Newer Development

The Psychology of Excessive Cellular Phone use

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Introduction

Mobile phones or cellular phones have emerged to become indispensable tools of daily life in the hands of mankind. Although the first cellular phone came into use more than forty years ago, the technology has gained its peak popularity in the period of the last ten years.¹ According to the International Telecommunication Union, the number of cellular subscriptions globally is expected to reach 7 billion in 2014, which is approaching the number of people on Earth.² The advent of numerous applications that provide the leisure of text messaging free of cost, lower call rates and easy availability and accessibility of internet use on cellular phones are among the prominent causes leading to the increase in its usage. Cellular phones, despite serving as a means to convey important information, for exchange of greetings and pleasantries and for the general entertainment of the user, have repercussions when projected to excessive use, which come into the realm of a number of recognizable psychological illnesses.³⁷

Background

Cellular phones are being used as multipurpose electronic devices in today’s world, with everyday uses varying from calling, text messaging, playing games to surfing the internet. Studies have shown that cellular phone use provides a plethora of psychological benefits to the user, namely feelings of independence and autonomy with respect to owning the device and controlling its parameters, establishing and maintaining healthy relationships by means of voice calls and text messaging. It has been reported to be used as a status symbol amongst peers, a constant source of fun and games and also to increase inclusion and connectedness amongst family and friends.¹⁸⁻¹² Needless to say, one cannot say enough to emphasize the usefulness of the novel technology. However, it comes with its own drawbacks. The harms become more evident with continuing and increasing use over time. There have been very few studies mentioning the detrimental effects of excessive use of cellular phones on psychosocial and physical health which include:

- Personal stress, insecurity, low self-confidence and frequent mood changes.³
- Anxiety due to inadequacy of access to mobile services at times, or due to feelings of social isolation and being neglected upon not receiving or sending text messages over a period of time.¹³
- Sleep disturbances, insomnia, waking up several times at night to check the phone for messages or voice calls.³
- Musculoskeletal effects such as neck pain and rigidity.¹⁴
- Dry eyes and computer vision syndrome.¹⁴
- Pain and weakness over the base of thumbs and wrists, increased frequency of de Quervain’s tenosynovitis.¹⁵
- Radiation effects from the constant emission of microwaves from cellular phones, even when not in use.¹⁶
- Dependency and addiction to cellular phone usage.¹⁷
- Nomophobia and others.¹⁴
- Delusions, auditory and tactile hallucinations.¹⁸⁻¹⁹
The SMS addiction

The short message service (SMS), referred to as text messaging, or simply texting is one of the major uses of the cellular phone. However, excessive text messaging can be one of the domains of cellular phone usage prone to cause psychosocial detriments to the user. Previous data suggests that it is a form of addiction and dependency disorder, though it has not been included under the category of substance use disorders in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). 1,4,17,20

The characteristics of excessive cellular phone usage meeting the definition of an addictive disorder include: 1,4,14,21

- Excessive use despite the high economic cost and time burden, increasing duration of unnecessary calls, chain messaging.
- Tolerance: Increasing frequency and duration of cellular phone use to obtain the same level of psychological satisfaction as earlier.
- Problems associated with excessive use: Interference in daily activities, affecting work and relationships, avoiding social, academic and recreational activities, decline in overall productivity.
- Failed attempts to cut down on usage.
- Withdrawal: Feelings of nervousness and anxiety when away from one’s cellular phone, or when unable to use it.

It has been reported that the addictive behavior in case of cellular phone use is negatively reinforced, indicating that the user indulges in order to relieve discomfort rather than to achieve pleasure. This is in concordance with the fact that the cellular phone has been instrumental in lowering stress, as well as in achieving a reduction in the levels of prevailing loneliness, especially amongst the youth. 22 It is interesting to note that because the technology being put in question here has since its advent been so useful to humankind, there exists no social consensus with regard to its risk for abuse. 1

Cellular phone anxiety, delusions and hallucinations

Earlier studies have thrown some light on anxiety arising from the excessive use of cellular phones. Researchers have found that regular cellular phone users often suffer from feelings of anxiety, stress and insecurity in the absence of the device. 14 This has been reported too often happening in situations such as poor network zones, or when unexpectedly, the battery or the phone credit runs out. 23 This view encompasses the term “nomophobia”, literally meaning no-mobile phobia. Briefly, it is the fear of being out of mobile phone contact, due to any reason. The other related term is “textxiety”, the feeling of anxiety on not receiving or sending text messages. 18 This can possibly stem from an underlying fear of social isolation. A study was done by Walsh et al, in which they found that not receiving messages and voice calls regularly is often perceived as not being loved by people, leading to feelings of depression. 24 Other entities include post-traumatic text disorder, where over-zealous text messaging has resulted in physical and mental insults to the user; and binge texting. 17 The latter often sees users sending multiple text messages in order to feel good about themselves and to attract responses that will bring a sense of elevation of mood. The other school of thought regarding cellular phone anxiety includes “ringxiety” and “textaphrenia”, which brings into play delusions and hallucinations, giving a psychotic angle to the issue in consideration. 17,18,24

An individual believes that he had heard his cellular phone ring; while in reality there was no such event. The same can be applied to a feeling of vibration in the pocket, when no such vibratory impulse had been produced by the cellular phone, often seen in cellular phone users who regularly keep their phones on vibration mode. Such auditory and tactile hallucinations reflect the phantom ringing syndrome and the phantom vibration syndrome, which possibly share a common underlying mechanism. 19,25 These syndromes are likened to hallucinations, but they have been seen to occur in otherwise normal individuals. 19 Lastly, communifaking is the act of pretending to be using a cellular phone (calling, texting or surfing the internet) for reasons of avoiding real conversations, gaining social acceptance or simply to show-off. 26

Facebook addiction (with activities like oversharing checking your facebook whenever possible, overly concerned with facebook image, reporting on facebook, spending hours everyday, mad rush to add mere friends and compromising
offline social life) has also been reported.\textsuperscript{37}

**Discussion**

Despite not being included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), excessive cellular phone usage does seem to meet most criteria of a substance use/dependency disorder.\textsuperscript{18} It possibly arises from a neurotic pathway, according to which the dependency is explained by a constant need to seek reassurance and the fear of being rejected.\textsuperscript{4} The newer entities like textphrenia, ringxiety, phantom ringing and vibration syndromes which link delusional thought and hallucinations to the problem are intriguing, but needless to say demand further research and analysis.

**References**


27. http://www.hongkiat.com/blog/facebook_addiction_signs