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An Idle Mind is an Unhappy Playground

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Background

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, Shattel (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 → Higher perceived stress, lower happiness, and a higher negative affect.

H2: Idle time → Decreased stress, higher happiness, and higher subjective well-being.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 263 undergraduates (M age=20.43 years, SD =4.670 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 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.

Method Continued

5 Conditions



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 ($r = .329, p < .01$) and negative affect ($r = .175, p < .01$) 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 negative affect ($r = .210, p < .01$) 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).

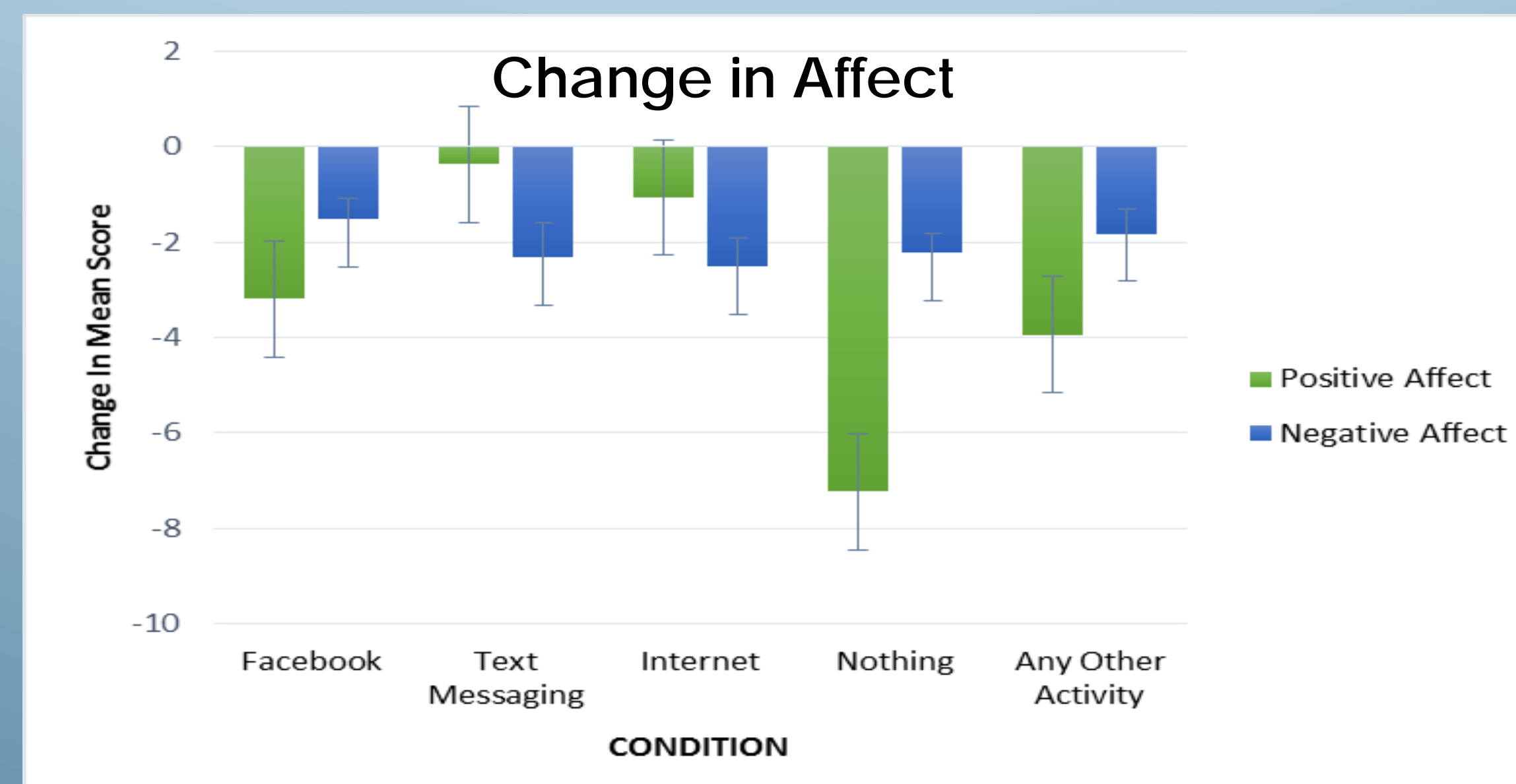


fig. 1

Results Continued

To establish treatment fidelity, the participants in the “do nothing” condition were asked (post-idle time) to indicate what they did during the 15 minutes. The participants in the “do nothing” group reported engaging in a total of 16 different activities. Observing the room, thinking, along with sleeping and sitting were among the top activities reported (see table 1). Other activities were mentioned with the following (frequency): read (7), picked at nails (5), did homework/studied (4), fixed hair/make-up (3), wrote (3), got on phone/internet (3), rolled around in desk chair (3), drew/doodled (2), focused on bodily pain (2), looked at two-way mirror (2), prayed (1). Thus, only a few participants (3) mentioned getting on the phone or internet during this time. Overall, participants did actually engage in idle time, and most used this idle time for thought.

Table 1. Activities Reported During Idle Time

Activity	Total Number of Times Reported
Observed the room	19
Thought	17
Thought about upcoming responsibility/event	10
Slept/laid head down	10
Just sat there	9

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 Shattel (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 sitting and thinking ;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.

Further research is necessary to investigate how idle time is perceived by individuals today and what, if any, factors, such as age, socioeconomic status, or gender, influence changes in affect as a result of idle time. Additionally, we would like to explore what effects meditation training would have on the experience of idle time. Perhaps, if young adults college students were given the tools to prompt relaxation, deep thought, and/or reflection, the idle time would not feel wasted, and participants would experience more positive psychological benefits.