

A phenomenological Case Study on the Psychological and Spiritual Conflict Resulting from Excessive Use of Smartphones - Focused on Christian University Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to, through in-depth interviews, identify the problems of Christian student's excessive smartphone use precipitating a psychological and spiritual conflict. A total of 11 students at a four-year Christian College participated in this study.

This study reflects participants experienced both spiritual and psychological conflict do to the high volume of smartphone use. The primary in depth interviews were conducted from June to July 2012. The secondary data was collected from April to May of 2014. The collected data was analysed according to the phenomenological case study method.

As a result of analysis, this case study consisted of five categories. Within these categories included a combined total of 17 subcategories and are explained in the following section.

The first category featured in the survey is "Addiction". While the subjects were gradually addicted to the use of smartphones, they experienced Time Concept Palsy, Mental Anxiety, Psychiatric symptoms and General Impairment of daily life. The second major category is "Isolation and Alienation of Existence". This category consists of the Present on the island, the Emergence of Instrumental Relationships, and the Human Isolation. The third category is "Idolization of the Smartphone". This topic includes recognising the smartphone as another existing self. In other words, it is called by slavery to the smartphone. The fourth category is "Changing the Pattern of Spiritual Ritual". This area deals with how the smartphone has changed the way in which college students worship and is comprised of the following subcategories. The emergence of the smartphone culture in the church, Desensitisation of Guilt, Disturbance of the Spiritual Life, and Conflicts of Faith. The fifth area is "Self-Regulation". This topic includes living a life centered on faith, self-reflection and self-regulation, and seeks the coexistence of faith and smartphone use.

Based on the findings, this case study proposes a plan of action to address the psychological-spiritual conflicts due to the excessive use of smartphones in the church and the University.

Keywords: Christian University Students, Excessive Use of Smartphones, Phenomenological Case Study, Psychological and Spiritual Conflict

1. Introduction

Ever since the integration of the smartphone into modern life, it has brought a large variety of societal changes. Besides the basic cell phone function, the smartphone has expanded functions much the same as a computer. The smartphone has made it possible to quickly and accu-

rately access information via the Internet. It also provides a place for communication with online social networks. Now, it is becoming an essential tool for almost everyone from children to the elderly. It brings significant benefits in terms of convenience to everyday life.

However, due to their uncontrolled use smartphones have become a serious problem and play a role in the

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development of a number of social disorders. University students, according to one study, cite instances of smartphone addiction at 18.1 percent¹. In a separate study, 17 percent of college students were reported as being fully addicted to using smartphones. Additionally, the same study reports that 66 percent of the students are in the initial phases of the addiction².

There is increasing evidence that excessive use of smartphones causes a variety of psychological side effects resulting in life and adaptation problems^{3,4}. Furthermore, there is a strong relationship between one's spiritual state and smartphone addiction. This is of consequence to society because, according to addiction related research, a person's sense of spiritual well-being reduces the re-emergence of addictions including alcoholism, gambling addiction, Internet addiction and cellular phone addiction⁵⁻⁷. In other words, when one has lower levels of spirituality, there is a tendency to engage in addictive behaviours.

As technology develops, a considerable number of college students undergo smartphone addiction problems, students considering themselves Christians are no exception. It is estimated that smartphone addiction causes obstruction to spiritual development and increases psychological dysfunction. The study detailed in this paper shows several students attending a Christian University who are highly reliant on smartphone use. As previously mentioned, using a phenomenological case study method, this study will illustrate how the students psychological and spiritual state has changed due to the over use of smartphones.

This research can be used as a basis for exploring ways to help future college students who are suffering from smartphone overuse thus supporting their spiritual and psychological well-being. Specifically, the question of this study is what kind of psychological, spiritual conflicts do Christian college students experience due to the excessive use of smartphones.

2. Methodology

The participants in this study are enrolled in a four-year Christian College and meet the following conditions; First, they are students who stated they have faith in God. Second, each described themselves as highly dependent smartphone users. Third, they reported, due to the excessive use of smartphone they experience psychological and spiritual conflict.

