

Is it Really Making You Feel Better?

An examination of Cognitive Dissonance Among College Students

This essay is intended for a non-specialist audience, emulating the journalism style of *Scientific American* or *The New York Times*

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I finally find time during my busy day to get comfortable, sit down and zone in on my homework. Leading up to this moment I've been thinking about everything I have to get done, and mentally allocated this time to focus. I check my phone one last time, put on some lo-fi music, and open up my computer to work on my most pressing assignment. I've only been looking at my computer for a few minutes before I decide to switch up the music, and I pick up my phone again. When I do, I see a text from my friend and take some time to respond. I have the desire to linger on my phone for a while, so I make the point to put it out of sight, where I won't hear the notifications. After doing this, I can get back to my computer and focus on getting some work done. It only takes about 20 minutes before I lose focus. Thoughts of the notifications from my friends nag me from the back of my mind until I must take a look. I step away from my work and re-immerses myself into my phone.

This cycle repeats throughout my study session. I find myself taking breaks just to scroll through Instagram and Snapchat, until I'm up to date on my feed and the memes aren't funny anymore.

This is just one example of how my phone usage disrupts my productivity and wellbeing. I know that this habit is harmful, and yet I continue it.



As a generation that is well accustomed to the internet and the role that cell phones play in our lives, most of us are also painfully aware of our self-sabotaging phone rituals. Excessive phone usage and other behaviors we engage in conflict with what we know to be good for us, creating recurring cognitive dissonance.

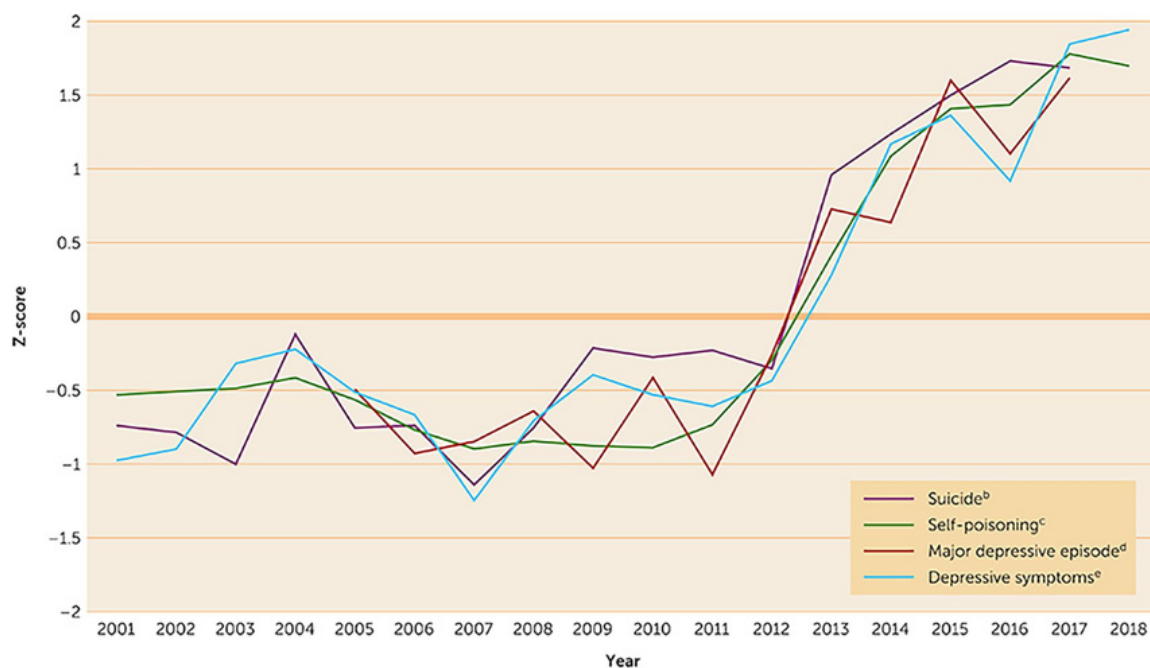
Yes, I know I spend too much time on my phone, but it's a part of my life, and I can't seem to help it. Yes, I did learn from something I saw on the internet that social media may be contributing to my depression and anxiety, but I would be out of the loop without it.

