

SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING AND PROBLEMATIC INTERNET USE IN A GROUP OF ROMANIAN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

The significant increase in the use of new technologies by the younger generation has prompted many research studies that have related the problematic use of new technologies to various aspects of adolescent life. This article attempted to determine if there was a significant negative correlation between the level of spiritual well-being and problematic Internet use in a group of gymnasium participants, aged 10 to 14 years, attending two educational institutions in Romania. Two questionnaires were used: the Spiritual Well-being Scale and the Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were obtained for the two main study constructs and the correlation was calculated using Spearman's rho coefficient. Adolescents maintain a relatively strong belief in the existence of God, but they have a low level of interest in reading spiritual books and they are concerned about spending too much time online. The results reveal the need to improve the spiritual well-being of adolescents and make them responsible users of new technologies.

Keywords

Spiritual well-being, problematic use of internet, adolescents

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INTRODUCTION

Young people born after 2000 are a special generation, influenced by the spread of new technologies. The development of technology and the impact it had on society caused the young generation to move quickly, in most cases, from satisfaction to addiction (Duță, 2011, p. 113). The appearance and explosive development of smartphones, the permanent connection to the internet, the emergence and global expansion of social networks—all these have influenced the young generation's attention towards these modern communication and entertainment tools. The new technological revolution has given rise to certain problems and dilemmas that have never been encountered before.

Analyzing the lives of adolescents over the past 20 years, a decline in attention, interest in quality reading, and enthusiastic participation in daily activities and spiritual activities has been observed.

The concepts proposed in this study, adolescent spiritual well-being and problematic use of technology by adolescents, have been studied in recent years, both separately and together, especially with the expansion of technology use in everyday life. The present study aims to compare aspects of spiritual well-being with adolescents' attention to new technologies, to examine the two concepts in an interdependent process and to observe to what extent adolescents' spiritual well-being and problematic use of new technologies may influence each other.

Spiritual well-being is a concept that has been approached in various ways in the literature. In general, the idea of spirituality is correlated with the idea of religion and religiosity. Thus, several different approaches that analyze these constructs are highlighted. There are scholars who perceive spirituality as a universal personal experience, not

connected to the doctrines of a religion (Polanski, 2002) or who consider spirituality separate from religion, although these concepts may be related or overlap (du Toit, 2006), and others consider that the two constructs are equivalent (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Finally, a last approach is that of spirituality that is included in religion, as an expression of a theistic worldview (Hill et al., 2000; Idler et al., 2003).

This last approach is accepted in this article, and the concept of spiritual well-being will have as its foundation the theistic conception that includes the Eternal God, Creator of all things and Source of love (Genesis 1:1; 1 John 4:8). Human beings are invited to know God through the Word of Scripture (John 5:39), through His creation (Romans 1:20) and through fellowship with the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). Even though God's original plan for man's eternal welfare and happiness was corrupted by disobedience and sin, bringing suffering and death (Romans 3:9-23; 6:23), God prepared a plan for the salvation and renewal of the human being for eternity (John 3:16; 1 John 2:25). Until then, God wants to bring peace to people's souls and the prospect of a meaningful life, contributing to the growth of the human being in all its aspects (2 Corinthians 5:18; Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2; Philippians 4:7; Mark 9:50).

In this article, spiritual well-being can be described as the sum of the good relationships people have with God, with the people around them, with the environment, and with themselves (Fisher, 2015). The concept of new technologies, used in this article and related to the understanding assumed by most researchers that have studied this phenomenon in recent years, includes the Internet and wi-fi connection, laptops, tablets, smartphones, social networks, online games. The limited space did not allow a specific individualized approach to each subcategory, but the present paper wanted to analyze the common risk of addiction and

highlight aspects that may cause discomfort to the user following excessive and unwise use, in analysis with the concept of spiritual well-being. As an example, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) classified gaming addiction as part of mental illness.

The specificity of this research is given by the results obtained in two Adventist educational institutions in the area of Muntenia, Romania, in the 2022-2023 school year, following the application of questionnaires to students in high school classes, aged 10-14 years, belonging to early adolescence.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The interest expressed in the spiritual well-being of children and adolescents has been highlighted in several reference works that have conducted a review of the fundamental works aimed at the spiritual well-being of the younger generation (Bridges & Moore, 2002; DeBlasio, 2011; Ruddock & Cameron, 2010).

