

# AGE OF DISCONNECT ANXIETY

AND FOUR REASONS WHY IT'S DIFFICULT TO STAY OFF THE GRID

U.S. Research Summary  
March 2008



## U.S. CONSUMER CONTEXT

The last 10 years have seen unprecedented growth in the penetration and use of technologies such as PCs, broadband and mobile phones.

In 1998, 38% of Americans were online according to [Pew Research Center](#) and only a small minority had access to high speed Internet at home. There were very few users of instant messaging and social media did not exist. Mobile phones were used by only one-in-three and digital cameras and MP3 players were not yet mainstream.

10 years later...

Internet use doubled to 75% in the U.S., translating to over 180 million users. Over 70 million Americans connect via MySpace or Facebook. About the same number uses instant messaging, not to mention the hundreds of emails sent and received daily. In November 2007, an American Facebook user connected to an average of 112 friends; MySpace users connected to even more people, coming in at an impressive 134 friends.

There are more than [230 million cell phone users](#) in the U.S. and in our February 2008 *Digital Life America* research, 83% said they take their cell phones "everywhere they go."

Mobile phone use in the younger age groups increased sharply in the past 5 years and a typical young American in the 12-29 age group calls 12 people regularly and sends and receives nearly 100 text messages weekly.

More than 25 million Americans now use a smartphone—BlackBerry being perhaps the most popular—but Treo, Motorola Q, iPhone close behind, up from a tiny fraction of that number only 4 years ago.

The American consumer is more connected and has more instant access to people and information than at any time in history. Losing that access creates *disconnect anxiety*.



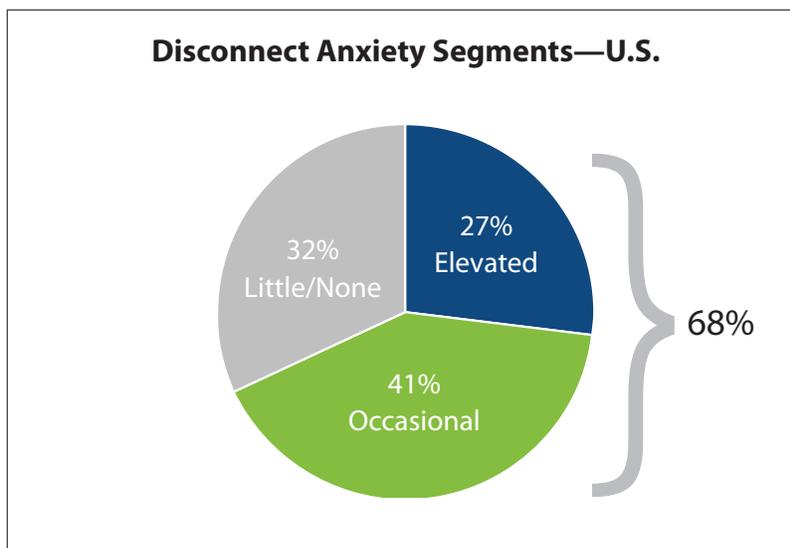
## WHAT IS DISCONNECT ANXIETY?

Disconnect Anxiety refers to various feelings of disorientation and nervousness experienced when a person is deprived of Internet or wireless access for a period of time.

In our research, we observed disconnect anxiety in people of all ages and backgrounds to varying levels of intensity. Anxiety resulting from 'BlackBerry blackouts' has been discussed in the popular press in the past year; however, other variants have received less attention to date.

## 68% EXPERIENCE ANXIETY WHEN DISCONNECTED

Overall, our research finds that 27% of the population exhibit significantly elevated levels of anxiety when disconnected<sup>1</sup>. In terms of profile, 41% of this group are 12-24, 50% are 25-49 and 9% are over the age of 50.



A secondary group of 41% exhibit above-average levels of anxiety occasionally, depending on the situation. The balance, 32% are below average in their anxiety response when unable to use their cell phones or the Internet. This group is disproportionately older than average (i.e., majority being 50+).

<sup>1</sup>Disconnect Anxiety segments are based on a 15-item multi-question scale which scores individuals based on (1) time spent online and with wireless devices, (2) location and nature of use of wireless devices and PCs, and (3) intensity of participation in social media as well as responses to attitudinal questions.

