

## Should we be talking about addiction when it comes to young drivers and smartphones?

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### Abstract

A qualitative investigation involving 30 young drivers was undertaken to explore how they perceive their own and their peers' smartphone use, both in general and while driving. A particular aim of the study was to explore whether young people considered it appropriate to describe problematic smartphone use as an 'addiction'. The findings suggest that that illegal smartphone use while driving is perceived to be very widespread. However, while the participants acknowledge that the behavior is highly habitual, they don't tend to see it as 'addictive' in nature. The findings have important implications for the design of education messages and programs.

### Background

Young drivers are over-represented in road crashes and driver distraction from smartphone use has been identified as a major contributing factor to such trauma (Oviedo-Trespalacios *et al*, 2016). An ongoing theme in the literature is the contention that some people are 'over-involved' or 'addicted' to their phones, which contributes to problematic use, both in general and while driving (Walsh *et al*, 2008; Billieux *et al*, 2015). However, it is unclear whether young people perceive problematic smartphone use as an 'addiction' and, thus, whether educational initiatives with this focus are likely to resonate with the target group. Consequently, the current study undertook an in-depth investigation of young people's perceptions about the nature and extent of their own and peers' smartphone use and the acceptability of the term 'addiction' in the driving context.

### Method

N = 30 drivers aged 17-25 years (13 males) participated in one of ten focus groups. The only other participation criteria was that they owned a smartphone. A \$50 Coles/Myer gift card was provided to those who participated.

To guide the discussions, a semi-structured interview schedule was purposefully developed. Questions explored the nature and extent of participants' smart phone use in general and while driving. Participants' perceptions of the extent to which others' (their actions and beliefs) influence their smart phone use as well as their thoughts about whether they consider their own or others' behaviour an addiction was explored. Participants were asked whether they had ever tried to reduce their phone use at some stage and, if so, why and what strategies they had attempted to use. A professional transcriber transcribed the audio-recorded discussions. Findings were derived through a thematic analysis.

### Results

There was general agreement among the participants that smartphone use while driving is very widespread (although knowledge of the relevant road rules was fragmentary). While it was

acknowledged that the behavior is highly habitual, the participants didn't tend to see it as addictive in nature because:

- smartphone use serves a practical purpose for many people (eg. communicating with others; entertainment etc);
- the potential consequences do not seem as bad as for addictions like problematic gambling or substance abuse; and
- the behavior is not generally seen as problematic by most people they know.

While participants didn't appear to perceive their own smartphone use as being problematic, some reported taking steps to reduce their phone use, both in general and while driving. Strategies they reported using included deleting social media apps and/or increasing the physical distance between themselves and their smartphones.

In contrast, some participants did report knowing others whose smartphone use was problematic, both in their general life and while driving. In these cases, the participants didn't tend to attribute the other person's problematic use to the smartphone *per se*, but to their high level of engagement with social media.

## Conclusion

The findings provide important insights to help inform the development of relevant content for education interventions targeting young adults and the issue of driver distraction from smartphones.

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## References

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