

The Psycho-Spiritual Dimensions of Smartphones use Among Young Catholic Faithful: A Study of Selected Parishes in Kogi State, Nigeria.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1304000238>

Received: 18 April 2026; Accepted: 24 April 2026; Published: 18 May 2026

ABSTRACT

The proliferation of smartphones has significantly transformed communication, social interaction, and access to information, particularly among young adults. While these technologies offer numerous benefits, concerns regarding excessive and problematic smartphone use have emerged, especially in relation to psycho – Spiritual wellbeing. This study, investigates the level of smartphone use among young Catholic faithful and explores appropriate psycho-spiritual strategies to address its negative implications. The study adopts a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach. Data were collected with a structured questionnaire administered to 71 young Catholic participants across selected parishes in Kogi State. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with the aid of SPSS (version 23). Findings suggest that excessive smartphone engagement and potential psychological strain. However, the study also acknowledges the positive potential of smartphones as tools for evangelization and spiritual growth when used appropriately. The study contributes to the limited empirical literature on the intersection of technology, psychology, spirituality and culture within African Catholic contexts.

Keywords: Psycho-Spiritual, Psycho-Spiritual wellbeing, Smartphone, Lokoja Diocese

INTRODUCTION

People commonly view their Cell phone as an integral part of who they are, and as an important extension of themselves (Belk, 1988). Present-day smart phones are seen as critical in maintaining social relationships and conducting the more mundane exigencies of everyday life (Junco & Cotton, 2012). Many young adults today cannot envision an existence without smartphone. Research suggests that media use has become such a significant part of youthful life that it is invisible and people do not necessarily realize their level of dependence on their smartphones (Moeller, 2010).

Although cell phones allow individuals to have unlimited access to information and to connect with others in a way otherwise thought impossible, there are many harmful and disturbing effects of smartphone dependence. This could lead to what Egunjobi (2023) classify as Compulsive Chatting Disorder/Facebook Addiction, WhatsApp Addiction. Which is characterized by compulsively touching the phone, and excessive time spent on social media with the primary purpose of chatting using Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc. despite adverse effect on personal life (problem sleeping), time management (late for important function), or relationship with family members and friends.

This work examined the prevalence of problematic smartphone use among young catholic adults and possible psycho-spiritual intervention in the use of Smartphone.

Background to the Study

An increasing reliance on cell phones among young adults and students may signal the evolution of cell phone use from a habit to an addiction. A large-scale survey of 2,500 US college students found that respondents reported spending one hour and 40 minutes might be addicted to their cell phone (McAllister, 2011). This

increasing dependence on cell phones coincides with the recent emergence of the Smart Phone. Sixty-seven percent of young adults 18 to 24 years of age own a Smart Phone compared to 53 percent of all adults. Cell phones are quickly replacing the laptop or desktop computer as the preferred method of accessing the Internet. A full 56 percent of Internet users access the web via their cell phones. This figure has nearly doubled from only three years ago. Seventy-seven percent of 18 to 29-year-olds use their phone to access the Internet (Brenner, 2012).

In 2023, the anticipated global smartphone penetration rate increased from 2022 to 69 percent. This is predicated on a global population of around 7.4 billion people and an estimated 6.7 billion smartphone subscriptions worldwide. The percentage of the general population that has a smartphone varies widely across the globe. For instance, the adoption rates of smartphones are between 86 and 82 percent in North America and Europe, respectively. As of late 2023, the same rate is only 55% in Sub-Saharan Africa, indicating a nearly 30% disparity in adoption rates between the top and worst rated regions (Laricchia, 2023).

Smartphones have revolutionized communication, access to information, and social interactions, making them indispensable tools in contemporary society. However, along with their benefits, concerns have emerged regarding excessive smartphone use, particularly among young people. Studies indicate that problematic smartphone use can contribute to psychological distress, reduced productivity, and deteriorating social relationships (Thomé, 2018). Furthermore, the pervasive nature of smartphones has raised concerns about their impact on spirituality, as digital distractions increasingly encroach upon personal reflection, prayer, and religious practices (Shaw, 2020). While various interventions have been proposed to curb problematic smartphone use, the psycho-spiritual dimension remains underexplored in mainstream global discourse.