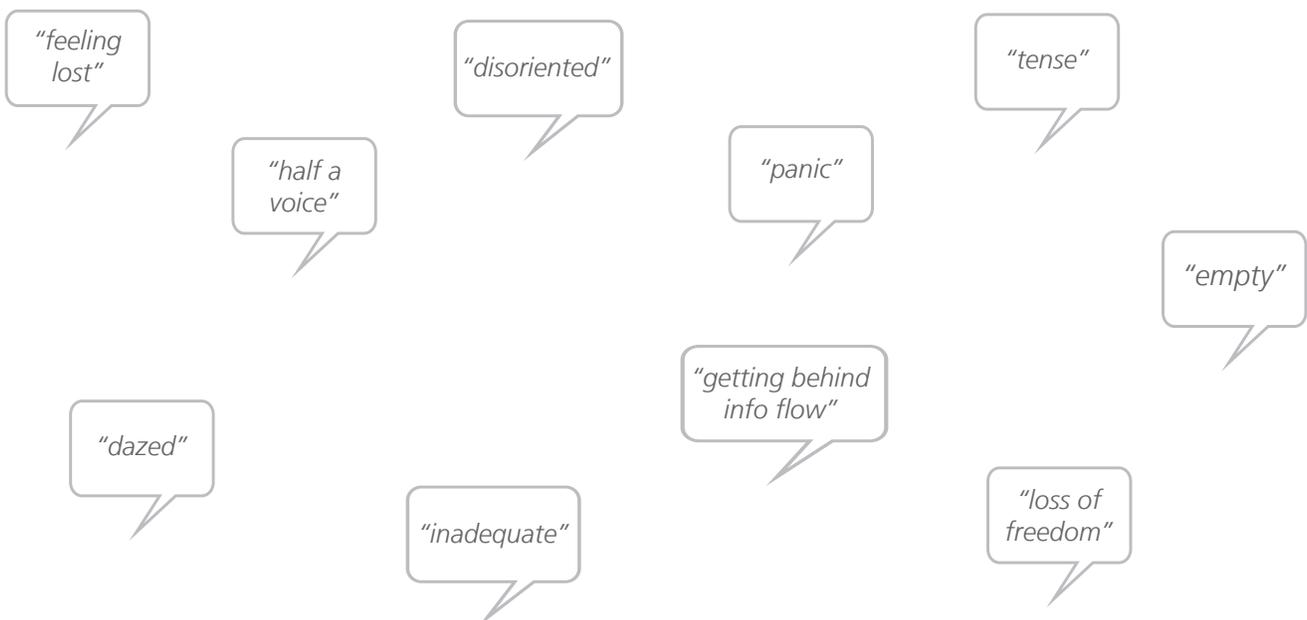
## WHY DO PEOPLE EXPERIENCE DISCONNECT ANXIETY?

Our research identified four main reasons why people feel anxious when disconnected. Disconnect anxiety is related to one or more of the following factors:

Factor	If disconnected, I will...
<b>Safety</b>	not be able to respond to an emergency
<b>Work</b>	miss important information (and promotion)
<b>Social</b>	miss the party
<b>Navigation</b>	get lost/unable to find my way

Depending on age, lifestage and employment factors, people may feel one, two or more of these factors at play at any given time.

## WORDS PEOPLE USE TO DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCE WHEN DISCONNECTED



## SAFETY

Concern for safety is a major cause of disconnect anxiety. People often describe their cell phone as a “lifeline” or a “safety net” and believe they are safer when carrying it. Whether the phone presents the option to call for help in case of a car accident or to call a friend on a lonely walk home at night, just carrying one makes people feel less vulnerable.

In our research, people have expressed the belief that fellow citizens on the street are less likely to stop and help nowadays. In the next breath, they acknowledge that they are probably justified in their fear of doing so. As a result, carrying a wireless phone is almost universally perceived as a necessity. And not having access or service creates anxiety about personal safety, and the safety of family members.

Being accessible to family is especially important for parents. Maintaining wireless connection gives the feeling one is in control and on top of situations.

Concern for safety of children including tweens and teens has in particular been a strong factor in parent-driven wireless adoption. 75% of American teens had a cell phone as of November 2007, nearly double the rate in 2003.