I am sure many young adults can relate to these statements.

Cognitive dissonance describes the psychological discomfort experienced when holding two conflicting attitudes, or when engaging in behaviors that go against one's beliefs. According to cognitive dissonance theory, people strive to maintain psychological consistency, and will be motivated by dissonance to change attitudes or behaviors until they are aligned (Harmon-Jones, E., & Harmon-Jones, C., 2022). An example that is

commonly used to describe cognitive dissonance is smoking. Many people feel discomfort knowing that smoking is unhealthy, while simultaneously engaging in the behavior because they find it enjoyable. To manage this conflict, people will either attempt to change their attitudes so that they view smoking as only positive, or they will change their behavior by quitting (McMaster & Lee, 1991). In an analogous manner, mobile phone addiction can cause feelings of cognitive dissonance. Unhealthy behaviors create psychological discomfort and further contribute to comorbid mental disorders.

So how do we address these issues? The answer can be found by examining the environmental and interpersonal factors that cause stress for our generation, and how our coping mechanisms may further contribute to mental suffering.



“Increases in Depression, Self-Harm, and Suicide Among U.S. Adolescents After 2012 and Links to Technology Use: Possible Mechanisms.” Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D.

In her book *iGen*, Dr. Jean Twenge studies the trending attitudes and behaviors of Generation-Z. She claims that technology is making us more isolated and expresses many concerns for our future. She observed that our generation spends more time on our phones than reading, education achievement is declining, we are less confident in our economic success, and we have an external locus of control (Twenge, 2017). An external locus of control describes the belief that one's life is in the hands of external, versus internal conditions. This mindset, along with our relationship with technology, may explain many of the characteristics that Dr. Twenge observed. Feeling as if there is only so much we can do to improve the world, and ourselves, may explain why we continue to engage in behaviors that we know to be bad for us.

The current state of the world is a primary source of stress for our generation. As we have grown up, we have watched technology advance, and can only imagine the ways in which it will further alter society. By the time we finish school, we will be dealing with an entirely new professional world. Our generation is fearful that our college education will be a waste of money and will not properly prepare us for the evolving workplaces that we are partially responsible for creating. We feel helpless as we watch the attainability of higher education and a place to live move further and further out of our reach. Furthermore, current economic, environmental, and other sociopolitical concerns place immense pressure on our generation to navigate these issues and restore humanity. We are at the forefront of a world that is crumbling. We are currently gazing into a terrifying, uncertain future.

College students, and other young adults have a unique relationship with technology that no previous generation has ever experienced. We grew up with cell phones in our hands. We have been provided with unlimited access to the rapidly expanding internet during our formative developmental years. Now, along with the rest of Americans, many college students are either bordering or fully experiencing an addiction to mobile devices (Albursan et al., 2022).

Social media and other virtual realms provide us with an extension to the physical world. As a result, as a generation, our psyches exist in multiple realities at once. The way we engage with the internet has conditioned the way we think and behave in our everyday lives. It has influenced the scope of the world that we perceive and has altered the way we think about ourselves and others. Our phones are an extension of who we are, and we've become attached.

Around half of Americans admit to being addicted to their cell phones. Self-report measures have indicated that the majority of Americans check their phones within ten minutes of waking up in the morning, and the average person spends 4 hours and 25 minutes on their phone each day (Kerai, 2023). There is varying information on statistics surrounding cell phone use, but it's safe to estimate that the average American checks their phone anywhere from 80 to 150 times a day. Signs of cell phone addiction include feelings of anxiety when the phone is misplaced, instinctively checking the phone out of habit, using the phone when bored, and being unable to or unmotivated to decrease cell phone use ("Cell Phone Addiction: The Statistics of Gadget Dependency," 2017).

