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## **Cell Phone Usage and Autonomy in College Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to determine cell phone usage differences in dependency upon family and friends between upper division (3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> year undergraduates) and lower division (1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduates) males and females. Subjects consisted of 270 students at a public liberal arts university in the southeastern United States. Participants in the study were administered an online survey that consisted of 31 questions assessing their cell phone usage. Cell phone usage in this study was defined as engaging in verbal communication on a cellular phone. Dependency was measured by the number of calls and length of calls one reportedly made to family and friends. Analysis of the data suggested that the most autonomous group, as indicated by cell phone usage, was upper division males and the least autonomous group was lower division females. Recommendations for further research conclude this study.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As cellular phones (cell phones) become more prevalent on college campuses, their effects on students' interpersonal relationships raise more questions. What are the effects of cell phones on college students' autonomy and dependency when they have a communication device in the palm of their hand? The purpose of this study is to determine if a difference exist in dependency upon friends and family in upper division (3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> year students) and lower division (1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> year students) males and females indicated by cell phone usage. Based on previous research, we proposed that

females, regardless of class status will demonstrate more dependency on family and friends indicated by their cell phone usage.

Cell phones help maintain positive relationships among friends and family members. Cell phones allow individuals to maintain relationships with others in times of separation due to distance (Baird, et al., 2005). Conversations previously carried out between fixed locations such as offices or public telephones have become possible while moving in traffic, relaxing at the beach or while walking to class (Wikle, 2001). Mobile conversations can be beneficial when in novel and intimidating situations which is often the case when students go off to college. It connects students with people they are no longer able to meet on a regular physical basis (Geser, 2004). Such contacts are important if bonds are to stay intact when students leave home to attend colleges.

Cell phones allow students not to "cut the apron strings" as easily after leaving home. Some students may rely heavily on their parents for advice in making large decisions such as choosing or changing a major or small decisions like how much fabric softener to add to their laundry. These students, with less knowledge of unfamiliar tasks, are now able to complete them because whenever an unfamiliar problem arises, they can contact more experienced collaborators (e.g. their parents) who tell them what to do. Thus, students may be less prone to develop autonomy when they are easily able to communicate with parents (Geser, 2004).

Cell phones help college students maintain bonds with friends from home. When students leave home for college, they often leave behind not only their family but also their friends. It is not uncommon for some of these friendships to wane or even end when friends no longer interact with each other on a regular basis. Cell phones alleviate the break down of some of these relationships. Geser (2004) believes that one of the major social functions of cell phones is to provide a "nomadic intimacy" by making it possible for people on the move to remain embedded in their personal social networks. However, the availability to talk to one's familiar acquaintances even when they are far away may limit the interaction for one to make new acquaintances. Students also may frequently call friends for advice when they have trouble making a decision. The cell phone can ease such indecisiveness by providing students with a means to get information and advice but especially to legitimize their decision by reaching consensus (Geser, 2004). When cell

phones are used in this manner, they could very well cause individuals to become more homogenous and dependent rather than autonomous (Anderson et al., 2005).

Previously published literature indicates that females were found to call someone primarily for social contact and they are likely to spend almost twice as much time on a cellular phone than males (Potts, 2004). Females talk mainly about relationships and daily concerns. Males use the cellular phone more for a particular reason, such as discussion of specific plans, rather than to talk about daily activities and relationships (Baird, et al., 2005). Also, women were more likely to stay in touch with friends despite the distance between them—women use the cellular phone to remain in touch (Baird et al., 2005). Perhaps women tend to have closer friends whom they remain tied to in spite of time and distance (Wood, 2004). From these findings, it is reasonable to hypothesize that even though all college students seem to be substantially dependent on their family and friends as indicated in the literature, females are probably likely to display this characteristic more frequently.

