

Smartphone is now 'the place where we live', anthropologists say

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According to a new report, people feel the same way about their smartphones as they do about their homes. "The smartphone is no longer just a device that we use," Professor Daniel Miller said. "It's become the place where we live."

Miller, who was the lead author on the study, is an anthropologist at University College London in the United Kingdom. Anthropologists study how people live. Miller's team of anthropologists spent more than a year recording smartphone use in nine countries around the world. The work took them to Ireland, Japan and Brazil.

The study found that people who own smartphones often choose their phone over their friends and family. "At any point, whether over a meal, a meeting or other shared activity, a person can just disappear," he said. They will have "gone home" by looking at their smartphone.

Miller said people's need for their phones was leading to a "death of proximity". Proximity refers to how near or far things are. "Even when we are physically together, we can be socially, emotionally or professionally alone."

This news is not all bad, however. The scientists say that chat apps have changed people's lives for the better. "For many users, a single app now represents the most important thing that the smartphone does for them." Popular chat apps include WeChat in China and WhatsApp in Brazil.

These chat apps are the "heart of the smartphone", scientists say. They are the place where people come together to exchange important information, reconnect and take care of each other.

Smartphones Are A Blessing And A Curse

Unlike many studies of smartphone use, the study specifically focused on older adults. The scientists chose people who were not young or elderly.

"An emphasis upon older people may appear strange," the scientists wrote. For years, scientists thought young people were the main users of smartphones. Now, they know that smartphones are "the possession of humanity as a whole". By focusing on adults, the scientists said, they could write a more complete study.

The scientists found that people all over the world need smartphones. They believe it is the first object to challenge the house or the workplace in terms of the amount of time we spend on it while awake, they wrote. "We are always 'at home' in our smartphone."

This digital "home" is not always a place to rest. For many people, work communications can come into our lives through the devices to disturb us, scientists said. Social media can stop people from feeling relaxed, too.

"The smartphone may reduce the experience of home as a refuge," the scientists wrote. A refuge is a place people can go to feel safe. A child bullied by other pupils at school now finds little rest at home, the scientists say. The bullying could continue through the child's smartphone.

However, there were benefits to increased smartphone use. "The smartphone is helping us create a vast range of helpful behaviours," Miller said. Our devices can help us connect families. They can create new spaces for healthcare and political debate, for example. "It is only by looking at the vastly different uses that we can fully understand the consequences of smartphones for people's lives around the world."

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