

Study shows smartphones promise satisfaction and meaning, but deliver only more searching

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Smartphone users will be disappointed if they expect their devices and social media to fill their need for purpose and meaning. In fact, it will

probably do the opposite, researchers at Baylor and Campbell Universities have found in a recently published study.

Christopher M. Pieper, Ph.D., senior lecturer of sociology at Baylor University, and lead author Justin J. Nelson, M.A, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology at Campbell University, partnered to understand the complex relationship between meaning-seeking and technology by analyzing data from the Baylor Religion Survey. Their research, "'Maladies of Infinite Aspiration': Smartphones, Meaning-Seeking, and Anomigenesis," was published in the journal *Sociological Perspectives*.

The researchers' results provide a sociological link to the psychological studies that point to connections between digital devices and media use with feelings of loneliness, depression, unhappiness, suicidal ideation and other poor mental health outcomes.

"Human beings are seekers—we seek meaning in our relationships, our work, our faith, in all areas of social life," Pieper said. "As researchers, we were interested in the role that smartphones—and the media they give us instant access to—might be playing in meaning-seeking.

"We conclude that [smartphone attachment](#)... could be anomigenic, causing a breakdown in social values because of the unstructured and limitless options they provide for seeking meaning and purpose and inadvertently exacerbate feelings of despair while simultaneously promising to resolve them," Pieper said. "Seeking itself becomes the only meaningful activity, which is the basis of anomie and addiction."

Nelson and Pieper also found a connection between this search for meaning and feelings of attachment to one's smartphone—a possible precursor to tech addiction.

"Our research finds that meaning-seeking is associated with increased

smartphone attachment—a feeling that you would panic if your phone stopped working," Nelson said. "Social media use is also correlated with increased feelings of attachment."

The researchers concentrated on responses to questions used in Wave 5 of the national Baylor Religion Survey that related to information and communication technology (ICT) device use, as well as questions related to meaning and purpose from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, to show that while devices promise satisfaction and meaning, they often deliver the opposite.

A key finding of the study is that this feeling of attachment is highest for those who use social media less often. However, the research found that individuals seeking solace or connection through their phones in shorter spurts might exacerbate attachment.

"What is interesting is this association decreases for the heaviest of social media users," Pieper said. "While we don't know how this group uses [social media](#), it might be that normalized use at the highest levels erases feelings of attachment for the individual—as we put it, it would be like saying one is attached to their eyes or lungs."

One positive the researchers found is that identifying a satisfying purpose for life seems to provide a protective effect against this sense of attachment and anomie, though this effect is not as strong as the opposite effect of meaning-seeking. Taken together, it is possible that media use bolstered by purpose, such as through family, work or faith, is less likely to produce alienating effects for the individual, the researchers said. But, not knowing what specific users are doing online, this remains a question for future research.

"What we have uncovered is a social mechanism that draws us into smartphone use, and that might keep us hooked, exacerbating feelings of

attachment and [anomie](#), and even disconnection, while they promise the opposite," Pieper said.

More information: Justin J. Nelson et al, "Maladies of Infinite Aspiration": Smartphones, Meaning-Seeking, and Anomigenesis, *Sociological Perspectives* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/07311214221114296](https://doi.org/10.1177/07311214221114296)

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