

18.04.2023

dr hab. Magdalena Ślusarczyk, prof. UJ  
Institute of Sociology  
Jagiellonian University

**Review of the doctoral dissertation of Dror Krikon M.A.  
entitled  
„The Smartphone in the Life of Israeli Youth.  
From “Virtual Friend” to Addiction”**

Supervisor: Professor Witold Wrzesień, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

The presented dissertation has 312 pages, including wide-ranging Introduction (Theoretical and Methodological Basis of the Dissertation) and appendices: questionnaires and in-depth interview (IDI) scenario. The bibliography is extensive, consisting of 290 entries, there are also 33 tables and three charts in the dissertation. The work consists of the above-mentioned Introduction, five chapters and Epilogue providing a summary of the scientific process and anticipating the further development of the investigated research question. The chapters encompass the history of the development of smartphones to their current form and functionalities, the characteristics of youth as a specific period of human life, the rationale behind the choice of generation for the study (Y and Z), research methodology, research findings and conclusions. The thesis has been written all in English.

Before I briefly describe all chapters as a background for thesis evaluation, I would like to emphasize that I see tackling this topic as a huge methodological and theoretical challenge. The pace of technological development of smartphones and the change in their social role makes it, in my opinion, not easy to build theoretical models and conduct research, while at the same time it is necessary for understanding the phenomenon and formulating recommendations for parents, teachers, politicians and, finally, young people themselves.

The Author begins by reflecting on contemporary society, and in particular the phenomenon of postmodernism, and draws attention to the instability of knowledge, the sense

of shaken or alienated authorities, including science, and the uncertainty of the future. He cites Giddens, Beck and Baumann to point out, on the one hand, the fluidity of society, including social norms as well as reflexivity, the lack of rootedness and short-term social relationships. The introduction contains also a critique of postmodernism, especially marketisation, consumption pressure and infantilisation, which, according to the Author, stems from the cult of youth, or the tendency to keep people in a state of constant arousal, which increases the propensity to consume. The phenomena described by the Author are, he argues, the reason for the increasing incidence of behavioural disorders, including addictions (pp. 24-25). The second contributor to this phenomenon is stress and a sense of anxiety, which, following Beck, the Author makes one of the distinctive features of the modern world. It results from the weakening of the institutions of socialisation and social control or the lack of individual authorities, instead placing the entire responsibility for all life decisions on the individual (p. 27). Also noteworthy in this section is the well-defined portrait of young people, including not only an attempt to frame this period in time, but also pointing out key characteristics or threats and challenges of this part of human life.

Finally, the Introduction concludes by posing the main research question: **What are the characteristic features of the influence of smartphone use for the everyday life of contemporary youth in Israel?** The Author breaks it down into 17 specific questions. This seems like a lot, and it could be debated whether some of the questions could not be combined into one, but this does not change the fact that the subject of the dissertation is well planned and clearly formulated, and the Author indicates precisely all the indicators of the answer to the main question. The choice of interpretative paradigm for conducting the analysis also seems adequate, as does the selection of tools (varied) and the sample - the inclusion of representatives of the so-called Generation Z (ages 15-18) and from Generation Y (ages 33-37), which allows comparison and an attempt to capture change.

The next part of the dissertation consists of four chapters entitled: 'The Smartphone', 'The Youth', 'Socialisation', 'Smartphone Addiction', which act as an overview of the existing literature and studies and outline the theoretical framework, and chapter five, 'The Smartphone in the Social Reality of Contemporary Youth in the Light of Research', which covers the entire research process from the formulation of the research question through the analysis of the research methods to the presentation of the results and subsequent discussion on them.

