

FORMATION, EDUCATION, AND THE ALWAYS-ON, ALWAYS-ON YOU SMARTPHONE

By Rob Rhea, PhD

Introduction

Smartphones are everywhere, can do everything, and are reshaping the ways people relate to one another. Making an actual phone call is almost passé. In Sherry Turkle, in her insightful book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk In A Digital Age*, suggests that the smartphone has changed not just how people communicate but how they think of ourselves and others. There is little moral high ground in how all, young and old, increasingly have their phones glued to their hands. In Turkle's words, "This is a loss, not an evolution."¹ It is news to no one that the "always-on, always-on-you" smartphone, tethering individuals to constant internet connectivity, is exerting an astounding formational and relational pull on users. The phone has become a primary portal for jobs, socializing, staying informed, dating and breaking up, and a thousand other endeavours. With a smartphone in hand, the possibilities seem endless.

In a broader sense, the smartphone is increasingly the beginning point of contact people have to the internet and digital ecosystems - digitally mediated interaction is quickly becoming the norm. The number of texts sent globally is increasing while the number of voice phone calls is decreasing. Many now consider access to the internet to be a non-negotiable. The United Nations now regards internet access as a human right because being able to freely access information can assist in making populations freer and more democratic.² Within America, 28 percent of adults report that they are online constantly.³ Forty-five percent of teens say they never unplug from the internet⁴ and the smartphone has become the primary access point for the internet. By age 11, 53 percent of American children have a smartphone with that number increasing to 97 percent by the time they reach 18.⁵ While saturation rates have plateaued, they are near total with 94 percent of 18-49-year-olds owning a smartphone.⁶

The phone exerts a power on the user by its mere presence. As an example, research suggests that the mere presence of a phone changes the depth of

¹ Sherry Turkle. *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (NY: Penguin Press, 2015), 14.

² United Nations. Report of the Special Rapporteur of the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, May 16, 2011, <https://www.ohchr.org/on/issues/freedomofopinion/pages/annual.aspx>.

³ Aaron Perrin and Sarah Atske, "About Three-in-Ten Adults Say They Are Almost Constantly Online," *Pew Research Centre*, March 26, 2021.

⁴ Monica Anderson and Jing Jing Jiange. "Teens, Social Media and Technology," *Pew Research Centre*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Deloitte, "Global Media Consumer Survey US Edition," *Deloitte Reports*, 2018.

conversation.⁷ The average 18-24-year-old American checks their phone 74 times a day while the average American checks their phone 52 times a day.⁸ Given the current US population, this statistic yields that Americans turn to their phones over 17 trillion times daily. Few educators would say this sort of repetition would not be formative. And this habituated action is not simply a physical action. The smartphone delivers entertainment, information, sexual content, and commerce, all with a high degree of novelty. Further, phones have become a source of anxiety in people's lives by creating a sense of always needing to catch up with emails, texts, social media posts, and professional obligations, to name a few. The mind, will, and desires are all accessed and formed through these habituated exposures. People are holistically directed by their phones.

This article will explore both the motivations and formational consequences of life lived through the smartphone in three sections. First, it will consider three shadows the smartphone casts onto the life of the user. Specifically, this section will consider the ways technology constrains or limits the user, the ways the phone influences one's experience of loneliness and solitude. To conclude this section, it will explore how the smartphone pulls the user away from the current moment we are in. The second section will examine the physiological and psychological impacts of smartphone use on well-being. The final section will consider the character formation implications of smartphone use. Even though the smartphone, with its online capabilities and social media interfaces, is a recent development, age-old wisdom still provides salient guidance. Through history, the contexts may change but the human heart does not. Wisdom from the scriptures and church history will continue to show the way forward with the technology of today and the devices and platforms of tomorrow.

Three Shadows the Smartphone Casts on Lives

As the smartphone's presence becomes increasingly assumed, thoughtful influencers should pause to consider the shadows the presence of the phone casts on lives. While the smartphone is a generative influence and beneficial in many ways, there are downsides. The first shadow or constraint is the inherent limitations the technology brings to the user. In the last half of the twentieth century, Marshall McLuhan showed that each technologically expanded capacity also involves a limitation.⁹ McLuhan saw technology in the broadest terms. Phones are technology

⁷ Adrian Ward, et al, "Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity," *Journal of the Association for Cognitive Research* 2, no. 2 (2017): 140-154; Andrew Przybylski and Netta Weinstein, "Can You Connect With Me Now? How the Presence of Mobile Communication Technology Influences Face-to-Face Conversation Quality," *Journal of Personal and Social Relationships* 30, no. 2 (July 2012): 237-246.

⁸ Deloitte, 2018.

⁹ Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (Cambridge, AM: MIT Press, 2002).

but so are houses and cars. Each technological development extends the users' capabilities in significant ways but also constrains them. The limitations serve as a corrective to the Enlightenment notion that every horizon that technology brings is only positive and expands possibilities.

