



## Full length article

## Are we addicted to our cell phones?



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## ABSTRACT

Cellular telephone use has become extremely widespread over the past several years. There has been concern that current high levels of cell phone use may be compared to a behavioral addiction. However, this has yet to be thoroughly tested. This area of research also lacks in determining what the causes and consequences of consistent cell phone use may be. The present study examined the prevalence of characteristics of a cell phone addiction among a university student population along with possible predictors of high frequency use. Participants were a total of 152 undergraduate students ( $n = 35$  males and  $n = 117$  females). It was hypothesized that anxiety, as measured using self-report questionnaires, would increase upon having access to one's cell phone limited for high frequency users. However, anxiety only increased when participants had their cell phone sitting in front of them and were instructed not to use them. Predictors and variables hypothesized to be related included social anxiety, social connectedness, and addiction-proneness. Results indicated that social anxiety and addiction-proneness are significant predictors of frequent cell phone use, but social connectedness has no significant connection. This study provided insights into why cell phones are sometimes used so compulsively, and if frequency of cell phone use is becoming so high that it is becoming a new behavioral addiction.

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## 1. Introduction

Cellular telephone use has become extremely widespread over the past several years, with approximately 8 million Canadians subscribing to wireless phone companies between 2007 and 2014 (Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association, 2014). The rapid advancement in technology, now allowing fast and accessible communication, may be one of many factors influencing this growing use of cell phones. The amount and frequency of cell phone use has been called to attention in social and clinical research (Lepp, Li, Barkley, & Salehi-Esfahani, 2015; Tanis, Beukeboom, Hartmann, & Vermeulen, 2015). What has been of particular concern are the qualities of behavior demonstrated in cell phone users that fall in the same category of a behavioral addiction (Griffiths, 1996). Although research in cell phone use has not been greatly developed as it is a relatively new field, there have been a few hypotheses as to why cell phones may be so appealing. Cell phones provide immediate access to communication (Plant, 2000) as well as a less intimate method of interaction for those

experiencing social anxiety (Forgays, Hyman, & Schreiber, 2014; Lee, Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2014; Reid & Reid, 2004). Essentially, it can be seen as an entire social network housed in one hand-held device.

As previous research has broadly discussed possible influencing factors that lead to high levels of cell phone use, the present study systematically tested for the prevalence of these factors, and whether they accurately predict high cell phone use which in turn may predict addictive behavioral qualities.

## 1.1. Prevalence and behaviors

Canada has accumulated approximately 28 million cell phone subscribers since 1985, and these statistics hold a steady trend of approximately 1 million additional users each year (Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association, 2014). Although these numbers may provide an idea about the popularity of cell phones, it does not provide an estimate of how much these cell phones are used or what they are used for. Casual observation can note that cell phones are taken nearly everywhere by majority of the population who are old enough and competent enough to use them (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013). Cell phones are now also more capable than simply making phone calls and sending text messages as majority of cell phones recently and currently being manufactured can now

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send e-mails, access the internet, provide navigation systems, take pictures and videos, play music and movies, download video games, check social media, and many other functions. With all these functions available, preliminary research has discovered some of the more popular uses of cell phones in an attempt to answer a fundamental question; Why is cell phone use so prevalent?

The prevalence of text messaging has become so high that social etiquette related to cell phone use has been of concern (Forgays et al., 2014). An age effect persists as a small percentage (approximately 25%) of individuals younger than 50 years old believe ending a relationship through text messaging is appropriate, while no individuals over 50 years of age rated this behavior as appropriate (Forgays et al., 2014). This trend remains consistent as younger individuals regularly rate the possibility of no cell phone access as anxiety-provoking, the expectancy of a reply to be sooner, higher irritability when waiting for a response to a text message, and rate a higher range of social situations to be appropriate for text messaging (Forgays et al., 2014). An accumulation of these findings suggests a norm of more frequent and socially acceptable cell phone use in younger populations. These findings become more extreme when specifically studying users of smartphones (Lee, Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2014).

Smartphones are a type of cell phone that allow users constant internet access (depending on their mobile data plan), which is primarily used for other forms of social interaction such as popular social media websites (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) (Lee, Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2014). These types of phones tend to lead to the most compulsive behavior that can have similar qualities to other behavioral addictions (Lee, Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2014). Social etiquette with cell phones has increasingly become an issue as high-frequency users tend to have difficulties abstaining from glancing at their phone or interrupting a conversation to answer a text message (Bianchi & Phillips, 2005). Research testing various hypotheses as to why this type of obsession has become so prevalent is present, but scarce (Lee, Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2014; Plant, 2000; Reid & Reid, 2004; Walsh, White, & Young, 2010).

