

What the Smartphone Addiction Debate Tells Us About Adolescent Smartphone Use

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Abstract: *This paper delves into the intricate mechanisms underlying smartphone addiction, meticulously examining its multifaceted impacts on adolescents. Specifically, it discusses three pivotal aspects: the detrimental consequences smartphones inflict upon adolescent development, the ongoing discourse surrounding smartphone addiction, and the profound insights garnered from this debate. Furthermore, the paper offers pragmatic recommendations aimed at guiding adolescents towards responsible smartphone usage.*

Keywords: Smartphone addiction, Adolescents.

1. Introduction

With the convenience of network connection technology, smartphones are becoming more and more powerful, and can even replace electronic devices such as computers and laptops. In 2023, the Fifth National Study on Internet Usage by Minors, China's minors have 193 million Internet users, and the Internet penetration rate has reached 97.2%. The current status quo also raises concerns about the overuse and overdependence of smartphones in the youth population. Smartphone addiction (SD) refers to smartphone dependence, which refers to the overdependence on smartphones and the impairment of psychological and social functioning caused by overuse. Phillips and Bianchi (2005) argued that smartphone overuse and its associated psychological symptoms constitute a behavioral addiction. Lee et al. (2014) pointed out that individuals' excessive dependence on and misuse of smartphones are prone to psychological and behavioral problems. Cell phone addiction is gradually becoming an emerging social and public health problem, a psychological and behavioral problem specific to individuals in the Internet era, with a high detection rate in the young population. Due to the characteristics of immature physical and mental development, adolescents are more likely to develop smartphone addiction [3]. In recent years, cell phone addiction among children and adolescents has become more and more serious, and Internet addiction or Internet pathology. Internet use is on the rise among Chinese adolescents [4][5], and excessive or problematic smartphone use among adolescents is twice as high as among adults [6]. In the past few years, there has been a surge in research on smartphone addiction, but there are also many debates. These debates shed some light on understanding adolescent smartphone use.

2. Adverse Effects of Smartphones on Teenagers

With the proliferation of network connectivity technology, smartphones have evolved into increasingly potent devices, capable of supplanting traditional electronic platforms like computers and laptops. According to the Fifth National Study on Internet Usage by Minors in 2023, China boasts an astounding 193 million minor internet users, with a penetration rate soaring to 97.2%. This prevalent usage underscores growing concerns regarding the potential for

overindulgence and overreliance on smartphones among youth. Smartphone addiction (SD), a term coined to describe the excessive reliance on smartphones and the subsequent deterioration of psychological and social functioning, has garnered significant attention. Phillips and Bianchi (2005) contend that excessive smartphone usage, along with its attendant psychological manifestations, constitutes a behavioral addiction. Lee et al. (2014) further emphasize that individuals' excessive dependency and misuse of smartphones predispose them to a myriad of psychological and behavioral issues. As a burgeoning social and public health concern, smartphone addiction represents a unique psychological and behavioral challenge of the digital age, particularly pronounced among young individuals. Adolescents, due to their immature physical and psychological development, are particularly vulnerable to developing this addiction [4]. Alarming, the prevalence of smartphone addiction among children and adolescents has escalated in recent years, paralleling the rise of internet addiction or internet pathology among Chinese adolescents [3][6]. Notably, problematic smartphone usage among adolescents is twice as prevalent as among adults. Despite the surge in research on smartphone addiction in recent years, there exists a robust debate surrounding its nature and implications, which has illuminated key insights into adolescent smartphone usage patterns.

3. Arguments about Smartphone Addiction

Firstly, The question of whether excessive smartphone usage can attain the threshold of addiction merits academic scrutiny. Addiction studies have a historical foundation rooted in the medical realm, specifically focusing on substance abuse and dependence. Nevertheless, among experts investigating smartphone addiction, it is acknowledged that this phenomenon is not commensurate with heroin or tobacco addiction in terms of severity or associated health consequences. According to Panova and Carbonell (2018), current research lacks definitive evidence from an addiction framework to conclusively establish the phenomenon of smartphone addiction. Furthermore, they contend that individuals displaying diminished self-regulatory abilities exhibit excessive smartphone use behaviors, whose consequences, though categorized as problematic or maladaptive, do not constitute severe harm. The excessive

utilization of smartphones can potentially negatively impact various aspects of life, including academic performance. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these issues may stem from diverse causes and pressures that transcend the addiction paradigm.