Chapter 1 begins with the history of the emergence and dissemination of smartphones, as well as the evolution of their technical functions and consequent social relevance. The Author then focuses on research indicating the impact of smartphone use and treating smartphones as indispensable on social relationships, networking and the functioning of deeper relationships and partnerships. Another strand is the analysis of research focusing on the link between the constant use of smartphones - also while studying and participating in educational activities - and academic success, whereby research-confirmed negative correlations are highlighted here. Conflict in the field of education and an overview of the decisions taken by schools in different countries regarding permission to own and use smartphones in schools are also strongly highlighted. Among the further themes addressed in this chapter are: the impact on sleep, the use of smartphones at work, the possibility to keep in touch even with a long physical distance, the impact on self-esteem, feelings of attractiveness and social acceptance. Finally, the Author raises the issue of the change in the essential original function of the smartphone - from being a tool that was supposed to help us to connect easily, it has become a device that causes our potential constant accessibility, makes it difficult to separate work and family life and potentially harms interpersonal relationships, including romantic and intimate ones, it also changes the channels, forms and intensity of communication within families. The Author also draws attention to the issue of so-called parental control (being able to stay in touch with the child is one of the most important reasons for buying them a smartphone in young age), which increases the sense of security, but at the same time reduces the scope of children's self-responsibility, and conveys, not necessarily intentionally, a message of mistrust. Finally, the smartphone is presented as an all-encompassing tool - for work, relationship building, entertainment, personal development. It can therefore at the same time support, distract or empower. It is thus only a new tool in known practices, but it remixes them and influences the emergence of new social practices. This means (p. 58) that: „The functions of the smartphone in the user's life can be divided into visible roles that the user understands and initiates and activates on the device, and then there are hidden roles, which are not immediately apparent to the user's understanding. These include the interference and influence of the smartphone on the process of socialization” (p. 58). With this quote, the Author concludes with a broad overview of the research on the role and importance of the smartphone, and concludes with the theme of socialisation (both of young people and media education of older generations) - both its influence on the socialisation process and its use as an educational or training or even therapeutic tool. Tracing the long history of the smartphone from the First World War, when cordless phones were first

used, to today's 'managers of our everyday life' is an undoubted advantage. At the same time, however, the lack of an announcement or listing in the introduction to the chapter what threads will be covered results in the feeling of being swamped by numerous studies, carried out in different years and places, independently of each other, without being able to link them coherently.

In Chapter 2, the Author attempts to define youth as a specific period of life, distinguished from others. He begins by pointing out the difficulty of clearly defining the framework of this period (if we do not use arbitrary social determinants such as the need to perform military service or legal responsibility) and by outlining the historical context and explaining the process of arriving at the current understanding of youth – as a period of transition between childhood and adulthood, characterised by certain specific features and social expectations different from other periods. The chapter continues with characterisations of youth, from biological to cultural and social factors. As with Chapter 1, the scope of the chapter and the decision not to divide it into parts is somewhat problematic. As a result, we are confronted once with philosophical reflections on the idealism of young people, and immediately afterwards with sociological references to the structural power of the group or sexual initiation, as well as findings from developmental psychology. Additionally, the Author introduces the theme of possible attitudes and activities of parents and then subcultures. Ultimately – with the conviction that the issue of youth and young people has been treated exhaustively – we are nevertheless left with a sense of some confusion. In the second part of the chapter, the Author begins a chronological analysis, but it is not announced or explained why such a decision has been made, why here and how it connects to the earlier part. In the final section, the Author rightly focuses on Israeli youth, but still it would have been better to do it in the form of a separate sub-chapter. Similarly, the work would have gained more clarity if the two generations that are the subject of the work, Generation Y and Generation Z, were discussed in a separate, highlighted subsection.

Chapter 3, devoted to the process of socialisation, is very well structured and here - despite its considerable length again - the Author maintains the full coherence of the argument. He introduces the readers to the context of socialisation processes, then discusses extensively the various agents of socialisation, also pointing out the changes currently taking place, and in the last section focuses on the obstacles, disruptions and failures of socialisation.