Research on the concept of spiritual well-being of children and youth has intensified especially with the expansion of social networks. These studies look at the impact that increased exposure to the influence of social media could have on the younger generation and how young people's perception and behavior can be influenced by it (Swist et al., 2015).

A study conducted in Christian educational institutions (Monahan, 2009) showed that there is a direct connection between the use of technology and the spiritual development of young people. The study shows that there are positive as well as negative influences of technology. There are benefits that make students more efficient and able to assimilate new information, but they can become victims of

online abuse, for example. Descriptive studies were conducted that analyzed how the use of smartphones and the Internet influenced the self-perceived mental health of young people. The researchers found links between young people's virtual behaviors and their feelings that their online actions could influence their mental health (Calpbinici & Arslan, 2019).

There were scholars who noticed a correlation between the compulsive use of new technologies and the way adolescents relate to stress, their social anxiety, as well as the perception of social support in the context of the values they have acquired (Adams et al., 2020; Şimşir et al., 2018). Other researchers have drawn attention to the effects of excessive Internet use by young people. This practice can be a cause for discouragement and depression, loneliness, anxiety and mental illness (Lam & Peng, 2010; Powale, 2023; Wyner, 2019). Spiritual well-being may also have a positive effect on alienation in Internet addicts, contributing to low levels of alienation (Tas, 2022).

Regarding how young people have to face the challenge of problematic use of new technologies, and the Internet in particular, both boys and girls were noted to be at risk of inappropriate or excessive use of social networks, blogs or the YouTube channel. As a characteristic of boys, they tend to play online games with their friends, while girls prefer surfing social networks, blogs and listening to music online (Dufour et al., 2017). Certain groups of young people may be vulnerable to problematic Internet use, according to psychological research that has linked problematic Internet use to self-control, self-esteem and subjective well-being (Mei et al., 2016; Sechi et al., 2020).

It is obvious that the evolution of digital technologies in the last two decades has influenced religion and spirituality, and it has redefined how people relate to new technologies.

Thus, there is a flexibility of options regarding religious beliefs and how specific religious practices are expressed (McClure, 2018). It has also been shown that individual-level religiosity may be negatively related to Internet addiction among young adults (Nadeem et al., 2019). Recent research focused on these topics has motivated the present research presented in this article.

Several studies in recent years have highlighted a link between spiritual well-being and problematic internet use. When young people use the Internet inappropriately, their self-esteem is affected, and their quality of life is perceived as declining (Çikrikci, 2016). Several meta-analyses, based on comparative studies and literature review, have highlighted the negative contribution of internet addiction (Gioia et al., 2021), the influence of social media use on mental health (Huang, 2022) and how spiritual habits can be influenced by smartphones and users' online behaviors (Monte-rosso et al., 2019).

Studies have been conducted on the interaction between well-being and the use of the Internet by students and young people in different geographical areas of the world, such as Czech Republic (Lee & Jirásek, 2019), Colombia (Tara-zona Jaimes, 2016), Ireland (Messena & Everri, 2023), Mexico (Fernández Martínez, 2012), and Romania (Bărcăcianu, 2020). These studies have shown that the amount of time young people spend on activities based on new technologies influences their spiritual and mental well-being. There are also studies that found that the development of the spiritual life of university students was affected when the dependence on the Internet increased (Fernández Martínez, 2012; Utomo & Marianta, 2023).

By devoting a significantly increased time for surfing the Internet affects the time spent in spiritual exercises (prayer, Bible study, meditation). Lower positive perceptions of the

image of God were observed among adolescents with a high degree of smartphone addiction compared to those who did not show a high degree of addiction. There was no significant difference in perception by gender (Radu, 2014; Shim, 2019). A significant negative correlation could be observed between the time spent by young people on the Internet and some spiritual disciplines such as prayer, repentance, worship, meditation, and examination of conscience (Tarazona Jaimes, 2016).

