



Exploring the relationships between college students' cell phone use, personality and leisure



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ABSTRACT

College students are more likely to use their cell phones for leisure than for school or work. Because leisure is important for health and well-being, and cell phone use has been associated with mental and physical health, the relationship between cell phone use and leisure should be better understood. This research classified college students into distinct groups based on their cell phone use and personality traits, and then compared each group's leisure experiences. *Methods:* A random sample of students ($N = 454$) completed validated surveys assessing personality (Big 5) and dimensions of the leisure experience (boredom, challenge, distress, awareness). Cell phone use and demographics were also assessed. *Results:* A cluster analysis produced a valid, three-group solution: a "High Use" group characterized primarily by cell phone use (over 10 h/day), and two Low Use groups (3 h/day) characterized by divergent personalities (extroverted and introverted). ANOVA compared each group's leisure experiences and found the "Low Use Extrovert" had significantly less boredom, greater preference for challenge, and greater awareness of opportunities and benefits than the other groups ($p < .01$). The "High Use" group experienced significantly more leisure distress than the other groups ($p < .05$). Implications for health and well-being are discussed.

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1. Introduction

From the perspective of college students, the modern cellular telephone (i.e. smartphone, mobile phone, and henceforth cell phone) is designed primarily for entertainment purposes. Recently, our group conducted a large study using a random sample of college students ($N = 305$) and 88% reported using their cell phone primarily for leisure rather than for school or work (Lepp, Barkley, Sanders, Rebold, & Gates, 2013). Certainly, this is a result of the phones' expanded functionality. In addition to traditional communication services, today's cell phones allow users to participate in popular online social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, to play a wide variety of video games both online and off, to stream movies and live sports, to create and share personal photos and videos, and to browse the internet. Furthermore, the cell phone's inherent mobility allows these leisure-related functions to be accessed nearly anytime and anyplace. In consideration of this, Lepp (2014a) argued that there is a complex and largely unexplored relationship between college students' cell phone use and leisure behavior. Because leisure plays a critical role in promoting and maintaining mental and physical health (Mannell,

2007), and college students frequently use their cell phones for leisure purposes, there is a need to examine the relationship between cell phone use and leisure more closely. This need is highlighted by two recent studies which identify a negative relationship between college students' cell phone use and their mental health (Lepp, Barkley, & Karpinski, 2014) and physical fitness (Lepp et al., 2013). In hopes of better illuminating the relationship between cell phone use and leisure, this current study will consider the role of personality. Personality has been shown to influence both cell phone use (Butts & Phillips, 2008) and leisure behavior (Lu & Hu, 2005; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Thus, this study extends our knowledge of cell phone use and college student behavior in two important ways. First, in order to better understand individual differences between low and high frequency cell phone users, this study presents a classification of college students based on their cell phone use and personality. Secondly, this study uses that classification to demonstrate that, among college students, different types of cell phone users perceive and experience leisure differently. Findings have important implications for college students' health and well-being.

2. Literature review

The Leisure Experience Battery is a survey comprised of four distinct scales which assesses an individual's perception and

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experience of leisure along four dimensions: boredom, challenge, distress, and awareness (Caldwell, Smith, & Weissinger, 1992). It was originally developed for use with adolescents and has since been validated with college students (Barnett, 2005). The first scale measures an individual's susceptibility to boredom during leisure. Leisure time boredom can result from a number of factors including disruption of the intrinsic motivation process, a limited leisure repertoire (number of leisure activities engaged in during a typical week), and a belief that leisure is not important (Weissinger, Caldwell, & Bandalos, 1992). The second scale measures an individual's preference for challenge during leisure. Challenge is important as research demonstrates leisure activities which are challenging are associated with personal growth and development, a deep sense of enjoyment, and quality of life (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kelly, Steinkamp, & Kelly, 1987). The third scale measures negative feelings an individual might have about leisure. Negative feelings about leisure could result from a fear of failing to keep oneself occupied, a fear that one's skills are not up to the challenges leisure presents, fear of evaluation by others, or a fear of being alone with one's thoughts (Caldwell et al., 1992). Lastly, the final scale assesses an individual's awareness of local leisure opportunities and resources as well as awareness of the potential benefits leisure provides.

The utility of the Leisure Experience Battery is in its ability to predict unhealthy leisure behaviors among adolescents and college students (Barnett, 2005; Caldwell et al., 1992). Theoretically, individuals with low leisure awareness, low leisure challenge, high leisure boredom and high leisure anxiety have less satisfying, less meaningful and less enjoyable experiences during free time. In turn, such individuals may perceive that opportunities for optimally satisfying leisure are limited and consequently engage in deviant or high-risk activities in order to achieve optimal arousal. Indeed, many of the unhealthy choices adolescents and college students make occur during their unobligated free time. In support of this, research has demonstrated that less than optimal leisure, as assessed by the Leisure Experience Battery, is positively related to leisure time smoking, marijuana use, alcohol consumption and risky sexual behavior (Caldwell & Smith, 1995; Miller et al., 2014; Sharp et al., 2011). Furthermore, longitudinal data suggests that leisure education (e.g. professional services aimed at developing a healthy leisure repertoire, improving leisure skills, and raising awareness about the potential benefits of leisure) can improve the leisure experience and reduce unhealthy leisure behaviors (Caldwell, Baldwin, Walls, & Smith, 2004).