% of American women who agree with the statement “the world is not as safe as it used to be”

78%

% who agree that “kids today face much more danger than when I was a child”

79%

*“I primarily use the Treo. But my wife is actually pregnant right now. She’s been relying on the phone a lot right now just in case she needs to call me...”*

*“There was one time when I did feel a little bit helpless when I wasn’t able to use it [my phone]. I was in Death Valley California ... God forbid this rental car we have—if we get a flat... there was no signal, absolutely none, so I was just praying. No signal, absolutely no signal. That was the only time I have felt truly helpless without a wireless device... nothing around for 150 miles. What would I have done? Rub two stones together? Cry for help?”*

*“It’s almost like you lose your sense of freedom because you can’t just call someone ... it’s like you are cut off, you’re just a little person walking around. You might as well be in the 1800s, like you don’t have contact. We are so used to nowadays having that with us it is like security.”*

## WORK

Work expectations and workflow considerations are important contributors of disconnect anxiety.

The constant stream of information creates the feeling at least that the flow must be constantly monitored. While there are usually no written rules about staying connected, in many job situations the expectation is implicit.

*"In my office we don't really have any written rule that you need to stay connected. But if you are not connected there will probably be fewer rules for you to follow, because you won't be around. We're expected to stay connected."*

*"It used to be acceptable that you would be "out of pocket" while on vacation for a week (that used to be the purpose of a vacation) but now—with GSM, Internet cafes—people expect access to be ubiquitous."*

Being 'always on' or 'connected' is a response—and ironically a contributor—to the fact our culture is spinning faster.



*"Computers and technology may make our lives easier from some aspects, but they have also caused us to place urgency on everything, and I always feel rushed. Before computers, if you wanted to communicate with someone, you sent them a letter, and received a reply a week or two later. Now, with email, you send one out today, and you expect a reply by the next day, later the same day, or even within minutes."*

In addition, our research suggests that people begin to crave the idea of access to the world of information, almost as much as the messages themselves. Being plugged in validates your importance.

*"I think between leaving the house and getting to work I probably check my BlackBerry about 10 times, and that's on the subway...it's just the driven high stress world that we live in, managing issues, needing to stay on top of things."*

% of BlackBerry users who used their device in the washroom in the past

63%

% of Americans who agree with the statement "I'm the kind of person who likes to be in touch all the time"

63%

% of laptop owners who use their laptops "frequently" in the bedroom

37%



Anxiety around disconnect experiences typically centers on missing out on important information. But our research suggests there is also an interesting variant which relates to concern about backlogs, i.e., a period of disconnect that will cause material to accumulate which will then take time to clear out.

*“Well you feel like you are lost. A couple of years ago I was in Asia traveling around and my wife and I went to Cambodia and the area that we were in NO ACCESS. So we went for four days and that was tough and when we got back to Hong Kong my wife knew I needed to sync up with my BlackBerry. So I am sitting on the train from the airport headed back to the city and I’m in the only little seat and I’ve got a flood, a flood of emails. And it’s just you are used to a certain type of access and efficiency so you can run your lifestyle the way you want to, then all of a sudden it’s been taken away—like someone taking away your drivers licence.”*

83% of American cell phone users agree with the statement “my cell phone goes everywhere I go,” underlining the extent of associated discomfort associated with being out of touch.

## SOCIAL

Among younger segments, the disconnect experience is panic inducing.

The ubiquitous messaging from friends has reached a new level with the rise of social networking. Never turning your cell phone off has been joined with “talking” to friends via Facebook.

Being out of the Facebook loop may mean missing invitations to social events and to be without the insider information that is valuable social currency among friends.

No one wants to be left out and staying connected via texting, IM and online via Facebook is the way to ensure it doesn’t happen.

*“Normally before eight o’clock in the morning you haven’t talked to your friends so the fact that now you are already corresponding before you even get to class and see people—you know you are in your PJs with your toothbrush hanging out and you are already talking to your friends. That’s pretty different from 2005 I guess.”*

*“I didn’t go on my computer for a week so then the weekend came and my brother and his girlfriend are like ‘we are going to this Christmas party’ and I’m like what?? How come I didn’t get invited, and then I go and look on my Facebook profile and there it is. No one bothers to pick up the phone and call you anymore. If you don’t check it, you’re out of the loop, like you don’t know what’s going on. So it’s the one thing. Now I don’t want to be left out, I’m going to check it all the time and see.”*

