

## Chapter 2

# A Case Study in Smartphone Usage and Gratification in the Age of Narcissism

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### ABSTRACT

*This research tracked the daily smartphone usage and checking habits of 43 undergraduate students at a mid-sized university for a minimum of thirty days to examine the primary uses of smartphones as well as the gratifications received from their usage. Empirical data was correlated with narcissism levels to better understand what drives a person to access media, often involuntarily. Results indicated significant differences between genders for device usage (how smartphones are used), the resulting gratifications (why smartphones are used), and narcissism. Findings showed an inverse relationship between smartphone usage and narcissism, and between usage and GPA. There also was a positive relationship between a user's smartphone checking habits and exhibitionism. These results are explained further through the lens of modern society's dependence on personal technologies and the gratifications that are satisfied.*

### INTRODUCTION

Smartphones have become ubiquitous, especially on college and university campuses where there is the largest demographic of smartphone owners (83%) (Mobile Technology Fact Sheet, 2014). In addition, the college-aged population spends the most amount of time on their devices: 37 hours per month on average (Nielsen, 2014). It should be noted, however, that there is a variety of uses including, but not limited to, information-seeking (e.g. maps), productivity (e.g. email), connectedness (e.g. social media), communication (e.g. texting), as well as for pure entertainment (e.g. gaming). Most smartphone owners toggle between its different uses, thus satiating a spectrum of wants and needs to use the device, making it a versatile and necessary technological tool in modern society.

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A growing body of research suggests an overdependence on the smartphone. According to a 2014 poll, most Americans believe using a cell phone in social settings more often hurts than helps conversation, yet 89% of those surveyed indicated having used their phones during their most recent social activity with others (Pew Research Center, 2014). Of the reasons given for accessing their phone, 40% of smartphone owners reported feeling the need to check if any notification alerts had been received. These checking habits, or “automated behaviors where the device is quickly opened to check the standby screen or information content in a specific application” (Oulasvirta, Rattenbury, Ma, & Raita, 2012, p. 107), may lead to habitually unnecessary device monitoring; a 2014 poll reported that 67% of smartphone users have found themselves excessively checking their phone for notifications “even when they don’t notice their phone ringing” (Mobile Technology Fact Sheet) and another poll showed that 50% of those surveyed occasionally or frequently checked their phones “for no particular reason” (Rainie & Zickuhr, 2015). Aside from checking a phone for no purposeful reason, some check their phones after experiencing “phantom vibration syndrome,” where the user mistakenly feels a sensation of a vibrating phone in his or her pocket. Drouin, Kaiser, and Miller (2012) surveyed 290 undergraduates and found that 89% of them had experienced phantom vibration and, on average, experienced it once every two weeks. Simply put, the smartphone has become a crutch, and the creeping effects of smartphone overuse are widely recognized.

An overdependence on smartphones has been shown to have physical, emotional, and cognitive consequences. Physical side effects are beginning to surface, including computer vision syndrome (Wen, 2013) and “text neck” (Khazan, 2014). One study found that the presence of a mobile device lowers empathy levels, which has been deemed the “iPhone effect” (Misra, Cheng, Genevie, & Yuan, 2014). Nicholas Carr has argued that an overdependence on smartphones might pose even more threat to cognition; he explains that relying on the automated features of smartphones ultimately degrades neurological connections in the brain: a phenomenon he refers to as the “degeneration effect” (2014, p.80). This is a result of continuously offloading information for the sake of freeing up internal memory. Sparrow, Liu, and Wegner (2011) showed that when people believe information to be accessible at a later point, they fail to commit the content to memory. Instead, people demonstrate a propensity for “transactive memory” wherein they are “better able to remember where an item has been stored than the identity of the item itself” (Sparrow et al., 2011, p.778). Personal technologies such as the smartphone are primed for this outsourcing of knowledge and the weakening of cognitive ability that results.

Provided that the most active demographic of smartphone users is college-aged persons who are at the peak of their academic lives, coupled with the pitfalls of an overdependence and the smartphone’s propensity for multitasking behaviors, it is important to understand the psychological characteristics of users who are predisposed to this dependency, and to deconstruct the uses and gratifications that trigger the feeling to reach for the smartphone in the first place.

## **Uses and Gratifications**

With regards to smartphones, there is an array of tasks that can be performed on the device. These uses can be broken down further into categories based on the direct description of use or outcome of use. Some examples include cognitive (information-seeking or knowledge acquisition), social interactive (interpersonal communication), integrative (personal identity or sense of closeness to others), hedonistic (entertainment), and mobile convenience gratifications (ease of use) (Ha, Kim, Saenz, Chang, & Park,

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