

# Research shows texting a compulsion for young adults

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(Phys.org)—Stroll through any U.S. college campus today, and you'll see a good percentage of students with noses buried in their smart phones. Many of them are texting.

"They're digital natives, meaning they're really used to using technology first and foremost for communication—not as a second option," said Paul Atchley, professor of psychology at the University of Kansas.

But is all of this texting healthy? Does texting perhaps have an addictive hold on today's [young adults](#)?

Atchley recently sought to discover if habitually using a device like a smart phone could interfere with college students' ability to make [rational decisions](#)—such as refraining from texting while driving a car.

"We used a technique from [behavioral economics](#) called 'delayed discounting,'" said the KU researcher, whose findings appear in the current issue of the *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*. "We essentially assessed if somebody is willing to wait to engage in that behavior for a reward."

Typically, in such a study, subjects are given a choice between a smaller reward now, or a larger reward later.

"If you think about being addicted to something, you're not really willing to wait to engage in that behavior," Atchley said. "If you're addicted to

alcohol, you'd rather have one beer now than two cases of beer in a week. So we simply did that within the context of texting to see what the decision-making profile looked like."

The researcher used KU students as subjects because they fall squarely in a demographic that has used cell phones for 8-10 years already. But are they addicted to texting? Atchley and KU [undergraduate student](#) Amelia Warden ran two separate studies to find out.

"If they're addicted to texting, they should want to just text right now," said the KU researcher.

First, the investigators offered subjects a purely monetary reward: an amount of money that increased if subjects were willing to wait to take it. Next, they offered subjects a hypothetical scenario where they could return an important text immediately for \$50, or wait to send a text for a period of time and get more money.

"If they really were addicted to the idea of sending a text immediately, the monetary situation wouldn't be that critical to them," Atchley said. "They'd be willing to take the monetary hit in order to send that text as quickly as possible."

However, the experiment showed that the decision-making behind evaluating a purely monetary reward was the same as the decision-making driving subjects' evaluation of monetary and informational (texting) reward situations. The researchers found the same rationalization at the heart of both.

"The main finding was that if you looked at monetary decisions, or decisions which were monetary plus informational—the opportunity to text—the shape of those curves is essentially the same. You'd predict a sharp decrease if someone was truly addicted to texting. They'd say, 'I

need to text now and if you're making me wait too long there's no point. So I'm going to give you all of your money back and just text right now.'" "

Atchley said that the timescale for a monetary decision was very long. For instance, monetary decisions lost half their perceived value in five months. But a decision to text a boyfriend or girlfriend back lost half its value in just two hours.

"The information lost value extremely quickly," said Atchley. "If I wait four hours to text you back, I may have missed a window of opportunity. It may not even be useful to text back after four hours. So I think what we're seeing is not evidence of addiction, but maybe of a compulsion—a need to respond quickly. Because if you don't, there's really no point."

A second experiment added texts from various kinds of people—a significant other, a friend and a casual acquaintance—to see if the subject would make choices based upon the idea of "social distance."

"If you're talking about texting an acquaintance back, people are willing to wait almost indefinitely to get that monetary reward," Atchley said. "But if it's someone closer to them, that changes. People were willing to give us \$25 back, to have the opportunity to text their girlfriend or boyfriend back within 20 minutes."

Provided by University of Kansas

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