In Africa, rapid smartphone penetration has reshaped socio-cultural and religious dynamics. With over 650 million mobile connections, Africa has one of the fastest-growing smartphone markets globally (GSMA, 2022). In Nigeria, the largest economy and most populous country on the continent, smartphone usage has surged, especially among young people (NCC, 2023). While this technological advancement has enhanced connectivity and access to religious resources, there is growing concern over the psychological and spiritual implications of excessive smartphone use. Many Nigerian youths struggle with smartphone addiction, leading to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and reduced focus on faith-based activities (Adebayo & Aluko, 2021). Religious institutions have recognized these challenges, but limited empirical studies exist on the integration of psycho-spiritual interventions to address them.

Rapid smartphone adoption in Africa has changed the dynamics of religion and society. Africa is one of the world's fastest-growing smartphone markets, with over 650 million mobile connections (GSMA, 2022). Smartphone use has increased, particularly among young people, in Nigeria, the continent's most populous and largest economy (NCC, 2023). Concern over the psychological and spiritual effects of excessive smartphone use is growing, even though this technology advancement has improved connectivity and access to religious materials. Many young people in Nigeria suffer from smartphone addiction, which can result in mental health issues like anxiety and despair as well as a diminished interest in religious pursuits (Adebayo & Aluko, 2021). Although religious organizations are aware of these difficulties, there aren't many empirical research on how to integrate psycho-spiritual remedies to deal with them.

Use of internet and mobile phones has witnessed a rapid increase, introducing radical changes to Kenyans. Access and usage of this technology is viewed as critical in society today because of the potential opportunities they provide in the world economy described as being knowledge-based and information driven (Duncombe & Boateng, 2009). The growth of Internet and mobile phones usage in Kenya has been exponential with the largest growth witnessed from 2007. Internet and mobile phones have become the basic means of communication for most Kenyans regardless of their economic status and geographical location. These technologies have increasingly become affordable to the lower strata of the population and used as a mechanism for greater participation of these groups in the development process (Waema, 2011).

In the diocese of Auchi of Nigeria, 32% of the lay faithful spend more than six hours on their smart phone daily. A study showed that lay faithful (19 to 30 years of age), younger people are the heaviest users of the Smartphone. Findings show that a large percentage of lay faithful who are 30 years and below (62%) take their smart phones with them to liturgical Celebrations (Egielewa, 2020).

In Kogi State, which has a significant Catholic population, the intersection of smartphone use and religious life presents unique challenges. Young Catholic faithful in selected parishes exhibit signs of excessive smartphone engagement, often leading to distractions during worship, diminished participation in faith-based activities, and weakening spiritual discipline (Ojonugwa, 2022). Despite the growing concern among clergy and parishioners, there is a noticeable gap in structured interventions that address both the psychological and spiritual dimensions of smartphone dependency. While some parishes have attempted awareness programs, a comprehensive psycho-spiritual intervention tailored to the needs of young Catholic faithful remains largely unexplored.

Smartphone use has changed dramatically for last decades both in the developing and developed countries. The pattern of use has also changed over time. Earlier it was being used only for means of communication by calling or texting, whereas now it provides the platform for many other functions at a time, for example, camera, calculator, voice recorder, games, and music player. Interestingly, the new generation mobile phones or smartphones access Internet, which is the gateway of virtual world. People can interact all over the world through social networking sites (for example, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter) or buy anything from home through online shopping sites or can make use of many other applications that make life easier and more comfortable (Wieland, 2014).

Importantly, cell phone addiction does not happen overnight, and, like most forms of behavioural addiction, occurs via a process (Martin et al., 2013). Addiction often begins with seemingly benign behaviour (for example, shopping, Internet and/or cell phone use) that, via a variety of psychological, biophysical, and environment triggers, “can become harmful and morph into an addiction” (Grover et al., 2011, p. 1). Although the concept of addiction has multiple definitions, traditionally it has been described as the repeated use of a substance despite the negative consequences suffered by the addicted individual (Alavi et al., 2012). More recently, the notion of addiction has been generalized to include behaviours like gambling, sex, exercise, eating, Internet, and cell phone use (Roberts & Pirog, 2012). Any entity that can produce a pleasurable sensation has the potential of becoming addictive (Alavi et al., 2012). Similar to substance addiction, behavioural addiction is best understood as a habitual drive or compulsion to continue to repeat a behaviour despite its negative impact on one’s well-being (Roberts & Pirog, 2012). Any often repeated behaviour that triggers “specific re-ward effects through biochemical processes in the body do have an addictive potential” (Alavi et al., 2012, p.292). Loss of control over the behaviour is an essential element of any addiction.