This study will investigate whether a difference exists in dependency upon friends and family in upper division and lower division males and females as indicated by cell phone usage. Cell phone usage in this study will be defined as engaging in verbal communication on a cell phone. Dependency will be measured by the number of calls and length of calls respondents report they make to family and friends. Our hypothesis is that, regardless of class status, females will demonstrate more dependency on family and friends indicated by their cell phone usage. This study will help further understanding into how cell phone usage facilitates or hinders undergraduate students' development of autonomy. Furthermore, this study can add to the knowledge of why cell phones are becoming so ubiquitous on college campuses.

## **METHOD**

### **PARTICIPANTS**

Subjects consisted of 270 undergraduates at a public liberal arts university in the southeastern United States. The sample was composed of 204 females and 66 males. In the sample, 13.6% identified themselves as 18 years of age or younger; 51.8% as 19-20; 25.4% as 21-22; 4.4% as 23-24; and 4.4% iden-

tified themselves as being 25 years of age or older. Since those 18 years or younger were considered minors, they were asked not to participate in the study and any results they submitted were excluded. There were 34 males who identified themselves as 1st or 2nd year students and 32 males who identified themselves as 3rd or 4th year students. There were 119 females who were 1st or 2nd year students and 84 females who were 3rd or 4th year students. Our sample consisted of 42 freshman, 111 sophomores, 54 juniors, and 64 seniors. All participants were students enrolled in psychology classes. Students received extra credit points from their various professors to participate in the study.

## **MATERIALS**

An online survey consisting of 31 questions was made available on the internet through a password protected instructional site (WebCT). To ensure consistency, subjects were each given the same online survey with identical questions. The survey consisted of 27 questions about cell phone usage. The additional four questions gathered demographic information.

## **DESIGN AND PROCEDURE**

The design used was a cross-sectional design that accessed cell phone usage among upper division students and lower division students at Georgia College & State University. The cell phone survey was made accessible on WebCT where students completed the study at their own pace on their own time and submitted it. The data was then analyzed using SPSS.

## **RESULTS**

Table 1 presents data regarding the average length of cell phone calls. The data suggests that overall, upper division males tended to have the shortest conversations, followed by lower division males, upper division females, and lower division females.

**Table 1**

*Average length of cell phone calls by gender and year in school*

Gender	1. What is the average length of your phone calls?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	1-5 minutes	21 65.60%	21 61.80%	42 63.60%
	5-10 minutes	8 25.00%	12 35.30%	20 30.30%
	10-15 minutes	3 9.40%	1 2.90%	4 6.10%
	15-20 minutes			
	more than 20 minutes			
	<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b> <b>100.00%</b>	<b>34</b> <b>100.00%</b>	<b>66</b> <b>100.00%</b>
Female	1-5 minutes	19 22.60%	22 18.50%	41 20.20%
	5-10 minutes	27 32.10%	46 38.70%	73 36.00%
	10-15 minutes	18 21.40%	30 25.20%	48 23.60%
	15-20 minutes	10 11.90%	12 10.10%	22 10.80%
	more than 20 minutes	10 11.90%	9 7.60%	19 9.40%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b> <b>100.00%</b>	<b>119</b> <b>100.00%</b>	<b>203</b> <b>100.00%</b>

The second question asked about the number of calls students made each day. The data presented in Table 2 suggests that upper division males tend to have fewer calls, followed by lower division males, lower division females, and upper division females. The average number of calls for the first three groups was four to six calls per day, whereas upper division females tended to average seven to eight calls per day.

**Table 2**

*Frequency of cell phone use per day by gender and year in school*

Gender	2. How often (each day) do you use your cell phone?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	0-3	10 31.30%	7 20.60%	17 25.80%
	4-6	12 37.50%	12 35.30%	24 36.40%
	7-9	5 15.60%	7 20.60%	12 18.20%
	10-12	3 9.40%	7 20.60%	10 15.20%
	13-15			
	16-18			
	19-21	1 3.10%		1 1.50%
	more than 22	1 3.10%	1 2.90%	2 3.00%
	<b>Total</b>	32 100.00%	34 100.00%	66 100.00%