The basic characteristics of the participants are as follows: there were a total of 11 participants which consisted of five men and six women. Their ages ranged from 19 to 26 years old. The participant's excessive smartphone usage varied from seven months to three years and three months. Daily smartphone usage ranged from as little as three hours a day to as much as 12 hours per day. For each test subject, the primary function of their smartphone varied. Their usage included; listening to music, watching movies, communicating through various social networking applications, monitoring traffic information, playing games, and surfing the internet. Data for this study was collected through in-depth interviews. The primary in depth interviews were conducted from June to July 2012. The secondary data was collected from April to May of 2014. Prior to each interview, the purpose of the research, procedures, participant's rights, and ethical considerations for research were explained, to which they voluntarily consented. All of the interviews were recorded with the participant's permission and the interviewer created a transcript within 24 hours.

As previously stated, in order to understand the nature of smartphone use by Christian college students, this study uses a combination of the phenomenological and qualitative case study methods. The phenomenological method was used for the "essential fundamental experience" analysis and the qualitative case study method was used to find the "uniqueness and universality" through the cases^{8,9}.

3. Results

Five categories of questions along with their supporting 17 subcategories were derived through a phenomenological qualitative analysis. The following is a description, along with accompanying statements, by research participants for each subject groups (Table 1).

3.1 Addiction to the World of the Smartphone Returned

3.1.1 *Paralysis of the Time Concept Return*

Participants experienced that, once they started to use the smartphone, they easily forget the concept of time. They thought they were focused on the internet for a very short period, but in reality, significant time has elapsed. Another subject mentioned that they played only one game but a couple of hours had actually gone by. It is

Table 1. Psychological-spiritual conflict due to the excessive user of Smartphone

Subject-Groups
Subjects
Addiction to the world of the smartphone returned
• Paralysis of the time concept return. • Psychological anxiety. • Psychiatric symptoms. • Difficulty in daily life.
Isolation and alienation
• Present on the island. • Emergence of Instrumental Relationships. • Alienation.
Idolisation of the smartphone
• Recognising it as one of the present. • Alter ego. • Enslavement.
Change and spiritual conflict
• The emergence of the smartphone culture in the church. • Desensitisation of guilt. • Interference with the spiritual side of life. • Religious conflict.
Keeping faith in the digital world
• The internal moral compass. • Self-reflection and regulation. • Exploring the coexistence of faith and the smartphone.

common perception that a smartphone is a “time swallowing machine”.

That same subject went on, “I only looked at the smart phone briefly for a game, but a couple of hours passed without my knowing it... I play story games, action games, and RPG games”. (Participant C).

Another testified, “I woke up a little late because it was my day off. I looked at the time and started internet surfing, but when I saw the time again, the morning was already gone. I regret wasting so much time but it happens over and over”. (Participant K).

3.1.2 Psychological Anxiety

Participants felt psychological anxiety being even a short time without their smartphone. They reported feeling disconnected from the world and felt like they were missing something important. Even when they didn't have a particular reason, they were constantly thinking about who was trying to contact them. They reported feeling a

sense of security when they had it in their hand. The main problem with the smartphone is it is a major source of anxiety.

“If I don't have my smartphone in my hand, I feel something is missing and I am insecure. One time, I had to fix my smart phone and couldn't use it for a few days. I felt restless and extremely insecure”. (Participants J).

“I think I am a little addicted. Whatever I do, I have to have it around me, even though there is nothing in particular to do... I don't do anything important with it”. (Participants B).

3.1.3 Psychiatric Symptoms

The participants also stated that they experienced at least some psychiatric symptoms caused by using a smartphone. Several mentioned that they sometimes hear it ringing or feel a false vibration even when the phone is silent. They also complained that it is difficult to pay attention to their studies because of the smartphone. “Since they store a lot of information in the smartphone, they feel panic without it.

“I know it isn't required for the task, however wherever I go, the smartphone is the number one item I have to bring. Sometimes, I feel the vibration even when no one is calling”. (Participant C).