A second shadow is the effect smartphone use has on people's sense of social connectedness, specifically experienced as loneliness. How are the distinctions between solitude and loneliness best understood in the smartphone discussion? Much smartphone use is individualized and physically isolated, while at the same time users are socially connected. Life is being lived "out there somewhere" as our bodies are in one place and our minds and consciousness are somewhere else. In real life (IRL) now refers only to physical proximity and has nothing to do with the quality of the interpersonal exchange. An important question to ask is whether smartphone-mediated relationships differ in degree and/or kind with conventional, face-to-face relations. Are exchanges facilitated through the phone substantively different than those that occur face-to-face?

A third shadow is the tension created when an experience is seen only in light of its "shareability." With the ever-present availability of a camera enabled phone, the user is able to step out of the current moment of experience to consider how the photo-captured moment will share with friends near and far. The contemporary phrase "pics or it didn't happen" captures this need to always validate an experience with a sharable picture.

Exploration of the three shadows will help to establish a realistic view of the smartphone's influence in the user's life.

The First Shadow: The Limiting Effects of Technology

The role technology plays in life has been a subject of popular and academic thought in the last half of the twentieth century through today. Topics around trans-humanism, augmented reality, virtual reality, and all manner of dystopian themes are now a part of everyday language and life. The visionary technological innovations have not arrived without consequence. Difficult ethical and existential questions related to human interactions with technology and machines were explored before recent innovations existed by two the technology thought leaders of the late twentieth century: Marshal McLuhan and Neil Postman.

Neil Postman was media critic and long-time professor at the State University of New York. He is best known for his critique of television's influence on society as reflected in his seminal work *Amusing Ourselves To Death*.¹⁰ One of Postman's central assumptions is that technological change and development always involve a trade-off. Technological innovation involves transformative benefits, but with real

¹⁰ Neil Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. (New York: Methuen Publishing, 1987).

limitations. The development of the automobile is an example. The car has allowed society to move people and goods with greater speed and capacity. However, the internal combustion engine has led to polluted air, choked cities and environmental disasters through oil spills. This is never truer than with the smartphone. The smartphone has provided ongoing and immediate access to the internet and the ability to instantaneously interact with friends and strangers around the globe. However, implicit in this new “smartphone-enabled” reality is the growing assumption that with all of these options, an individual should be able to direct their attention to wherever they want, whenever they want. The limiting trade-off then is people have become increasingly inattentive to those they are physically with and have become obsessed with the people and places from which they are removed. “Being present” with someone has taken on a new meaning with the smartphone in hand. As Turkle has stated, the great irony the smartphone has fostered is relational schizophrenia: hypervigilance when apart; inattention when together.¹¹ The smartphone presents a type of push and pull in life – people are pushed away from the present moment and company they are with and pulled toward an ever-ready and alluring horizon of possibility and novelty. Further, the phone sells the lie that they can be in two places at once. By bifurcating interactions between physical presence and virtual presence, the phone incrementally moves people away from the moment they are in. Increasingly gone are the nuanced relational moments and non-verbal cues involved in real interpersonal communication. As Turkle would say, this is a loss, not an evolution.

McLuhan, a Canadian professor and media theorist, was an astute observer of the interaction of the technology and the person using the technology. One of his central axioms is that all technology people use is an extension of their humanity in some way- the hammer extends the hand, the car extends the foot. and so on.¹² However, in using technology, the capabilities they gain can be offset by limitations incurred through using the technology. A well-travelled example is the hammer. When an individual picks up a hammer, they can accomplish tasks they were unable to accomplish before, such as driving a nail. However, now they cannot use their hand to button their shirt or pick up a pen to write something. While the smartphone and the hammer are both examples of technology, it needs to be acknowledged that they are fundamentally different. A hammer extends the hand. A smartphone extends the psyche. The phone is a medium through which the deepest elements of who a person is are communicated. Identity related issues such as who people love, how they love, what they like, and what they value are readily posted through the outward facing modalities of social media.

¹¹ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 160.

¹² McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 6.

Through this outward facing process, people become increasingly able to sidestep or avoid the complexities of the moment they are in. If a child is upset, parents hand them a cartoon playing on a device. If feeling underappreciated, teenagers can fish for likes by posting photos of a recent outing. The relational realities, both within and without, are often left unattended. Tech companies have become masters at taking circles of friends and attachments and perpetually looping them back as the means for soothing the existential tension users feel. Self-soothing protocols act like a Tylenol – short-term relief but with no capacity to address the underlying source of discomfort or angst. This cycle works itself out many times every day.

The Second Shadow: Solitude and Loneliness

Are people alone when they are by themselves relating to others through social media on their phones? Is this an experience of solitude? Does the relational economy of the smartphone realm diminish or exacerbate feelings of loneliness? Loneliness can be a complex issue. A person can be extremely lonely and be in a crowd. This loneliness is often truly dark. Conversely, a person can be in a state of solitude and yet feel relationally rich and connected. Understanding the relational overlap and distinctives of solitude and loneliness is an important facet of a discussion on smartphones.