Secondly, the existence of smartphone addiction remains a contentious issue. Lowe-Calverley (2020a) and other scholars contend that individuals do not inherently develop an addictive tendency towards the smartphone device itself, but rather that the addictive tendency stems from an individual's preference for specific content or functionality that the smartphone facilitates access to. Individuals employ, or are facilitated by, a particular device (or medium) to cultivate an addictive predisposition towards a specific function or content. Researchers must differentiate between content capable of eliciting comparable addictive behaviors from users and the medium's role in providing user-friendly access to such content, which can potentially trigger addiction. The specific functionalities and content hosted on smartphones are pivotal in fostering addiction. The portable and ubiquitous nature of smartphones facilitates problematic online behaviors, such as compulsive social media usage, pornography and gambling addictions, excessive gaming, among others. enabling access to these activities anytime, anywhere, thereby escalating the frequency of their usage. However, the smartphone device itself is not the root of the problem. Balakrishnan and Griffiths (2019) discovered that gamers frequently attributed their addictions to mobile gaming. In this context, the potential addiction is specifically tied to the gaming behavior, rather than the device in its entirety.

Thirdly, the issue of addiction judgment criteria and characteristics. screening studies predominantly emphasize prolonged usage duration and heightened tolerance. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that in contemporary society, the frequent utilization of smartphones has become an integral aspect of daily life. Consequently, adolescents' inclination towards and engagement with their devices, when viewed as necessities for daily functioning, should not be automatically equated with addiction. Furthermore, the mere presence of smartphones as a constant thought in one's mind, justified by their essential role in daily life, does not inherently indicate addiction. In line with this, researchers such as Panova and Carbonell (2018) contend that many adolescents acknowledge their frequent smartphone usage, yet this may not necessarily reflect addiction, given the pervasive integration of smartphones into their social, professional, and personal lives.

4. Insights from the Smartphone Addiction Debate

Researchers have advocated for a nuanced distinction between smartphone usage categorized as problematic or maladaptive and the addictive symptoms indicative of severe psychopathology. This distinction safeguards against diminishing the gravity of mental health disorders while concurrently preventing the trivialization of routine behaviors through over-pathologization. Billieux (2015), alongside other scholars, cautions against the excessive pathologization of mundane life occurrences, emphasizing the need for a balanced perspective. This discourse underscores the importance of adopting a more rational stance towards

adolescent smartphone addiction discourse, eschewing both over-pathologization and stigmatization. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that excessive smartphone use can indeed elicit a myriad of detrimental effects on adolescents. While the concept of smartphone addiction remains contentious, the fact remains that excessive usage does have tangible repercussions on teenage well-being. Consequently, our approach must strike a delicate balance, neither oversimplifying nor overly dramatizing the issue from a political, legal, or any other singular perspective.

Second, the content of smartphone use is more important. The study revealed an absence of addiction to smartphone devices themselves, but rather an addiction to a particular aspect of their content. Notably, adolescents' engagement with smartphone content emerges as a pivotal factor. Consequently, it is imperative to discern between the content experienced by users and the medium that enables access to such content, as individuals may develop addictive tendencies towards specific activities undertaken within the context of their experience, rather than the device facilitating those activities. The rise of "live teaching" and "online courses" as standardized instructional modalities underscores the prevalence of smartphones among student populations as a tool of choice. In this scenario, the potential for addiction pertains to specific gaming behaviors, rather than the device holistically. To delve into the conceptualization of smartphone addiction, the study examined adolescents' preferences for distinct smartphone features from a parental perspective, while scrutinizing behavioral alterations associated with restricted access to these preferred features. Furthermore, it explored the correlation between smartphone usage and self-reported psychological well-being. The exposure content was cautiously curated to exclude undesirable elements such as gaming and online gambling. A comprehensive online survey was administered to 471 participants, eliciting data on sociodemographic characteristics, patterns of actual and hypothetical smartphone usage, and indicators of psychological well-being, including depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms [19].

Third, focusing on and guiding the norms of smart phone. Smartphones have become an essential part of everyday life, and when people's daily lives are connected to their smartphones, they experience separation anxiety when they cannot use them or are away from them. Smartphones can provide a "security blanket" effect for adolescents during times of stress, reducing the stress response, similar to the relationship between a child and a comforting object such as a blanket. However, on the other hand, it is important to recognize the harmful effects of excessive smartphone use on adolescents. Therefore, it is important for adolescents to develop a rational and scientific way of using smartphones, and parents can play a role in guiding and nurturing them in this process.

In a nationwide survey by Ma, Rongzi, and Meng et al. (2021), parental communication and awareness can effectively curb children's and adolescents' cell phone use and addiction by providing them with appropriate emotional and informational support, and by effectively communicating with them to make them realize the importance of balancing their cell phone use with their daily student life. Chinese parents' generally

negative attitudes toward children and adolescents' cell phone use overly restrict their children's cell phone use, which is counterproductive and leads to children and adolescents playing with their cell phones through lying and other means, which in turn makes them more susceptible to cell phone addiction. Zhou Nan (2024) et al. concluded that cell phone usage time and cell phone addiction among Chinese children and adolescents are influenced by a variety of internal and external factors, such as the motivation for cell phone use and parenting styles. Therefore, parents should understand the internal needs of children and adolescents through communication and channel them in a reasonable way. Family education should help parents develop positive parenting behaviors such as communication and knowledge to reduce the occurrence of inappropriate cell phone use. School education should help adolescents develop scientific motivation for cell phone use.

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