

Smartphones and Digital Entertainment in Nepal's Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries

Findings from Interviews, Surveys, and Screen-Time Data Across
Three Monastic Communities

By Jack Noble

Namaskar!

This is a pamphlet explaining the findings of a formal research project on how *gumba* communities in Nepal are using, thinking about, and governing phone use and “time pass apps” like Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and so on. Smartphones provide access to useful teachings, books, communication, and information, but also raise questions about the role of distracting and addicting technologies in monastic life. Because sharing potentially controversial opinions can be difficult, *gumba* rule-makers often do not know how people really feel about phone use, or how they really use their phones day to day.

To help, I gathered a small dataset of lamas’ perspectives on phone use for monastery administrators across Nepal to refer to in their governance conversations. I went to three monasteries in Nepal—one large community in Kathmandu (site A), one small rural community in East Nepal (site B), and one nunnery on the edge of the Kathmandu valley (site C)—and interviewed more than twenty *lamas*. We talked about how lamas are using their mobiles, how they feel about that use, and how they and their community are managing phone use. I also gave a short survey to seventy-two *shedra* students, teachers, and *Lopon* about phone use, and recorded screen-time data from almost sixty of their phones.

The findings below are organized into four parts: how lamas use their phones; what concerns they have; what they value; and how they want to move forward. Please read and take whatever seems useful to you and your community. This work was conducted with the Rangjung Yeshe Institute for Buddhist Studies at Kathmandu University and funded by Fulbright Nepal. The head lama at each location, and each participating monk, gave permission to take part. The full academic paper will be made available at ryismartphonestudy.com when it is published. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at the addresses listed below.

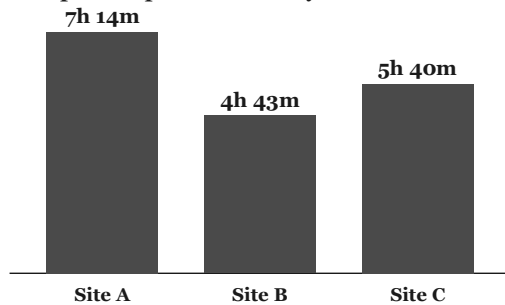
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How lamas use their phones

A. Most lamas use smartphones every day.

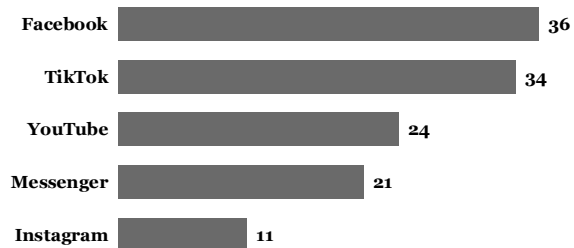
- Everyone that took part in the project owned a smartphone.
- The average amount of time lamas spent on their phone was about six and a half hours every day. Lamas picked up and turned on their phone an average of fifty-six times every day.
- Entertainment apps were by far the most used—Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube especially.

Time spent on phones each day



Most used apps

(by number of times recorded as a top-three most-used app)



B. Most lamas thought that they used their phones less than they did.

- 80% of survey participants under-estimated their own phone use.
- Actual recorded use was about 1.5 times higher than people thought it was.

average phone use (perceived)	average phone use (real)	Difference
272 minutes	415 minutes	2.4 hours

C. Time pass apps are used mostly at night, on holidays, and during breaks.

- Most lamas said they did not use phones during *puja* or in class.
- Many shedra students and Lopon said that they used their phones for entertainment for several hours before sleep every night.
- Most also said they spend many hours on time pass apps during free days.

"I use [time pass apps] a lot in the evenings... three, four hours, probably. Often I am not free until 9 pm at night... so then sometimes I use until 9, 10, 11." (site A, Lopon, age 33)

D. Many lamas already work to limit their own use.

- More than half of interviewees said they try to self-restrict entertainment use.
- Strategies included deleting apps, locking phones away during exam periods, and switching to a flip phone.
- Lamas at the rural site B felt less strongly about self-restriction than the students and Lo pon in Kathmandu valley did.

"I used to like Tiktok, Instagram, but these days I have like deleted completely...because from these reels I might get like distracted." (site A, Lo pon, age 32)

What lamas are worried about

Many lamas expressed worries and distrust of the effects of high phone use on themselves and their communities.