To understand the challenge described above, it would be helpful to understand the differences between solitude and loneliness. Throughout Christian history, solitude has long been considered one of the classic disciplines. Early monastics codified the practice of solitude as a normal and regular part of the Christian life. Christian spiritual guides have for centuries spoken about the powerful context solitude sets for spiritual growth and depth. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic *Life Together*, emphasizes that Christians need to take time away from their physical community. Bonhoeffer states that the “one who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair.”¹³ Bonhoeffer’s words point to the need to find a balance. In solitude, individuals are left with only inner voices and impulses, which the smartphone can easily drown out or allow them to avoid. Solitude is often coupled with the discipline of silence. If a person’s voice is taken away (silence) and their audience (solitude) is removed, then their inner life is all that is left. The individual must have time alone in order to bring something of substance to the times they are in community. The times in community will be far deeper and more meaningful as a result of the times in

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009): 78.

solitude. Together times of silence/solitude and times of community form a type of virtuous circle of growth and formation.

In light of the mounting crisis of loneliness in the West, the balance of silence and community is in short supply. The insurance company Cigna recently released a significant study showing levels of loneliness reaching critical levels across the general population.¹⁴ To the surprise of many, young adults (18-29) reported having the highest levels of loneliness. Other sources are making the same point with regards to loneliness among young adults. The National College Health Association's annual survey provides a robust picture of various health and well-being measures of university students. The survey assesses factors related to the physical, emotional, and relational health and well-being of university students across North America, with sample sizes exceeding 200,000. The 2018 wave of data reveals an increasing degree of loneliness among university students, with 65 percent of students reporting having felt "very lonely" in the last year,¹⁵ an increase over the two previous years (64 percent and 62 percent, respectively).¹⁶ If some of the highest levels of smartphone use are in the 18-29 demographic,¹⁷ and the highest levels of loneliness are also in the same demographic, it would seem worthwhile to explore how the two factors might be correlated. Internationally, in the United Kingdom, Britain has recently installed a new cabinet level post - the Minister of Loneliness as a way of responding to what it sees as an emerging health crisis. This action shows that government agencies see loneliness as a threat to the well-being and security of citizens.

Suffice to say, the promise of social media to bridge the gaps between individuals and to ensure heightened feelings of connectedness and intimacy have not materialized. As recent events have revealed,¹⁸ the corporate entities that provide these social media platforms are in reality relentlessly monetizing our most basic need to be seen and known and actively industrializing our identities and relationships.¹⁹

¹⁴ Cigna Corporation, "Loneliness and the Workplace." *Cigna Reports*, 23 January, 2021, <https://www.cigna.com/static/www-cigna-com/docs/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combating-loneliness/cigna-2020-loneliness-factsheet.pdf>.

¹⁵ American College Health Association, Undergraduate Student Reference Group Executive Summary 2018. 2019. https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/ncha-ii_fall_2016_undergraduate_reference_group_executive_summary.pdf.

¹⁶ American College Health Association, Undergraduate Student Reference Group Executive Summary 2017. 2018. https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/ncha-ii_fall_2017_reference_group_executive_summary_undergrads_only.pdf; American College Health Association, Undergraduate Student Reference Group Executive Summary 2016. 2017. https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/ncha-ii_fall_2016_undergraduate_reference_group_executive_summary.pdf.

¹⁷ Deloitte, 2018.

¹⁸ Jeff Horwitz and Justin Scheck, "The Facebook Files," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039>.

¹⁹ Felicia Song. *Restless Devices: Recovering Personhood, Presence and Place in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2021),

The Third Shadow: Smartphones and the Flight from the Current Moment

One of the most used and helpful aspects of a modern smartphone is the increasingly high-quality camera with which most are equipped. With a good quality camera continually at hand, people are continually recording every event of their days, from images of their epic lives to favorite meals, to friends and family. Picture taking and the digital recording of daily events are increasingly a part of everyday lives. The phrase “pics or it didn’t happen” has entered the popular vocabulary. It has been reported that 3.2 billion photos and 720,000 hours of video are shared daily, primarily through smartphone devices.²⁰ Life is now fully documented through photographs and video. Taking pictures to record the important events in life is one thing. Meticulously selecting, editing, and sharing them globally to create a life image is another.

The blending of actual experiences and a highlight reel of photographs of these experiences is described in the words of the art and photography critic Susan Sontag. In her classic work *On Photography*, she says “Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it, and participating in a public event comes more and more to be equivalent to looking at it in photographed form. That most logical of nineteenth-century aesthetes, Mallarmé, said that everything in the world exists in order to end in a book. Today everything exists to end in a photograph.”²¹ As the current phrase goes, “pics or it didn’t happen.”

