Executive function and smartphone use habits in young adults

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Widespread availability of digital tools has changed the daily activities, habits, and education of college students. Prior work exploring how these changes relate to aspects of daily and psychological functioning have frequently relied on self-report assessments of relevant digital habits. Such studies suggest, for instance, that those possessing weaker executive skills may be more prone to involvement with digital media. Here, in a sample of undergraduates, we investigate the degree to which participants’ self-reported smartphone use aligns with their actual usage habits, as recorded by their mobile devices, and consider whether this alignment varies as a function of individual differences in executive functioning. We find that, somewhat surprisingly, individuals with stronger executive functioning tend to underestimate their smartphone use, while those with poorer executive skills tend to provide self-report estimates that exceed actual mobile use records. These findings suggest that the relationship between individuals’ subjective perception of smartphone habits may vary with higher-order cognitive abilities, and thus, studies relying on purely self-report methods to assess digital media habits may have the potential to mischaracterize key relationships with psychological functioning.

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