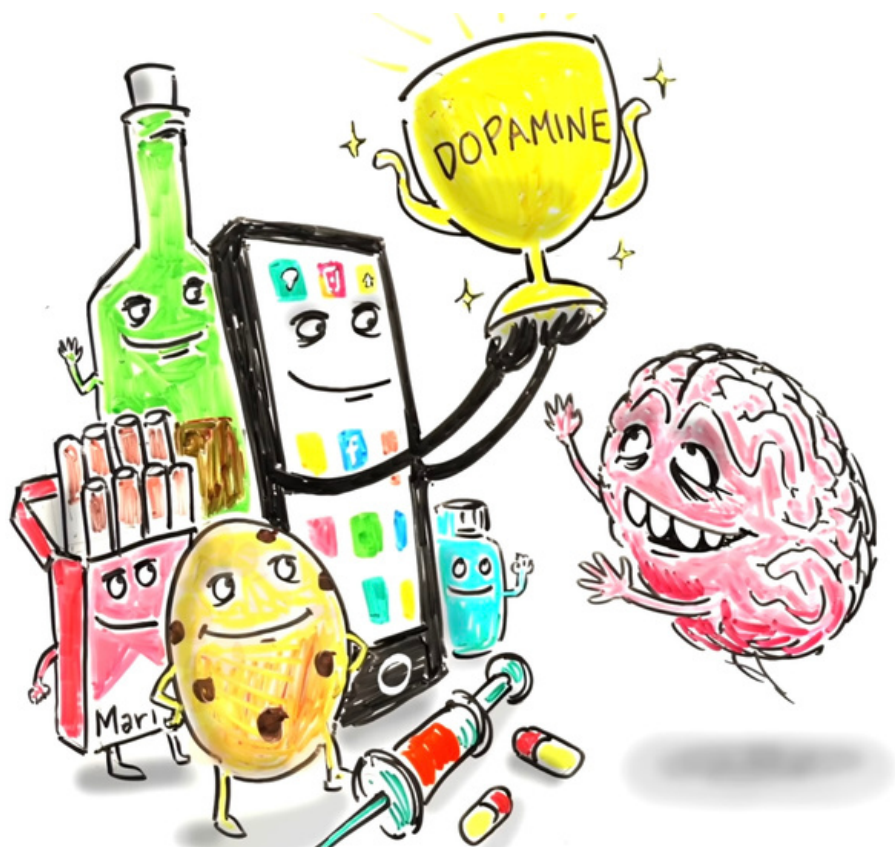
As the number of people who own smartphones increases around the globe, mobile phone addiction has been considered as a new behavioral addiction diagnosis to be included in the DSM-5 (Lin, Chiang et al., 2016). A behavioral addiction can be identified by "continuously engaging in a particular behavior despite its negative consequences, using this action to avoid reality or create a euphoric feeling, constituting tolerance for the behavior's continuation, detecting withdrawal symptoms when its missing, having interpersonal issues as a result of the constant action, and relapsing into it" (Çelik, B., & Ataş, 2023, p.132). These symptoms can be used to identify internet and cell phone use disorders. Many of my peers and I have experienced these symptoms. We continue to rely on our phones when we're bored, when we don't want to talk to people, when we lay in bed, and when we want an escape from our responsibilities. We do this despite knowing and feeling that it has negative effects on our mood, motivation, energy levels, attention span, self-esteem, and more. We habitually check our phones, and experience feelings of immense anxiety and panic when our phones become misplaced. Applying behavioral addiction symptoms to cell phone usage, next I would like to expand on the act of using the mechanism to avoid reality and to create a euphoric feeling, as well as the cognitive dissonance that is experienced when continuing the behavior despite its negative consequences.

As I have previously explained, college students today experience a lot of stress caused by the current state of our reality, as well as our relationship with technology. From personal experience, I would speculate that many of us use our phones to cope with aversive feelings. Social media platforms provide various forms of highly stimulating, never-ending, entertainment. The internet allows us to enter a vast world of content that is curated to our interests. This is a method of escaping from our personl lives...