On the other hand, being involved in religious life and maintaining a high level of spirituality during adolescence has been found to help young people be more active and creative in their free time (Malinakova et al., 2018; Pong, 2018). It was also found that teenagers who have a higher level of religiosity show a lower level of addiction to internet games (Dossi et al., 2022). It was a very interesting finding that young people who perceived a high level of spiritual well-being showed a lower level of addiction to games, even if they had certain religious beliefs or not (Pong, 2022).

Looking at the expression of religious beliefs in relation to the use of new technologies, it was found that while Internet use accompanies the tendency to be religiously unaffiliated and coincides with acceptance of religious pluralism, Internet use does not replace a person's religious behavior (McClure, 2018). An alarming sign about the problematic use of the Internet was issued in 2019 by the Research Service of the European Parliament, which warned about the devastating impact that problematic internet use has on people's health and quality of life in general (O'Brien et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The study reported here is empirical, descriptive and correlational.

Objectives

This study aimed to determine whether there was a negative correlation between the level of spiritual well-being and problematic Internet use in a group of secondary school participants aged 10 to 14 years attending two of the Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions from Romania.

Hypotheses

There is a correlation between the level of spiritual well-being and problematic Internet use in a group of middle school participants, aged 10 to 14 years, attending two of the Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions in Romania.

Variables

The variables involved in this study were the self-perceived level of spiritual well-being and the self-perceived level of problematic Internet use.

Methods

The study provided a descriptive and correlational analysis of data provided by responses to a pair of questionnaires intended to measure self-perceived level of spiritual well-being and problematic Internet use.

Tools

In addition to collecting a few demographic data—gender, age, grade— two instruments were applied to measure

the constructs of self-perceived spiritual well-being and problematic internet use. They are described as follows.

Spiritual well-being. The Spiritual Well-Being Scale, Romanian children's version (see appendix A), was developed from biblical worldview and validated by six experts from the areas of elementary and middle school education, educational psychology, and religious education (Korniejczuk et al., 2024), with 527 children and adolescents of both genders, aged 7 to 17 years. The items are grouped in four dimensions: relationship with self, relationship with others, relationship with nature, and relationship with God. The instrument uses a five-point Likert scale, which showed an alpha reliability coefficient of .952.

Problematic use of the Internet. The Questionnaire on Problematic Internet Use (Thatcher & Goolam, 2005), translated and validated in Romanian language (Bărcăcianu, 2020), was used. It is a 20-item questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. Since the original questionnaire was first used in South Africa in 2005 on a student population, certain questions were adapted in 2020 for Romanian adolescents. The questions are designed to measure three dimensions: concern about using the Internet, adverse effects, social interactions. For the internal consistency of the questionnaire, Bărcăcianu obtained a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .879.

Population and sampling procedure

A total of 118 students (50 boys, 68 girls) at the gymnasium level (grades 5-8) aged 10-14 years, were non-randomly selected from two Christian private schools located in the cities in Bucharest and Ploiești, Romania, to participate in the study. The questionnaire was applied in both schools during the 2022-2023 school year.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were obtained for the two main constructs of the study and their respective dimensions. Since the assumptions of joint normality of the data were not assumed, it was decided to opt for obtaining Spearman's rho (ρ) coefficient to estimate the degree of correlation between both constructs.

Ethical considerations

The study did not require nominal identification of participants because the study's findings are general and do not identify individuals. Therefore, confidentiality was preserved. Furthermore, the nature of the inquiry does not affect the integrity of the subjects. A note was sent to the participants' parents to obtain appropriate informed consent. Data collection posed no risk to the subjects. There were no cases of children whose parents did not approve participation in the study.

RESULTS

Descriptive analysis

Spiritual well-being. On a scale of 1 to 5, the mean of the spiritual well-being for the entire group was high ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.59$). The minimum mean observed was 2.34 and the maximum 5.00. Naturally, a negative skewed distribution was observed (-0.837). Internal consistency was measured by Cronbach's alpha and was very high ($\alpha = .95$).