“Certainly, there are many bad side effects from using the smartphone. I can't concentrate on tasks. While I study, I keep peeking at my phone. It is really convenient to use but also very addictive”. (Participant A).

3.1.4 Difficulty in Daily Life

Participants also experience difficulties in their daily and academic life. If at any moment, the smart phone is turned off they feel helpless in regard to traffic or contacts. The use of smartphones also lowers efficiencies in academic performance. It commands your attention promising you limitless information and connection to the world.

“Even when I prepare for a test, I keep looking to see who has contacted me. Once engaged, I'll stop studying and continue chatting with my friends. Because of this concern, I sometimes try to leave my smartphone at home. When I do, I can't concentrate on my studies because I'm curious who might be calling me”. (Participant D).

Another participant stated, “Once, I was late paying my phone bill. I was in a panic desperately looking for an open Wi-Fi connection. In that moment, I realized that I was addicted to using my smartphone. I can't function without it”. (Participant F).

3.2 Isolation and Alienation

3.2.1 *Present on the Island*

It is an irony that although the smartphone's main function is facilitating contact between people, in terms of feeling connected, smartphones make people feel more isolated than ever. This self-imposed isolation extends to the immediate family as well. Participants stated that not only did they concentrate on the smartphone while eating family dinner, but also when they met with their friends. They were completely engaged with their smartphone. Although they were together at the same location, their consciousness was somewhere far away. In other words, when they were together, they were not really interacting with each other.

"When I go home, I see my parents using cell phones too. My Dad has a job that requires a smartphone and my Mom is usually busy on the smartphone contacting deacons from her church or dealing with other church business. We are often together in the house, but we hardly interact with each other". (Participant B).

Another said, "When I meet people, we all would rather play with our smartphones then make a conversation. There is no exception, even between friends. I use my smartphone when I eat or have family time". (Participant K).

3.2.2 *Emergence of Instrumental Relationships*

Although smartphones made it possible to expand human networks they also have resulted in a serious diminishment in the quality and depth of interpersonal relationships. While people are utilising various messenger functions, they experienced only a very superficial relationship with the actual world. While they are using the internet, the phone is the priority. Now people are beginning to recognise the smartphone not simply a tool but as another consciousness.

"A while ago my friend introduced me to social communication. It was a different world. I could talk with a stranger without revealing any information about myself. I can talk to people, exposing just my login ID. While I continue the conversation, I can hang up anytime I want. If I want to stop using the service, I simply get rid of the ID. I feel relationships on the web are disposable". (Participants C).

3.2.3 *Alienation*

Surprisingly, although a smartphone is simply a mechanical device, it has the capability to alienate. Generally,

participants felt discomfort having relationships with people who don't have smartphones. Conversely, people who don't have a smartphone are felt that they were being alienated. This speaks to the fact that due to the use of smartphones, cutting off people unilaterally is quickly becoming the norm. Facebook and Kakao Talk are two such social platforms that contribute to this trend. One student mentioned, "I feel anxious without my smartphone. It is a burden without my social network. Without it I have to send a message, but sending messages is costly and time-consuming. The online social network services are very convenient in many ways". (Participant A).

3.3 Idolization of the Smartphone

3.3.1 *Recognising it as one of the Present*

Beyond convenience, participants recognise the smartphone as "one of the present". One of the participants stated that all of the information she needs in her daily life is connected to the smartphone and for at least 50 percent of her life, she is connected to it. When she didn't have a smartphone, she would spend time looking at the computer and talking with her sister, but now, they just surf the internet without speaking. This anecdote illustrates how the smartphone is replacing the "present humans". One test subject admitted, "For me, my smartphone is my best friend. Without it, I don't feel bored. It is a tool that allows me to communicate with the world". (Participants H).

Another stated, "The smartphone is my friend, obeying my commands and providing me with all sorts of convenient tools". (Participant G).

3.3.2 *Alter Ego*

Participants often expressed that their smartphone is "another them". It is essentially their alter ego. Participants bring it everywhere they go and in some ways, it helps them to distinguish themselves among the crowd. "My feeling toward my smartphone is, for me, like a new friend. That being said I also understand that there are negative aspects such as a lack of self-reliance, essentially becoming less functional in the world. I am completely dependent on the machine. I always like to have it around me because I think it will improve how I see myself". (Participant B).

