

Exploring British Adolescents' Views and Experiences of Problematic Smartphone Use and Smartphone Etiquette

Aims

The aim of this paper is to identify some of the common experiences of smartphone use of British adolescents, including problematic use. Due to the lack of qualitative literature that explores the topic, this study provides rich insights into adolescents' perceptions and experiences of smartphones. The paper considers the following key research questions:

- What experiences and attitudes characterise adolescents' relationships with their smartphones?
- Do adolescents consider any aspect of their smartphone use to be problematic?

Key Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate the complexity of disentangling functional and enjoyable smartphone use from problematic use for teens, particularly in an era when smartphones are embedded so deeply in modern life. The different aspects of the adolescents' smartphone experiences were encapsulated by the following four themes. These themes encompass both the different drivers underlying potentially excessive or antisocial smartphone use, and how young people seek to minimise these risks by monitoring both their own and others' smartphone use:

- **The Comfort Bubble** highlighted the safe space and relief provided by smartphone usage.
- **The Extended Self** showed aspects of teenage smartphone use that related to maintaining relationships, staying in the loop, and having the ability to store memories and media important to the participants.
- **Digital Native Etiquette** demonstrated the way participants navigate the social rules of appropriate smartphone use, and the strategies employed to safeguard against problematic or excessive phone use.
- **Defining Dependency** highlighted the views of participants regarding problematic smartphone use. Some potential problematic aspects for these respondents included the need to have their phones in close proximity even at night, anxiety at having misplaced their phones, or distraction by their phones when socialising in person.

Policy Context

The experiences of smartphone users who were born after 1995 continue to warrant research. The implications of the findings of this study can inform potential future measures of problematic smartphone use and ways of promoting education about healthy smartphone use by applying some of the strategies put forward by the young people in this study. The teens' experiences indicate that young people who are more impulsive could be less likely to defer their smartphone use, leading to more problematic or compulsive use. An unhealthy dependency on smartphones could therefore potentially be measured with scales that incorporate measures of sensation seeking, need for close proximity, and antisocial phone use.

Further qualitative studies with adolescents from diverse backgrounds are needed to further establish potentially common experiences and particularly to ensure the reliability and applicability of any clinical or subclinical screening and assessment tools.

For future measures of smartphone dependency or related behavioural addiction(s), investigators may wish to incorporate some of the issues highlighted in this study, such as non-social phone use (e.g., scrolling and notification checking) or measures of antisocial smartphone use (such as neglecting or ignoring an in-person interaction to check one's phone) when in the company of others. An agreement on social rules by parents and schools can minimize the detrimental impact of smartphones on relationships and productivity, provided they are age-appropriate. Young people should be encouraged by families, friends, and schools to self-monitor their use.

Methodology

This study adds valuable qualitative data to the experiences of smartphone use and smartphone dependency and is the first to do so with an adolescent cohort and focus group discussions. An exploratory qualitative approach was used. Three focus groups with 13 young people were conducted in 2018. The convenience sampling methods used for this study yielded a homogeneous demographic of participants (white, state school students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds). Participants were between the ages of 16–18 years, although their individual ages were not recorded as part of the data collection. The data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Background

Smartphones are now a ubiquitous part of daily life for adolescents in the U.K., who use their phones for a multitude of reasons beyond calling or texting. Today's adolescents appear to be particularly at risk of problematic smartphone use and the related negative outcomes. To date, little qualitative research has been conducted with adolescent smartphone users about their experiences of smartphone use, particularly problematic or excessive use. Because smartphones are an integral part of modern-day living, they should be viewed in terms of *how* and *why* young people are using their phones as opposed to *how much* they are using them.

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