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An Idle Mind is an Unhappy Playground

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In an increasingly technology-driven society, remaining connected and entertained is easier than ever before, and idle time may be a thing of the past. With text messaging, social media, and email just a swish or flick away, it is unsurprising that research is pointing to cell phone addiction among many young adults and adolescents. A recent study by Smith (2012) found that 11% of American cell phone users worry that they spend too much time connected to their mobile devices. This number is highest among young adults 18-24 (21%), and some researchers suggest that this could affect development profoundly (Turkle, 2011).

Researchers have shown that there are numerous negative effects of cell phone addiction, including depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness (e.g., Hong, Chiu, & Huang, 2012; Thomee, Harenstam, & Hagberg, 2011). In a recent commentary, Stattel (2010) advocated for idle time as a way of escaping the demands and stresses of our constant communication and encouraging deep thought and reflection. In the current study, we examined how college students would use idle time and the effects it could have on affect and subjective well-being.

Based on extant literature, we predicted the following:

H1: Text message dependence (TMD) and Internet Addiction $\rightarrow$ Higher perceived stress, lower happiness, and a higher negative affect.

H2: Idle time $\rightarrow$ Decreased stress, higher happiness, and higher subjective well-being.

Method

Participants were 263 undergraduates (M age = 20.43 years, SD = 4.67 years; 97 male and 166 female) who were enrolled in an introductory psychology class and participating in the study for class credit. The participants completed an online survey, then participated in one of the five conditions for 15 minutes, and then completed the survey again.

Materials

The survey included demographic questions and rating scales for questions related to:

- Internet Addiction (Young, 1998)(ex. How often do you find that you stay on-line longer than you intended?)
- Text Messaging Dependence (Igarashi et al., 2009)(ex. I sometimes spend many hours on text messaging.)
- Subjective Happiness (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)(ex. In general, I consider myself: Not a very happy person to A very happy person)
- Perceived Stress (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983)(ex. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?)
- Positive and Negative Affect (PANAS, Watson et al., 1988) This 21-item scale presents words describing different emotions and the participant rates to what extent he or she feels that emotion at the current time.

Results

H1: Texting, social networking, and internet usage were not significantly related to stress, happiness, or positive and negative affect. However, two aspects of text message dependence (TMD), emotional reaction and relationship maintenance, were significantly related to happiness, stress, and negative affect measured at the start of the experiment. The emotional reaction subscale of TMD was significantly and positively related to stress ($r = .329$, $p < .05$) and negatively related to happiness ($r = -.139$, $p < .05$). Similarly, the relationship maintenance subscale of TMD was positively related to stress ($r = .281$, $p < .01$) and negatively related to happiness ($r = -.150$, $p < .05$).

H2: In terms of changes in affect as a result of the interaction, an ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference by condition in the change in positive affect ($F(4, 255) = 10.606$, $p < .01$). Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons showed that the “doing nothing” condition produced a significantly greater (negative) change in positive affect than the Facebook, text messaging, and internet conditions and that the “anything but the phone or internet” condition produced a significantly greater (negative) change in positive affect than the text messaging condition (fig 1).

Conclusions & Future Directions

When participants were asked to do nothing and just sit there, they mostly used the time for thinking or resting—the time was truly idle. However, although Stattel (2010) promoted idle time as a way to lower anxiety, for the young adults in this study who engaged in idle time (and even for those who did anything but the phone or internet), there were significant decreases in positive affect. Thus, forced idle time had a negative effect on our participants. Perhaps this is because college students would rather keep busy and address the many items on their agendas rather than just sit and think. Thus, idle time might be considered wasted time. It also might be that college students would enjoy idle time if it were embarked upon at their leisure, rather than forced during an experiment. This is a direction for future research.