Addiction-like behaviour to mobile phones is a serious problem for an individual’s social life and work, although this type of addiction is not recognized as a diagnostic category at this time in Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM-IV) (Walsh et al, 2010). The new category of mobile phone addiction for the DSM-V had been proposed but was rejected due to lack of empirical findings (Lee & Busiol, 2016). The terminologies such as mobile phone addiction, problematic use, excessive use, and overuse of mobile phones have been interchangeably used across studies as there is no said criteria till date for addictive use. Initially, mobile phone addiction was described and assessed by categories used for drug addiction (that is, loss of control, craving, withdrawal, and relapse).

Statement of the problem

Despite its manifold advantages, the excessive use of mobile phones has become a concern for its extensive association with harmful effects. Increased accessibility and easy availability of mobile phones among youths has shown negative impact on academic performance, mental well-being, sleep quality, and particular association with depression, psychological morbidity, and other factors (Alhajjar, 2014). Studies focusing on the behavioural addictions are ever increasing. The most common researched areas are the Internet, videogames, and mobile phones. Some researchers suggest that a certain behaviour might be addictive when it is associated with negative consequences and physical and psychological reinforcements (Griffiths, 2000). Cía (2014) in a study emphasizes on automatism, which leads to uncontrollable use, irresistible desire, loss of control, inattention to usual activities, the focalization of interests on the particular behaviour, and continuation of the behaviour despite its negative effects. Catholic youth seem to have the smartphone at the centre of their functionality. This article seek to check the level of smartphone use and provide psycho-spiritual means to help in the use of smartphone.

Statement of the Research Gap

Kogi State, empirical research on the psycho-spiritual implications of smartphone use within Catholic parishes is scarce. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this critical gap by exploring psycho-spiritual interventions for smartphone use among young Catholic faithful in selected parishes in Kogi State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the study

1. To examine the prevalence of Smartphone use among Young Catholics in selected Parishes of Kogi State.
2. To provide psycho-spiritual strategies in the use of Smartphone.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) guided this study. The theory was initially developed by Herzog (1944) and later expanded by Blumler and Katz (1974). It originated in the field of mass communication studies to explain how individuals actively use media to fulfil their needs.

UGT posits that audiences are not passive recipients of media content. Instead, they actively select and use media (including smartphones) to satisfy specific needs, such as: Cognitive needs: Information, knowledge, understanding. Affective needs: Emotional satisfaction, entertainment. Personal identity needs: Validation, self-expression, reinforcement of personal values. Social integration needs: Connection, interaction, and relationship-building. Escapism needs: Relaxation, diversion, or escape from reality. In the context of smartphones, individuals use devices to fulfil these needs through apps, social media, games, and other digital tools.

This framework remains valuable for understanding smartphone use, particularly why individuals are drawn to certain apps or activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Smartphone Use Patterns and Socio-Psychological Well-being

Egielewa (2020) in the article the perception of smartphones among catholic faithful: a study of selected parishes in Edo state, Nigeria. The study examines the perception of the Catholic faithful (priests and lay faithful) on the role of the smartphone in liturgical celebrations and whether it is still a tool of human development today. Using Descriptive Research design research, the study uses a sample size of 350 lay faithful and 51 priests in the Catholic Diocese of Auchi (present Edo North Senatorial District) in Edo State, Nigeria. The study is based on the Grounded Theory Model of Mobile Technology Addiction. The findings of the research show that most priests in the diocese of Auchi own two smart phones (49%) while most members of the lay faithful own only one Smart phone (57%). Also, on average, more priests spend less than 6 hours on their smart phones. Only 20% of priests spend more than six hours on their smart phone daily, while for lay faithful, it is 32% who spend more than six hours on their smart phone daily. Findings from the research show that both as priests (10 years as priests and below) and lay faithful (19 to 30 years of age), younger people are the heaviest users of the Smartphone. The study recommended that Lay faithful and priests should be educated to desist from using their smartphones during liturgical ceremonies. There should be seminars to educate lay faithful and priests about the proper use of smartphones as Catholic Christians.

Shim (2019) investigated the relationship between Christian spirituality and smartphone addiction in adolescents. The study found that adolescents with lower levels of spiritual well-being were at a higher risk of developing smartphone addiction. Although this research was not conducted in Nigeria, it underscores the potential spiritual vulnerabilities associated with excessive smartphone use among young Christians, including those in Nigerian Catholic communities.