Table 2 (con't)

Gender	2. How often (each day) do you use your c ell phone?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Female	0-3	6 7.10%	11 9.20%	17 8.40%
	4-6	22 26.20%	40 33.60%	62 30.50%
	7-9	24 28.60%	28 23.50%	52 25.60%
	10-12	17 20.20%	23 19.30%	40 19.70%
	13-15	6 7.10%	6 5.00%	12 5.90%
	16-18	2 2.40%	7 5.90%	9 4.40%
	19-21	1 1.20%	1 0.80%	2 1.00%
	more than 22	6 7.10%	3 2.50%	9 4.40%
	<b>Total</b>	84 100.00%	119 100.00%	203 100.00%



Table 3 displays data about who students called most frequently. It suggests that males and lower division females tended to talk to friends most, while upper division females tended to talk to a significant other most. All groups called family least. However, lower division females were more likely to call family more often followed by upper division females, upper division males, and lower division males. This implies that females are more dependent on family when compared with some of the other questions on the survey.

**Table 3**  
*Who is frequently called by gender and year in school*

Gender	3. Who do you call most frequently?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	Family	5 15.60%	2 5.90%	7 10.60%
	Friends	15 46.90%	20 58.80%	35 53.00%
	Significant Other	12 37.50%	12 35.30%	24 36.40%
	Total	32 100.00%	34 100.00%	66 100.00%
Female	Family	20 23.80%	29 24.40%	49 24.10%
	Friends	27 32.10%	53 44.50%	80 39.40%
	Significant Other	37 44.00%	37 31.10%	74 36.50%
	Total	84 100.00%	119 100.00%	203 100.00%

Whether or not students delayed decision making until they have consulted someone else is an important indicator of their dependence on others when it comes to decision making. Data in Table 4 suggests that males were more likely than females to choose the “often” option, but across the board, females were more likely to delay at least part of the time.

**Table 4**  
*Delayed decision making by gender and year in school*

Gender	4. Do you delay making decisions until you have called someone on your cell phone to consult or ask for advice?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	<b>often</b>	4 12.50%	4 11.80%	8 12.10%
	<b>sometimes</b>	12 37.50%	7 20.60%	19 28.80%
	<b>rarely</b>	12 37.50%	22 64.70%	34 51.50%
	<b>never</b>	4 12.50%	1 2.90%	5 7.60%
	<b>Total</b>	32 100.00%	34 100.00%	66 100.00%
Female	<b>often</b>	8 9.50%	12 10.10%	20 9.90%
	<b>sometimes</b>	48 57.10%	81 68.10%	129 63.50%
	<b>rarely</b>	26 31.00%	23 19.30%	49 24.10%
	<b>never</b>	2 2.40%	3 2.50%	5 2.50%
	<b>Total</b>	84 100.00%	119 100.00%	203 100.00%

Table 5 is a representation of the data gathered on if students used their phones as a means of filling periods of long absences. It suggests that lower division females, followed by upper division females, lower division males, and upper division males are more likely to use their phones to alleviate homesickness.

**Table 5**  
*Use of cell phone as a mean to fill long absences by gender and year in school*

Gender	5. Do you use your cell phone as a means of filling voids of long absences (i.e. curing homesickness)?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	never	7 21.90%	9 26.50%	16 24.20%
	rarely	13 40.60%	12 35.30%	25 37.90%
	sometimes	12 37.50%	12 35.30%	24 36.40%
	always		1 2.90%	1 1.50%
	<b>Total</b>	32 100.00%	34 100.00%	66 100.00%
Female	never	10 11.90%	14 11.80%	24 11.80%
	rarely	19 22.60%	17 14.30%	36 17.70%
	sometimes	47 56.00%	70 58.80%	117 57.60%
	always	8 9.50%	18 15.10%	26 12.80%
	<b>Total</b>	84 100.00%	119 100.00%	203 100.00%

The sixth question in the survey was aimed at finding how often students called home. Table 6 shows that females tended to call home daily, while males tended to call home once per week. A greater percentage of lower division females than upper division females call home daily, but upper division males were more likely to call home more often than lower division males.