"My smart phone is like my alter ego. All of my information is in it including; my pictures, my private data, and my social networks. With my old folder phone, I was

just able to access pictures but my smartphone has endless possibilities". (Participant C).

3.3.3 *Enslavement*

Recently, a new understanding is emerging regarding smart phones. It is no longer always seen as a convenient tool. Now it is often seen as a controlling force in daily life. One participant stated that since he does most activities with his smartphone, he feels that he was becoming a virtual slave to it. He feels that he can act only with his smartphones guidance. Some participants thought that their smartphones replaced their own independent thought process. This can be seen as a role reversal of "user" and "tool". When the users can no longer function independently, who is in control?

"I started to use the smartphone for its convenience but recently, I feel that it has been using me". (Participant H).

"Smartphones are so attractive to people because it gives them a false impression that they are becoming smarter by using it. Soon however, they realize that they are, in fact, becoming a slave to the machine. It is like a bad friend always whispering in your ear. I know that it is harmful to me but I can't stop using it". (Participant F).

"It is like my second head. I do everything with it, it remembers things for me. It even seems to know me". (Participant E).

3.4 *Change and Spiritual Conflict*

3.4.1 *The Emergence of the Smartphone Culture in the Church*

It seems like there is a new culture in the church regarding the use of smartphones. Their increasing use is an intrusion into worship and other church activities. Instead of reading a hard copy Bible in worship, it is common to see people use a Bible application.

One participant said, "Even the older generation accepts the new change. I bring both my Bible and smartphone. Once the sermon begins, I tend to open the Bible application. Some ministers will have restrictions on the use of smartphones, but they don't make us stop using them completely". (Participant B)

3.4.2 *Desensitisation of Guilt*

When the smartphones began appearing in church, the students reported that there was a bit of guilt involved in using the Bible application during worship, how-

ever as time went by, participants became increasingly less reluctant. In this way, they have also become more susceptible to its dangers. In fact, participants in some case have even begun searching the internet instead of using the Bible application. They simply cannot resist the temptation.

"In the past, I always brought my Bible to worship. Without it, I felt like I wasn't prepared for the service. Now, I started to bring just my smartphone. At first, I felt guilty. Now, I feel it is very convenient and I don't feel guilty anymore". (Participant B).

Similarly, one student mentioned, "At first, I felt conflicted about searching the internet during worship but now it has become natural". (Participant A).

3.4.3 *Interference with the Spiritual Side of Life*

While the participants in the study use the smartphone, they feel that the machine interferes with their spiritual growth. When they didn't have a smartphone, many used to spend their free time in prayer. Now however, they don't have free time. It seems they are always busy with their phone. They find themselves answering the messenger or searching the internet, even during the worship service. Additionally, they often feel confused due to the indiscriminate or even harmful information accessed via the smartphone. They feel threatened that their faith is in danger by the technology. "When I was in high school, I was a member of the CCC religious club. I used to have my meditation book and practiced every morning. After I finished my military service, I started to use a smartphone. I don't know whether it was the main reason, but I don't do morning meditation anymore". (Participant J).

Another admitted, "I know it is not right and I should stand firm for my faith, but if I hear the news for mass media criticising the church, I find myself joining in". (Participant K).

3.4.4 *Religious Conflict*

To the participant, the smartphone has been recognised as an "infinite possibility machine". In addition, it has been understood as a great advancement for human civilization, much the same as the Tower of Babel of ancient times. The smartphone, as did the Tower of Babel, challenges the power of the Divine. Participants confessed that they placed the smartphone before God. It is a love/hate relationship. For some, because of this realisation, their inner conflict has intensified.

"I think God is jealous of the smartphones influence because people put it before him. I wish people could use smartphones only for positive things". (Participant F).

Another of the participants acknowledged, "I am very pessimistic concerning my smartphone use. It has very few limitations. ...I think the smartphone is like the power of the Tower of Babel reborn in the modern world. I don't think God approves". (Participants G).

