Phone, Majority Of Them Own A Smart-phone," *Outside the Beltway*. Np, 6 June 2013, Web. 28 Oct, 2013.

2. Tom Gardner, "That 1980's Show: No Internet, Pink Ghetto Blasters and Mullets, of Course, as Father Bans All Modern Technology for a YEAR to Take Family Back to 1986," *Mail Online*. Np, 6 Sept, 2013. Web, 07 Oct, 2013.

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when I was a kid before everything was connected,”³ The McMillan family is just one example of people who are trying to disconnect from the technology that they feel has become addictive. This research attempted to determine whether Generation Y's seemingly constant connection via technology can be classified as an addiction. It tried to determine whether members of this generation are losing their ability to interact in personal, face-to-face contact with others without somehow returning to their “devices” in the midst of real-world interactions.

Over the past several decades, the number of cell phone subscriptions in the United States has grown significantly as people's reliance on this technology has increased. There were 681,000 cellular telephone subscriptions in the United States in 1986⁴ and 326.4 million in December 2012. As late as December 2002, there were no houses that relied solely on wireless devices, but in 2012, 35.8 percent of U.S. households were wireless only.⁵ Throughout this study, the author tried to address questions related to cell phone addiction and analyze its consequent psychological effects.

II. Literature Review

Before analyzing human interactions with cell phones, it is important to understand the definition of addiction and addictive characteristics. Alaghemandan explained that all entities capable of stimulating a person can be addictive. In his article, “Behavioral addiction versus substance addiction: Correspondence of psychiatric and psychological views,” he found that “whenever a habit changes into an obligation, it can be considered as an addiction.”⁶ The Department of Internal Medicine conducted an experiment that evaluated how behavioral addiction correlated to substance addiction. According to their research, “Behavioral addiction such as internet addiction is similar to drug addiction except that in the former, the individual is not addicted to a substance but the behavior or the feeling brought about by the relevant action.”⁷

Mozes introduced the concept of materialism and the factors that contribute to society's obsession without devices. In his article, “Can Excessive Cellphone Use Become an Addiction,” published by *U.S. News & World Report*, Mozes stated, “The way we treat and interact with our devices is often impulsive and uncontrollable. Roberts also explained that there are benefits to cell phones, but, “like anything, if we go overboard it can become a problem.”⁸ Roberts explained that numerous factors including materialism and impulsiveness play a role in turning cell phone use into an addiction. Roberts was quoted by Mozes as saying, “That's particularly true when we use them excessively in public, . . . Because when we do so we're signaling that we've got this shiny object, this status symbol, our iPhone or Android or Blackberry, and that we've got important people to talk to or text, who are may be even more important than the people right in front of us. And that we're so important that we have to talk everywhere and all the time in front of others.”⁹

The article, “A Biblio Analysis of the Scientific Literature on Internet, Video Games, and Cell Phone Addiction,” published in the *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, concluded that the considerable amount of cell phone use in today's global society isn't as much an issue of addiction and dependence, but

3. Joseph Brean, “Why This Ontario Family Ditched Their Smartphones so They Could Live for a Year like It's 1986 - Mulletts And all” *National Post News Why This Ontario Family Ditched Their Smartphones so They Could Live for a Year like Its 1986 Mulletts And all Comments*, Np, 9 June 2013, Web, 07 Oct, 2013.

4. “Number of Cell Phones in the US,” *Number of Cell Phones in the US*. Np, 2002, Web, 28 Oct, 2013.

5. “U.S. Wireless Quick Facts,” *U.S. Wireless Quick Facts*, CTIA Advocacy, Dec, 2012, Web, 28 Oct, 2013.

6. S. S. Alavi, M. Ferdosi, F. Jannatifard, M. Eslami, H. Alaghemandan, & M. Setare, (2012), “Behavioral addiction versus substance addiction: Correspondence of psychiatric and psychological views,” *International Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 3(4) Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1287515141?accountid=10730>.

7. S. S. Alavi, M. Ferdosi, F. Jannatifard, M. Eslami, H. Alaghemandan, & M. Setare, (2012), “Behavioral addiction versus substance addiction: Correspondence of psychiatric and psychological views,” *International Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 3(4) Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1287515141?accountid=10730>.