Behaviors related to cell phone use have become such a concern that it has been compared to other behavioral addictions (Walsh et al., 2010). Although extreme amounts of cell phone use and signs of attachment have not been placed in the category of a pathological addiction, as it has not been determined if the negative consequences of cell phone use outweigh the benefits and if these consequences are debilitating, researchers have developed measurements of cell phone addiction based on pathological addictions (Walsh et al., 2010). Walsh, White and Young's (2010) Mobile Phone Involvement Questionnaire is based on Brown's (1993, 1997) eight components of a behavioral addiction; Salience – cognitive, salience – behavioral, conflict – interpersonal, conflict–other activities, relief/euphoria, loss of control/tolerance, and withdrawal. These researchers posit that if an individual self-rates high on these dimensions, they likely have some degree of a cell phone addiction.

## 1.2. Social anxiety

Social anxiety is described as a fear of social situations, resulting in avoidance of social situations or otherwise feelings of anxiety and stress when encountering the feared situations (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It has been suggested that individuals who experience social anxiety tend to be more compulsive smartphone users (Lee, Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2014). Communication through cell phones is a less intimate setting than face-to-face interactions, and this distance may decrease anxiety when communicating with others because it allows for more time and thought towards each reply in a conversation (Lee, Chang, Lin,

& Cheng, 2014). Conversations become even less intimate and therefore more comfortable when communicating through text messaging. Text messaging allows an escape of personal interactions in which one believes they are being constantly “evaluated or scrutinized” which can typically be felt in public settings, particularly by people who have social anxiety (Lee, Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2014). Because of this feeling of judgment, individuals who have social anxiety prefer to text as a form of communication rather than make a phone call, which is a more personal type of contact (Reid & Reid, 2004). It also allows these individuals an opportunity to disclose their “real-self” which is more of a challenge in face-to-face conversations (Reid & Reid, 2004). In turn, this easily accessible option of communication may encourage individuals to avoid face-to-face conversations and therefore heighten their social anxiety as they decrease their experiences with intimate types of contact.

An additional reason cell phones may increase social anxiety is the nature of the object. Cell phones are typically kept in purses, personal bags, and pockets which are easily accessible. Individuals can take out their phone to become pre-occupied within the context of social situations to avoid direct communication with the people around them. Although this convenient escape from social situations could encourage the development of social anxiety for reasons previously mentioned, King et al. (2013) has suggested that cell phones may be facilitating for those with social anxiety as they use their cell phones to provide them with comfort and allow them to feel “safe and confident” in self-perceived overwhelming social situations. Simply, cell phones may reduce anxiety for those who have social anxiety.

While many studies have tested the relationship between social anxiety and cell phone use, results have yet to be exceedingly consistent as some find no relationship between the two variables (Harwood, Dooley, Scott, & Joiner, 2014) and some even find an inverse relationship (Lu et al., 2011). Lu et al. (2011) found that anxiety was negatively associated with text message dependency when controlling for depression. These researchers postulate that those high in text-message dependency (driving their cell phone addiction) find texting very central and important to their relationships. Thus, access to this constant communication via text messaging decreases anxiety related to social interaction. Lu et al. (2011) have also suggested the possibility of those low in anxiety being less fearful of rejection as defined by the absence of receiving a response to text messages. Therefore, there is less inhibition to communicate via text messages at a more frequent rate.

## 1.3. Social connectedness

Constant cell phone use can be a means of feeling social connectedness and togetherness, regardless of the prevalence of social anxieties. Cell phones have been found to be primarily used as a need for connection for young adults, but also used to validate approval from others (Walsh et al., 2010). Walsh et al. (2010) describe high frequency cell phone use as an explanation of the finding that cell phones assist in facilitating young adults' social life. This finding helps to explain why prevalence is especially high in young adults. In this stage of life, people tend to seek out reassurance and acceptance of their self-concept, and making friends and social connections can be a successful strategy.

With this view, cell phones would be a highly important object to young adults. Indeed, young adults seem to be the largest population in frequent cell phone use (Forgays et al., 2014; LaFrance, 2011), demonstrating attachment to the object through acts such as consistently sleeping besides their cell phones (LaFrance, 2011), texting or calling while driving, and experiencing some degree of “separation anxiety” when they are without their phone (Weller,

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