With memories of events supported and extended through an expanding pool of photo and video documentation, events are now reduced, as Sontag suggests, to the photos that captured them. The increasing capacity for concurrent experiencing and sharing pulls individuals out of the moment of experience/engagement and places them where others view (and judge) their experience. Individuals now use photographs to shape and construct their memories and more existentially, the quality of their lives.

The Smartphone and Physical Well-being

An increasing body of research is revealing that smartphones are affecting users in significant physiological and psychological ways. Sleep disruption, orthopedic issues related to head and neck strain, eye strain, and serious injury related to distracted driving are just a few of the ways people’s bodies are being affected by ongoing phone use. The same is true, if not more so, of the psychological impacts of extended smartphone use. Anxiety, depression, and a diminished

²⁰ T.J. Thompson, Daniel Angus and Paula Dootson, “3.2 Photos and 720,000 Hours of Video are Shared Online Daily. Can You Sort Real From Fake?” *The Conversation*, November 2, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/3-2-billion-images-and-720-000-hours-of-video-are-shared-online-daily-can-you-sort-real-from-fake-148630>.

²¹ Susan Sontag. *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 24.

capacity to verbally communicate and read the emotional states of others are some of the ways the smartphone is affecting people's psychological dimensions.

Associations of Smartphone Use: Physiological

Sleep is one of the most important yet often least appreciated parts of a healthy life. Disrupted sleep and issues related to sleep hygiene are serious health issues, particularly for adolescents²² and young adults.²³ It has been reported that looking at their phones is often the last thing teenagers do before they fall asleep and the first thing they do when they wake up.²⁴ One report states that 57 percent of university students leave their ringer on to respond to messages as they arrive throughout the night.²⁵ This, coupled with the increasing number of people who use their phones as an alarm to wake up, makes the phone a 24/7 companion. Factors common to young adult experiences, such as stress and alcohol consumption, further complicate a situation where getting a sufficient amount of sleep is difficult. Shortened sleep duration increases health risks for obesity, metabolic dysfunction, increased mortality risk, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and general cardiovascular maladies.²⁶

Sleep hygiene is seen as a significant health issue during the university years. Extended phone use, stress and sleep disruption can exist in an reciprocal relationship. In relationship to sleep alone, research among university students has correlated high daily levels of stress to a shortened sleep duration and compromised quality of sleep.²⁷ Anxious adolescents have been shown to take longer to fall asleep than non-anxious adolescents, further complicating sleep issues.²⁸ The same seems to be true of university students. Research has positively related increased levels of sociability in communicating with peers on phones in the evening to increased levels

²² Heather Woods and Holly Scott, "Sleepy teens: Social Media Use in Adolescents is Associated with Poor Sleep Quality, Anxiety, Depression, and Low Self-Esteem," *Journal of Adolescence* 51, (August 2016): 41-49; Teresa Arora, et al, "Associations Between Specific Technologies and Adolescent Sleep Quantity, Sleep Quality, and Parasomnias," *Sleep Medicine* 12, no. 2 (February 2014):240-247).

²³ Mayo Clinic, "Are Smartphones Disrupting Your Sleep? Mayo Clinic Study Examines the Question," *Science Daily*, June 23, 2013, <https://sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/06/130603163610.html>.

²⁴ Larry Rosen, Mark Carrier and Nancy Cheever, "Facebook and Texting Made Me Do It: Media-Induced Task-Switching While Studying," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, no. 3 (May 2011): 948-858.

²⁵ Balan Rathakrishnan, et al, "Smartphone Addiction and Sleep Quality on Academic Performance: An Exploratory Research," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 6 (August 2021): 82-91.

²⁶ Teresa Valerio, Myoung Kim and Kathy Sexton-Radek, "Association of Stress, General Health and Alcohol Use With Poor Sleep Quality in U.S. College Students," *American Journal of Health Education* 47, no. 1 (2016): 17-23; Michael Grandner, et al, "Problems Associated with Short Sleep: Bridging the Gap Between Laboratory and Epidemiological Studies," *Sleep Medicine Review* 14, no. 4 (August 2010): 239-247.

²⁷ Leah Doane and Emily Thurston, "Associations Among Sleep, Daily Experiences, and Loneliness in Adolescence: Evidence of Moderating and Bidirectional Pathways," *Journal of Adolescence* 37, no. 4 (February 2014): 145-154.

²⁸ Michelle Short, et al, "The Sleep Patterns and Well-Being of Australian Adolescents," *Journal of Adolescence* 36, no. 1 (February 2013): 103-110.

of difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep²⁹ and this is especially true for those using the smartphones.³⁰ There have been studies revealing physical effects of even being around a smartphone. In one study, iPhone users were measured for blood pressure, heart rate, and levels of anxiety when they were allowed to hear their ring tones but were not able to answer them.³¹ A majority of respondents in the study recorded raises in each of these domains when they could hear but not answer their phones.