...or so we think. Although we may perceive certain features of our phones as comforting, this only worsens our problems in the long run. Ironically, our current engagement with technology exacerbates stress through our exposure to a vast scope of information regarding current events. We may not even realize it, but routinely using social media constantly reminds us of the issues that are taking place across the globe. Not only does this include news stories and tragic headlines, but we are also exposed to hundreds of online discussions surrounding social, political, economic, and environmental crises. Social media gives people a voice for activism, but consistently internalizing desperate cries for help can be extremely disheartening and overwhelming. The daily reminders of everything that is wrong with society creates a lot of pressure for our generation. We are expected to grow up and step into a world that needs a lot of saving. However, seeing this overwhelming scope of issues while feeling unequipped to address them fosters our external locus of control and causes many of us to feel anxious, depressed, and hopeless.

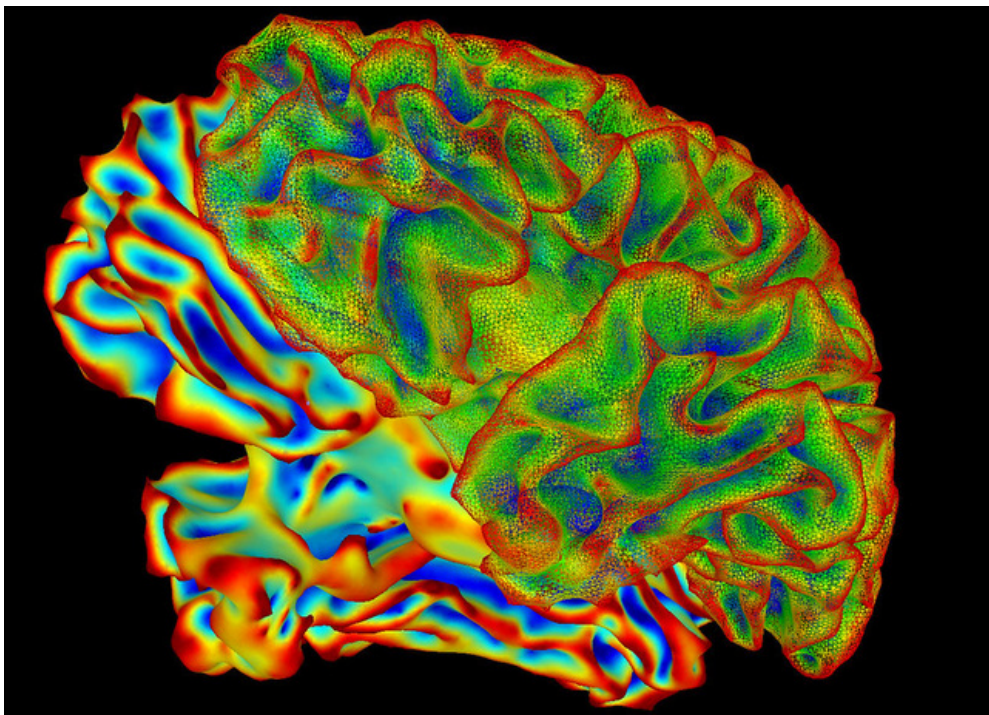
How is it that exposure to the internet can be simultaneously rewarding and destructive? It all has to do with the instantly gratifying features of technology, and how this goes against the natural reward systems in our brains. Featured in the video, *How to Find Balance in the Age of Indulgence*, Anna Lembke explains that we currently live in a world with an abundance of easily accessible, instant rewards such as the entertainment content that is provided to us by our phones (After Skool, 2022). She explains how an overindulgence in unhealthy, pleasurable substances and behaviors is causing a global decline in mental health. While picking up the phone and laughing at ten second videos feels good in the moment, the consequences can be much more than we bargained for. Consuming unlimited, easy-access entertainment releases dopamine in our brains. This instant gratification makes us feel good in the moment but is eventually balanced out by a reduction of dopamine release during other, less exciting activities. Furthermore, the lack of effort required to obtain this form of excitement reduces its sustainability over time. As a result, we quickly become dependent on our phones as a source of pleasure, while increasing our overall feelings of pain.

