

The Contextual Effects of Cell Phone Use on Students

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According to Isiklar et al. (2013), 87% of the world's population uses cell phones to do everything from placing calls and receiving texts to playing games and taking photographs (p. 9). Many studies about cell phone use begin with a statistic similar to the one used by Isiklar et al. to demonstrate the pervasiveness of cell phone technology, and researchers frequently focus on students as one of the groups most affected by constant cell phone use. However, many researchers do not find the exact cause and effect relationship they are looking for in young adults who use cell phones. For example, Nathan and Zeitzer (2013) found there was no measurable increase in a student's daily fatigue due to the number of texts and calls they received (p. 5). This lack of predicted outcomes suggests the effects of cell phone use on teens and young adults have been somewhat over-emphasized. What the studies do show is that cell phone use during times designated for other key activities, such as studying, socializing, and sleeping, correlates with other struggles typically associated with adolescence, such as focus and retention, poor self-worth, and fatigue.

Researchers do have reason to suspect cell phone use in the classroom and during study has adverse effects on a student's ability to focus on learning, but the issue is complicated. According to surveys, 99% of students report having used a cell phone during designated class time, a greater number than the 97% who report having used a cell phone while driving (Elder, 2013, p. 589). To gauge the effects of this habit, Elder (2013) conducted a study in which students listened to a mini-lecture and took a corresponding quiz. Researchers instructed half of the students to use their cell phones during the lecture, while the other half listened without technological distractions (p. 588). All of the students performed badly on the quiz, which initially appears to disprove the hypothesis that cell phones negatively affect learning. However,

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Elder suggested a few reasons for his skewed results. First, none of the students were invested in the lecture and, thus, did poorly on the quiz (p. 591). This indifference prevented the distracted students from standing out in the results because all of the students in the study were disengaged. Additionally, the mini-lecture was only 12 minutes long, a length that failed to simulate real academic conditions. Elder concluded, “Sustained multi-tasking during longer lectures more analogous to how students actual[ly] engage with their phones during courses” (p. 590). Elder’s study demonstrates that distraction and inattention is one of the real culprits behind poor academic performance. Cell phone use can contribute to these behaviors, but any number of other factors can also divert a student’s attention from the learning at hand.

Similarly, the relationship between adolescent cell phone use and self-worth is more nuanced than some might initially suspect. Cell phone use does not appear to directly impact self-worth. However, poorly-timed cell phone use can aggravate a feeling of disconnectedness, which can lead to other emotional consequences. In a study, Isiklar et al. (2013) sought to define the relationship between cell phones and self-esteem and found “self-esteem is a stronger predictor of addiction” than of “mobile use on its own” (p. 13). Addiction, they noted, often results in the subject “excluding [herself] from the social surrounding” and feeling anxious when denied access to the object of attachment (p. 10). Thus, self-worth suffers when cell phone use reaches addictive levels, just as it would in a person who suffers from another addiction. The real problem is not the existence and utilization of cell phone technology, but rather the excessive use of cell phones in place of human connection.

Cell phone use has also been thought to cause sleep problems. In their study on cell phone use and sleepiness, Nathan and Zeitzer (2013) hypothesized, “[An] increased number of calls would be associated with increased sleepiness” (p.2). This assertion turned out to be

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unsubstantiated (p. 5); however, the researchers did find some behaviors associated with nocturnal cell phone use that might be linked to prolonged fatigue, such as staying up later to use the phone and “expectations of accessibility” (p. 2). In the study, 49% of the surveyed high school students sometimes woke up to their phones in the night (p. 2), and all but 1% felt the need to be accessible by phone at least some of the time (p. 3). These behaviors were correlated with adolescent fatigue. Nathan and Zeitzer concluded, “Our analyses revealed that use or perceived need of use of the mobile phone during normal sleeping hours may contribute to daytime sleepiness” (p. 5). Once again, general use of cell phones turned out to be unproblematic. The trouble occurred when the surveyed students used their cell phones at times when another activity would have made a healthier priority.

Untimely use of and dependence on cell phones can exacerbate adolescent struggles with academics, self-worth, and fatigue. Researchers have studied the consequences of cell phone technology for humans at length, but recent work has shown the cause and effect relationship—including the one between cell phones and young people—to be complex and contextual.

Describing general use as problematic is too broad because the issues associated with cell phones arise under specific conditions and in tandem with diverse factors. With 87% of the population accessing cell phones regularly, these clarifications to old assumptions are essential to improving the relationship between technology and users.

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