In Chapter 4, the last in the theoretical part, the Author introduces the issue of smartphone addiction by posing the following questions: Whether the increasing use of smartphones can be considered an addiction? What has drug addiction got to do with it? What

brain processes are involved? And how does this addiction affect youth and their specific age characteristics? The Author analyses the issue very broadly, starting with the concept of addiction, its neurobiological and biological as well as psychological and social connotations. He then identifies forms of so-called technological addiction, e.g. to games, and thus leads to a reflection on whether we can speak explicitly of smartphone addiction. The Author presents different positions, as there is still no consensus on this issue, but he himself favours defining this kind of addiction and disagrees with softer terms such as misuse of devices. He argues, firstly, that the set of functions of smartphones and the possibilities they offer is very broad, secondly, he emphasises that Internet addiction is widely accepted, yet 'being online' is nowadays basically the same as using smartphones, and finally, he refers to the symptoms of addiction recognised in various studies and refers to the reactions of people who misuse smartphones.

The second part of the dissertation covers the Author's own research. It has been very extensive: both quantitative research (even if statistically non-representative) and qualitative research. It comprises a set of methods that combine features of sociological ethnographic research, field research, and comparative research. The techniques used are: questionnaire and individual in-depth interview (IDI). The quantitative research was preceded by two pilot studies. The first one verified the scope of the questions and their formulation. The second pilot study included 105 questionnaire responses, which were tested in statistical tests (Cronbach's Alpha) for reliability. These two pilot studies decided which research questions would be investigated through quantitative research and which through qualitative research. The IDI questions for the qualitative part of this work were constructed at the same time to complement the quantitative study. The interview initially included thirty questions, and after two pilots had also been done for the quantitative part, the questionnaire was expanded to thirty-eight questions. The quantitative research took four months to complete. The questionnaire aimed at Generation Y was distributed first, and after responses had been received from about 152 research participants, the questionnaire for the youth, Generation Z, was also distributed. This sample eventually included 537 research participants. The next three months were devoted to qualitative research. Twenty Generation Y respondents were randomly sampled from the questionnaire responses. In the same way, thirty Generation Z respondents were randomly sampled from the questionnaire responses, for which the consent of one of the parents was obtained. Finally, a broad quantitative and qualitative sample was obtained. In the sample for the quantitative research we have a predominance of women in

both generations, the samples for the qualitative research were gender balanced. All this proves a good and careful consideration of the research process, an adequate tool construction process and correct implementation.

The Author starts the presentation of the results and their analysis by outlining the general picture and characteristics of smartphone use: when does one start using, how much time do young people spend with it, do they have friends or acquaintances without smartphones. The next block of questions covered the experience of cyberbullying. These questions were explored in more depth in the qualitative research: basic forms of use were asked about, including the apps used, as well as the social norms that regulate smartphone use. Among the results of this section, it is of course not surprising to find that the smartphone occupies a central and dominant place in the daily life of the youth in Israel or that it is one of the most prevalent solutions to boredom. However, it is interesting to note that while Generation Y representatives raised the issue of lack of physical contact, Generation Z did so much less frequently. We can also see a generational shift in tools, Facebook is central for Generation Y, compared to Instagram for the youth. Following this introduction, the first chapter strictly covering the analysis of the research is entitled 'Sociality and smartphone use'. The Author addresses six issues here: how the smartphone influences the motivation of youth to make face-to-face interactions, how it changes the interaction patterns among youth and between youth and other people, what the increasing use of the smartphone does to the ability to recognize facial expressions for youth, how digital media use via the smartphone influence youth social involvement, how so called smartphone culture affects intimate relationships among the youth and how it affects the youth's courage to express an opinion. This part is long, the Author also poses a lot of questions and additionally draws answers from two data sources, but the partial summaries adopted allow the argument to be followed efficiently. However, while I very much appreciate these short summary subsections, they are mainly repetitions of conclusions and formulations given earlier.