Studies demonstrate that the mere presence of a phone is profound. Clearly, smartphone use can have wide-range effects on users, especially affecting their quality of sleep and general physical and emotional states. This, in turn, has significant influence on their capacity to learn. If only part of this is true for the students sitting in classes, chapel, or church events, it would seem to reaffirm the formative and contextual influence the phone has on the educational contexts of which they are a part.

Associations of Smartphone Use: Psychological

Mental health is a worldwide issue. The World Health Organization (2016) reports that depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide. This depression is occurring while more and more of the world's populations are gaining access to smartphones and increasing feeling like they cannot live without their smartphones.³² Of all the implications of the smartphone, some of the most pronounced are psychological. Obviously, the influence of the smartphone is not all bad. The smartphone contributes in legitimate ways to people's lives and their overall well-being. Legitimate contributions are seen in increased productivity, easy access to information, social information and connection, and entertainment name a few.³³ However, in the face of these benefits, the current rise in anxiety, depression and psychopathologies of all sorts among adolescents and young adults seems to follow the rise in prevalence of the smartphone.

Introduced in 2007, the iPhone and its competitors have almost reached a level of complete saturation with adolescents and young adults. Parallel to this trend is the increasing levels of anxiety and depression in this same demographic.³⁴ Of

²⁹ Rosen, Carrier and Cheever, "Facebook and Texting Made Me Do It, 2021; Melissa Moore, et al, "Sleep Problems and Temperament in Adolescents," *Child Care Health Development* 37, no. 4 (July 2011): 559-562.

³⁰ Woods and Scott, *Sleepteens*, 41-49.

³¹ Russell Clayton, Glenn Leschner and Anthony Almond, "The Extended iSelf: The Impact of iPhone Separation on Cognition, Emotion, and Physiology," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20, no. 2 (January 2015): 119-135.

³² Erin Smith, "US Smartphone Use in 2015," *Pew Research Centre*, 2015.

³³ John Elhai, et al, "Problematic Smartphone Use: A Conceptual Overview and Systemic Review of Relations with Anxiety and Depression Psychopathology," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 207 (2017): 251-259.

³⁴ Kadir Demerici, et al. "Relationship Of Smartphone Use Severity With Sleep Quality, Depression, And Anxiety In University Students." *Journal of Behavioural Addictions* 4, no. 2 (April 26, 2015): 85-92.

special concern are the current record levels of suicide, especially among young men. Pastors, counsellors, educators and student workers are having to take these new realities in account as they pursue educational and developmental ends. Research appears to support a correlation between the quality of experience online and incidence of negative mental health states.³⁵ Drivers of the increase in anxiety and depression may not be due to heated negative discussions regarding politics or religion, as one would normally think. The increase may simply be due to feelings of being left out or the fear of possibly missing out.³⁶

For students, research is revealing high levels of smartphone use increases levels of stress and decreases levels of academic performance. This stress makes students less satisfied with life in general, which pushes them to use their smartphone even more to emotionally manage and self-soothe, creating a destructive feedback loop.³⁷ A negative association between excessive smartphone use and academic performance has been demonstrated on several occasions.³⁸

One of the fallacies inherent with a smartphone is the belief that the individual can effectively multitask. This belief has been repeatedly shown to be a myth. Smartphone use and multitasking have been shown to be related to a decline in overall academic performance.³⁹ Further to this point, studies have revealed that use of Facebook and text messaging while doing schoolwork or attending class are negatively related to college GPAs.⁴⁰ Multitasking students⁴¹ experience more stress, with this being especially true among adolescents.⁴² Multitaskers even consume more caffeinated drinks than non-multitasking students, further complicating an already complicated sleep situation.⁴³

³⁵ Cesar Escobar-Viera, et al, "Passive and Active Social Media Use and Depressive Symptoms Among United States Adults," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 21, no. 7 (2018): 437-443.

³⁶ John Elhai, et al, "Fear of Missing Out, Need for Touch, Anxiety and Depression are Linked to Cellphone Use," *Computer in Human Behavior* 63 (June 2016): 509-516.

³⁷ Maya Samaha and Nazir Hawi, "Relationships Among Smartphone Addiction, Stress, Academic Performance, and Satisfaction With Life," *Computers in Human Behavior* 57 (April 2017): 321-325.

³⁸ Terry Judd, "Making Sense of Multitasking: The Role of Facebook," *Computers & Education* 70 (January, 2014): 194-202; Aryn Karpinski, et al, "An Exploration of Social Networking Site Use, Multitasking and Academic Performance Among United States and European University Students," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29 (May 2013): 1182-1192.

