Singaporeans would rather lose their purse or identity card than their cellphone, poll shows

Mobile phone ADDICTION

For two days, Ms Rani Devi’s life was topsy-turvy. Her Nokia 7610 phone had been fished.
Not only did she lose the phone numbers and e-mail addresses of her friends and business contacts, but she also lost her alarm clock, camera and radio.

“It was the most stressful two days of my life. My whole world was in that phone,” moaned the 28-year-old sales executive.
Her mother had to wake her up in the mornings for work. Her search for a public payphone often left her in distress and she also had to keep a purse full of coins to make the calls. The worst was not being able to SMS.

However, her woes did not end with a new Nokia 7610 phone.

“I had to wait for my friends to call or SMS me. Some numbers, like those of people I rarely keep in touch with, were gone forever.”

A quarter of Singaporeans aged 14 to 40 would empathise with her. They, too, would feel equally paralysed: they say they cannot live without a cellphone. Four out of 10 say they can live without their cellphone for only one day.

“Those findings are from a street poll carried out by The Sunday Times two weeks ago, when 150 people were interviewed on their cellphone usage and habits. They affirmed that the gadget had become an integral part of our lives, not least because of its many roles.

It is a camera, organiser, alarm clock, calculator, and game and music machine.

The young use it to flirt, sending SMS messages to those they fancy (66 per cent), while a few (18 per cent) find it very expedient for breaking up.

Engineering undergraduate Lee Hong Cheng, 23, recalls sending his girlfriend this message two years ago: “We should go our separate ways.”

Her reply, even more curt: “Fine.”

Singaporeans use their mobile phones everywhere — from the boardroom to the bistro, and from the car to the can.

Sociology professor Chung Wai-Kueung, from Singapore Management University, is convinced the cellphone will become increasingly indispensable as it becomes more affordable, more effective and has more functions.

“It not only communicates information, but also allows a person to share his or her emotions with others very easily. You can do it wherever you go, and that makes you even more dependent on it,” he said.

Already, three in 10 find the loss of, say, their wallet (28 per cent) or identity card (23 per cent) less distressing.

Businessman Danny Low, 37, who sells plumbing fixtures, said: “For keys, all I need is to get a new set of locks and keys for everyone in the family. For the IC, I just need to make a police report and wait for a new one.”

“But my mobile phone is my rice bowl. All my clients’ numbers are in it and I have no idea how to build another contact list that spans over 30 years.”

Ms Devi says it took her several months to compile most of her list.

Like their counterparts in Hong Kong and Taiwan, almost every Singaporean owns a cellphone. Mr Aloysius Choong, lead analyst for IT and telecom research firm IDC Asia/Pacific, says it is no longer a status symbol, as it was 15 years ago. It is now a necessity, as shown by the amount Singaporeans spend on communications gadgets.

This has been rising at 6.2 per cent yearly, according to the latest Household Expenditure Survey, which is done once every five years. The amount rose from S$277 a month in 1998 to S$372 in 2003.

Indeed, six out of 10 people told The Sunday Times they continue talking even when nature calls.

Never mind that the person on the other end can hear the flushing and other awkward noises. It’s all about multitasking, they declared blithely.

Businesswoman Wilene Chang, 35, even dropped her cellphone into a toilet bowl. It did not break her habit, though. “What’s the big deal? It’s not as if the other party can smell your stink,” she said with a shrug.

Mr Benjamin Sng, 28, a co-owner of an advertising firm, even takes his Bluetooth headset into the shower. “In my line of work, phone calls to and from clients are almost non-stop.”

More than 90 per cent admit, without qualms, that they talk on the cellphone or send SMS messages during a meal, even when there’s company across the table.

They do so less frequently at meetings and while driving: about six in 10 at meetings, and almost three in 10 when driving.

But Singaporeans’ passion for the cellphone cannot match that of the South Koreans. They get a new handset every six months.

In Singapore, only 3 per cent do so. Most get a new phone only when their 12- to 24-month contract with the phone company expires or the gadget stops working.

And they won’t spend more than S$200 on a new handset.

Said events planner S. Ramaiah, 26: “The phones don’t last very long, so it doesn’t make sense to splurge when it will be dead after two or three years.”

Singaporeans also strive to keep their phone bills small. About half pay, at most, S$50 a month.

There is no sign that the Singaporean’s love affair with their cellphone will cool off. More likely, it will intensify.

As fitness instructor Moham med Abdul Sharif, 30, puts it: “Which gadget gives us the same mobility and connectivity to the rest of the world?”

“Best of all, it is no bigger than your palm.”

Additional reporting by Shariene Tan & Renee Tan