

Adolescent phone dependence: unmet needs and spiritual void

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Abstract: As mobile phones have become increasingly powerful, adolescents' reliance on these devices has grown significantly. Their psychological dependence primarily manifests in three aspects: conformity, entertainment, and social interaction. The issues arising from these psychological needs essentially reflect a spiritual void among adolescents—namely, a lack of faith, a lack of sense of responsibility, and a lack of adherence to mainstream values. This spiritual void among adolescent students should be given due attention by educators.

Keywords: Mobile phone dependence, psychological needs, psychological void

1. Introduction

As mobile phone capabilities have continuously evolved, the user base has steadily expanded—from an initial small segment of the population to the widespread adoption seen today. Mobile phones have indeed brought significant convenience to our lives, enabling us to browse the internet, socialize, access information, entertain ourselves, shop, and more; they are increasingly becoming all-purpose "family pets." However, the widespread use of mobile phones has also exerted negative influences on us, particularly on young students. Many adolescents have become addicted to mobile internet use, lacking the necessary spiritual pursuits; they prioritize themselves and money, neglect social responsibilities, and seek comfort and leisure in their lives, leading to a gradual erosion of their spiritual foundation. The mobile phone was originally merely a simple communication tool—so, what hidden secrets lie behind the mobile phone dependency among young people? This article aims to explore the psychological needs of individuals who rely heavily on mobile phones, uncover the underlying reasons for this dependency, and examine the relationship between mobile phone dependency and the spiritual void experienced by today's youth.

2. The need for conformity and the absence of mainstream values

2.1. The herd mentality and competitive mindset behind mobile phone dependency

Relevant surveys indicate that one of the key reasons for mobile phone dependence is the desire stemming from herd mentality.[1] On campus, mobile phones have become a means for most students to compete with one another, showcase their individuality, or express a more avant-garde attitude. As a variety of smartphones—and successive generations of the iPhone—have captivated young people, their craving for vanity is largely satisfied.

It is perfectly reasonable for teenagers to use mobile phones – leveraging the advancements of modern technology to enhance their daily lives – but when the use of mobile phones becomes distorted into a means of social status display, or when it fosters a widespread culture of comparison among adolescents, we must take heed.

2.2. The causes of the interplay between historical turning points and psychological characteristics

The emergence of the conformity mentality is a product of the intersection between the historical context and the psychological characteristics of adolescents. Chinese adolescents are living through an era of rapid technological advancement, which also represents a critical period for the formation of their outlook on life,

values, and worldview. On one hand, they possess a strong sense of curiosity and are easily drawn to novel experiences; they exhibit a pronounced tendency toward conformity, particularly when influenced by the interests and aspirations of their peers. On the other hand, their ability to distinguish right from wrong remains relatively weak, and when confronted with a complex social environment, they lack the capacity for rational judgment. The comprehensive functionality, rich content, and ever-changing designs of mobile phones not only satisfy adolescents' curiosity about novel technologies but also foster the growth of their conformity mentality. Especially under the influence of the vulgar notion that "lacking a tablet means being outdated, lacking a smartphone means losing face, and lacking a laptop means having no dignity," this conformity mentality has gradually evolved into a competitive comparison mindset. According to a survey, 52.7% of respondents believe that the pursuit of high-end digital products exacerbates adolescents' vanity. Professor Yang Qian of the Beijing Institute of Business Administration and Management argues that there is an inherent element of vanity and ostentation within the subconscious of adolescents; moreover, the value systems promoted by corporate marketing strategies are highly relatable to this demographic. As a result, adolescents develop a mindset of premature or ostentatious consumption—sometimes even disregarding their own or their families' financial means to fulfill their desire for consumption.

2.3. The psychological and value system crisis triggered by inflated vanity

When face-saving concerns are intertwined with material desires, and when the value of commodities determines social value and social norms, traditional values inevitably become absent. Adolescents naturally yearn for affirmation and fear being isolated—this is a perfectly normal psychological state. However, in the absence of proper guidance, such feelings may be satisfied through alternative means, namely, by pursuing material desires.