8. Ibid.

9. Alan Mozes, “Can Excessive Cellphone Use Become an Addiction?” *US News. U.S. News & World Report*, 04 Dec, 2012, Web, 7 Oct, 2013.

rather it is an issue of controlling impulses. The study stated, “One behavioral addiction that has received considerable media attention is the pathological use of certain information and communications technologies (ICT), such as the Internet, cell phones, and video games.”¹⁰ If humans learned to control their impulses related to cell phone use, they would be given the opportunity to interact and communicate with the present environment in which they are surrounded.

Morrill studied the changes in adolescent development since cell phones have become an integral aspect in American society. In the article, “Cell Phone Use and Psychological Development Among Emerging Adults,” Morrill explained the issues surrounding the ability for adolescents to solve problems, trust, and have positive self-affirmation due to cell phone use. Young adults feel a sense of entitlement and status with a cell phone. Morrill compared cell phones in today’s society to technology from older generations. Morrill added further explanation:

“Like the television in the 1950s and Internet in the 1990s, mobile telephony has emerged as one of the defining technologies of our time” (Campbell & Park, 2008, p. 371). Cell phones are having an impact on society in many ways including time use, privacy issues, and constant accessibility (Rainie & Keeter, 2006). In 1995, close to 34 million people in the United States had a cell phone; as of 2007, the number of subscribers was 255 million, or 84 percent of the U.S. population (Statistical Abstract of the United States Census Bureau, 2009).¹¹ One of the biggest surprises surrounding the growth of technology is the worldwide acceptance and intense use of cell phones among youth (Ling, 2005). With cell phone ownership becoming so widespread, society is starting to see and question the impacts of cell phone use on adolescent development.¹²

Morrill added that the younger population have become the primary users of cell phones in America, and “the value and meaning of a cell phone for an adolescent will most likely carry strong social implications within their peer group.”¹³ Morrill explains that “Measuring the constant connection and distraction; the amount of time spent in voice-to-voice communication and text messaging; as well as the length of cell phone ownership may identify the impacts on an adolescent’s psychosocial development during one of the most critical periods in their life. An individual’s identity development may influence how cell phones are used to explore, make commitments, and resolve crises during this turbulent stage in development.”¹⁴

Brian conducted an experiment with two teens who would go without phones for 48 hours. She published her research and findings in the article “Two Days with No Phone.” Prior to conducting the experiment, Brian asked the two teens about their phone habits and the amount of time they spend with their devices. She found that the two students woke up several times during the night to text. One student even slept with his phone beneath his pillow. “It’s common for teens’ sleep to be interrupted by texts. Sometimes teens even send texts filled with nonsense words when they don’t wake up all the way,”¹⁵ Brian claims that many teens have troubling problems when they try to go without cell phones or technology.

In Brian’s study, students had to give up their phones and electronic media for 24 hours. The results showed that, “One in five people experienced changes in their bodies or emotions that are signs of possible addiction.”¹⁶ Participants thought they heard their phone ring or vibrate, even when it wasn’t with them, they had strong cravings to reach for their phone to check missed messages or calls. Some people were fidgeting and unable to be still, in addition to feeling anxious, worried and lonely.

10. Xavier Carbonell, E. Guardiola, M. Beranuy, & A. Bellés, (2009). A bibliometric analysis of the scientific literature on internet, video games, and cell phone addiction, *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, 97(2), 102-7, Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/203513204?accountid=10730>.

11. T. B. Morrill, (2009), *Cell phone use and psychosocial development among emerging adults*. (Order No. 3379281, Utah State University), *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 164, Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/305011871?accountid=10730>, (305011871).