**Table 6**

*Frequency students call home by gender and year in school*

Gender	6. How often do you call home (to your parent or guardian)?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	Daily	5 15.60%	2 5.90%	7 10.60%
	Couple of times a week	10 31.30%	14 41.20%	24 36.40%
	Once a week	16 50.00%	16 47.10%	32 48.50%
	Never	1 3.10%	2 5.90%	3 4.50%
	<b>Total</b>	32 100.00%	34 100.00%	66 100.00%
Female	Daily	37 44.00%	58 49.20%	95 47.00%
	Couple of times a week	33 39.30%	40 33.90%	73 36.10%
	Once a week	13 15.50%	17 14.40%	30 14.90%
	Never	1 1.20%	3 2.50%	4 2.00%
	<b>Total</b>	84 100.00%	118 100.00%	202 100.00%

The seventh question asked if students would go home more, less, or the same if they didn't own a cell phone. Table 7 shows that all groups averaged the same. However, it also shows that lower division females were more likely to pick "more" as an option followed by upper division males, lower division males, and upper division females.

**Table 7**

*Change in students visiting home if no cell phone available by gender and year in school*

Gender	7. If you didn't have a cell phone, would you visit your family back home?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	more	5 15.60%	5 14.70%	10 15.20%
	less		3 8.80%	3 4.50%
	same	27 84.40%	26 76.50%	53 80.30%
	<b>Total</b>	32 100.00%	34 100.00%	66 100.00%
Female	more	12 14.30%	36 30.50%	48 23.80%
	less	1 1.20%	1 0.80%	2 1.00%
	same	71 84.50%	81 68.60%	152 75.20%
	<b>Total</b>	84 100.00%	118 100.00%	202 100.00%

The eighth question asked about the primary purpose of phone calls. Table 8 shows that upper division females tended to call a significant other, while the three other groups tended to call for the purpose of making plans with friends.

**Table 8**

*Primary purpose of cell phone calls gender and year in school*

Gender	8 When making cell phone calls, what is the PRIMARY (1st) purpose of your calls?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	<b>make plans with friends</b>	12 37.50%	24 70.60%	36 54.50%
	<b>gossip with friends</b>	1 3.10%		1 1.50%
	<b>speak to significant other</b>	10 31.30%	3 8.80%	13 19.70%
	<b>speak with family</b>	4 12.50%	1 2.90%	5 7.60%
	<b>check in with friends</b>	4 12.50%	5 14.70%	9 13.60%
	<b>alleviate boredom</b>		1 2.90%	1 1.50%
	<b>discuss work</b>	1 3.10%		1 1.50%
	<b>Total</b>	32 100.00%	34 100.00%	66 100.00%
Female	<b>make plans with friends</b>	22 26.20%	35 29.40%	57 28.10%
	<b>gossip with friends</b>		1 0.80%	1 0.50%
	<b>speak to significant other</b>	30 35.70%	32 26.90%	62 30.50%
	<b>speak with family</b>	14 16.70%	27 22.70%	41 20.20%

*Table 8 (con't)*

Gender	8 When making cell phone calls, what is the PRIMARY (1st) purpose of your calls?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
	<b>check in with friends</b>	10 11.90%	19 16.00%	29 14.30%
	<b>alleviate boredom</b>	7 8.30%	5 4.20%	12 5.90%
	<b>discuss work</b>	1 1.20%		1 0.50%
	<b>Total</b>	84 100.00%	119 100.00%	203 100.00%

The ninth question asked about the secondary purpose of phone calls. The answers to this question are presented in Table 9. All groups tended to pick "speak with family" more.