An analysis by items allowed us to observe that items 1, "I believe in the existence of God" ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 0.60$); 25, "I believe that God loves me" ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.62$ 0.69); and 26, "I am grateful to God for the wonderful

things he has created” ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.615$), obtained the highest score. Although with values that cannot be considered low on the scale of 1 to 5, the items with the lowest scores were the following: 20, “I take the time to study the Bible or other spiritual books” ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.14$); 12, “I feel that nature speaks to me of God’s love” ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.02$); and 14, “I ask for God’s help in the smallest things I do” ($M = 3.73$; $SD = 1.19$).

Problematic use of the Internet. Likewise, on a scale of 1 to 5, the mean of problematic internet use was somewhat low ($M = 2.06$, $SD = .69$). The minimum observed was equal to 1.05, while the maximum was 4.25. The distribution showed a positive skewness (.717). The internal consistency coefficient was shown to be better than that initially obtained by Bărcăcianu (2020). A Cronbach’s alpha of .91 was obtained. The means for its dimensions were the following: (a) online preoccupation, 2.26 ($SD = 0.85$); (b) adverse effects, 1.75 ($SD = 0.67$); and (c) social interactions, 2.27 ($SD = 0.94$). The data distribution of the adverse effects dimension showed a high positive skewness (1.378) and kurtosis (1.804).

The items with the highest scores, which reveal where the greatest problems in Internet use occur, were the following in descending order: 1, “Do you ever find that you stay on the Internet much longer than intended?” ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.05$); 4, “Do you find it easier to interact with others online as opposed to face to face?” ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.36$); and 2 “Do you find that you need to spend more and more time on the internet to feel satisfied?” ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.14$). The items with the lowest scores, which reveal the smallest problems in internet use, belong to the *adverse effects* dimension and were the following: 13, “Have you ever suffered any serious adverse financial consequences because of your use of the internet?” ($M = 1.32$, $SD = 0.76$); 11,

“Have you ever suffered any serious physical/health related consequences because of your use of internet?” ($M = 1.50$, $SD = 0.87$); and 12, “Have you ever suffered any serious adverse psychological consequences because of your use of the Internet?” ($M = 1.51$, $SD = 1.02$).

Correlational analysis

In the present study, the constructs did not show normality in the rather asymmetric distribution of their data. The Spiritual Well-being Scale showed a statistic of .103 on the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($p = .004$) and the Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire showed a statistic of .112 ($p = .001$) on the same test. For this reason, it was decided to use Spearman’s rho coefficient to calculate the correlation between them.

A moderate but highly significant negative correlation was observed between general means of self-perceived spiritual well-being and self-perceived problematic Internet use ($\rho = -.471$, $p < .001$), with a coefficient of determination (explained variance) equal to .221.

DISCUSSIONS

Students’ responses to the items of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale, Romanian children version, were grouped into four categories that showed the good relationships they have with God, with the people around them, with the environment and with themselves (Fisher, 2004).

The students answered the questions showing certainty about the existence of God and about the manifestation of His love towards people. At the same time, it surprises young people’s low interest in Bible study and in reading other materials. This finding comes as confirmation of the general perception in recent years of a general decline in

interest in quality reading. In past studies, the negative relationship of internet addiction with learning approaches, attitude towards reading and reading habits indicates that students who have control problems in using new technologies may be affected in the learning process (Hilt, 2013). However, the internet addiction variable is not a significant predictor of reading attitude (Lara Contreras, 2019).

Another area that needs attention is how teenagers interact with nature and activities related to it, as exhibited by the low score obtained by question 12, “I feel that nature speaks to me of God’s love”. It has been demonstrated that well-being and activities in nature influence each other (Roberts et al., 2020), but the lack of interaction with nature was evident during the pandemic, in a context of the isolation of people (Varela et al., 2023).

Analyzing national surveys of students in the United States between 1991 and 2016, it was found that psychological well-being, satisfaction levels, and expressed happiness declined sharply after 2012, following the large-scale development of social media and the significant increase in the number of smart phones. Adolescents’ perceived level of happiness became lower as they spent more time in online activities and less time in activities that offered face to face social interaction, sports, and participation in social projects (Twenge et al., 2018). Moreover, a high level of spiritual well-being contributes to a high level of personal satisfaction and individual happiness (Holder et al., 2010; Krok, 2016; Marlin, 2009). Young people who had a higher level of spirituality showed an increased level of happiness, even though this was not necessarily linked to certain religious practices, such as church attendance.

