

# Marketing expert finds attachment to cellphones more about entertainment, less about communication

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That panicked feeling we get when the family pet goes missing is the same when we misplace our mobile phone, says a Kansas State University marketing professor. Moreover, those feelings of loss and hopelessness without our digital companion are natural.

"The cellphone's no longer just a [cellphone](#); it's become the way we communicate and a part of our life," said Esther Swilley, who researches technology and marketing. This reliance on cellphones and other [mobile technology](#) in daily life is an interest of Swilley's, and a phenomenon she hopes to explain.

One long-term study has Swilley looking at the [attitudes](#) people have toward their [mobile phone](#) and how these attitudes are influenced by a user's relationship with their device. That attachment, called mobile [affinity](#), depends on whether an owner views their [cellphone](#) or [smartphone](#) as a device that's more fun than it is functional or vice versa. Gaining insight into this relationship could enable retailers to better understand the consumer [mindset](#) and could even make it possible to market to consumers individually based on their interests and beliefs.

To find and collect this data, Swilley uses a hotbed of information: a college campus. She observes how Kansas State students use and respond to their phone, as well as surveying students in her marketing course.

According to her data pool, the majority of participants are between ages 19-24, with 52 percent being male. More importantly, 99 percent own a mobile phone.

"Honestly I'm surprised this wasn't 100 percent," Swilley said. "People share other devices like computers, but cellphones are an interesting thing because we each have our own. That individual ownership is a really big deal for people."

Swilley found that a majority of the participants said they are attached to their phone because of its functionality as an entertainment device rather than as a tool that can communicate anytime and anywhere. So it comes to no surprise to Swilley that games are the most downloaded application for cellphones, according to app stores.

What is surprising to her is that study participants indicated their mobile phone allowed for little to no self-expression. This is odd because while mobile phone owners have said their phone is a part of themselves, it's not a way they express themselves, Swilley said. A future study looking at what makes mobile technology aesthetically pleasing may eventually answer this, however.

With the adoption of more smartphones and the introduction of apps, Swilley has noticed that for many owners, their phone's entertainment factor has become a source of pride and joy -- similar to that of a lovable new pet.

"It's sort of similar to when people had those Tamagotchi pets as children; cellphones are just the adult version of that," Swilley said.

"People don't turn them off, are constantly playing with them, and want to show off the neat things the phone can do."

The concept for looking at consumer attitudes toward their phone

stemmed from the time Swilley was employed at BellSouth Corporation, now a subsidiary of AT&T Inc.

"Every employee was given a BlackBerry. Some of us weren't interested in having a pager, so the phones just sat there for some time," Swilley said. "But when I left three years later, I almost cried because I had to give up my BlackBerry. It had become a part of me and I was attached to it. It was the way I communicated. Today when I look at people now with their cellphones I see the same attachment."

Swilley's future mobile-related studies include looking at:

- Mobile coupon use and which sites the majority of consumers use to get these coupons.
- How a user reacts when he or she is making an online purchase on their phone and receive an incoming call.
- What it takes to make a functional and appealing website that is only visited via cellphones, including how the design will look and how it is standardized for various screen sizes.

Provided by Kansas State University

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