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. S. J. Brian, (2013, Sep 02), Two days with no phone. *Scholastic Action*, 37, 4-6, Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1432704113?accountid=10730>

16. Ibid.

These feelings of stress and anxiety due to an absence of technology are new to teens across the globe. This addiction has altered the way humans personally interact with one another, and has created a distance in the ways in which we communicate. These devices have driven a wedge between intimate and direct conversation and communication. It is becoming an addiction that is impeding personal well-being, causing unnecessary anxieties and pressures. The research suggests that there needs to be a balance between time spent with these devices, and without them. Without a set balance, people will continue to become more obsessed and consumed by technology, and there is a concern that humans will lose all closeness and affection that can come from personalized conversations.

Based on the literature review, the following three research questions were asked in this study:

RQ1. Are college-age students addicted to their cell phones?

RQ2. What are obvious traits that show addiction to cell phones?

RQ3. What psychological effects do people feel when they are disconnected?

III. Methods

Field observations and a survey were conducted to gauge the level of engagement that Elon University students have towards their devices, and with each other in face-to-face situations.

For this study, the author tried to capture a sample that is an accurate representation of the individuals affected by cell phone addiction. A survey of Elon University students between the ages of 18 and 22 was conducted. There were 65 responses to survey questions that were designed to gauge cell phone habits, primary uses of cell phones, and feelings and emotions individuals possess without their cell phone. (For a full list of survey questions, see Appendix A.)

Based on the survey results, the researcher conducted field observations at four locations on campus. The observation locations were set at heavily populated student locations at times when more students would likely be present. The researcher recorded a number of interactions among the student population, including the number of students texting, talking on their phones, listening with ear buds, and the number of students who did not have contact with their devices. (Refer to Appendix B to see the full set up and design of the field observations.)

IV. Findings

The 9-question survey generated 65 responses from students. The vast majority of students, 95.4 percent owned an iPhone, while only two students owned a Droid, and one claimed they didn't own a smart phone.

When asked the primary usage of their cell phone, texting was mentioned by 83.1 percent of students as the most used feature, followed by calling by 10.8 percent, and Facebook, Twitter or Instagram by 1.5 percent each. More than half of the students surveyed said they believe they are addicted to instant and constant communication (56.9%). Students reported feeling disconnected (77.4%), naked (25.8%) and stressed (25.8%) when they didn't carry their cell phones. The wide range of feelings is due to the fact that people don't like being uninformed about things happening within the world around them. People want to be in touch and receive information within seconds. Almost all students (98.5%) believe that young adults look for self-gratification and acceptance from their peers through social media, which is constantly available through cell phones. An overwhelming majority (82.8%) agreed that there are negative psychological impacts on the self-esteem of young adults due to their addiction to technology.

Field observations were conducted to gauge Elon student's interactions and behaviors with cell phones. More than 200 students were observed, and the results were somewhat surprising. The researcher found that 83 of the 191 students observed (43.5%) were either texting or holding their cell phone, while 68 students observed (35.6%) did not have their cell phone out at all. The other students were either talking on their cell phones (6.8%) or listening with ear buds (14.1%).

Based on the survey, it was possible to answer some of the original research questions raised. Regarding the question on what were obvious traits that show addiction to cell phones, young adults feel the constant need to check their cell phones for any form of contact from family, friends and work. Of the students surveyed, 44 percent agreed with the statement, "When I walk across campus, the majority of people are on their cell phones." Although this is true based on the field observations, many may find it surprising that just over a third of the students observed did not have their cell phone visible.

In an effort to find what psychological effects people felt when they were disconnected, the survey asked students to identify feelings and emotions associated with the absence of their cell phone. One student reported in the survey that without a cell phone, the student had a "fear of missing out," commonly known as FOMO ("Fear of Missing Out"), in today's society. About 77 percent of students surveyed said they felt disconnected, while others said they felt free without their devices.

When asked for any other feedback regarding the topic, students provided a number of responses. One student said, "I think that as a society we do rely on instant communication. It has become a blessing and a curse at the same time. Sometimes we do need times to decompress and get away from social media," while another student simply claimed, "This is depressing." Two separate respondents mentioned how time abroad has changed their opinion on cell phone use. One student said, "Meals with friends, hanging out with my host family, and other activities with other people are much more enjoyable without everyone looking at their phone. I hope that living abroad without being able to use my phone will make me use my phone less when I return to the States." Another student responded, "When I was abroad it was such a relief to not be on my phone all the time and when I was on vacation. I wish I could feel like I could have that relief all the time but you are at such a disadvantage to not have your phone because you miss out on things."