³⁹ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 2015; Faria Sana, Tina Weston and Nicolas Cepeda, "Laptop Multitasking Hinders Classroom for Both Users and Nearby Peers," *Computers & Education* 62 (March 2013): 24-31; Rosen, et al, "Facebook and Texting," 948-958.

⁴⁰ Reynold Junco and Sheila Cotton, "No A 4 U: The Relationship Between Multitasking and Academic Performance," *Computers & Education* 59 (September 2012): 505-514.

⁴¹ Laura Bowman, et al, "Can Students Really Multitask: An Experimental Study of Instant Messaging While Reading," *Computers & Education* 54, No. 4 (May 2010): 927-931.

⁴² Roy Pea, et al, "Media Use, Face-to-Face Communication, Media Multitasking and Social Well-being Among 8-12 Year Old Girls," *Developmental Psychology* 48, no. 2 (March 2012): 327-336.

⁴³ Christina Calamaro, Thornton Mason and Sarah Ratcliffe, "Adolescents Living the 24.7 Lifestyle: Effects of Caffeine and Technology on Sleep Duration and Daytime Functioning" *Pediatrics* 123, no. 6 (June 2009): 1005-2010.

The Smartphone and Character Formation

The motivations for posting and sharing are shaped and guided by persons who see themselves and want others to see them as much as by anything else. As much as technology constantly changes, the ways that it is experienced and guided by these internal desires remain the same. These intrinsic guides for what is posted and why it is posted arise out of a person's character and commitments. Use of the smartphone and social media are in many ways exercises in spiritual and character formation.

One of the challenges that every generation faces is how to appropriate the ancient and timeless wisdom of the scriptures and Christian traditions of the past for the expanding horizons of the modern moment. While change has continued to unfold throughout the generations, people have never been more aware of the world and everyone in the world. Every day, Instagram users upload over 95 million photographs. Around 5 billion videos are watched on YouTube. Just under 20 percent of the world's population, or 1.47 billion people, log onto Facebook. From Instagram to YouTube, to Facebook, the primary posting and viewing platform is the smartphone. If the average person is checking their phones several dozen times per day, it is easy to see the enormous potential influence the phone has on the individual. In light of the onslaught, what wisdom can be appropriated for guidance? How do people discern the heart and character issues these repetitive exposures bring into their lives and how do they reform their thoughts and desires in response? The following section will look at three classic vices: vainglory, envy, and lust. This discussion will be followed by a reflection on how certain social media platforms uniquely form people's minds and direct them toward longstanding and destructive attitudes and possible corrective responses.

Before beginning this discussion, it is important to understand what makes something a vice. A vice (or virtue) is a habit or a character trait. Unlike something innate, they are acquired moral qualities. They are cultivated through repeated actions or habits, and together they form character. As they are repeated, they typically become easier. Aristotle and many others have observed that habituated action is a powerful driver of character formation.⁴⁴ This repetition, either physical or emotional, can establish patterns which affect character at deep levels.

From Vainglory to True Excellence

In the world of potential vocations, the role of being an "influencer" – a famous person whose personal tastes, preferences, and overall life influence the purchasing choices of the general population – is now a career aspiration. The

⁴⁴ Wright, N.T. *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. NY: HarperCollins, 2013, 33-36.

images of these influencers are monetized to exorbitant levels. Social media influencers like the Kardashians or Selena Gomez command hundreds of thousands of dollars for posts related to products. Through photo editing and painstaking curation, every appearance of an influencer is tended to. Though not everyone strives to influence the purchasing choices of others, many people strive to influence and shape the ways they appear to others. Appearance has become everything.

Vainglory is an archaic term but could be seen as one of the “primary colors” of western culture. With the escalating desire for fame and the rise in narcissism,⁴⁵ a discussion on vainglory has never been more relevant. The greatest joy of the modern vainglorious person would be to be perceived by all to be an excellent in all they do and who they are, regardless of whether they actually embody excellence. The perception is more important than the reality. The attention, affirmation, and applause of others are the ultimate reward. In *Vainglory: The Forgotten Vice*, Rebecca DeYoung unpacks the history of this term and provides a nuanced discussion on legitimate and non-legitimate pursuits of glory. DeYoung states that central to this discussion is the important distinction regarding what we seek to find glory in.⁴⁶ Glory, in and of itself, is a good thing. Christians are told to exalt in the hope of glory of God (Rom 5:2) and to live their lives so that they bring glory to their Father in heaven (Matt 5:16). However, how humans relate to the issue of glory has been an issue the church has struggled with for centuries. Should a faithful follower of Jesus strive to never receive glory for anything they have or achieve? What is the role of pride in making personal achievements known to others? Key to understanding the issue is to see glory, as Aquinas suggested, as understood as “goodness that is displayed.”⁴⁷ A beautiful art project, academic work, or musical performance can be displayed goodness and be completely appropriate. Yet the exact same art project, academic work, or musical performance can be entirely vainglorious. How does this happen?