As a result, comparing themselves to others inevitably fuels their vanity, further materializes their sense of self-worth, and reinforces their egocentric mindset. To satisfy this need, they may even lie, making it difficult for them to focus their energy on studying or working. If they consistently find themselves at a disadvantage in this blind comparison culture, they may experience significant psychological stress, feel isolated from their group, and consequently develop feelings of frustration, anxiety, and inferiority.

A sense of vanity exists within the inner world of every adolescent; with proper guidance, this vanity can be moderated, allowing the adolescent's values and outlook on life to develop healthily. However, if guidance is inadequate—particularly for individuals with a strong sense of vanity—elements such as selfishness, hypocrisy, and deception may subtly or consciously infiltrate their mindset. Such infiltration can, to some extent, lead to the erosion of mainstream values—such as the concept of justice, the perception of the nation, and the view of the collective—and it is inherently at odds with life virtues such as humility, prudence, integrity, and avoiding hollow fame, thereby weakening a sound outlook on life and values. Individuals driven by vanity seek praise and engage in good deeds; they become complacent upon receiving external recognition or achieving success, and at times, they may even resort to deception. They find various ways to conceal their shortcomings; in daily life, they emphasize the flaws of others while highlighting their own strengths. Under the influence of this mindset, which focuses on exaggerating weaknesses and emphasizing strengths, they seek psychological satisfaction. More importantly, to fulfill this psychological need, they may disregard family bonds, friendships, or even romantic relationships, ultimately leading to the distortion of their values regarding family, love, and friendship.

2.4. Losing the sense of happiness and re-establishing sound values

Therefore, if the blind comparison stemming from smartphone dependency is not addressed promptly, it may lead children to become overly preoccupied with gains and losses. No one can possess everything they desire, nor can they own everything that others possess; thus, such blind comparison prevents them from recognizing what they have, focusing instead solely on what others possess but they do not. This outcome inevitably leaves them exhausted and overwhelmed by worries as they pursue material satisfaction, ultimately erasing any sense of happiness from their lives.

Furthermore, the diverse range of mobile phone features, the vast array of virtual worlds, and the overwhelming flood of spam messages leave adolescents—already lacking sound rational judgment—feeling overwhelmed. Such outdated and misleading information exerts a severe negative influence on

adolescents' development of a correct outlook on life and values; to some extent, it contributes to the formation of misguided notions of right and wrong among young people, undermines their moral and sense of responsibility, hinders the development of their ideological perspectives and moral behavior, pollutes their inner world, and leads some adolescents to experience moral deviance, deviant behavior, or even engage in criminal activity.

To address the negative psychological tendencies that arise among adolescent students during their mobile phone usage, we should strengthen our guidance on their outlook on life and values, help them develop a proactive outlook on life and noble values, teach them how to conduct accurate self-assessment, and encourage them to compare themselves in terms of academic performance and personal character—while reducing their focus on materialistic comparisons—thereby fostering a positive and optimistic mindset.

3. Leisure needs and burden avoidance

3.1. Growing entertainment demand

Huang Lijuan and Lin Danhua posit that middle school students' mobile phone dependence stems from four types of psychological needs: information and cognitive needs; relaxation and entertainment needs; personal identity and fashion needs; and communication, belonging, and emotional needs. Among these four needs, the most prominent is the need for entertainment and relaxation. [2]

With the powerful internet connectivity offered by mobile phones, these devices have become a cornerstone of the digital world. Their lightweight and convenient nature has won them widespread popularity among consumers, particularly young mobile phone users. With just one device in hand, users can explore the world, read news, listen to music, play games, shop online, chat, and more; their extensive entertainment capabilities have successfully captured the attention of young people.

3.2. Pan-entertainment impact

When an adult is under high levels of stress, engaging in appropriate self-relaxation through certain activities is a natural psychological need. However, when a teenager is constantly immersed in entertainment to the point of being unable to extricate themselves, coupled with a lack of self-control and rational thinking, such relaxation can instead evolve into a detrimental psychological state.