Although cell phone use is typically not considered an unhealthy or risky behavior, research has demonstrated that it can be "problematic" and addictive (Beranuy, Oberst, Carbonell, & Chamarro, 2009; Bianchi & Phillips, 2005; Ezoe et al., 2009; Hong, Chiu, & Huang, 2012; Takao, Takahashi, & Kitamura, 2009). Furthermore, the increasing use of new media technologies including cell phones has been linked with "ill-being" (operationalized as psychological issues, behavior problems, attention problems and physical health) in children, preteens, and teenagers – even after controlling for physical activity and diet (Rosen et al., 2014). Our groups' previous research suggests that conceptualizing young people's media consumption as a leisure behavior may offer new insights into current understandings. First, our group identified a negative relationship between college students' cell phone use and objectively measured cardiorespiratory fitness (Lepp et al., 2013). Interview data from the same study provided several explanations for this negative relationship including the possibility that high frequency cell phone users are more likely than low frequency users to forgo leisure time physical activity in order to sit and play with their devices. Theoretically, this suggests that college students' cell phone use might be understood as a sedentary behavior similar to television watching. Research by Kubey and

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes television watching as an easily accessible, passive, low skill, low concentration, low challenge leisure activity not likely to facilitate optimal leisure experiences. This might be an apt description of leisure time cell phone use today. Thus, it may be that high frequency cell phone users prefer less challenge during leisure relative to low frequency users.

Further analysis of the interviews described above compared low and high frequency cell phone users' self-reported leisure activities, motivations and experiences (Lepp & Barkley, 2014). Results suggest that additional differences may exist between the two groups. First, high frequency cell phone users reported engaging in fewer mentally challenging leisure pursuits such as reading and creating art and music. Likewise, high frequency cell phone users occasionally identified "sitting around" and "doing nothing" as a leisure activity. In addition to an aversion to challenge, this may suggest a lack of awareness of nearby leisure opportunities and resources. Second, high frequency users were more likely to mention leisure time boredom as a motivation for cell phone use. Thus, high frequency users may be more susceptible to leisure time boredom. Third, results showed that high frequency cell phone users were more likely to describe leisure time cell phone use in terms of negative affect rather than positive affect. The reverse was true for low frequency users. Indeed, high frequency users tended to describe the experience of leisure time cell phone use as stressful, annoying, addictive, and regretful while low frequency users did not. This suggests a possible relationship between cell phone use and the Leisure Experience Battery's distress scale.

In support of this possibility, our group recently measured cell phone use, anxiety, academic performance (grade point average or GPA), and satisfaction with life (happiness) in a large sample of college students ($N = 496$) (Lepp et al., 2014). Analysis showed that cell phone use was negatively related to GPA and positively related to anxiety. Following this, GPA was positively related to happiness while anxiety was negatively related to happiness. Thus, for the population studied, high frequency cell phone users tended to have lower GPA, higher anxiety, and lower happiness relative to their peers who used the cell phone less often. This has two implications for the present study. First, an important benefit of leisure is stress relief (Iwasaki, Mackay, Mactavish, Ristock, & Bartlett, 2006; Trenberth & Dewe, 2002). Yet, cell phone use is related to anxiety among high frequency cell phone users, therefore if they consistently utilize the device during leisure then it may interfere with this benefit. Second, as we have already demonstrated, a mediated relationship exists between college students' cell phone use and satisfaction with life. Leisure is an important contributor to life satisfaction and related measures of subjective well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Lu & Hu, 2005). Therefore, if the relationship between cell phone use and leisure becomes more clearly understood then it may provide additional pathways for understanding the mediated relationship between cell phone use and happiness.

Finally, in a separate study, our group assessed the relationships between cell phone use, leisure time physical activity and sedentary behavior (i.e., time spent sitting) among a large random sample ($N = 223$) of college students (Barkley & Lepp, 2013). For the majority of participants, cell phone use was positively related to sedentary behavior, even after controlling for leisure time physical activity. Thus, given two equally active people, the one who used the cell phone more also allocated more time to sitting. However, a small but significant portion of the sample defied this relationship. Instead, they were characterized by low cell phone use, low physical activity and high sedentary behavior. This aberration from the larger trend may be due to personality differences. A meta-analysis of 35 independent samples found that extraversion is positively and emotional stability is negatively related to physical activity (Rhodes & Smith, 2006). These two personality traits have

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