It is important to add that a truly meaningful spiritual life for children and adolescents can be possible if they are properly guided and emotionally nurtured by adults

(Apostolides, 2018; Fandiño Leguía, 2016). Parents who were religiously active and provided spiritual support to their children positively influenced their children's spiritual well-being and strengthened their children's faith as teenagers and young adults (Fredericks, 2019; Hull, 2015; Swan, 2013). It has been observed that adolescent girls are influenced by the interaction with their mothers and the degree of internet addiction of girls is influenced by the psychological and spiritual well-being of mothers (Ahmadi et al., 2018).

It is also very important that teachers of teenagers show passion while emphasizing skills that promote a harmonious and holistic development of young people (Globokar, 2018). Thus, increasing adolescent values will develop the level of spiritual well-being (Şimşir et al., 2018). Adolescents who feel supported by adults develop spiritual well-being and a high level of self-esteem (Krok, 2016; Winkfield, 2009). Used safely and effectively, new technologies help promote well-being among young people (Campbell & Robards, 2013).

Despite the risks that the use of new technologies can bring, having a wise approach and full attention, adolescents can be practically guided towards a positive use of new technologies that does not diminish the development of their spiritual well-being (Monahan, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

The results present an important challenge for Christian education. They reveal the need to improve the spiritual well-being of adolescents and, at the same time, make them responsible users of new technologies. The study also shows the necessity and importance of education for children and adolescents' spiritual health. This goal can be achieved by

designing programs that promote the true purpose of life, inner peace, hope, and faith, which contribute to a life full of meaning, satisfaction, and genuine happiness. At the same time, it is important that school leaders organize training classes for students in the use of new technologies and that students are informed about the negative effects in case of inappropriate or excessive use. It is necessary to draw the attention of parents and families to the correct and effective use of new technologies and initiate actions that provide an example of good practice for teenagers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

The Spiritual Well-Being Scale, Romanian children's version

Hello!

The questionnaire to which we invite you to participate applies to a research within the Master's in Education courses. The answers to these questions will help us better understand the spiritual well-being of children and adolescents. The validity of the study depends on the honesty of your answers. We assure you of data confidentiality.

Thank you for your cooperation!!

Girl _____ Boy _____

Class: _____

Age: _____ years

Please tick (x) only one option that you consider appropriate for each question:

1 - Totally disagree

2 - Disagree

3 - Neutral / Neither agree nor disagree

4 - Agreed

5 - Totally agree

No crt.	Items	1	2	3	4	5
1.	I believe in the existence of God.					
2.	The beauty of nature makes me think of God.					
3.	I consider myself a God-fearing person.					
4.	I have a desire to learn more about God.					
5.	I want to help my friends know God better.					
6.	I like to pray.					
7.	I believe that God is the Creator of the entire Universe.					
8.	I feel that God is with me in everything I do.					

9.	I take care of the environment.						
10.	I am happy when I help others.						
11.	I want to tell others about Jesus.						
12.	I feel that nature speaks to me about God's love.						
13.	I feel joy when I help.						
14.	I ask for God's help in the smallest things.						
15.	I believe that God has given me salvation as a gift.						
16.	I believe in the power of prayer.						
17.	I study the Bible to know God better.						
18.	When I encounter problems, I trust that God will make things work out.						
19.	I look with admiration and respect at the nature created by God.						
20.	I take time to study the Bible or other spiritual books.						
21.	I feel that reading the Bible improves my life.						
22.	When I walk in nature, I feel closer to God.						
23.	I feel that Jesus is my friend.						
24.	I believe that nature discovers God.						
25.	I believe God loves me.						
26.	I am grateful to God for the wonderful things he has created.						
27.	I go into nature to enjoy God's creation.						
28.	I believe "it is more blessed to give than to receive".						
29.	The relationship with God makes me happy.						
30.	I help my friends when they need it.						