

Natalie Malinowski

THE SMARTPHONE  
REVOLUTION

Nominated by Mary Jo Wiese

## The Smartphone Revolution

Over the past week, I joined the very few adults in the world that do not have a phone. I previously referred to myself as a technology assailant. However, living on a college campus without a phone for a week illuminated the benefits of The Smartphone that I previously took for granted. When I reunited with my smartphone at the end of the week, I even concluded that living without a phone, even a smartphone, is unnecessary to be present and undistracted. If I can ration the applications on my Iphone, keeping only the necessary ones and allotting myself times when I can have “guilty-pleasure apps” (like Facebook), then maybe my experiment can become a blueprint for a larger social movement to save college students from incomplete, technologically disrupted lives.

Within the first hour without my phone, I noticed how often my friends’ smartphones separated them from the space they inhabited, the space with their friends. One friend, in particular, repeatedly left the group to talk with people from home. Fortunately, through her smartphone, she can sustain close relationships with her friends and family from back home. However, the smartphone’s abundance of connectivity applications easily disengages her from forming new relationships.

Each time people use their phones in social environments, they inevitably miss opportunities to develop closer relationships with the people physically surrounding them. Furthermore, they deflect potential friends. According to an analysis of “Couples, the Internet, and Social Media,” a research study by Casey Phillips in *Government Technology*, 40% of young smartphone users report feeling ignored by their peers (Phillips). When someone using their phone shows disinterest in their surroundings, potential friends lose interest as well. Based on my survey study of 17 Goucher students, most smartphone owners use their device to connect with

other people. So, it's unfortunate that the device that people use to keep in touch just as seamlessly distances them from people.

Not surprisingly, but nonetheless unnerving, people don't even need to use their smartphone for it to distance them from their surroundings. Even if smartphone users push their phone aside, research shows that it continues to occupy their mind. Many of us have voluntarily allowed this to happen on days when we expect an important call, but Bill Davidow discusses how this phenomenon invades our lives more often than we know.

His research analysis reveals that social media and messaging notifications stimulate dopamine outputs that smartphone users have no conscious control over (Davidow). One Goucher student who participated in my poll compared receiving a notification on her phone to opening a present on Christmas morning. It's an exciting surprise tied up in an anxious feeling that we can't shake. Considering the multitude of people that always carry their phones, their mind's involuntary response to our phone—an equivalent to an open mailbox—never turns off. So, rather than engaging with the person sitting across from them, their mind anticipates notifications.

To make matters worse, not many people escape this internal attachment. Even social butterflies don't last against the manipulative tactics of the technology industry. Robinson Meyer explains in his article, "The Phone That Wasn't There: 11 Things You Need to Know About Phantom Vibrations," that extroverts and neurotics report more phantom vibrations than any other social personality (Meyer). Phantom vibrations are occurrences when phone owners believe their phone is vibrating when it's not. Their frequency in extroverts and neurotics implies that they're continuously thinking about what's going on in their phone. Meyer's theory affects introverts as well. Although, their dopamine stimulation more often comes from games on

smartphones, which present them with an opportunity “to move away from the real social environment” (Aysan and Savci 205).

Smartphones not only alter our external relationships, they also impact a person’s identity. In a study published by the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, researchers tested how smartphones distort a person’s self-portrayal. They discovered that when they separated study participants from their ringing smartphones, the participants’ anxiety increased and their ability to concentrate on the word puzzle vanished. However, when the same participants completed the word puzzle with their smartphone beside them, they reported that their emotions were pleasant (Almond, Clayton, and Leshner 132). The participants’ inability to operate when their smartphone called them suggests that people experience separation anxiety when they’re far from their phone. This further hints that many smartphone owners, especially youth, believe their phone is a part of their self (Almond, Clayton, and Leshner 132). In fact, this idea has become prevalent enough for the medical sector to define it: *nomophobia*: a fear, anxiety, or discomfort related to being out of touch with technology (Almond, Clayton, and Leshner 120).

Obviously, many smartphone owners nestle their phones deep into their life. And it’s not surprising considering that many people rely on their smartphone to keep in touch (Facebook, Instagram, Text Messaging, Phone, Whatsapp, Email), organize their life (Calendar, Alerts, Alarm Clock), de-stress (Music, Pinterest, Netflix), and mobilize (Google Maps, airline applications, Yelp). While living without a phone, I realised that smartphones increase the efficiency of our daily lives. Every time I went out while I didn’t have a smartphone, I scurried around my room to hunt down my planner and my Onecard (which I usually carry on the back of my phone). If I wanted to quickly contact people or play music, I pained my back to lug my computer around. And each night, I reset my ancient alarm clock, praying that its low volume

would wake me up in time for class. Some things can be substituted or left behind, but smartphones also provide valuable technology that should not be ignored.

This juxtaposition of one device simultaneously helping and hurting a person's socialization, exposes the smartphone's recurring issue. How do adolescents reap smartphone's benefits without enduring its psychological consequences?

Combating smartphone addiction begins with identifying the addiction. So, here it is: people on average use their smartphone for 3.5 hours per day, which combined equates to nearly one day each week (Almond, Clayton, and Leshner 127). But, a smartphone revolution is possible with the help of a few influential people beginning to exhibit or mandate limitations on smartphone use.

