

Mobile telephone use by young people in Switzerland: the borders between committed use and addictive behaviour

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Background

Within a very short period of time, the mobile telephone has become an established means of communication in our society. Indeed, among the younger generation in Switzerland the mobile phone is considered indispensable. According to a GFS study from 2008, 87% of all Swiss residents aged 16 and above own a mobile phone and, on average, a young person in Switzerland obtains their first mobile phone at the age of 13.5 (Bieri, Longchamp, Kopp, Tschöpe & Ratelband-Pally, 2008). Young people quickly learn how to use this new means of communication and integrate the newly acquired contact possibilities into their daily lives. As this medium has only become widespread among adolescents in the last five years – probably primarily due to reasons of cost – there have been few studies in Switzerland to date on the effects of mobile communications on the lives of young people (Luder, 2007; Süss, 2004). The proposed study is intended to fill this gap.

Objectives and expected results

The principal objective of the research is the detailed description of mobile telephone usage behaviour among young people (12 to 19 years old) in Switzerland. The use of mobile phones is associated with a variety of positive and negative psychosocial aspects. The positive aspects include an increased feeling of belonging to the peer group, better social identification and a stronger feeling of security. In contrast, negative effects may include stress, peer pressure or mobile phone dependence. Mobile phone dependence will be operationalised in the proposed study on the basis of a current and validated English model of behavioural addiction (Charlton & Danforth, 2007). In the model, four user types are defined: “non-users”, “conservative users”, “engaged users” and “behaviourally addictive”. Brown’s theories of behavioural addiction (1993, 1997) provide the basis of this model.

In the study, the interrelations of psychosocial variables with the latter three user types will be analysed (if the number of “non-users” permits, this group will also be included). This will elicit potential psychosocial predispositions, e.g. personality traits, gender, life satisfaction, lifestyle, etc., of the various mobile phone user types. In addition to making telephone calls, as a hybrid medium, the mobile phone offers the user many applications such as SMS, email, video games, etc.,. The study will therefore include an accurate record of the use of the various mobile phone features. In this way, specific mobile phone functions can be determined as predictors for the user types described above, e.g. is mobile phone addiction correlated with SMS usage or with video games that can be played on the handset?

Method

The study will be based on a paper and pencil survey of 1,000 young people, made up of adolescents between 12 and 19 years of age, in Switzerland. The survey will be conducted in three languages (German, French and Italian), and around 340 people will be surveyed in the classroom in each of the three large language areas of the country. The composition of the sample should be representative of the total population in terms of gender, level of education attained and degree of urbanisation. The selection of individual school classes will be carried out at random according to a quota scheme. The questionnaire will be constructed as far as possible by the use of existing and validated scales. This is expected to deliver a high quality of concept operationalisation. The collected data will be reviewed after the field phase, aggregated, and evaluated with descriptive as well as inferential statistical methods.