Akeusola, Bolanle. (2023). Exploring Smartphone Use Patterns and Their Associations with Demographic Characteristics, Socio-psychological Well-being, and Socio-cultural Factors among Nigerian Youth. The widespread adoption of smartphones has transformed communication and information access, particularly among Nigerian youths. As Africa's most populous nation and rapidly digitizing economy, Nigeria offers a

unique backdrop to investigate the complex interplay between smartphone use patterns, socio-psychological well-being, and socio-cultural factors among its youth population. The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design to explore these intricate relationships comprehensively. The methodological approach involved a quantitative research framework using a tailored measurement scale developed to gather relevant data, encompassing demographic details, smartphone use patterns, socio-psychological well-being indicators, and socio-cultural factors. The study focused on Nigerian youth aged 18 to 30 years, employing a snowball sampling technique to disseminate the research instrument through WhatsApp and Telegram platforms. A total of 1241 participants from different regions of the country were included in the study. The results showed significant variations in smartphone use patterns among Nigerian youth based on age groups, gender, and socioeconomic background. The results revealed significant variations in smartphone use patterns based on demographic characteristics, including age, sex, and socioeconomic background. Furthermore, smartphone use patterns exhibited significant correlations with various aspects of socio-psychological well-being, such as emotional well-being, stress levels, sleep quality, and life satisfaction. Sociocultural factors did not significantly predict smartphone use patterns; family dynamics and peer interactions emerged as significant indirect influencers through psychological well-being. The recommendations arising from the study's findings suggest tailored interventions for demographic groups, promotion of digital well-being, and the incorporation of digital literacy education.

The Catholic Church accepts and appreciates the use of Smartphones for proclaiming the good news. In fact, all social communication applications could be effectively used for evangelization. In *Benefits and Challenges of a Smart Phone to Candidates in the Holistic Formation of the Catholic Religious in Langata Sub-County Nairobi – County*, Tesfa et al (2023) focused on examining the benefits and challenges of using a smart phone in the holistic formation of the religious in Langata Sub-County, Nairobi County in Kenya. The specific objectives included; investigating the benefits and drawbacks of using IMO and Instagram, investigating the advantages and disadvantages of using Twitter and Facebook, investigating the advantages and disadvantages of using WhatsApp and Viber, and proposing alternative methods for effectively utilizing the benefits of smart phones for the holistic formation of the Religious in Langata Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya. The study was based on the "Uses and gratifications theory" (UGT) and media system dependence theory. It used quantitative and qualitative methodologies, using a convergent parallel mixed method research design to enhance its findings. The target population consisted of 50 Novices, 10 Mother Superiors, and 95 Professed Sisters from various Congregations. Purposive sampling was used to sample 10 major superiors and 95 Professed Sisters, while simple random sampling was used to sample 40 novices. Data collected via questionnaires and interviewing protocols. Both quantitative and qualitative analytic methods were used to analyse the data. According to the research on the benefits of smartphone use for holistic formation, WhatsApp was used to communicate with new people in novel ways, Facebook was used to share information about formation and forging professional connections. Findings on challenges of using smartphones showed that; WhatsApp is a significant source of interruption during prayers, and religious women are psychologically affected by Facebook bullying. The study concluded that; the use of a smartphone could influence religious formation either positively or negatively, depending on the user. The study's recommendations include; formees should be trained on the proper use of smartphones, communities should also conduct workshops and invite communication experts to enlighten the novices on how to detect dangers such as scams and exploiters online, superiors should form small groups amongst formees to enhance sister's keeper" spirit, and strict rules should be established in the community to control the use of smartphones during critical times, like time for community prayers and other activities.

While direct studies on smartphone use among young Catholic youth in specific Nigerian dioceses are scarce, existing literature indicates that excessive smartphone use can have significant psycho-spiritual implications. These include increased stress, decreased life satisfaction, distractions during religious practices, and a potential decline in spiritual well-being. Addressing these challenges may require targeted interventions, such as educating youth on responsible smartphone use and fostering environments that promote spiritual resilience in the digital age.

METHODOLOGY

This study used descriptive research design. According to Creswell (2014), Descriptive research is a research method used to determine the characteristics of a population or particular phenomenon. The study used the

standardized 32-item Smartphone Addiction Scale (SAS) by Kwon et al., (2013) for assessing high-risk usage, to collect quantitative data, which is reliable and valid. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. The targeted population in this study comprised youth from parishes within the four deaneries in Lokoja Diocese through simple random sampling. The research questionnaire comprised of 32 questions. The questionnaire constituted of closed-ended questions, and was administered to the participants. The questionnaire consisted two sections, A to B. The first section A, addressed the respondents' demographic information. The second section B, addressed the levels of smartphone use.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study presents the distribution of smartphone use among Catholic youths in selected parishes of a diocese. The data is categorized into five levels: Very High, High, Moderate, Low, and Very Low. Here's an interpretation and analysis:

Rating	Frequency	Percent
Very Low	5	7.0
Low	9	12.7
Moderate	15	21.1
High	21	29.6
Very High	21	29.6
Total	71	100.0

A significant proportion (59.2%) of the participants fall under the "Very High" and "High" smartphone use categories. This indicates that over half of the Catholic youths studied are frequent smartphone users. This is consistent with the findings of Egielewa (2020) that lay faithful (19 to 30 years of age), younger people are the heaviest users of the Smartphone. Moderate use accounts for 21.1%, representing a smaller but notable group of balanced users. A minority, 19.7% (12.7% Low + 7% Very Low), exhibit low levels of smartphone usage.

These youths likely rely heavily on their smartphones for communication, entertainment, social media, or even educational purposes. It raises potential concerns about overuse, including distractions from spiritual practices, reduced interpersonal interactions, or possible effects on mental health.

Moderate Usage of 21.1% might represent a more balanced use of smartphones, effectively integrating it into their daily lives without excessive reliance. Low and Very Low Usage of 19.7% might prioritize non-digital forms of communication and activities or have limited access to smartphones. This could reflect a conscious effort to reduce dependency, cultural influences, or economic factors. Tesfa et al (2023) maintains that if well managed, smartphone can benefit holistic formation.

The equal distribution of "Very High" and "High" levels (29.6% each) highlights the prevalence of intensive smartphone use. The relatively smaller percentage of "Very Low" users (7%) suggests that almost all participants engage with smartphones to some degree.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Cell phone use is a good example of what Mick and Fournier (1998) referred to as a paradox of technology. The use of modern smart-phones can be both freeing and enslaving at the same time. The cell phone allows us the freedom to gather information, communicate, and socialize in ways only dreamed of before the discovery of cellular technology. At the same time, however, cell phones can lead to dependence (as seen in our discussion) and restrictions. Cell phones have become inextricably woven into our daily lives an almost invisible driver of modern life. It is incumbent upon users to identify the all-important tipping point where cell phone use crosses the line from a helpful tool to one that enslaves both users and society alike.

Educational Programs: Introduce workshops on healthy smartphone habits, emphasizing balanced use. Communication experts should be invited to enlighten catholic youths on how to detect dangers such as scams

and exploiters online, Parish priests should form small groups amongst youth members to enhance “brother's keeper” spirit, and strict personal rules should be encouraged among these individual to control the use of smartphones during critical times.

Spiritual Integration: Encourage the use of smartphones for accessing religious content, prayer apps, and parish updates, turning potential distractions into tools for spiritual growth. Young Catholic faithful should be encouraged to engage with curated religious content such as daily Scripture reflections, online Mass participation where necessary as during the time of the covid 19 pandemic, guided prayer applications, digital rosaries, and catechetical resources. Parish communities can further harness this potential by sharing regular updates, devotionals, and faith-based challenges through digital platforms. By reframing smartphone use as a channel for encounter with God, participants can gradually cultivate disciplined and purposeful engagement, transforming habitual scrolling into moments of prayer, reflection, and spiritual nourishment.

Monitoring and Support: Provide resources for parents and youths to manage potential issues related to excessive smartphone use. This includes equipping young people and their families with practical tools such as screen-time tracking applications, digital wellbeing features, and scheduled “tech-free” periods, particularly during prayer, study, and rest. Beyond technological tools, access to psycho-spiritual counselling services should be made available within parish or diocesan structures to support individuals struggling with dependency, anxiety, or diminished self-regulation. Formation programs can also include digital literacy and self-regulation skills, enabling users to critically evaluate their usage patterns and make healthier choices aligned with their personal and spiritual values.

Targeted Outreach: Tailor interventions to high-use groups to address overuse and promote meaningful engagement in parish activities. Such targeted outreach may include specialized workshops, small faith-sharing groups, and mentorship programs that address the underlying psychological and social drivers of excessive use, such as loneliness, stress, or the need for validation. Parish leaders and youth ministers can design engaging, alternative activities, such as community service, retreats, and interactive liturgical participation, that foster real-life connections and deepen spiritual commitment. By intentionally engaging high-use groups, the Church can not only mitigate the negative effects of overuse but also redirect youthful energy toward meaningful participation in faith and community life.

The data reflects a diverse spectrum of smartphone use among Catholic youths, with the majority leaning toward high usage levels. While smartphones offer valuable opportunities for connectivity and learning, managing their use effectively is crucial to ensure they support rather than hinder personal, social, and spiritual development.

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