**Table 9**

*Secondary purpose of cell phone calls by gender and year in school*

Gender	9 When making cell phone calls, what is the NEXT (2nd) purpose of your calls?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	<b>make plans with friends</b>	8 25.00%	6 17.60%	14 21.20%
	<b>gossip with friends</b>			
	<b>speak with significant other</b>	3 9.40%	8 23.50%	11 16.70%
	<b>discuss school</b>	1 3.10%	3 8.80%	4 6.10%
	<b>speak with family</b>	12 37.50%	10 29.40%	22 33.30%

Table 9 (con't)

Gender	9 When making cell phone calls, what is the NEXT (2nd) purpose of your calls?	Year in School		Total	
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year		
	<b>check in with friends</b>	4 12.50%	6 17.60%	10 15.20%	
	<b>alleviate boredom</b>	1 3.10%	1 2.90%	2 3.00%	
	<b>discuss work</b>	3 9.40%		3 4.50%	
	<b>Total</b>	32 100.00%	34 100.00%	66 100.00%	
	Female	<b>make plans with friends</b>	15 17.90%	33 27.70%	48 23.60%
		<b>gossip with friends</b>	3 3.60%	5 4.20%	8 3.90%
		<b>speak with significant other</b>	15 17.90%	12 10.10%	27 13.30%
		<b>discuss school</b>		2 1.70%	2 1.00%
		<b>speak with family</b>	33 39.30%	45 37.80%	78 38.40%
<b>check in with friends</b>		15 17.90%	16 13.40%	31 15.30%	
<b>alleviate boredom</b>		3 3.60%	5 4.20%	8 3.90%	
<b>discuss work</b>			1 0.80%	1 0.50%	
<b>Total</b>		84 100.00%	119 100.00%	203 100.00%	



The tenth question asked about the third purpose of phone calls. The data in Table 10 suggests that upper division females called to make plans with friends and the other three groups said the third purpose was to check in with friends.

**Table 10**

*Third purpose of cell phone calls by gender and year in school*

Gender	10. When making cell phone calls, what is the THIRD (3rd) purpose of your calls?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	make plans with friends	3 9.40%		3 4.50%
	gossip with friends	1 3.10%		1 1.50%
	speak to significant other	1 3.10%	3 8.80%	4 6.10%
	discuss school	7 21.90%	4 11.80%	11 16.70%
	speak with family	6 18.80%	9 26.50%	15 22.70%
	check in with friends	11 34.40%	13 38.20%	24 36.40%
	alleviate boredom	3 9.40%	5 14.70%	8 12.10%
	discuss work			
	<b>Total</b>	32 100.00%	34 100.00%	66 100.00%
Female	make plans with friends	20 23.80%	20 16.80%	40 19.70%
	gossip with friends	10 11.90%	8 6.70%	18 8.90%
	speak to significant other	5 6.00%	12 10.10%	17 8.40%

Table 10 (con't)

Gender	10. When making cell phone calls, what is the THIRD (3rd) purpose of your calls?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
	<b>discuss school</b>	10 11.90%	6 5.00%	16 7.90%
	<b>speak with family</b>	19 22.60%	30 25.20%	49 24.10%
	<b>check in with friends</b>	9 10.70%	32 26.90%	41 20.20%
	<b>alleviate boredom</b>	7 8.30%	11 9.20%	18 8.90%
	<b>discuss work</b>	4 4.80%		4 2.00%
	<b>Total</b>	84 100.00%	119 100.00%	203 100.00%

The data for the responses to the eleventh question which asked about the fourth purpose of phone calls is presented in Table 11. Lower division males said their fourth purpose of making cell phone calls was to discuss school, while upper division males were torn equally between discussing school and calling family. Females tended to call to alleviate boredom.