The negative impact of the law of equivalent exchange in a commodity-driven society should not be underestimated. Particularly under current circumstances, in their pursuit of maximizing commercial profits, mainstream market-oriented media outlets have catered to vulgar, negative, or even unhealthy ideological trends by mixing healthy content with vulgar culture; through deliberate denationalization, this has fostered harmful social influences, thereby complicating the public discourse environment. This complexity manifests primarily in two aspects: First, there is a trend toward excessive tertiarization. When a vast array of soap operas, anime and video games laden with violence, distorted historical accounts and various literary classics, popular music devoid of artistic value, and vulgar online books have replaced refined arts, people's spiritual needs inevitably fall into a void. While this "fast-food culture" meets, to some extent, the practical demands of today's hectic lifestyle, it has led to confusion in people's values and outlook on life; this confusion has directly caused the life goals of some adolescents to deviate severely from the correct course. Second, there is a trend toward vulgarization. As highbrow culture gradually disappears and scenes of murder, violence, and pornography become increasingly prevalent in our daily lives, society's traditional moral boundaries and our established conventional beliefs are likewise being subverted.

3.3. Gradual erosion of values

For adolescents who are immersed on the internet and find themselves on the periphery of social life, this influence is both profound and subtle; on one hand, it severely distorts the real social environment; more importantly, it can easily lead these adolescents—whose ability to discern is already quite limited yet who possess a strong tendency to imitate—to blindly follow others.

The values of adolescents growing up in complex social environments are highly malleable. Adolescence is a period of great change in life; their minds are not yet fully mature, their ability to discern is

limited, and their outlook on life, worldview, and values remain unstable. When confronted with a vast array of external information, they often find themselves passively absorbing it, losing their sense of self amid diverse values, and their own values gradually becoming increasingly confused. They tend to embrace personal worship and pursue hedonism, failing to comprehend the pain of sorrow or the inevitability of life's end; they prioritize personal pleasure over compassion, are drawn to nonsensical comedy shows, or captivated by pornographic online games filled with violence and murder, and lack a pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty, a recognition of nobility and excellence, or a quest for the meaning and value of life.

More importantly, the clandestine and virtual nature of online information leads adolescents to increasingly use pseudonyms or remain anonymous when engaging in online communication. In such circumstances, their words and actions lack clear boundaries, leading to self-indulgence and a greater ease in escaping the moral constraints of real-life society; as a result, their sense of social responsibility gradually diminishes.

3.4. Responsibility education return

The human instinct to seek pleasure and avoid pain is inherent; however, when vulgar cultural content becomes a means for modern individuals to escape setbacks or release pent-up emotions, the psychological and behavioral issues arising from such environments inevitably follow. The emergence of negative behaviors—such as weak willpower, poor self-control, or non-compliance with social norms—will inevitably lead to a deficiency in the addicted individuals' self-discipline, sense of responsibility, and resilience to setbacks. Therefore, while leveraging the entertainment function of mobile phones, it is particularly important to provide appropriate guidance to help young students cultivate a sense of social responsibility, a sense of family responsibility, and an attitude of personal accountability.

4. Social psychological needs and the absence of moral beliefs in life

4.1. Mobile social interaction and identity construction

Interpersonal interaction is a primary means of socialization for adolescents. Tu Chenggang and Gu Lin argue that college students' use of mobile phones stems from a significant psychological need—namely, a desire for social engagement. Through using their phones to call peers or send text messages, they maintain constant contact with others, accumulate social capital, and thereby fulfill their social needs. Often, adolescent students use the number of phone numbers stored on their devices as a measure of the size of their social network and as a benchmark for their level of social identity. [1]

