

Study links mobile device addiction to depression and anxiety

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University of Illinois psychology professor Alejandro Lleras found that mobile device addiction is associated with depression and anxiety. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Is cellphone use detrimental to mental health? A new study from the

University of Illinois finds that addiction to, and not simply use of, mobile technology is linked to anxiety and depression in college-age students.

The study was published in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*.

"There's a long history of the public fearing new technologies as they are deployed in society," said U. of I. psychology professor Alejandro Lleras, who conducted this study with undergraduate honors student Tayana Panova. This fear of new technology happened with televisions, video games and most recently, smartphones, he said.

Lleras and Panova surveyed over 300 university students with questionnaires that addressed the students' [mental health](#), amount of [cellphone](#) and Internet use, and motivations for turning to their electronic devices. Questions included: "Do you think that your academic or work performance has been negatively affected by your cellphone use?" and "Do you think that life without the Internet is boring, empty and sad?"

The goal was to see if addictive and self-destructive behaviors with phones and the Internet related to mental health.

"People who self-described as having really addictive style behaviors toward the Internet and cellphones scored much higher on depression and [anxiety](#) scales," Lleras said. However, the researchers found no relationship between cellphone or Internet use and negative mental health outcomes among participants who used these technologies to escape from boredom. Thus, the motivation for going online is an important factor in relating technology usage to depression and anxiety, Lleras said.

In a follow-up study, Lleras tested the role of having, but not using, a

cellphone during a stressful situation. Individuals who were allowed to keep their cellphones during an experimental, stressful situation were less likely to be negatively affected by stress compared with those without their phones.

"Having access to a phone seemed to allow that group to resist or to be less sensitive to the stress manipulation," Lleras said. This benefit was both small and short-lived, but suggests the phone might serve as a comfort item in stressful or anxiety-inducing situations.

While the role of phones as comfort items is somewhat tenuous, the relationship between motivation for cellphone or Internet use and mental health warrants further exploration, Lleras said. Breaking addictive technology habits may provide an important supplemental treatment for addressing [mental health issues](#) such as general anxiety disorder or depression, he said.

"We shouldn't be scared of people connecting online or talking on their phones," he said. "The interaction with the device is not going to make you depressed if you are just using it when you are bored. This should go toward soothing some of that public anxiety over new technology."

More information: Tayana Panova et al. Avoidance or boredom: Negative mental health outcomes associated with use of Information and Communication Technologies depend on users' motivations, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.062](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.062)

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