MISQ Archivist

Constant Checking Is Not Addiction: A Grounded Theory of IT-Mediated State-Tracking

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Abstract

Constant checking of digital devices has been a widely observed phenomenon: people check email clients, social networking systems, news websites, and other information technologies at the expense of distracted driving, neglected children, and lost productivity. The predominant perspective on such phenomena of excessive IT use is that users are addicted to technology. Actually, we know very little about what exactly "constant checking" is, what causes it, and under what conditions negative outcomes might ensue. Based on qualitative data collected from 90 individuals, we develop a grounded theory that views constant-checking behaviors as information-seeking habits instead of an addiction in need of medical treatment. We find that these habits satisfy deep-rooted and recurring needs for information, are facilitated by today's high accessibility of information, and are fueled by an interesting reward pattern. To represent constant-checking behaviors in light of our findings, we posit a new construct—IT-mediated state-tracking—defined as an individual's habitual use of IT to seek information that closes the gap between their knowledge about a real-world domain's state and its actual state. We also learn that the intended and unintended consequences of IT-mediated state-tracking are contingent upon situational factors, which suggests that a more balanced perspective on these behaviors is warranted. Our research steers the discussion about excessive IT use in a new direction by offering a new construct and a grounded theory that helps us to better understand the phenomenon of constant checking.

Keywords: IT-mediated state-tracking, information needs, constant checking, representation theory, grounded theory, unintended consequences, technology addiction