4.2. Egocentrism and belief-based concerns

The use of mobile phones, like any other technology, carries dual implications. For adolescents, leveraging mobile phones to build social networks as part of their socialization process is not inherently negative; however, this casual form of communication is often permeated with unhealthy, immature, or even vulgar thoughts and information. Under the subtle influence of such content, the moral awareness of adolescents—who already lack a mature worldview and outlook on life—begins to weaken, and their sense of social responsibility declines; on the other hand, the casual and open nature of these conversations provides immense satisfaction to adolescents who cherish freedom and seek liberation. They can escape the various constraints imposed by their parents and schools, make their own choices, and plan their lives—whether it be academics, leisure, or entertainment—without any reservations. While this extreme autonomy helps foster adolescents' sense of selfhood, it also fosters a tendency toward egocentrism. Although they often make rational decisions in real life, this egocentric tendency harbors a significant hidden danger. Without proper guidance, it can easily evolve into a form of individualism justified by the need to protect oneself. Once this occurs, in both work and daily life, they tend to seek only personal gain and avoid any potential harm, adopting a "don't-care" attitude toward matters that do not concern them; they lack clear standards for distinguishing right from wrong or good from evil, have no drive for proactive personal growth, and lack both the basic awareness of serving society and the pursuit of lofty moral ideals. As a result, materialism, hedonism, and individualism may prevail, and moral value systems may become increasingly diversified. In fact, some adolescents today even believe that every standard possesses its own

"legitimacy"; as a result, the interests of the collective, the state, and the general public have gradually faded from their awareness. For example, when faced with a dilemma such as "should money be given first or should the person be rescued first," some young students argue that "one should not ask for money before saving someone, but it is acceptable if the person being saved voluntarily offers money." On the surface, this stance seems moderate; however, beneath this apparent compromise lies a underlying tendency toward utilitarianism and secularism. Accompanying this utilitarian and secular outlook is the rise of individualism, selfishness, and a pronounced "self-centeredness." The frequent occurrence of juvenile delinquency at the present time serves as a compelling illustration of this phenomenon. Some adolescents, lacking moral convictions, may experience "depression or distress" when they encounter setbacks or situations that do not align with their personal expectations; in severe cases, they may even commit suicide or commit homicide.

4.3. Value-based leadership and belief reformation

The adolescent years represent a critical and highly dynamic phase in the formation of one's life values; during this period, the guiding role of parents and teachers is indispensable. Pi Yijun remarked, "The moral and value confusion that emerges in adult society can have a profound impact on adolescents' development; therefore, we should promote moral and legal behavioral norms in everyday life. However, this is no easy task, as it requires adults to set an example; our society must truly take responsibility for the growth of young people. Within our education system, there is a severe lack of education and awareness regarding the value of life and the concept of death. We should foster greater reflection on the value of life and extend more life-centered and humanistic care to children as they grow." [3] The establishment of moral beliefs among adolescents depends on the support provided by schools, families, and various sectors of society.

Moral beliefs represent the highest goal and ultimate ideal that we strive to attain. An individual's moral behavior is directly shaped by the moral beliefs they hold. When adolescents are exposed to positive moral beliefs during their upbringing, this inevitably exerts a constructive influence; conversely, exposure to negative moral beliefs can lead to harmful or detrimental behavior. The fragmented and conflicting belief systems prevalent in mobile social media can cause confusion among young students, making it difficult for them to discern right from wrong. For this demographic, the criteria upon which they base their moral judgments stem from their personal experiences and from the individuals they regard as moral role models. Therefore, the exemplary behavior of parents, the guidance provided by school education, and the broader societal influences all play crucial roles in fostering noble moral beliefs among adolescents. Rejecting the extreme, secular, utilitarian, or self-centered value systems that challenge the traditional moral framework, and establishing lofty moral role models for young students, is key to addressing the lack of moral conviction among this group.

5. Conclusion

The value orientations of young people determine the value orientations of society in the future. Professor Tao Hongdae, an expert in treating internet addiction, stated: "When the development of the economic base and the superstructure become unbalanced, problems will arise within society." A nation needs faith. The greatest distinction between humans and animals lies in human nature, and the highest manifestation of human nature is faith. The growth and development of young students are crucial to the progress of the nation, society, and the entire people. School educators and social workers should strengthen their guidance and education of young people, enabling them to embrace faith as a guiding principle and establish a clear spiritual compass for themselves; to shoulder their responsibilities and embrace a meaningful life; and to clarify their own values, thereby charting the right course for their lives. Only in this way can young people truly take on the responsibilities of society and become its true pillars. In doing so, educators fulfill their mission and demonstrate their profound personal value by fulfilling their role as "engineers of the human soul."

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