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

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13 British adolescents aged 16–18 years, convenience sample recruited through a state high school.

## Implications For Parents About

Parental practices / parental mediation

# Abstract

Smartphones are now a ubiquitous part of daily life for adolescents in the United Kingdom, who use their phones for a multitude of reasons beyond calling or texting. To date, little qualitative research has been conducted with adolescent smartphone users about their experiences of smartphone use, particularly problematic or excessive use. This study directly explored the topics of problematic use and smartphone etiquette with 13 British adolescents aged 16–18 years across three focus group discussions. An inductive thematic analysis resulted in the development of four themes related to users’ experiences: The Comfort Bubble, Digital Native Etiquette, The Extended Self, and Defining Dependency. These themes encompass the different drives underlying potentially excessive or antisocial smartphone use and how young people seek to minimize these risks by monitoring both their own and others’ smartphone use. The findings of this study demonstrate the complexity of disentangling functional and enjoyable smartphone use from problematic use in an era when smartphones are embedded so deeply in modern life. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of 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.Résumé Les téléphones intelligents sont omniprésents dans la vie quotidienne des adolescents au Royaume-Uni. Ceux-ci les utilisent pour une foule de raisons dépassant le simple appel ou message texte. Il existe à ce jour très peu de recherches qualitatives menées auprès d’adolescents qui utilisent un téléphone intelligent au sujet de leur expérience d’utilisation, particulièrement si elle est problématique ou excessive. Cette étude se penche directement sur l’utilisation problématique et l’étiquette chez 13 adolescents britanniques âgés de 16 à 18 ans dans le cadre de trois groupes de discussion. Une analyse thématique inductive a permis de cerner quatre thèmes liés à l’expérience des utilisateurs : la bulle du confort, l’étiquette numérique naturelle, l’extension du Soi et la définition de la dépendance. Ces thèmes englobent les différents facteurs qui peuvent sous-tendre l’utilisation excessive ou antisociale des téléphones intelligents et la façon dont les jeunes cherchent à réduire ces risques en surveillant leur propre utilisation et celle d’autres personnes. Les conclusions de cette étude démontrent à quel point il est complexe de faire la distinction entre l’utilisation fonctionnelle et agréable du téléphone intelligent et son utilisation problématique à une époque où cet appareil est si profondément ancré dans la vie moderne. Les implications de ces conclusions sont abordées sur le plan des mesures futures potentielles visant l’utilisation problématique des téléphones intelligents et les façons de promouvoir la sensibilisation à l’usage sain à l’aide de certaines des stratégies suggérées par les jeunes ayant participé à cette étude.

# Outcome

Four themes represent the different aspects of the participants’ smartphone experiences. "The Comfort Bubble highlighted the safe space and relief
provided by smartphone usage, whereas 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 was a somewhat surprising finding as a theme, as the
respondents spoke openly and with great insight as to how they navigated the social
rules of appropriate smartphone use. This theme also provided an answer to the
second research question regarding how participants found strategies to safeguard
themselves from problematic or excessive phone use. The last theme, Defining
Dependency, also 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 socializing in person." (Conlin and Sillence, 2021: 291). "The sense of comfort and escapism provided by smartphones appeared to help participants avoid unpleasant thoughts, emotions, or experiences by providing a
variety of novel stimuli. Many of the respondents therefore seemed to highlight
instances of ‘‘sensation seeking’’... The design of certain smartphone apps and processes can encourage compulsive behaviours" (Conlin and Sillence, 2021: 292). "Many of the respondents felt that what is deemed as problematic use was context
dependent. For instance, the time spent socializing via smartphones and receiving
messages from contacts has been proven to increase positive affect, especially group
chats, which help create a sense of community and belonging, whereas non-social
features of smartphone use, such as scrolling and removing notifications, are more
related to depression, anxiety, and negative affect" (Conlin and Sillence, 2021: 293).