**Table 11**

*Fourth purpose of cell phone calls by gender and year in school*

Gender	11. When making cell phone calls, what is the FOURTH (4th) purpose of your calls?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	make plans with friends	4 12.50%	2 5.90%	6 9.10%
	gossip with friends	2 6.30%	2 5.90%	4 6.10%
	speak to significant other	1 3.10%		1 1.50%
	discuss school	7 21.90%	7 20.60%	14 21.20%
	speak with family	7 21.90%	8 23.50%	15 22.70%
	check in with friends	4 12.50%	4 11.80%	8 12.10%
	alleviate boredom	4 12.50%	6 17.60%	10 15.20%
	discuss work	3 9.40%	5 14.70%	8 12.10%
	<b>Total</b>	32 100.00%	34 100.00%	66 100.00%
Female	make plans with friends	11 13.10%	20 16.90%	31 15.30%
	gossip with friends	14 16.70%	17 14.40%	31 15.30%

Table 11 (cont'd)

Gender	11. When making cell phone calls, what is the FOURTH (4th) purpose of your calls?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
	<b>speak to significant other</b>	4 4.80%	2 1.70%	6 3.00%
	<b>discuss school</b>	7 8.30%	13 11.00%	20 9.90%
	<b>speak with family</b>	12 14.30%	8 6.80%	20 9.90%
	<b>check in with friends</b>	17 20.20%	21 17.80%	38 18.80%
	<b>alleviate boredom</b>	15 17.90%	29 24.60%	44 21.80%
	<b>discuss work</b>	4 4.80%	8 6.80%	12 5.90%
	<b>Total</b>	84 100.00%	118 100.00%	202 100.00%

The twelfth question of our survey asked about whom students talked to most often. Table 12 shows that all groups stated friends as whom they called most. It also shows that upper division females were most likely to call family, followed by lower division females, upper division males, and lower division males.

**Table 12**

*Who is talked to the most by gender and year in school*

Gender	12. Who do you talk to the most?	Year in School		Total
		3rd or 4th Year	1st or 2nd Year	
Male	family	6 19.40%	5 14.70%	11 16.90%
	friend	22 71.00%	25 73.50%	47 72.30%
	co-workers	1 3.20%	1 2.90%	2 3.10%
	other	2 6.50%	3 8.80%	5 7.70%
	<b>Total</b>	31 100.00%	34 100.00%	65 100.00%
Female	family	33 39.30%	38 31.90%	71 35.00%
	friends	43 51.20%	72 60.50%	115 56.70%
	co-workers			
	other	8 9.50%	9 7.60%	17 8.40%
	<b>Total</b>	84 100.00%	119 100.00%	203 100.00%

## DISCUSSION

After analyzing the data, we concluded that lower division students as a whole tend to rely more on friends than family, but as they get older and become upper division students, this changes. Upper division males still depend mostly on friends but begin to seek parents' advice more. Upper division females, however, rely more on a significant other. Overall, the most autonomous group—as indicated by cell phone usage—was upper division males, followed by lower division males, upper division females, and lower division females. The data, overall, supported the hypothesis.

In future research a more representative sample beyond psychology students is recommended. It would have been helpful to have more specific questions. It was hard to determine what the data revealed since the questions focused less on dependency and more on who talks to the most.

The data analysis suggests that when students first get to college, they tend to seek autonomy from their parents but rely more on their friends. As students get older, they begin to call friends less and call a significant other and family more. This shift is related to older students beginning to think of settling down and beginning to seek the advice of older, wiser family members. The difference in upper division females (relying more on a significant other) may be due to thoughts of a longer term relationship—in short, the significant other becomes the “family.” It is assumed that upper division males are reconnecting with family out of a renewed respect for parents as they begin the process of entering the working world as they mature. Lower division students as a whole tend to rely more on friends because they are seeking autonomy from parents but still are not ready to be completely self-reliant.

It was a surprise to the researchers to discover that upper division males call their families more than upper division females which disproves our hypothesis that females are more dependent on family than upper division males. The data supports the hypothesis that lower division females and males are more dependent on their friends than upper division males and females which both substantiates the theory that lower division students as a whole would be more dependent than upper division males and disproves the premise that females as a whole would be more dependent on their friends than males as a whole. Overall, the data suggests that the older students get, the more autonomous they become.

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