A pursuit of glory becomes empty or vain in at least two ways. In the first instance, things which are inherently vain or empty are esteemed, glorified, and pursued above all else. Wealth or beauty can be treated in this way. As ultimate goals, money and beauty will fail the person and do not or cannot ensure a meaningful life. Proverbs reminds that beauty is fleeting (31:30) and that to trust in money (11:28) is ultimately foolish. A second way a pursuit of glory can become vainglorious is when something truly worth glory is sought for the wrong reasons. Musical excellence is a worthwhile goal and endeavor. However, musical excellence

⁴⁵ Jean Twenge. *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (NY: Penguin Press, 2015).

⁴⁶ Rebecca Konyndyck DeYoung. *Vainglory: The Forgotten Vice* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

⁴⁷ DeYoung, *Vainglory*, 14.

wrapped solely around the admiration and adulation of others misses the mark. At best, it is a good thing done for the wrong reasons.

How does the smartphone and social media feed the natural bent to vainglory and how can this tendency be corrected? Drawing on Aquinas and others, DeYoung distinguishes between the two versions of vainglory with the categories of “object” and “motive” – what individuals glory in and why they glory in that particular thing.⁴⁸ These categories of vainglory are particularly relevant to the discussion on smartphones. Old and young alike can be guilty of going to great lengths to communicate social or family occasions that appear happy and blissful, that in reality are anything but. A perfect example of this is a *New York Times* article titled “Honeymoon Hashtag Hell.”⁴⁹ The article unpacks the real stress and near marriage-ending strain the attempt to capture the perfect honeymoon sunset hair flip inflicted on a newlywed couple. Meals consumed on the honeymoon are not measured by how they tasted or where they occurred. They are assessed for how they would post on Instagram. The article goes on to report that 70 percent of brides post to social media throughout their honeymoon. Sharing a wonderful experience with friends and relatives is one thing. Creating the most epic honeymoon at the expense of your marriage is another. Many honeymoon locations and destinations feature Instagram moments and tours as a part of their regular promotion tours.

Closer to the heart and character of this discussion is understanding how an individual comes to terms with why they post what they post on social media. As vainglory is a primarily a condition of the heart, a key to understanding why social media can be a ready accomplice for the vainglorious is understanding the connection to pride. As C.S. Lewis famously suggested, pride is the mother of all sins.⁵⁰ In pride people place themselves at the center, the place that only God should hold, and begin to see themselves as the means to the happier, more fulfilling life, particularly as compared to others. As Aquinas suggests, pride is an inordinate desire for excellence, where excellence is only seen in comparative terms. DeYoung captures this in summarizing that “pride is really about the superiority of one’s goodness. Vainglory, on the other hand, is a disordered desire for the display of one’s goodness.”⁵¹ Why are vainglorious persons drawn to posting the highlight reel? Because their identity and enduring significance rests on a sense of superiority to another. The gaze is always drawn to others and rarely upward to God.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 26ff.

⁴⁹ Maggie Parker, “Honeymoon Hashtag Hell,” *New York Times*, June 19, 2019, <https://newyorktimes.com/2019/06/19/fashion/weddings/honeymoon-hashtag-hell/html>.

⁵⁰ C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001).

⁵¹ DeYoung, *Vainglory*, 42.

From Envy To Joy

It has been said that envy is the subtlest, smallest-hearted, and most soul-destroying of all the sins. "...[O]f the seven deadly sins, envy is no fun at all."⁵² Envy has its eyes locked on others more than any of the other vices. The envious person's gaze is continually benchmarking against those around them. Also, it is rarely focused on general concerns. Its focus is particular in nature through observation of another person's gifts and skills. The envious strive to occupy a place of superiority and rank compared to those around them. This is especially true if they see themselves as having a similar strength, particularly a strength that gives a person a sense of worth, honour, standing, or esteem.⁵³ Envy fosters a world view that is based on a zero-sum proposition - if someone enjoys or experiences a good in some way, that is somehow a deficit to the envious person. Their natural response is to undermine, destroy or at the very least disregard the success of the other.

The bottom line for the envious is how they compare to those around them. This tendency to compare is why the smartphone can be such fertile ground for envy to gain a strong foothold. As mentioned previously, Instagrammers upload around 95 million pictures per day. Every event is posted and is framed as an ongoing highlight reel for friends and foes to review. If the envious are constantly looking outward at the successes of others, then the leading social media platforms provide an unimpeded opportunity to see and be reminded of who they are. The aspirational nature of social media holds all faces in comparison. This aspect of social media can be uniquely challenging for adolescent boys and girls to navigate. In the developmental stage of identity formation, social comparisons and relationships are a primary way that their identity is established. As teenagers or young adults go through the necessary work of internal introspection and social development, they are especially vulnerable to lamenting their own moment and may be overcome with envy for a social life or affluence that seems currently out of reach.