Two additional responses mentioned how students either worry, or have hope for the future in relation to cell phone behaviors. One student said, "The trend of cell phone addiction will only get worse," while the second claimed, "I think [it's] the change that is happening, and when our generation has kids, this won't be an issue anymore." Another student mentioned one possible impact of excessive cell phone use: "People often forget how to interact face-to-face because we use technology as a crutch to avoid true interaction." The overall opinion of the majority of student's surveyed was that they are aware of the behaviors of themselves and their peers. It appears that the addiction is real: young adults are influenced by the negative psychological effects associated with excessive cell phone use and self-gratification.

V. Conclusion

Observations and a survey of student's on Elon's campus showed that Elon is not an exception to the phenomenon that cell phone addiction is affecting many young adults. People are becoming more aware of their own personal habits and behaviors regarding interaction with their devices, and some people believe the obsession surrounding instant and constant communication will diminish by the time Generation Y parents have their own children. Some people claimed that these addictive behaviors and habits arise because they don't want to be disconnected from their friends and family. They need to have their cell phones so they are able to respond, or reach out to people instantly, and impulsively. Others believe that the use of technology to communicate has decreased our ability to communicate with one another in person. As one survey participant put it, "I think people often forget how to interact face-to-face because we use technology as a crutch to avoid true interaction."

All it takes to see the truth behind this is observe families and friends at a restaurant. Try to find one group of the targeted individuals who can go the entire duration of their meal without reaching for their cell phone. People also tend to feel much more comfortable behind the screen of a cell phone than in the presence of another person. This is where people lose the ability to face difficult issues and have vocal confrontations with one another. Scientific studies and surveys have shown that there are negative psychological effects related to cell phone addiction. Many young adults need validation that they are pretty or popular, and they use social media, accessed through most cell phones to achieve this self-gratification. Many individuals feel a heightened level of stress and anxiety when they are with their phones, because they are so used to constantly having instant access to communication; others feel free without them

because it gives them a chance to disconnect and think their own thoughts without interruption. Overall, it is clear that many members of Generation Y are aware of addictive behaviors they picked up and the accompanying negative consequences.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. What type of cell phone do you own?
2. What is the primary purpose of your cell phone (1 being the most used feature)
3. Do you believe you are addicted to instant and constant communication?
4. Do you ever purposely leave your cell phone at home to disconnect?
5. How do you feel without your cell phone (stressed, disconnected, alone, naked...)
6. Do you think young adults look for a sense of gratification through various platforms in technology? (Facebook, Twitter, Texts, Instagrams)
7. Do you believe our addiction to technology contribute to negative psychological effects and self-esteem?
8. Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following... (I am addicted to my cell phone, Americans as a whole are addicted to technology, When I walk across campus, the majority of people are on their cell phones, I feel stressed and alone when I don't have my cell phone, I wish society would rely less on instant and constant communication, I wish I could disconnect more and enjoy communicating with friends in person without the added distraction of cell phones.
9. Do you have any other thoughts and opinions on society and our cell phone use?

Appendix B: Field Observations of students on four campus locations

	McEwen	Moseley	Belk Library	Powell	Total	Total (%)
Holding or texting	16	31	23	13	83	43.5
Talking	3	4	4	2	13	6.8
Listening	5	9	10	3	27	14.1
No phone visible	26	7	19	16	68	35.6
Total	50	51	56	34	191	100.0

Notes: McEwen represents observations outside of McEwen Dining Hall between 3:00-3:15 p.m. on Nov. 4, 2013; Moseley means observations outside of Moseley Center by the flowerbed between 2:30-2:45 p.m. on Nov. 5, 2013; Belk Library was used when the author observed students entering or exiting Belk Library between 2:45-3:00 p.m. on Nov. 5, 2013; and the Powell observations were done while watching students crossing Haggard Ave. in front of Powell between 3:00-3:15 p.m. on Nov. 5, 2013.