% of American 12-24 year olds who text on their cell phones regularly

74%

Average number of visits to Facebook profile daily

2.4

Number of friends a 12-24 year old has on MySpace

178

on Facebook

159

*"My cell phone is my social life. Getting calls from friends, text messaging about the night's plans. My whole summer is detailed in pictures on my phone. If I forget it at home I'm going nuts wondering what's going on, what I'm missing. It's my social life."*

*"I keep my cell phone on all the time and the only time I turn the ringer off is if I'm at work it will be on silent, if I'm sleeping it will be on silent, but the reason I don't turn it off is because I have caller ID so say if I'm sleeping and someone calls me or whatever, then the next day I can be like 'oh that person called me at 3:00 am in the morning, I wonder why?' Or if I'm in class I'll know who called me but if I turn it off it doesn't have caller ID for the calls I missed."*

*"When I'm away on holiday I love that people can still be in touch with me on my phone and I can pick it up if I need to."*

## NAVIGATION

People describe relying heavily on the devices they carry around to keep them organized, reminded of where they should be and what they have to do. And of course the devices also hold and carry information that we no longer have to keep in our memory.

*"Not to mention all the numbers. I lost my cell phone, I left my cell phone in a cab two weeks ago and I was just going crazy because all your numbers... the only other numbers you have are like strangely on Facebook."*

Our cell phones and laptops are becoming an extension of ourselves, morphing into what writer/blogger Clive Thompson calls an "outboard brain."



*"The planning aspect... I utilize mine on the calendar for my 7 to 9 day. I utilize it a ton for the calendar, events, meetings, that's the nuance. Before I actually used to carry around one of those paper ones and then it is all synched with the computer and it actually buzzes when you have a meeting and it's more or less idiot proof. You know that at 10:00 I have to be here and 11:00 o'clock I have to be there and in that aspect it has changed my lifestyle because it's just an instantaneous update on a regular basis of where I am going."*

% of cell phone users who think that an interactive map on their phone is a good or great idea

85%

% who say the same for a mobile service that allows users to locate their friends

70%

## DISCONNECT ANXIETY ACROSS GENERATIONS

	How They Connect	Type of Anxiety	Behavioral Flags
<b>Tweens/Teens</b>	Texting, Instant Messaging, MySpace	<b>Social/Navigational</b> —cut-off from friends, their collective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– IM on all the time as they work on the PC</li> <li>– Sleep disorders due to late night texting— inability to disconnect</li> <li>– Unable to concentrate on homework</li> </ul>
<b>Young Adults</b>	Texting, MySpace, Facebook, Regular email, Instant Messaging	<b>Social/Work/Navigational</b> —cut-off from friends, some work related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– PC use increasing—likely to use cell phones in the washroom</li> <li>– Spend “too much time” on MySpace, Facebook</li> </ul>
<b>Xers/Boomers</b>	Regular email/Mobile email (BlackBerry or similar), MySpace and texting generally if have kids	<b>Work/Safety</b> —mixed feelings when disconnected from work (anxiety on one hand and relief on the other)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– “CrackBerry”</li> <li>– Withdrawal symptoms...</li> <li>– Kids pointing out parents’ addictive behaviour</li> <li>– Bad driving</li> </ul>
<b>Older Adults</b>	Regular email, some Instant Messaging or Skype with family	<b>Minimal</b> —cut off from family/ grandchildren etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Typically not an issue</li> </ul>

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The data for this report come from SRG's *Digital Life America* tracking study for the October 2006 to February 2008 period in the U.S., unless otherwise noted. Four waves of research conducted in this period interviewed a total of 4,994 Americans aged 12 and older on all aspects of their use of and attitudes toward communications and entertainment technologies.

The samples for *Digital Life America* are nationally-representative of the U.S. online population and capture all important demographic segments such as teens, young adults as well as older age groups. In addition, African-American and English-speaking Hispanic populations are represented on a proportionate basis.

The interviews over this period were complemented by in-depth one-on-one and focus group discussions.

A parallel study covered similar ground in Canada and is available separately.

**DIGITAL LIFE AMERICA**

## ABOUT SRG

Solutions Research Group (SRG) is a consumer research firm with special expertise in media, technology, wireless, leisure, youth and multicultural markets.

Based in Toronto, the firm is best known for its syndicated quarterly tracking studies of consumer behavior, including *Digital Life America* in the U.S. and *Fast Forward* in the Canadian market. **[www.srgnet.com](http://www.srgnet.com)**