

We are not addicted to smartphones, we are addicted to social interaction

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A new study of dysfunctional use of smart technology finds that the most addictive smartphone functions all share a common theme: they tap into the human desire to connect with other people. The findings,

published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, suggest that smartphone addiction could be hyper-social, not anti-social.

"There is a lot of panic surrounding this topic," says Professor Samuel Veissière, from the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University, Canada. "We're trying to offer some good news and show that it is our desire for human interaction that is addictive—and there are fairly simple solutions to deal with this."

We all know people who, seemingly incapable of living without the bright screen of their phone for more than a few minutes, are constantly texting and checking out what friends are up to on social media.

These are examples of what many consider to be the antisocial behavior brought on by smartphone [addiction](#), a phenomenon that has garnered media attention in the past few months and led investors and consumers to demand that tech giants address this problem.

But what if we were looking at things the wrong way? Could smartphone addiction be hyper-social, not anti-social?

Professor Veissière, a cognitive anthropologist who studies the evolution of cognition and culture, explains that the desire to watch and monitor others—but also to be seen and monitored by others—runs deep in our evolutionary past. Humans evolved to be a uniquely social species and require constant input from others to seek a guide for culturally appropriate behavior. This is also a way for them to find meaning, goals, and a sense of identity.

Together with Moriah Stendel, also from McGill's Department of Psychiatry, Professor Veissière reviewed current literature on dysfunctional use of [smart technology](#) through an evolutionary lens. The researchers found that the most addictive smartphone functions all

shared a common theme: they tap into the human desire to connect with other people.

Healthy urges can become unhealthy addictions

While smartphones harness a normal and healthy need for sociality, Professor Veissière agrees that the pace and scale of hyper-connectivity pushes the brain's reward system to run on overdrive, which can lead to unhealthy addictions.

"In post-industrial environments where foods are abundant and readily available, our cravings for fat and sugar sculpted by distant evolutionary pressures can easily go into insatiable overdrive and lead to obesity, diabetes, and heart disease (...) the pro-social needs and rewards [of smartphone use as a means to connect] can similarly be hijacked to produce a manic theatre of hyper-social monitoring," the authors write in their paper.

Turning off push notifications and setting up appropriate times to check your phone can go a long way to regain control over [smartphone](#) addiction. Research suggests that workplace policies "that prohibit evening and weekend emails" are also important.

"Rather than start regulating the tech companies or the use of these devices, we need to start having a conversation about the appropriate way to use smartphones," concludes Professor Veissière. "Parents and teachers need to be made aware of how important this is."

More information: Samuel P. L. Veissière et al, Hypernatural Monitoring: A Social Rehearsal Account of Smartphone Addiction, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00141](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00141)

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