Of course, another option includes self-control, but, research suggests that's not probable, especially in adolescents. Research shows that popularity predominantly influences adolescents' decisions, which means that adolescents will not change on their own. This social analysis manifests in a neurological experiment conducted by the *Association for Psychological Science*, "The Power of the *Like* in Adolescence: Effects of Peer Influence on Neural and Behavioral Responses to Social Media." The researchers identified that popularity affects adolescents' decisions, based on their observations of others' "liking" patterns on an application that resembles Instagram. They noted that photos with more likes spurred participants to like the photos, and they stimulated regions of their brain connected to social cognition (Sherman, Payton, Hernandez, Greenfield, and Dapretto 1031). This reveals that youth and young adults mimic popular trends because they perceive them as favorable, cool behaviors.

While adolescents may not break their addiction on their own, if society alters its use of the smartphone, adolescents will follow. Some areas of society already promote this, such as Bird in Hand, a coffee shop in Baltimore, which does not allow customers to use technology at

their tables from 11 AM to 3 PM. People respect the coffee shop's warm environment and dedication to serving healthy, humane food, so they consequently respect their vision to promote social interaction (which they imply technological use can prevent). Through their business, the owners hint at their beliefs that technological addictions have crushing effects on relationships. But, they provide a space where people can experience the opposite effect: physical socializing and connection! Hopefully, their customers start to catch on and carry this practice into the rest of their life.

Take note, however, that Bird in Hand still allows customers to use technology during the morning and night hours. The coffee shop recognizes smartphones' benefits, which I, a technology assailant, too cannot ignore. As nice as it is for someone to drop by for a quick chat rather than send a text message, the time it takes to walk exceeds the small amount of leisurely time most people have. A quick text holds more value than I thought! And while I've focused more on the people around me, I've missed major news alerts, including an alert of an intruder on campus.

Engineers, scientists, and application innovators problem-solved to make life easier through technological improvement. We should not discredit them or stomp on their innovations if they also happen to bring along digressions. Rather, start a trend, or follow the grassroots movement to ration the amount of time we tap away at our smartphones.

Tristan Harris, who graduated from Stanford with a degree in Computer Science, left Google to start up a movement he calls "Time Well Spent." While working in the technology industry in Silicon Valley, he questioned how a few corporate minds had the unchecked power to psychologically manipulate millions of smartphone users. Now, his grassroots movement emphasizes "reversing the digital attention crisis and realigning technology with humanity's best interest" (Harris). He problem solves with "focus mode" ideas, which could, for example,

temporarily hold all notifications while typing an email (Bosker). Harris beckons technology corporations to take accountability through a small, start-up team of people with his same experience or who merely exhibit disdain for the technology time vacuum. However, they're not advocating to ban smartphones; in fact he and his co-workers own smartphones!

Many people acknowledge their extreme dependence on their smartphone, yet like me, they think that smartphones are all or nothing; a person either does not have a smartphone or they have a smartphone with *all* the apps. In order for Harris' movement to gain momentum, society must realize and decipher the difference between problematic and effective smartphone use. Problematic smartphone use resembles

“neglect of activities due to excessive use, disrupting social relations due to excessive use, use as an escape tool from negative emotions and life stress, having problems in giving up and reducing the use, becoming nervous and anxious when it is not possible to use, and deceiving others regarding the duration and amount of use” (Aysan and Savci 204).

I needed to experience a week without an iPhone to comprehend effective smartphone use. Now I implement my personalized focus mode by deleting apps, like Instagram—which I can live without—and removing notifications from every app but phone calls. Changing this black and white mentality can return smartphones to their original, advantageous intent: connection, knowledge, and accessibility.

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## Research Strategy

First, I scavenged through the Goucher library database and found several editorials and academic journal articles examining how excessive smartphone activity distorts people's perceptions of themselves, their relationships, and their emotions. The sources revealed dismal effects on the human condition, most prominently in adolescents. This was not news to me; I felt like a servant to my iPhone, checking on it six times per hour. Our parasitic relationship caused me to experiment with my own life and steered my research toward adolescents' use with smartphones.

However, I could not rely on my experience alone. After all, I knew my relationship with technology was far more mild than most. I wanted evidence of other Goucher students' relationships with smartphones. Students' flabbergasted faces when I told them I was living without my phone summed up what I suspected: adolescents nearly survive off of their phones. However, my survey illuminated rarer evidence as well: many students were aware of their dependence on their phone, whether they approved of it or not. Their awareness and my own struggle without a smartphone directed my research towards a more viable goal.

I concluded that adolescents would be more willing to follow movements to remove the "parasitic" portion of their relationship because they acknowledged it. I realized this potential the night I visited Bird In Hand coffee shop. I remembered their table cards gently nudging customers to value face-to-face over virtual interaction, and I recognized their smaller efforts as a larger awareness revolution. Thus, my solution took shape.

The Goucher library guide initiated my discoveries in academic journals that I could trust. And then it guided me on to my own study, which I intertwined into the peer-reviewed, scholarly research accessible through Goucher.