

Smartphones have become people's homes: anthropologists

Smartphones have become the place where people “live”, a book published by University College London-led anthropologists suggests. With a specific focus on older adults, the team documented smartphone use in nine countries across Africa, Asia, Europe and South America.

The Global Smartphone suggests users creatively adapt their devices to meet their cultural, social, health, financial and educational needs. However, the team also found smartphones are causing the “death of proximity”, as users are less likely to spend face-to-face time with others, even if they are physically present, in favour of being “at home” on their devices. ([University College London](#), [UCL Press](#))

Why does this matter?

Whether we like it or not, smartphones are now essential, and many people see them as an extension of themselves. Indeed, the social distancing and lockdown requirements of the COVID-19 pandemic may have been far less bearable without having a smartphone to hand.

From a health perspective, smartphones can and do improve our wellbeing. Greater connectivity with others can reduce feelings of loneliness and boost

mental health. There's also the plethora of health apps that can help users make positive lifestyle changes, gather health information and have virtual appointments with their doctors.

The book's authors also claim that smartphones are changing the way we experience ageing, with feeling old being associated with frailty rather than age, which can only be a good thing for the wider society. Together, these positives highlight the need to address digital inequality to ensure people everywhere feel included.

What a pain

Hours of scrolling through apps or playing games on a smartphone do, however, have negative health consequences. Poor posture and repetitive strain can result in painful injuries such as "text neck". Excessive screen time can also damage eyesight and interrupt sleep, not to mention all the other potentially serious health effects associated with long periods of physical inactivity.

Smartphone addiction, which may not be an addiction to the devices themselves but rather the way we engage with them, is also problematic. Some people may even experience nomophobia – NOMO for short – where anxiety arises from the fear of being unable to communicate or feel connected with others. Symptoms also include fear of being unable to immediately access information, or not having the convenience and peace of mind from owning a working smartphone.

What's the answer?

If smartphones have become the place where we live, then it wouldn't be a bad idea to go "outside" from time to time. Regular digital detoxing can also promote healthy behaviours, such as getting more exercise and help us reconnect with non-digital hobbies and activities, including real-world face time with our nearest and dearest where and when lockdowns permit.

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