The next part of the analysis refers to the effects of the smartphone in private use. Here, the Author addresses the issues of the use of the devices while studying (in the classroom), the impact on sleep, on decision-making and finally the question of how smartphone culture affects the independence of the youth. One of the findings I highlighted is a certain manifestation of self-reflection. On the one hand, respondents confirm that they like teachers to allow the use of devices during lessons, but at the same time they feel that it affects them badly. The question remains whether this implies cognitive dissonance. At the same time, do they value boundaries and freedom of choice and/or the pleasure of using a

smartphone? My second reflection and also a question to the Author – if respondents express a belief in their ability to separate themselves from the device (e.g. to sleep) and yet do not do so, is there a kind of self-deception occurring here? To quote: „(...) many of the research participants are capable and would have no problem doing so, but for convenience's sake they are not interested in doing so” (p. 227). Another interesting aspect are the findings concerning correlation between smartphone use and decision-making difficulties', which were confirmed in Generation Z and partly in Generation Y: The more intensively smartphones are used, the more difficult, protracted, and stressful daily decision-making becomes. On the one hand, respondents emphasise the availability of information and the support they get this way, and on the other hand, precisely the difficulty of making decisions. Could this be a situation of not being able to cope with an overabundance of sources?

It is therefore worth emphasising that, although they very much want to have smartphones close by, they appreciate putting up boundaries and are reflexive about the possible consequences.

In the final subchapter, Author examines three research problems. First, he discusses smartphone addiction and the indicators that can show and describe the level of the addiction and dependence on the smartphone among the youth. Then, he deals with the effects of the smartphone on self-esteem, and finally he examines the effects of using digital media via the smartphone on classroom popularity.

The Author concludes that both generations have no problem with self-esteem and rate their social popularity highly. „Everyone reported themselves as social and sociable people, and everyone reported that they loved and valued themselves. While a few report mild self-criticism, this does not diminish their self-esteem and self-love.” (p. 259). What I miss here is a slightly more critical approach or the addition of other questions assessing feelings of popularity and self-esteem to this part of the questionnaire. The strong reaction to the potential lack of so-called 'likes' and comments under posts/content shows that these beliefs are not necessarily firmly established. But there is just an additional note, this does not question the Author's finding that the data collected is not enough to indicate a relationship between low self-esteem and the possibility of smartphone addiction. Moreover, the assumption of adopting an interpretivist paradigm (made in the Introduction), also captures the primacy of the Author's own interpretation of participants in the social world and their definitions.

To summarise, the research analysis has been carried out reliably and a large body of valuable material has been produced, presenting a picture of young people living in a digital

world. In addition, the choice of two generations makes it possible to observe the changes taking place. They may not be dramatic, but they are nevertheless visible. Some such differences, indicating perhaps a targeted process of change in certain behaviours have already been referred to in this review. In addition, we can also point out, among others:

- „The difficulty in decision-making was significantly higher among the sample from Generation Z in comparison to Generation Y.” (229);

- „(...) for the youth, the lack of any reaction to their online content is seen as a tough situation and, for some, also dramatic. (...) For the comparison group (Generation Y), such a situation is also considered tough, but not dramatically so (...) (p. 252). One may therefore regret that the Author did not make a broader comparison between the two generations, or try to build a model of the process. However, this may be a suggestion for preparing a scientific article from this material.

The thesis has also some editing's weaknesses, typos or missing page numbers but they are few.

To sum up the thesis is inspiring from both of the theoretical and methodological point of view. Aims and methods are clearly described, Author represents the ideas and knowledge with sufficient theoretical background. The aims were fulfilled, methods of research work are appropriate to the aims and hypothesis formulated in the thesis even if we can identified some weaknesses. References of concerned literature are very extensive and cover the present state of knowledge. The abovementioned shortcomings do not substantially affect the quality of the work and do not disqualify it in any way. I clearly recommend its acceptance and admitting Mr Dror Krikon to public defense of his thesis.

Roghayeh Ghusayfeh