As college students, many of us are pretty familiar with the negative effects that technology and social media have on our brains. We've heard the spiel before. We've also experienced first-hand symptoms of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, sleep disturbances and other mental disorders. We experience cognitive dissonance because our phones can provide momentary joy and relaxation, while simultaneously exacerbating poor mental health overall. Most of us continue to engage with social media, despite its negative consequences.



After Skool. (2022, June 7). *How to find balance in the age of Indulgence* - Dr. Anna Lembke

Putting down our phones is more than a matter of willpower. This behavioral addiction is deeply rooted in the neural circuitry of our brains. A recent study revealed that internet and cell phone addictions cause a derangement of neurotransmitter levels in the anterior cingulate cortex. “In this study, the risk factors and psychiatric comorbidities of Internet and smartphone addiction were possibly associated with decreased ACC function due to increased GABA levels” (Seo et al., 2020). This means that the behaviors associated with cell phone addiction directly impair the functioning of reward systems in the brain, contributing to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other correlated mental illnesses. Additional studies revealed that internet addiction can decrease the density of gray matter in different regions of the brain, activate regions responsible for impulsivity, decrease dopamine receptor availability, and cause “abnormal functional activity of brain regions associated with the reliance on rewards” (Tereshchenko & Kasparov, 2019). Chemical changes are taking place in our brains as we engage with our phones, altering our state of mind, ingraining destructive habits, and deterring us from happiness.



However, one of the same studies also revealed that, “the neurotransmitters can be reversed and normalized with improvement regarding Internet and smartphone addiction,” and through cognitive behavioral therapy (Seo et al., 2020). Additional studies have revealed the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy in treating internet addiction disorder (Lutfian et al., 2023). Whether through therapy or the conscious effort of daily self-care practices, we can reverse the neurobiological harms of cell phone addiction and improve our well-being. Healthy phone habits can be established by consciously monitoring screen time and maintaining personal restrictions and boundaries. For example, limiting the frequency of phone use, restricting certain apps, or only using your phone during certain times of the day. However, for the generation that hardly knows life without cell phones, using them in a healthy way is much easier said than done.

For anyone struggling to maintain a healthy mental state, and especially for college students, it can be difficult to establish balance in the things we do and consume. Eating healthy, exercising regularly, and getting the right amount of sleep are all crucial to taking care of our bodies, yet even these basic needs can be difficult to satisfy. In college, many students struggle to meet these health standards and other personal goals. We all have things that we want to improve about ourselves; flaws and habits we want to break. Actively making choices that will benefit our higher selves requires consistent effort and discipline, which we do not always have. We experience cognitive dissonance day to day when our goal-based intentions don't align with the choices we make. And sometimes we have to rely on unhealthy coping mechanisms just so that we can meet other goals.

Despite the many challenges we face, I encourage our generation to practice mindfulness and continue to seek balance in life. Cognitive dissonance surrounding what we know to be good for us, versus what helps us cope, can make us feel like there is no right choice in anything. However, we can overcome these feelings of uncertainty and stress. Do the best you can to recognize unhealthy habits and find ways to break them. Think about the activities you do, and the things that you consume; gravitate towards the ones that will benefit you in the long term. As explained by Dr. Lambke, we live in the age of [over]indulgence and would all benefit from refraining from instantly gratifying behaviors, and seeking more effortful, natural rewards (After Skool, 2022). In order to overcome unhealthy habits, we must take diligent care of ourselves and our minds. We have the chance to rewire our brains in a way that serves our higher capabilities as humans. It's time that we face the world, and all of its problems, instead of running away. By doing so, we might find that we are much more capable of enjoying it than we think. We need to be more present, embrace moments of quietness, choose the more difficult tasks, and put down our phones.

