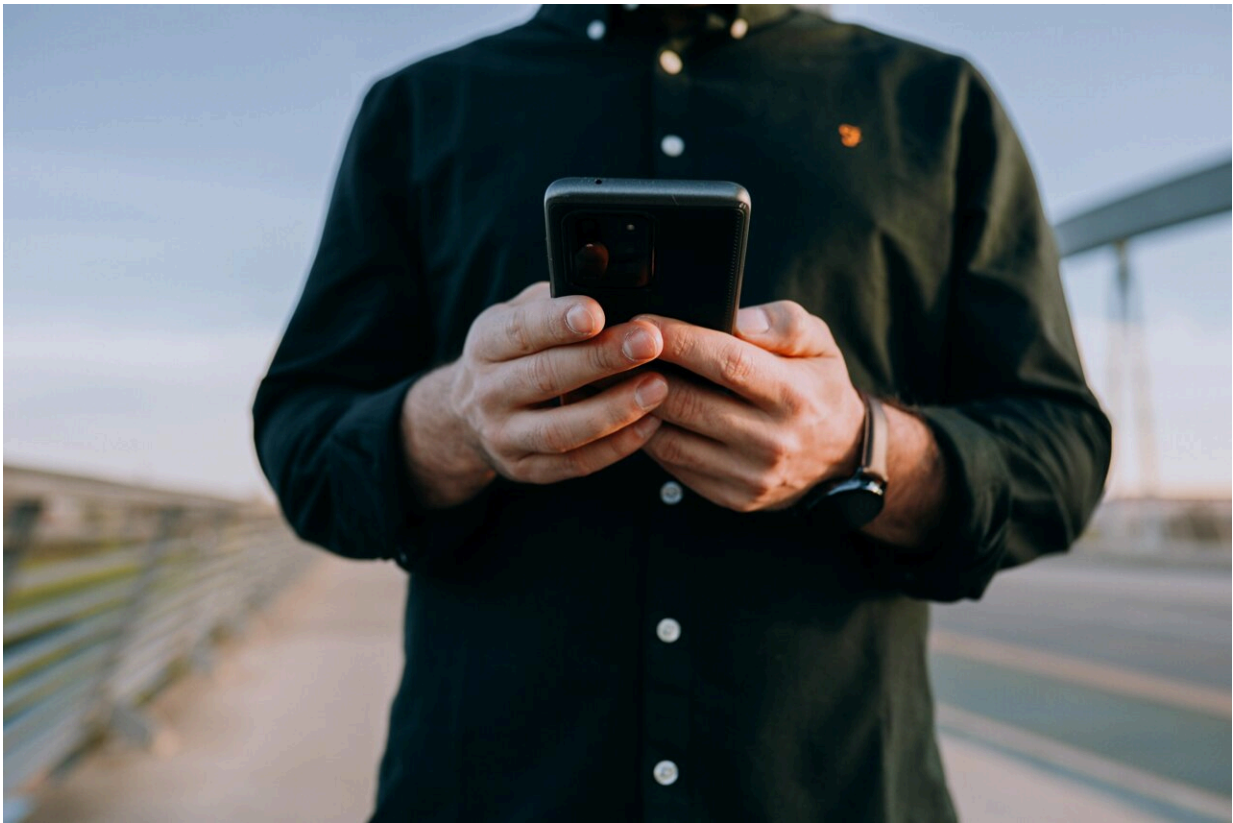


# Exploring problematic smartphone use during COVID-19 pandemic

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Someone using a smartphone. Credit: Malte Helmhold, Unsplash, CC0 ([creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/](https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/))

A new survey study has identified links between problematic smartphone use and low sense of control, repetitive thinking, and fear of missing out

(FOMO) during the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2021, suggesting possible avenues for reducing the severity of such use. Julia Brailovskaia of Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany, and colleagues present these findings in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* on December 22, 2021.

Previous research has shown that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, [smartphone use](#) has significantly increased. While smartphones can enhance daily routines and social connection, use of smartphones can become problematic and negatively affect relationships, work, and mental or [physical health](#). A better understanding of factors that may contribute to problematic [smartphone](#) use could help inform efforts to prevent and manage such behavior.

To provide new insights, Brailovskaia and colleagues conducted an [online survey](#) of 516 smartphone users aged 18 and over in Germany in April and May of 2021. The survey included questions to evaluate self-reported smartphone use as well as sense of control, fear of missing out, and repetitive negative thinking—three factors that the researchers hypothesized could contribute to problematic smartphone use, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Statistical analysis of the survey results found that low sense of control, fear of missing out, and repetitive negative thinking were, indeed, all associated with greater severity of problematic smartphone use.

While the findings do not prove causation, the statistical analysis also suggested possible interactions between the four factors. For one, fear of missing out may be a key mechanism by which low sense of control could lead to problematic smartphone use. Meanwhile, a higher degree of repetitive negative thinking was associated with a stronger relationship between fear of missing out and problematic smartphone use.

The sample was comprised of mostly female and rather young participants; the authors suggest that the study should be replicated in more age and gender balanced samples from other countries, to ensure the results are generalizable to other populations. Furthermore, the study was conducted during the pandemic when participants' usual [daily routines](#) may have been disrupted, possibly affecting the participants' sense of control. Nonetheless, the findings are in line with the hypothesis that loss of control—as experienced by some during the pandemic—could boost the risk of problematic smartphone use.

On the basis of their findings and prior studies, the researchers propose that [physical activity](#) and mindfulness practices could help reduce problematic smartphone use.

The authors add: "Problematic smartphone use is fostered by the interaction of loss of control, [fear](#) of missing out and repetitive negative thinking."

**More information:** Brailovskaia J, Stirnberg J, Rozgonjuk D, Margraf J, Elhai JD (2021) From low sense of control to problematic smartphone use severity during Covid-19 outbreak: The mediating role of fear of missing out and the moderating role of repetitive negative thinking. *PLoS ONE* 16(12): e0261023. [doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261023](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261023)

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