A. Shedra students felt that phones and time pass apps:

- Are addictive, easy to overuse, and wasteful of their time
- Make it much harder to concentrate on their studies
- Make meditation more difficult
- Reduce how much they sleep
- Reduce the time they spend with other people
- Worsen their mental health

"With our mouths we say we have to control ourselves, but we can't" (site C, shedra student, age 21)

"For me, for my study life, having a lot of [internet] is a huge problem. Now, we have exams coming, in Sunday, in ten days, in few weeks, exams will start. But still I have everything to do. But, for other people, maybe different, for me personally it is a huge effect. Some people can study really well with it... personally for me I cannot control myself." (site A, shedra student, age 23)

"[my mobile] affects me very much...because of phone my emotion is very unstable...good thought and bad thought always clashing..." (site A, shedra student, age 25)

B. Lo pon, teachers, and administrators felt that phones and time pass apps:

- Are easy to overuse and a major distraction in general
- Make the monastery less social
- Make students less respectful and less attentive in class
- Are a *bud* (demon) and a major obstacle to developing strong practice

"It's lonely now, isn't it? This is a lonely person's friend. Now the phone is the best friend. The best friend." (site A, Lopon and primary school teacher, age 36)

"I am lost in the mobile...I need to learn many things, you know? But I am lost in the mobile. My time is wasting...[time pass app] is totally opposite to the practice of dharma." (site A, Lopon, age 40)

What lamas like about smartphones

Many lamas also appreciated the ways phones help them and make their lives easier.

A. Shedra students liked:

- The availability of recorded dharma talks on YouTube
- The ease of communicating with friends and family far away
- The usefulness of research and Tibetan translator apps
- Access to foreign media like movies, books, and news

"About the dharma, what they say, in another place, in another monastery, what the guru has said about the dharma, we can know that from the internet. Now, that's good...they post on social media. Now, if we don't have a phone, in this place in the jungle...we wouldn't even know what he said. We know that from our phones. That's good." (site C, shedra student, age 21)

B. Lopon, teachers, and administrators liked:

- The ease with which dharma teachings can be spread online
- The helpfulness of phones and messaging for administrative coordination
- The availability of educational resources online
- How much younger lamas can learn about the outside world
- How time pass apps can sometimes be a useful distraction from negative emotions

"Good use there is, for attention practice, lots of audio, explanations from guru in audio, masters in India and Tibet, good audio from big lamas. And many thankas are available, and many books, pdf, dictionary are available." (site A, Lopon and administrator, age 34)

How lamas want to move forward

Almost three-quarters of the 72 participants expressed desire for new rules regarding phone and digital entertainment use, offering many ideas for how gumbas could reduce the harms of time pass apps without getting rid of the positive and useful parts of phones.

A. Stronger place and time restrictions

Many participants at all three sites thought that things would be better if rules banning phone use in certain contexts or at certain times of day were strengthened and better enforced. People particularly mentioned strong restrictions on night-time use as a rule they thought would be very good for their community.

Examples:

- Strictly no phones after 10 PM
- Strictly no phones during self-study periods, *puja*, and class time
- Removing free Wi-Fi at the monastery to discourage use

"[no phones after] 10 o'clock... that rule would be good. Tomorrow morning I have to go to class. And I will feel sleepy. I doze off in class. And from there, I don't understand. And I fail."
(site C, shedra student, age 20)

B. Bans with a weekly allowance

Eleven participants thought that lamas should only be allowed to use their phones one or two days a week. Some thought that this rule should only apply to lamas in primary school and in the shedra, not to adults. Though hard, they thought the change would be better for the community in the long run.

Examples:

- Phone use allowed on weekends or one day a week only
- Phone use allowed on holidays only

"if phones are for students, allowing them to use it one day a week is the best... Because the more you use the phone, the less attention goes to studies. This is something I have experienced myself. That is why now I also use the phone only one day a week. That is why if I reached a big post, I would make it so phone usage is only one day a week." (I-B3, shedra student, age 30)

C. Better education

Three participants at site A proposed that phone use would be less of a problem if monasteries taught lamas how to use phones and entertainment apps properly.

Examples:

- Training on healthy phone use
- Teaching advantages and disadvantages

"What I feel is, how to use that mobile, the advantages and disadvantages of the apps inside it, that kind of education should be given to them. if those things are taught through education, then people will misuse it less..." (site A, Lopon, age 40)

D. App-specific restrictions

Four participants thought that not all phone use should be banned, but that specifically problematic apps, or certain activities on them, should be.

Examples:

- Limits on highly distracting or addictive apps such as social media
- Bans on making TikToks or Instagram Reels

E. Accountability systems

Finally, three participants thought that a system should be put in place to make people's phone use public, thus keeping people's habits accountable to the community.

Examples:

- Screen-time checks
- A public "screen time habits" chart, posted somewhere in the monastery
- Increased community discussion of phones and phone use habits more generally

"I would like to see...accountability...I would like if the khenpos would come and be like, 'I have to see your screen time.' Really, you know, post it, put it on the wall. Because that's what we do for like, our absences." (site A, shedra student, age 35)

Questions for Further Reflection

Some questions that gumba administrators and teachers may want to consider while thinking about how to manage phone use in their community include:

- What kinds of phone use are most beneficial to our community, and worth protecting?
- What kinds of use are most harmful, and need to be limited?
- How might traditional ways of regulating behavior in the monastery be usefully applied to phone use?
- Which apps *specifically* are a problem in our community? How might we focus on managing those specific kinds of use?
- What role should education and self-governance play? When does self-governance need to be aided through restrictive rules and regulations?
- How can we best support lamas in bringing their phone use behaviors into alignment with their own values?