The Smartphone and the Battle with Lust

One of the ongoing spiritual battlefronts in the lives of Christian is in the area of pornography, and there is no modality for the delivery of pornographic content that exceeds the smartphone. The pornographic website Pornhub reports that 77 percent of its content is delivered through a smartphone. Statistics vary but it is conservative to say that most Christian men, and increasingly women have some sort of regular encounter with pornographic content. This is especially true for young adults and adolescents. For many, pornography has become the *de facto* sex educator of the day. Given the anonymity and accessibility of pornography delivered

⁵² Joseph Epstein. *The Seven Deadly Sins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.

⁵³ Rebecca Konyndyck DeYoung. *The Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).

via the smartphone, the normal inquisitiveness of teenagers can take them to the darkest reaches of the internet.

It is no wonder that the smartphone is often renamed “pocket porn.” With anonymous access to the internet via the “always-on, always-on-you” smartphone, it is easy to see how easily destructive patterns can be established. For many people, the smartphone is the last thing they look at before they go to bed and what wakes them up in the morning. This constant pressure next to the bed can set the stage for poor decision-making and regret.

Destructive pornographic patterns of behavior can be especially strong in the minds and bodies of adolescents and young adults. Laurence Steinberg, whose enlightening book *The Age of Opportunity* reveals the unique capacities and vulnerabilities of the adolescent brain, makes the point that powerful emotional experiences, good or bad, have an especially enduring effect on the adolescent mind.⁵⁴ Due to a neural bloom that occurs during the adolescent and young adult life phase, emotional and sexual encounters will be deeply remembered over the course of a person’s life. If the smartphone is the most consistent influence during this stage, pornography use and masturbation cycles can be especially destructive.

If Steinberg’s thesis is even an approximation of the challenges the smartphone brings to this adolescent and young adult sexual experience, it is worth asking what spiritual and formational issues are at play at these moments. To begin, the smartphone is ideally constructed to be a means for immediate and continual consumption. Social media posts, podcasts, playlists, news, and information are continually there for ready consumption. The same is true for explicit content. It is often said that a person “consumes” pornography. This language makes an important point. People rarely say they consume a movie or a piece of music. When an individual is viewed in pornography through a consumption-based medium like the smartphone, that person is being viewed as a “consumable.”⁵⁵ This is the impulse at the heart of lust. In lust, the viewer primarily sees the one viewed as a collection of parts for consumption. The unity and integrity of the whole person is lost. The person’s character, creativity, or competence are stripped away leaving only the body. And the focus is not the whole body, just select parts of the body.

The particular effects of pornography on adolescents and young adults suggests that a priority for Christian education and formation is to develop a robust theology of the body to address bodies, both physically present and encountered in online domains like the smartphone. A theology of the body might contain the following elements. First, the body and its portrayal reflect the image of God (Gen 1:27; Ps 139:14) and are at the center of the Christian life. There are theological and

⁵⁴ Laurence Steinberg, *The Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (NY: Houghton, Mifflin and Harcourt, 2015).

⁵⁵ Lawrence Cunningham. *The Seven Deadly Sins: A Visitor’s Guide* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2012).

ontological realities to having flesh. How bodies are treated and portrayed reflects on their Creator. Second, lust engages the whole body and comes to the individual with power. Too often, individuals believe they can expose themselves to almost any sexualized content and still walk away if they want to. Once “lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin ... (James 1:15, NASB).” Sex engages a person at every level – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It has objective power and consequence, which is central to the gift it is and the power it holds. Equally, sexual sin affects the individual at every level. Sexual sin is not a worse sin, but it is a unique sin. Third, what people give their body and mind to (Rom 6:12-14) affects the condition (and desires) of their heart, which shapes their intentions and reflects in their actions (Prov 4:23). There is no escaping this reality – what is sowed to the Spirit will be reaped in the Spirit. If sowed to the flesh, it will be reaped in the flesh (Gal 6:8). If an individual repeatedly returns to an online place, especially when they are tired and alone, they are in a profoundly vulnerable moment.

Conclusion

Smartphones are increasingly enmeshed in the day-to-day realities of life. Smartphone saturation is occurring around the world and through all segments of the population. Through smartphones, people connect socially with those they care about most, conduct their business, and entertain and distract themselves, all while doing nothing to stay connected. The smartphone connects to an almost endless horizon of possibilities. Social media companies are some of the most capitalized and aggressive companies in the world, knowingly fostering and exploiting the “attention economy.” Parents, educators and pastors must continue to look for ways to grow in wisdom and increase their vigilance to understand the influence of the smartphone on physical bodies and the character and soul.

Rob Rhea serves as the Associate Vice-President of Student Life at Trinity Western University, where he previously served as University Chaplain for 23 years. Also at TWU, he serves as the Director of the Centre For Spiritual Formation In Higher Education. His research interests are related to Christian formation and moral issues in digital spaces in the lives of young adults.

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