3.5 Keeping Faith in the Digital World

3.5.1 The Internal Moral Compass

The modern age is regarded as the "digital age". Smart phones have become an irreversible force in our contemporary culture. While participants in this study acknowledged the realities of living in this extremely digitalised world, they also are trying to filter harmful and unnecessary information. The participants are essentially trying to maintain their Christian perspective. They are attempting to access information available through the internet while, at the same time, filtering it. They are ultimately trying to maintain psychological distance from their smartphone. In this way, they can re-establish themselves as the "primary self".

"I'm afraid that the internet media is so biased; therefore there is a lot of incorrect information floating around. Before it is confirmed, people often propagate this incorrect information via their social networks. I hated that so I decided to stop using Facebook". (Participant K).

At least from the Christian perspective, smart phones have tangible negative effects. Both smart phones and computers were invented to be convenient tools, but in so being, we have become overly dependent upon them. "I used to blindly accept news from the internet without question, but now I try to rethink and evaluate that information". (Participant J).

3.5.2 Self-Reflection and Regulation

Participants demonstrate self-reflection through acknowledging their indiscreet smartphone use, during worship and other devotional times. Participants seek the solution for smartphone overused by setting rules and self-regulating. Participants in the study tried to control themselves by making small changes, for example, reading the Bible itself instead of using the Bible application or turning off their smartphones during times they deem as valuable.

One participant recounts, "During worship, while I was using my smartphone, I got a text message from the

pastor. He advised me to turn off the smart phone during the worship service. I felt shame and reflected upon my bad habit". (Participant A)

"Now, I try to turn off my smartphone unless I really need it. I know it is not right to use it during the worship service". (Participant K).

3.5.3 Exploring the Coexistence of Faith and the Smartphone

The study also found that participants explore ways to maintain their faith while continuing to use their phone. Moreover, they tried to find positive uses for it. Taking a positive view, one participant stated that she reads the Bible more than ever thanks to the smart phone Bible application. Another participant is using her smartphone to preach to others.

The participant says that "it is easier to approach people with a smartphone than with the actual Bible. People have less resistance to smartphones and it provides easy access to Christian knowledge. When they have a meeting in church, using the messenger service is also helpful for expressing their thoughts. It is very common to use the Bible application among Christians. It used to be work opening the Bible every day but now I set the alarm to read it and faithfully follow the plan". (Participants J).

"To non-Christians, seeing the Bible brings resistance. However, when people see contents in my smart phone, people are less so. They don't feel that I am preaching but sharing information. Based on this experience, I think smart phones will be very helpful in the future in reaching out to people". (Participant J).

4. Conclusion

In this study, the psychological and spiritual conflicts associated with overuse of smartphones have been identified. The following details suggestions based on the results found.

The First, it is necessary to screen whether college students are addicted to using the smartphone. According to the degree, proper education of smartphone usage would be beneficial to students who are prone to addiction. At the same time, psychotherapy should be offered to relieve anxiety and psychological disorders resulting from its use. Second, smartphone use often results in people isolating themselves. In addition, people often recognise their smartphone as "another self," leading to a role reversal of

“user” and “tool”. Third, it has been noticed that due to excessive use of smartphones, participants suffered from conflict in their spiritual lives. However, as they became aware, they made a more earnest effort to be mindful of their faith in this digital age.

Considering these aspects, this study proposes to develop and provide enhanced interpersonal and communication programs as well as emphasising education celebrating human contact. These programs will contribute to restoring respect in the human spirit. It is necessary to educate students in the proper perspective and attitude towards smart media. This will help to minimise inner conflict. It cannot be the solution to prohibit or criticize the use of smartphones. It is however, necessary to keep a balance between faith and smartphone use. In this case, bilateral coexistence is the key to the solution.

Although this study was only focused on college students, nearly the entire population uses smartphones, from small children to the elderly. We propose to study the problem of smartphone overuse and its psychological/spiritual side effects on different target groups. Those studies will, no doubt, aid in a clearer understanding of this particular technologies role in our life.

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